

Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still
on his 75th birthday**

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BUILDING THE CHURCH TODAY

GEORGE M. PHILIP

It is a basic principle of life and activity that if a man does not know what he is doing or is supposed to be doing it is most unlikely that he will achieve anything worthwhile. No matter how sincere, enthusiastic, gifted, intellectual or sound in theology he may be, unless he is quite clear about his objective, and the means to attain it he is unlikely to achieve much that is good. Indeed, he may well create something of a Frankenstein 'monster' which he neither likes nor desires, and is in fact unable to control. Almost inevitably he himself will be discouraged and disillusioned to the point of demoralisation. In the ecclesiastical realm he may soon be on the move to another area to try again. But if he is no clearer as to what he is supposed to be doing, and if he has no real consciousness of whose authority and direction he is working under, then the same confused issue will result. It is therefore of primary importance in all that is meant by 'building the church' to be clear about the nature and the inspiration of the God-given task.

When such a degree of confusion and uncertainty exists and has become established, it is all the more important to urge Christians, especially those called to full time ministry together with all who share in the on-going work and witness of the church, to think through clearly what it is they are called to do. There are many catch-words: 'mission', 'evangelism', 'outreach', 'impact', and the like, to say nothing of 'experiments' and 'new forms of worship'; but they can all too easily preoccupy the participants with what they themselves are doing at that immediate moment without ever allowing them to consider, let alone assess, exactly what it is they are supposed to be doing under God. No amount of change of methods or tools, and no amount of 'reports in depth', will ever prove effective unless there is a clear idea of the objective and an equally clear conviction that God has called us to do this very thing. There are many cynical voices saying that the church is crumbling (and so it is in terms of statistics and buildings) and that its day is finished. But over against that we have the affirmation of our Lord Jesus Christ that he will build his Church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. If that is his objective and we are called to be workers together with God (2 Cor. 6:1), then we must see our work as 'building the church'. This must be our priority, and nothing must take its place. Clear conviction alone can give us continuing courage to go on and to keep going on.

When the church is spoken of today, especially in Scotland, people tend to think of the familiar ecclesiastical organisations with buildings of a certain kind in many strategic sites in cities and country. Sometimes those buildings that look far past their best do not give much evidence of significant or enthusiastic use by the people who

claim membership. Even within the membership and life of the church the general idea is of a large and complicated business venture, dealing with religious and social matters, with its organisation, structure and committees, all overshadowed by the central church offices, 'the powers that be' who are always asking for money and telling congregations what they may or may not do. Until the present generation, during which the pattern has altered significantly, the church was very much the place people went to because their parents and grandparents went there before them, and the 'habit' of church-going was considered a proper thing, especially for the children! However, with the change in the social climate, the ascendancy of humanist philosophy, the emphasis on secularism, and the constant flow and change in the economic situation leading to people moving more frequently, contact is lost with the 'family church', the church they went to (or did not go to) for baptisms, marriages and funerals. The 'church' becomes either a place in some other area, a memory of long ago that creates a degree of wistfulness, or a place locally where everyone is a stranger, a place to which fewer and fewer people seem to go, especially of the younger generation. To try to build a church in a situation and atmosphere like this appears as a hopeless task, unless there is a clear concept of what the church really is and can be, and a conviction that God himself has called his people together for this purpose.

If God desires to gather a people to himself it is both sad and significant that generally speaking, even among those who profess to be evangelical, biblical believers, there is a strange lack of interest in the doctrine of the church. Individualism has become dominant, a sense of duty is almost regarded as a sign of weakness, and any suggestion of discipline or rebuke, and in some cases even exhortation can meet with resentment. This stems in great part from a devaluing of the ministry as a God-ordained office, given for the good of God's people. It is no surprise that preaching is also lightly regarded almost as an 'extra', if not a kind of 'performance' to be liked or enjoyed or criticised and refused. Few seem to see that in the preaching and hearing of the Word of God there is in fact the experience of a divine encounter, whereby men and women are made wise unto salvation, fed by the Bread of God and built up in their most holy faith.

It is both strange and sad that the terms 'church planting' and 'church building' are to a great extent confined to the overseas missionary work of the church, and to that part of overseas mission undertaken by the interdenominational societies. The major denominations apparently tend to assume that the church is there, and that what has been will go on being. Our society is increasingly materialistic in its philosophy and is becoming increasingly multi-racial, with a variety of cultural patterns and practices. If the Christian gospel is to survive, let alone progress, then churches must be built that will stand no matter what happens. Such churches must be clear,

convinced and instructed in the fundamentals of the faith; churches that will not be just religious institutions, but family homes for believers together with their children of all ages.

