

Brought to perfection

A well-tended garden is a visual delight, especially during the summer.

Few gardens can compare with those in the grounds of large country houses. Velvet lawns, soft and springy underfoot, dotted here and there with trees and bushes of every kind. Vivid displays of flowers of endless colour and variety, their blended fragrances filling the air. Neat rockeries and cool refreshing fountains – everywhere a feast of colour, variety and beauty!

Over the years the gardener has worked long and hard to produce such satisfying results: breaking the hard ground and pulling up thorns and thistles; fertilising barren soil; planting, seeding and laying turf – all that goes into turning uncultivated land into a display of nature at its loveliest.

When a dedicated gardener goes into a new garden, he goes in with a sense of purpose. He doesn't just pull up a few weeds here and there and indiscriminately put in a few plants. First he takes a long, hard look at the garden to see where and how best it can be improved. Then he takes time to find and remove every weed and consider which plants to grow, and where. His goal is the perfect garden and he carefully plans the best way

to reach that goal.

We, the church, are God's garden. And God, like the gardener, has both a goal for us and a plan to bring it through to completion. As we saw in the last chapter the church is 'built . . . into' indicating that it has an ultimate destiny to fulfil.

God's destiny for his people is a perfect church. We are to manifest the nature and glory of God in the same way as a garden reflects the gardener and, right now, our Father is at work in you and me, pruning and cutting, planting and sowing, removing the rubbish and replacing it with the life of God.

'No spot or wrinkle'

Summing up his ministry, Paul said: 'We proclaim *Christ*, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ' (Colossians 1:28).

Paul was stating Jesus' declared objective for the whole church: 'That he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless' (Ephesians 5:27 NASB).

The illustration this time is that of a wedding. The church Jesus is preparing is to be a flawless bride — 'no spot'. Spots are the plague and embarrassment of adolescence, that formative time before full maturity. But the church of Jesus Christ will be done with all her 'growing pains' and be cleansed from every blemish as she responds to what Paul describes as 'the washing with water through the word' (Ephesians 5:26).

We need to soak ourselves in God's Word, the Bible, allowing it to wash us inside and out. We need to read the Word, hear the Word and study the Word continually. That is the basis of the 'admonishing and teaching' which Paul speaks of as being so necessary. As we respond to it in obedience, the Word will cleanse us and bring us to full maturity.

The church is also to be one in which there is 'no . . . wrinkle'. Wrinkles are the marks of years of care on a face that has seen better days. However honourable, they are a visible testimony

of old age. But the church Jesus presents to himself will not be 'over the hill' and on the decline. Like the garden in summertime or a splendid new building, she will be in the prime of her glory – the very perfection of spiritual beauty.

To enable the church to become that perfect building, however, an examination of its foundations is necessary, because only what has been properly founded can be gloriously finished. A detailed study of essential spiritual foundations is beyond the scope of this book,¹ but let's quickly review the basic scriptural requirements.

Washed with the word

The ongoing ministry of Jesus towards his church, carried out by his servants since his ascension, is that of applying God's word to all areas of our life. That 'word' is the whole of God's purpose as revealed in the Scriptures, and it is revealed not only for our interest but also for our implementation. It isn't sufficient just to hear the word; it must be acted upon.

Jesus made that 'action' principle quite clear in the parable of the two builders recorded in Matthew 7:24-27. The wise man who put the words of Jesus into practice was like someone building his house on solid rock with the result that, when the fierce winds and the rains came, all that he had built stood firm.

The foolish man, however, heard the words of Jesus but did not carry them out. With no foundations for his life, when the winds and the rains came, all he had built was washed away. Like the do-it-yourself man, he had built without instructions and it had ended in disaster.

What was true of him is true of any church which builds without reference to the whole counsel of God – or tries to replace that counsel with its own preferences or traditions. Somewhere down the line it is destined to fall, and what have been supposed to be bastions of history will prove to be nothing more than the sands of time – a very shaky foundation.

There is invariably a cost involved, but applying God's Word

is a priority, and we must give it priority whatever that cost may be.

For almost thirty years Kenneth had been a member of a denominational church where the pastor was both born again and Spirit-filled. Kenneth himself was baptised in the Holy Spirit while attending that church. It was after being given some leadership responsibility that he found himself becoming more and more convinced of the need to put God's Word into practice.

'I decided to go all out to obey the Scriptures,' he says, 'but this caused much dissension and aggression among members of the church - both local and in the circuit.

'Eventually, some members said I should accept the denominational tradition or leave. Others asked me to stay on but not be dogmatic about the Scriptures, but I knew there could be no room for compromise. My desire was to obey the Scriptures and the Lord fully, and be in a place where the personal and corporate commitment required by the Lord - and necessary for me to grow as a Christian - would be possible.

'Leaving wasn't easy. I had been in the church for a very long time. My family made the move with me, out of deference to me and to the Lord, and found the first year at the new church very difficult. Also, from having a position of leadership I now had no church responsibility at all.

'But God didn't let us down. The encouragement of the people around us and the very positive teaching of the Scriptures has resulted in each one of us growing in maturity. My family are now very happy, entering into the life of the church fully and building close relationships. I know the peace of God in my life and am now able to contribute much more to the life of the church.'

