

BUILT UPON PROPHETS AND APOSTLES

“Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets:” such is Paul’s description of the position occupied by true believers. Such is the position we occupy this morning as distinguished from the position we occupied in times past and the position occupied by the multitudes around us. Most of them are built on no foundation at all. They are content to let mortal life drift out, “taking their chance,” as they express it, —which is no chance at all. Others are built on a human foundation, like the Swedenborgians for example. Emmanuel Swedenborg had dreams—vivid dreams, coherent dreams, but still dreams—the mere tremors and vibrations of the brain pulp inside his skull. They were not like the visions of the prophets and apostles—related to external facts, attested by independent witnesses, supported by a powerful body of collateral circumstances, confirmed by miracle, and interwoven with a nation’s history.

Many prefer to be judges of the Bible rather than that the Bible should be judge of them. So they stand, built upon their own opinions, which will prove but a foundation of shadow and mist—no foundation except such as the mirage is to the traveller in the desert. Others again, a large body of people, like the multitudes that belong to the Church of England, are built on mere names and words. They are nominally built on the right foundation, but not really so. They say “Bible,” but they do not know it or submit to it. They say, “Peter,” “Paul,” “John,” “James,” “Andrew,” etc. with the Papal prefix of “St.,” but they have no acquaintance with these teachers, reject what they taught and live in daily disregard of the commandments they delivered. The names are mere outside labels for a system of things which inside is a mere hollow of chaotic vapour. To be built on words and names is no to be built on the real foundation. The real foundation is the foundation of the apostles and prophets—a foundation consisting of what they declared from God.

This foundation is in all senses a real and strong foundation. It is a very different foundation from our own feelings and opinions, or from a system of views and observances “received by tradition from our fathers.” Let us realise how actual and divine it is from the sample case before us in the reading this morning—the first chapter of John.

The chapter commences,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of Life—for the Life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness.”

It is a long time since these words were written, but their significance has not altered with the lapse of time. The truth which they expressed at the moment of utterance is as true now as when they first inscribed in wet ink on the parchment that received the first epistle of John. Let us strive for a moment to realise what that significance is, that we may see how strong is the foundation on which we are built. The endeavour requires us to go back to the moment when the letter was first written—when the Greek characters were first inscribed at the dictation or by the hands of John, for we may throw away all uncertainty as to whether it was John or not. It is not our century alone that says John; the eighteenth century says John, the seventeenth century says John, the sixteenth century says John, and so, back and back, every century right away to the very century when John was living, says John. This is absolute proof that it was John; for it was never known, and is, in fact, impossible that any book or

document should be universally imputed to a man who had not written it, back to the very age when he was living.

So it was John that wrote these words. Let us lay this down to ourselves as a fact not to be disputed. We shall see how powerful an element it is in the strong foundation on which we are built. The enemy knows how important the question of authorship is with regard to all the apostolic writings, which is the reason why they try to throw a veil or raise a dust over it by treating it as a doubtful scholastic question of authenticity. It is no scholarly question at all, but a question of robust common sense, involving the vitalest of issues.

Imagine ourselves, then, present at the writing—an old man is before us, either sitting at a table writing, or telling someone else sitting at a table what to say. He writes or says, “That . . . which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled”—we beg leave to interrupt him for a moment. “Is it really so, John? Did you really hear, see and handle the matters you are writing of?” He would answer, “Certainly;” as the letter proceeds to say:

“The life was manifested and we have seen it, and bear witness and show unto you that eternal life which was the Father and was manifested unto us.”

We might respectfully interpose: “In what way manifested? Was it a matter of mental illumination which might be delusion, or was it a manifestation outside yourselves that others could have seen?” He might respond, “As I have said, it was something we saw and heard and handled, and therefore outside ourselves.” We might reverentially enquire, “What shape did it take?” He might refer us to his gospel narrative:

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John (the Baptist) He was not the light, but was sent to bear witness of that light The Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? He answered There standeth one among you whom ye know not That he should be made manifest to Israel, I am come baptising with water The next day, John seeth Jesus coming unto him and saith, Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.”

Upon which, we might suppose ourselves asking: “Then the manifestation was in form of a personage that actually appeared, and walked, and talked, and ate, and drank?” To which John could only say, “Oh yes; have you not heard of the thing that happened in Judea 60 years ago? You should read the accounts written by the other apostles. It does not rest with me alone; far from it, the things done were done before the eyes of ‘many witnesses.’ (Luke 1:2; Acts 13:31). Christ was born in Bethlehem in fulfilment of what had been foretold by the prophets. He was born ‘not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man but of God.’ He was the Son of God by the power of the Spirit upon Mary his mother. He grew up to be a man, and at 30 years of age was introduced to Israel by John the Baptist, who did not know him, but who had said beforehand that the Spirit of God would openly descend upon the man who was the Son of God. This actually happened, and identified him for us who were disciples of the Baptist. The Spirit of God not only descended upon him, but abode upon him, and impelled him forthwith into a work of travel throughout the land of Israel, in the course of which he delivered such teaching, and performed such miracles, as never were seen or heard in connection with man before. I and others were his disciples and travelled with him. We were from the beginning eye-witnesses and ministers of the word. We heard all he said, saw all he did, and handled him many a time. I had the happiness to be loved by him, and leant often on his bosom at tables. At last, he was taken by the chief priests, whose anger he excited by his condemnation of their ways; and being brought before the Roman Governor on

a charge of treason, was ordered to be crucified. He was actually crucified to our grief and dismay. I stood by his cross and saw him die. His body was given up to two influential men, and deposited in the grave of one of them—Joseph of Arimathea. He had told us all this, but we had not realised it, and we *'knew not the scripture that he should rise from the dead.'*

Did he rise, then?