Of course we must not fall into the snare of narrowing down our vision of the church to a merely local and congregational concept. That would cause us to be preoccupied with the hazards, the limits and the disappointments of our own situation, without having the encouragement of being aware that we are part of one glorious, universal work of the living God. It is necessary to remind ourselves constantly of both the geographical and historical nature of the church. Paul greeted the congregation at Corinth and made them aware of all that they were and all that they shared together with all those in every place who call on the name of the Lord (1 Cor. 1:2). This is the church we are part of, no matter how small and seemingly insignificant our local work may be. This is what we are, no matter how large, important and well recognised our own congregation may be. We are a part, only a part, but a glorious part. The very fact that we are there at all is entirely due to the gracious working of God's Spirit through his Word. It is God alone who works salvation. It is God alone who gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6,7). Apart from him we can do nothing (1 John 15:4,5). It is Christ who builds the church and who adds to it those who are being saved (Acts 2:47).

We must also grasp the historical dimension of the building of the church. The work neither begins nor ends with us. Other men have laboured and we have entered into their labours (John 4:37,38). We can never be free from the sense of debt we owe to those who have gone before us. Their work may not have been perfect, and at times what they accomplished and built may have subsequently lapsed from its spiritual freshness and dynamic. But the fact remains that our predecessors fought battles, laid foundations and formulated the great confessions and creeds whereby through dark ages the substance of the faith was preserved for following generations. Of course, we in our generation also create situations and leave legacies which will have to be lived with for good or ill by those who come after us. This is indeed a tremendous responsibility which should always challenge and direct us in our part of building the church. But we must never lose sight of the immense privilege it is to be part of the work and witness of the church of Christ in its on-going life down through the generations of history. This is something that gives dignity to our persons and our work. We are lifted up from obscurity and irrelevance, and given the honour and function of being workers together with God.

It is here that we are compelled to recognise that in the economy of God the church is, and must ever be, distinct from the world. It is different from the world both in its nature and its destiny. There is nothing in Scripture to cause us to believe that the created world as we know it is going to last for ever. Indeed, we are told that the heavens and the earth as we now know them will pass away. Both the words and

the imagery used to declare this seem to signify a great cataclysmic end to creation's history, not by the agency of man nor by his scientific ingenuity, either deliberately or accidentally, but by the specific design of God. In the plan of God when this little planet earth has served the purpose for which it was brought into being, it will pass away. But the church is spoken of as eternal. Its destiny is in eternity, where it will be a glorious church without spot or blemish or any such thing (Eph.5:25-27). It is only in the world to come that the church will be seen as she really is destined to be, the glorious, spotless bride of Christ.

The church is not a voluntary society (of which there are many in the world doing good and beneficial work for humanity) which people may or may not join according to inclination or conviction. The church is made up of all those who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour, who have been born anew of the Spirit of God, who have been made members of the family of God and who are called to his eternal glory (2 Peter 1:3). Inasmuch as they are members of Christ they are members of his body, which is the church, and they are members one of another. The church is a living spiritual organism not a human organisation. It is not a building, nor a conglomerate of buildings, made of stone and lime, but one spiritual building made of living stones (1 Peter 2:5) built together to form a habitation of God by the Spirit.

To speak of God dwelling amongst his people, not ashamed to be called their God, and enjoying their company as well as receiving their worship and their glad service is indeed a glorious and moving concept. It corresponds well with the affirmation in the Shorter Catechism that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him both now and for ever. This points to the fact that true spiritual religion is not a burdensome thing of dry duty, and mental and emotional frustration. We are not dealing with that travesty of Christ, Swinburn's 'pale Galilean' who causes the whole world to grow grey under his influence. We are dealing with the One who said that he had come in order that we might have life to the full. When we are building churches we are not really concerned with structures but rather with family homes where people of all ages, backgrounds and capacities become, through Christ, members of the household of God, God's fireside family (Eph. 2:19). It is the God of salvation who presides over the family and his presence with his people is the very breath of life whereby we have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ and consequently fellowship with one another.