For Kenneth and his family there was a price to pay but they were willing to pay it. And as they put their trust in God's Word he honoured them for it, pouring out his blessing upon them as individuals and as a family.

Is God's Word the deciding factor in your life?

Built on the cornerstone

'No-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ,' declares Paul (1 Corinthians 3:11). And to this he adds that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (Ephesians 2:20).

Paul was saying that the ministries of apostles and prophets are the foundations of the church. These ministries, rooted firmly in Christ and held together by him, are extensions of Jesus himself, who is the mainstay of the whole structure.

We are discovering that right foundations are essential for the fulfilment of God's purpose for his church and the success of our individual lives. If the church is to come to perfection, therefore, apostles and prophets, along with other biblical ministries, must be recognised by the church – and received by her as the appointed and anointed servants of the Lord.

Sadly, many aren't willing to accept apostles and prophets in the church today. They accept that they had a place in the early church of the New Testament but believe they are now no longer needed.

But look at what the Word of God has to say: 'He . . . gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up *until* we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fulness of Christ' (Ephesians 4:11-13).

God's purpose in giving such ministries to the church is clear from this scripture, and until that purpose is completed God will continue to use them.

They exist – apostles and prophets included – to plant churches, to envision and direct us, teaching us the ways of God. They are men with a God-given understanding of what the Lord wants in his church. Men able to see clearly how God is wanting to work out his purposes and willing to work

obediently to put into effect what God is showing them. Men willing to bring the clear word of God to the church – as necessary for us today as it was in Isaiah's day, when God spoke judgment and restoration through the mouth of his obedient servant.

Sean, a pastor, recognised the need in his church for ministry from outside. He didn't like the word 'apostle', however, thinking it presumptuous for anyone to take on such a title. But he had no problem with the functional role of such a person – and indeed welcomed it. Eventually he linked in with a network of related Christian churches which recognised and incorporated all of the ministries described in Ephesians 4.

'The practical benefits are immense,' Sean commented. 'It puts you in touch with people who have a national and international perspective of what God is doing among his people. And it puts you in touch with other churches who share the same vision as you do, which is a great source of encouragement.'

'It also gives you access to leaders with special teaching and inspirational abilities and to people experienced in church planting and church growth, helping you to avoid pitfalls and all kinds of potential hazards. Where local leadership is concerned, I believe you need outside help to appoint or confirm appointments and provide advice and help. This takes pressure off the local elders, especially newly-appointed ones, as it provides a court to whom appeal can be made should problems arise.'

'I no longer have a problem with recognising a man as an apostle and calling him one. God has said it in his Word and, as far as I'm concerned, that settles it. But I've also been able to appreciate the wisdom of God in it all and see for myself many of the benefits of putting that wisdom into practice.'

What an encouraging testimony from someone who, despite initial doubts, discovered for himself the wisdom of God's ways! Having discovered it, he allowed it to become part of his life, experiencing the blessing of God through his obedience to it.

'On to maturity'

The letter to the Hebrews highlights another aspect of spiritual foundations: 'Let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment' (Hebrews 6:1-2).

Taking this in conjunction with the scriptures already considered, we conclude that our foundations are to be: first, Jesus Christ himself – a living experience of him in our lives and our meetings and his Word a priority in our life; second, the ongoing input of apostles and prophets; and, third, an embracing of the basic doctrines of repentance, faith, baptism in water and in the Holy Spirit, living in the power of Jesus' resurrection life and living under God's eternal government.

As we have already seen in various testimonies, it is within our own power to place ourselves in the environment which enables these conditions to exist and be exercised. We have a solemn responsibility to live out our immediate (that is, our day-to-day lives here and now) in the light of our ultimate (what God has said we will be). In other words, what we will be, we must now diligently begin to be.

How does this affect us as individuals? Well, here's how Scripture describes our final glorious state: 'Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2).

We are going to be like Jesus. What a glorious expectation! To return to the gardening image with which this chapter began, our waste ground, our hard and barren soil covered with weeds and brambles is being transformed into a fertile, fruitful, beautiful garden. What a promise, and what a hope!

But *we aren't just to sit back and wait for it to happen*. We are to work towards it here and now: 'Everyone who has this hope in him purifies *himself*, just as [Jesus] is pure' (1 John 3:3).

By faith we begin to co-operate with God and implement the word of our expectation into the working out of our experience. If I am to be like Jesus one day then I'm going to begin today.

The same attitude must also be found in the church. We have repeatedly quoted Paul's words about Christ's love for his church. Set in the context of a marriage relationship, Jesus is seen anticipating a glorious completion to redemption history when he presents the church, his bride, to himself. John, however, gives us a glimpse of this process from a different perspective: 'The wedding of the Lamb has come, and *the bride has made herself ready*' (Revelation 19:7).

The church of Jesus Christ should be a pilgrim community, not locked nostalgically into the past, nor wandering aimlessly in the present, but moving with determination to embrace all the purposes of God, actively working with him to become all that he has destined her to be.

Beautiful garden or compost heap? The choice is ours.

Chapter 5 NOTES

1 A helpful guide on this topic is *Essential Foundations*, by Hugh Thompson (Harvestime/School of the Word)