

Building Upon God's Foundation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of building upon the foundation of the Cross, rejecting worldly and carnal things, and emphasizing the positive side of spiritual building through love.

Scripture: Isaiah 54:1

Topics: "Building on God's Foundation", "The Role of Love in the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of building upon the foundation laid by the Cross, highlighting the duality of hope and uncertainty in the prophetic messages of Isaiah. He explains that while God has cleared the ground for recovery and restoration, the question remains about what His people will construct upon that foundation. Sparks warns against building with worldly wisdom, carnality, and soulish appeal, which God will not allow on His foundation. Instead, he stresses that love is the essential material for building up the Church, as it aligns with God's purpose and reflects the true nature of Christ. The sermon calls for believers to evaluate their contributions to the Church and ensure they are rooted in love, which is the only thing that truly builds.

Transcript

We have seen that, with chapter 54 of Isaiah's prophecies, there commences a movement of God toward recovery and rebuilding. The Cross has cleared the way for this new prospect. From chapter 54 onwards, a number of bright, hopeful notes are struck. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 60:

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee."

The way having been opened, the ground cleared, and the foundation laid by the Cross, the Lord is facing the whole matter of the recovery, restoration, and rebuilding of His people. There is a new prospect, a new hope, a new message of encouragement. But, with it, a new note is struck. In these later chapters of Isaiah, there are both lights and shades in this new prospect. The sun shines: "Thy light is come... the glory of the Lord is risen"--it is like the sun rising on an early summer day; and then it is as if a heavy cloud comes over the face of the sun. It may be only passing over, it may be only temporary, but you wonder whether the whole prospect is going to change; whether the bright time is passing, if that is the end.

It is just like that in these later chapters of Isaiah. The sun--the glory of the Lord--has risen; there is a bright prospect; but then, here and there, you come on darker things, such as chapter 58, beginning:

"Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and declare unto My People their transgression...."

From time to time there are these dark clouds, that seem to pass over the face of the sun, even in the presence of this new prospect; and they bring to the heart a feeling of uncertainty. Is this 'radiant morn' too soon to pass away? We are conscious of mixed feelings: we do not yet feel assured that all is going to follow through on this new prospect, to work out according to the seeming promise.

From the Lord's side, of course, there is no question: the Lord has for Himself His new ground, and He shows Himself as One Who means to be positive. He is not of two minds; there is no shadow cast by His turning or changing. Everything from the Lord's side shows Him to be One Who is out for something--really after a new day, a new situation. Yes: for His part, the Lord is positive.

A Check on the Arm of the Lord

But it would seem that He is having to go carefully. He wants to go right out, to have no reserves, but... but... there seems to be something that is still holding His Arm in check; He just cannot go right ahead, as He indicates He would do. The old ground has suffered a fiery purging in the Cross; all that stubble, all that tangle and network of thorns and briars, has been dealt with by the fires. He has come in and got His foundation: but... there seems still to be a question. You cannot read through these chapters without feeling: 'We are not through this business yet; we are not right out on the other side; we are not sure how it is going to work out yet.' The Lord is pretty sure; the Lord is encouraging; the Lord is saying that, as for Himself, He is not holding back for any reason from His side; but there is something that He is encountering.

Let me put it like this. The ground has been cleared, and the foundation has been laid; but now comes the question: What is going to be built upon that foundation? And that is just where the uncertainty comes in, not as to the foundation, for that is settled in the Cross--but as to the superstructure: what is going to be imposed upon the foundation? The Lord is not sure what His people are going to put upon His foundation.

So far as the Old Testament is concerned, the more immediate answer to the question as to the new building on that new ground is found in what we call the post exilic prophets, the prophets after the Exile--Zechariah, Haggai and Malachi. We see there what the people would put upon the foundation; the new building, 'of what sort it was'. But if you should raise the objection, again, that that is 'Old Testament', let me remind you that I said in the previous chapter that the counterpart of this can be found in the New Testament, in our very own dispensation. We saw that Isaiah 53 finds its parallel in the letter to the Romans, where the Cross encounters all the rubbish and evil and tangle, deals with it in fiery judgment, and clears the ground for a new prospect. That new prospect is brought into view in chapter 8 of Romans; God has now got His foundation. But what is the counterpart of these later chapters of Isaiah?