Since this is so, 'going to church', which so many pre-judge as dull in the extreme, is a most significant exercise. There is a tremendous therapy mentally, psychologically and spiritually in being part of a congregation of God's people at worship. The presence of God among his own ransomed people and the activity of the Spirit of God in life-giving and life-sweetening grace and power, in and through every constituent part of the service, make every such gathering an occasion

of profound spiritual significance. An essential and central part of that worship is the preaching and hearing of the Word of God. As people are taught by the Word, corrected, cautioned, inspired and fed by it, then the whole pattern of their thinking is moulded by it so that they begin to think wholesomely and in Scriptural and spiritual categories. This is the beginning of creative Christian service and the beginning of a true understanding of the work of God.

This does not in any sense picture the church as an escape ghetto for pious Christians who cannot cope with the real world. Real 'spiritual homes' will always be frequented by enquirers, seekers, prodigals, rebels and a whole host of people with a variety of hurts, hopes, fears and needs. In a society that is cruelly and even sadistically impersonal, a society which causes people to feel 'rootless', there is a basic 'attraction' to a place and a people where there is an awareness of life and peace, hope and purpose. In this sense the building of the church is both the essence and power of evangelism and outreach. Think of how the people gathered to Jesus, and how, even when he sought solitude, he could not be hid (Mark 7:24). Think of how the whole of the neighbourhood (including the critics) gathered to John the Baptist as a result of his radical preaching of repentance. By the power of the Holy Spirit there was 'inflow' rather than frantic, organised outreach. Think of the marvellous words in the prophecy of Zechariah telling of a day when people from far and near would say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' (Zech.8:23). This is the kind of church we need to build. But how is it to be done?

There has to be clear thinking on the levels of procedure and practice. All too often various denominations have 'built a church' in a certain area. That is, they have erected a building or a complex of buildings and then have set about looking for people to come to them. What is happening is further confused in the mid 1980's by the enthusiasm for a multi-purpose building used not only by several denominations but by social service and community authorities. This can lead to a bustle of activity and an impression of success and ever-increasing influence. No doubt in terms of community service such a 'centre' is both justified and valuable and we have no desire to criticise or devalue social work. The church does a great deal of it and inspires many others to do the same. Where there is need there must be care and it must not be on the lowest level of a 'cup of cold water' in Jesus' name. Responsibilities of service have to be fulfilled willingly but they are not the same as, nor a substitute for, the building of the church. The church in biblical terms is a God-centred, God-worshipping, God-learning and God-serving, God-glorifying family of people who are one in Christ because they have believed the Gospel and have been born into the family of God.

The church belongs to Christ and is redeemed by Christ, washed by Christ, ministered to by Christ, nurtured and fed by Christ, built up and matured by Christ until all believers grow together to the measure

of the stature of the fulness of Christ. Within this gathered unity and never apart from it individualism finds its true and safe expression. The members of the body of Christ are unique in themselves, not only allowed but required to be themselves in their individual capacities and gifts in order that they might be effective 'joints and sinews' (Eph.4:16; Col.2:19) whereby the body functions in obedience to and service of its Head, who is Christ. In all its developments, in all its growth to maturity, and in all its costly service the church is warmed by the love of Christ and reassured by the fact that Christ rules over all things in the interest of the Church (Eph.1:22).

The church is not yet complete, it is still being built by Christ himself and the gates of hell can neither prevent the building nor can they stand against the church. We do wrong and rob ourselves of both thrill and peace when we begin to think of the church as being on the defensive. Through the whole of the Old Testament we read of the mighty hand of God working for the protection, the victory and the sanctification of His people. His purposes are sure and even though his ways are mysterious and past finding out they are always effective. In the New Testament we have the Gospel accounts of the total victory of Christ in his death and resurrection, and in the Epistles we have the account of on-going work of the gospel and the building of the church on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, Jesus Christ himself being the head corner-stone. The whole story of the New Testament is diffused with a sense of confidence and assurance. In every generation the men and women who are in Christ, and therefore who are the church, are urged to be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord because their labour is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor.15:58).

What then is the labour that must be the essence of building the church? The contemporary church situation would give a variety of answers ranging through routine visitation, concentration on youth work, getting involved in socio-political issues affecting the parish and the nation, campaigns against evils in other countries and livening up services by way of music, drama and dancing as part of worship. There are even those who would advocate getting rid of the Bible, its truths and standards: a desire expressed on a television interview by a minister who described the New Testament Gospels as a 'collection of grossly exaggerated stories'. But, when you read the New Testament, you discover that the church was a preaching church and the pattern of its ministry was reasoning out of the Scriptures. The spiritual debility of the church in our generation stems from its neglect of the Scriptures, a neglect that is becoming recognised, as is evident from the increasing emphasis on the need for education within the church, starting with the eldership, in order to dispel the ignorance of Scripture and Christian doctrine. An example of this ignorance was seen in a young, go-ahead business man, an elder in the Kirk, who stated, 'What I like about the story of the Cross is that there is no theology in it.' If that is symptomatic of the understanding of the eldership then it is little

wonder that the church is crumbling rather than being built.