Truly: this was the crowning manifestation of that eternal life which was with the Father. He appeared alive to us on the third day, and on many days afterwards by many infallible proofs, and at the end of forty days took leave of us, as he had said in his last words to us he would. He told us he would send the Holy Spirit upon us to abide with us, and direct us in the testimony which he said we should have to deliver in all the world for him, and that the Spirit would give us power to work works similar to his in confirmation of our testimony to his resurrection. He said we must wait in Jerusalem for the fulfilment of this promise. We did so wait, and we had not to wait long. In about ten days after his departure, being assembled on the occasion of the Feast of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon us all, and enabled us to speak with tongues we had never learnt, and to perform other miracles in attestation of our witness to the resurrection of Christ. From that day to this, we have been busy proclaiming his name throughout the world. Most of the apostles are dead, but you will find the result of their labour in existence in all the leading cities of the Empire and communities of believers in Christ, who meet regularly in his honour and memory, and are waiting for his return from heaven. I am writing to some of them, and this is what I am saying:

'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of Life.'"

Thus, you see, dear brethren and sisters, in being built on John, we are built not on John only, but on the foundation of many witnesses—a foundation of fact and truth—a foundation not of one apostle, but of all the apostles, and not only on them, but necessarily also on the foundation of the prophets, for the work of the apostles cannot be separated from the prophets whom Jesus said he had come to fulfil. Thus the work of the apostles goes back to and embraces the work of God for a thousand years before their day, God's word with Israel from the day He brought them out of Egypt by Moses to the day when the angelic host announced the birth of him, who was the end of the whole work for righteousness to everyone that believeth.

So strong is our foundation in being built on the foundation of apostles and prophets: Great is our privilege in knowing these things in a day when impenetrable fog overspreads the religious world! Great also in a certain way is the price we have to pay; shall we rebel against the ordinance that appoints affliction commensurate with the privilege? We are despised and detested and denounced for no other reason than that we adhere to the foundation of the apostles and prophets, as against all the shams and subterfuges of the time. It is unpleasant experience, but we can bear it if we keep our eyes open to the truth. If we take our eyes off the actuality of the truth, we shall cease to be able to bear it, and shall be in danger of being at last among those of whom Jesus speaks in the parable of the sower.

"They endure for a while, but by-and-by, when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, they are offended."

John opens before us considerations powerful to strengthen us in our determination to adhere to Christ in the midst of all the difficulties.

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ, and these things write we unto you that your joy may be full.”

The fellowship here referred to is a joyful thing—not possible of being seen in all its significance till the veil is removed that meanwhile separates from the Father’s presence. It is a very different thing from the “*fellowship*” of ecclesial phrase, which is often a sheer endurance and great trial of affliction—as intended for the discipline of the true children. True fellowship is a state of being a fellow of, a state of being in close companionship and congenial intimacy with another. It amounts almost to identity. Association is a pure satisfaction bordering on ecstasy; separation a cause of the reverse experience. The grounds of it lie in identity of view, taste, feeling, principle, and aim. It is because there is little of this identity, that there is little of pure fellowship in the present evil state. There may be any amount of association without true fellowship, though true fellowship craves association. There may be nominal fellowship that is sincere enough without being real. The obligations of duty may lead to it without the heart tasting the sweets of it, for lack of the mutuality of the conditions out of which it springs. This is speaking of the fellowship of probation, but this is all preliminary.

The true fellowship which the apostles have been sent to create, is that fellowship with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ, which will be triumphantly established in a multitude upon the earth at last on the basis of incorruptibility of nature. The mind turns to this with solace and comfort in the midst of the terrible evil of the present state. It lies ahead like the bright and hospitable shelter of home at the end of the weary traveller’s journey over the storm-swept moor. It is a vision of light and holiness and joy. The “*general assembly and ecclesia of the first-born*” will be an assembly of picked men and women from every age, who have victoriously fought their way through the obstructions and discouragements that beset the path of righteousness in “Time’s dark wilderness of years.” Their corporate relation one to another, in the strength and grace of spirit nature, the intensity of divine intelligence, the sweetness of all-prevailing and spontaneous love, and the constant of everlasting life—is so glorious as only to be fully symbolised by the splendour of the New Jerusalem, descending from God out of Heaven, blazing with His glory in all the glowing hues and tints of stones most precious. We can enter into the abandon of delightful imagery, which informs us that—

“The city has no need of the sun, neither of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God enlightens it and the Lamb is the light thereof . . . and there shall be no night there and they need no candle, neither light of the sun: for the Lord God giveth them light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.”

We can heartily join in the exclamation:

“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life and enter in through the gates into the city.”

May it be our privilege to have a place in that glorious fellowship.

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