Right and Wrong Building Illustrated in 1 Corinthians

The counterpart--so patent as you look at it--is in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Writing of his first arrival in Corinth, the Apostle said: "When I came unto you... I determined"--The language is 'I deliberately made up my mind'--"not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1-2). The foundation has been laid: "As a wise masterbuilder I laid a foundation" (3:10), and the foundation is Christ crucified. The Cross, as Paul so clearly sets forth in his letter to the Romans, has provided the foundation, and that foundation has been laid in Corinth. But as you read on in this verse (3:10), your heart almost stands still. You hear Paul saying: "I laid a foundation, and another buildeth

thereon." He shows that it is possible to build on this, either "wood, hay, stubble", or "gold, silver, costly stones"; and that every man's work is going to be tried by fire, to discover what sort it is. If any man's work is burnt up--what happens? Well, "he himself shall be saved"--he will just get in--"yet so as through fire"; he will have lost everything.

So there comes this very big question: What are you going to put upon that foundation? what are you going to superimpose upon that ground of the Cross? Are you going to bring back things that are absolutely contradictory to the Cross? If so, you see what happens.

Now in this first letter to the Corinthians there is much about building, in many connections. It is perhaps a little unfortunate that, in a number of passages in the New Testament, and consistently throughout the letters to the Corinthians, the original words for 'build' and 'building' have been rendered 'edify' and 'edification'-- although the Revised Version often gives 'build' or 'build up' in the margin, and the compound verb, 'build upon', is usually--for example in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15-- translated thus. But during the 300 years since our Authorized Version was made, the word 'edify' has lost some of its force, and present day usage might tend to give us the idea of the acquisition of head knowledge, which of course is not Paul's meaning at all. The root meaning of the word survives in our word 'edifice', and Paul is all the time talking about spiritual building--the building up of true spiritual character.

I would suggest to you that you should follow through the nine occasions in this first letter where the words 'edify' or 'edification' are used. The whole matter of spiritual gifts, for instance, is summed up in that one word--Do they build up? If they do not, they are of no value in the purpose of God; they can be ruled out; they have missed their point--for even Divine gifts can miss the point or be side tracked; we shall have to touch on that again. It is the spiritually constructive side of things which receives such emphasis in this first letter to the Corinthians. The foundation--Christ crucified-- is laid. Now for the building!

What God Will Not Allow on His Foundation

And, when you come to the building, a real battle starts up. The question is: What is God going to allow to be put on His foundation? For right through this letter we find a long series of 'No's'--things to which God says: 'No, not that on My foundation, please; I have no place for that. You may spend your whole life on that, but it will all go up in smoke. It is not suitable to My foundation; it is not according to the Cross of the Lord Jesus.'

Now, it would take a long time to consider all the things in this letter to which God says: 'No'. We will just touch on two or three, as representative of much more. As we read the letter, with this in mind--Will God allow anything like that to be put on His foundation?--and as we see the answer, surely our reaction must be: Very well, let us have the Cross deal with that immediately. We don't want that to be held over until it is too late, and we just scramble into Heaven, without anything that we can take with us of a life work--for that is the issue. We don't want to postpone or refuse the operation of the Cross until it is too late to save our life work, to save the fruit of all our energies.

(1) Carnality

We begin with chapter 3. "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat; for ye were not yet able to bear it: nay, not even now are ye able; for ye are yet carnal: FOR"--this is the description of carnality--"for whereas there is among you JEALOUSY...." Let us weigh it, even if it be to our own judgment and condemnation; it is better

that the Cross come right in now. 'There is jealousy among you'? God says 'No' to that: 'I cannot have that on My foundation. My foundation is the Cross, and it says No to that.'

Paul continues: "There is among you jealousy AND STRIFE..." Strife! We must think this through and face it honestly. It may seem very elementary, but we are not facing the world, the unconverted, here; we are right in the Church, amongst believers; we are dealing with those amongst whom God's foundation has been laid; with those who are "called to be saints" (1 Cor. 1:2); that is, who are regarded by God as His own people. Strife? God says 'No' to that on His foundation. Is that found among us? You know what is going to happen? Sooner or later, it is going to be exposed as wood, hay and stubble--that is the value of it--and it is going up in smoke.

"Are ye not carnal, and walk after the manner of men?" You are not allowed to walk after the manner of men on God's foundation--you are just not allowed. God says 'No' to "the manner of men" on His foundation. "For when one saith, I am of... and another, I am of..." Here we must fill in the appropriate names ourselves: names that are right up to date; names right in our own circle, in our own assembly; names of our own Christian world, or historic religious names. 'One says, I am of... and another, I am of...; and yet another, I am of...' They all express human partialities, human preferences, human likes and human dislikes, which produce divisions. God says: 'No, not on My foundation; that is not My Church, not My building. I never build with material like that, and neither may you. You may have a wonderful set up--of your own making--with stuff of that kind: but it is all going up in smoke. However much you may have seemed to have, in the end you will have nothing.'

(2) Worldly Wisdom

And how much there is here in this early section about "the wisdom of the world" (1:20)--the wisdom of man, man's mind about things. God says: 'None of that on My foundation; there is no place at all for your mind on My foundation; there is only place for the mind of the Spirit.' If we have not got the mind of the Spirit, we have no right to be doing anything on God's foundation. But after all, are not these the very things, the very troubles, that are blighting Christianity today? They are! And do not let us think of Christianity in a detached, objective way. This comes very close to home. These very things may be causing mischief, even amongst ourselves: we may be bringing on to God's foundation a mind, a mentality, which is not the mentality of the Spirit. For that is what it amounts to--a mentality. "Who among men knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him? even so the things of God none knoweth, save the Spirit of God" (2:11). These are two different mentalities, you see--the natural mind and the spiritual mind. God says: 'None of the natural mind or mentality at all on My foundation.'

Paul here calls this the 'world' coming in, and constructing something upon God's foundation; and God says: 'There is no place for the world in any form on My foundation.' If you look at it closely, you find that this searches out so much: the world's standards or judgments or values--how the world thinks, how the world does things. These Corinthians were trying to make an impression, and moreover by natural means. The Cross of Isaiah 53 is not a very 'impressive' thing, judged by worldly standards, is it? There is nothing there that would popularize the Gospel--rather does it cause offence.

(3) Soulful Appeal

Are you trying to make the work of God successful by an appeal to the natural man? Now, I hold no brief for ugliness or for crudeness; I believe that God is a God of beauty. But if we think we are going to make God's work successful or acceptable by display, by appeal to the soul of man--artistically, aesthetically,

and so on--we are on wrong lines. Let me put it another way: the source of any 'appeal', any 'impression', any 'grip', any 'overwhelming', must lie essentially and only in spiritual values, of an inward kind, not in what captivates or gratifies the natural fancies of people. The Arm of the Lord will not be revealed to the 'natural man' or to the 'world' in any way for its good; only against it.

As we move on in this letter, we find that the Cross touches so many other things. It touches our feelings--our natural emotions, our natural passions; there is much about that here. And, as with our mentality, so also with our emotions, the Lord says: 'None of that on My foundation, none whatever.' There is so much here to which the Cross says 'No', as to building. I invite you to look at it more closely; it is not my purpose to give an exposition of the letter to the Corinthians. I want to come to the positive side.

For there is a positive side to this letter. What is it that God says may be put on His foundation? It would be very pathetic, would it not, if the letter were all negative, all: No, no! never! Take note of that, because you may recall that I said, earlier, that you can never come into God's 'Yes' until you have accepted God's 'No'. But there is a very mighty 'Yes', in this letter. What is it? Perhaps we think we know it. Well, maybe we do know it, as to the words; but I suggest that we know practically nothing of the thing itself.

Misapplied Spiritual Gifts

Let us look, then, at Chapter 13. Here the Apostle writes off everything that is not spiritually constructive. It may have been something that God gave, but it has been taken hold of by man and used for man's satisfaction, gratification, pleasure, or even glory. The mentality and emotion of the natural man have been brought to bear upon Divine things--spiritual gifts, such as tongues, and so on--and have robbed them of their value to build up, and made them just occasions for display. There has been glorying in these spiritual gifts. The Apostle here writes that all off, and says that they were never given for that; even though given of God, they amount to 'nothing'--that is the very word he uses here--when it comes to building. "If I... have not love, I am nothing." Paul dismisses these things; but notice that he is all the time reaching after the positive through the negative.

"If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal." Exeunt spiritual gifts which have failed to fulfil their purpose in building the House of God. Let us not cling to anything that does not serve that purpose.

"And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains...." That is quite scriptural--that is what the Lord Jesus said: "If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove" (Matt. 17:20). That is perfectly scriptural, and yet you can be perfectly scriptural and have faith like that, and it can mean nothing. If it fails to build up the House of God, if it does not result in this scriptural structure, it becomes negative. Exit all knowledge of mysteries, and secret lore, and faith that removes mountains. 'Out you go if you do not build up! That is the value of you--nothing!' "If I have all faith... but have not love, I am nothing". With all that, I am nothing!

"And if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned...." If I am a philanthropist, and am most charitable, even sacrificial, in my giving; even if I am a martyr, and give my body to be burned; that can all be done without any constructive value in the building of the House of God. If I do all these things, "but have not love, it profiteth me nothing".

That, then, is the showing out of court of things-- wonderful things in themselves--but which have failed to serve the purpose for which they were given, namely, 'spiritual building'.

What God Will Allow on His Foundation: Love

Now for the positive. Let us bring in that to which God says: Yes! He says 'No' to that, and to that, and to that; but now, where does His 'Yes' lie? Here it is--Love!

"Love suffereth long...." There were some who, because their rights were injured or taken from them, dragged their brethren before the magistrate, right away. "Love suffereth long, and is kind...." You may put that on the foundation; that is something constructive, is it not? "Love envieth not...." When you quietly work your way, like this, into and through every clause, do you not want to stop and say: 'Say no more--that finds me out too much'? But we must go on, for, after all, it is what God is calling for.

"Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up...." Go back to the beginning of chapter 8, and you will read this: "Knowledge puffeth up, but love buildeth up". There is a great deal of difference between 'puffing up' and 'building up'. 'Love is not puffed up': there is nothing false, artificial, make believe, pretend, about love. The false thing is like a rubber balloon: you can blow it up pretty big, but you have only to put the tiniest point of a needle in it--and where is it? It is gone. Paul says it is no use putting that on God's foundation.

"Love... doth not behave itself unseemly...." Unseemly behaviour: we could spend much time on that, could we not? Is this seemly? does it become a Christian? does it become the Lord Jesus? does it become that holy House of God? does it become the Cross of the Lord Jesus? Love is seemly; it does not behave itself unseemly. "Love... seeketh not its own"--does not want its own way, does not work to its own ends; does not draw to itself; "is not provoked, taketh not account of evil; rejoiceth not in unrighteousness, but rejoiceth with the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love never faileth...."

You may think that I am not saying very much, but I am saying a great deal. I would like to give you that passage in a translation which I think a classic:

"I may speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but if I have no love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal; I may prophesy, fathom all mysteries and secret lore, I may have such absolute faith that I can move hills from their place, but if I have no love, I count for nothing; I may distribute all I possess in charity, I may give up my body to be burnt, but if I have no love, I make nothing of it. Love is very patient, very kind. Love knows no jealousy; love makes no parade, gives itself no airs, is never rude, never selfish, never irritated, never resentful; love is never glad when others go wrong, love is gladdened by goodness, always slow to expose, always eager to believe the best, always hopeful, always patient. Love never disappears."

You may put that on the foundation, for God says Yes to all that. "To whom is the Arm of the Lord revealed?" To that; just to that.

There is a most pressing need that we should face this matter of what the Cross sets aside, and what the Cross brings in; what may be put on God's foundation, and what may not. It concerns every one of us quite seriously, as to what there will be at the end: not what there is now, however showy and popular, and however enjoying of man's approval and applause it may be. God is moving to build up: He shows what He cannot and will not use in His building, and then He says: 'This is what I will use; this is the material for

the building of My Church. This is what really builds: "Love buildeth up".'

May the Lord smite our hearts, if need be, to enlighten us as to what the real values are. Not even spiritual gifts are the real values, unless the effect of them is real spiritual increase amongst the believers. That is the test. It is not the things themselves, not their presence, not even the fact that the Lord gave them. The test of every gift is: Does it really build the Church? does it really build the House? is it really resulting in a larger measure of Christ?

For these things may be an obstruction to Christ. This letter to the Corinthians makes it so clear that the possession of spiritual gifts is no guarantee of spiritual maturity. Here you have the most immature of the churches--Paul says: 'I have fed you with milk; you are still babes'--and yet characterized by all these gifts. It is not that the gifts are wrong, but that they have been sidetracked; they have not served the purpose for which they were given--that is, bringing to the full measure of Christ. That is the object, and that object is only achieved by love.

May the Lord give us that kind of love! This is not natural love; this love springs out of the Cross. It is the love which comes right out of the work of the Cross within us. We cannot get it by striving after it; but, as the Cross does its work in our hearts and in our natures, it will rise and grow. The Lord increase our love!

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