It would be wrong to suggest that there is not concern in the church. There *is* concern and a great deal of energy and ingenuity are being addressed to remedying the situation. But by and large the route being followed is one of reorganisation on every level from administration, through new forms of worship, new patterns for raising Christian liberality, to new schemes of teaching material for all ages. But the sheer volume of changes and experiments is self-defeating. This has always been the case. Consider the following quotation from the Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter, A.D.66:

We trained hard — but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams, we would be reorganised. I was to learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganising, and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralisation.

The illusion of progress created by activity of the kind mentioned above is the very thing that keeps the church from recognising that by and large it is failing to get down to the business of building the church. The distraction is subtle. It is right and proper to emphasise that the gospel must be applied to every part of human life, personal and social. No-one can possibly disagree with that. But the *application* of the gospel is not the explanation of the gospel and should not precede it. The imperative declaration of the message of salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and the power of Christ to transform and deliver sinners from their guilt and their condition must come before the application of that truth to life. If the order is reversed and the preaching of the gospel of salvation is either displaced or assumed (or even denied) then we first qualify the message, then ignore it and finally lose it. This is the present national situation. By and large people do not know that there is a gospel, that there is a need for salvation and that sinners need to be reconciled to God. To a great extent people assume that they and everyone else are in some way 'Christian' and that all go to heaven in the end. If people are given the impression that all go to heaven no matter how they have ignored God and Christ, then they will obviously take the attitude that there is no great need to bother about salvation and in consequence the church is regarded as irrelevant or at best an interesting activity for those so inclined, especially women and children.

Think of the apostolic situation. It was a society living under totalitarian military rule. It was marked by entrenched materialism and social breakdown with the inevitable disintegration of marriage and family life. It was evident that its cultural achievements were past their peak and there were many evidences of emergent demonism. There was a tremendous ignorance of the truth of God, as evidenced by the altar in Athens to 'The Unknown God'. In that situation the apostles and missionaries, armed with the Scriptures and with a burning desire to make Christ known, turned the world upside down.

They were convinced about their message and they laid out the truth of Scripture systematically. They were equally convinced that their methods were not carnal or worldly and they made no attempt to copy the patterns and procedures of society. Their weapon was the Scriptures and they had confidence in them and in the God who had given them. The fruit of their work was the building of the church.

If we consider the accounts of apostles' preaching in the Acts of the Apostles as they opened up the Scriptures and affirmed the truths concerning the person and work of Christ in his death and resurrection; and if we consider the comprehensive nature and the spiritual depth of the teaching of the Epistles, letters sent in the first instance to comparatively new Christians and newly established congregations that were still feeling their way, then we have a marvellous example of the kind of ministry by which salvation is heralded and the church built in an unfriendly, antagonistic and needy society. We have also a tremendous challenge and a glorious encouragement to go and to do the very same thing in the very same way in our own generation, getting down to the systematic preaching of the Word of God, expounding and applying it in such a way that all who hear will know beyond any shadow of doubt that we both believe it and are prepared to live by it.

This deliberate commitment to the preaching of the Word of God, going through Old and New Testaments book by book, chapter by chapter, verse by verse where necessary, is the 'experiment' which simply has it been tried by the generality of the church over the past forty years. The ignorance of the Scriptures inside the church and the apparent distaste for coming to grips with the basic doctrines of salvation and life give manifest evidence of this appalling neglect. It is not a situation that can be rectified on the basis of conference and training week-ends, valuable as these may be at times. Nor is it a situation to be rectified by simply reading books and pamphlets, or by personal Bible study, or by means of small group discussions, however valuable these may be. The root of the remedy lies in the pulpits of individual congregations with the Word of God being fully preached, holding back nothing that is profitable. But this is not a case of cold, clinical statements of Biblical truth, nor an obsessive concern to have every theological sentence exactly formulated. Such a manner of preaching tends to cause people either to switch off because they have heard it all before or to make them look for doctrinal inaccuracies, and so fail to hear the Word of God. The Scriptures must be unfolded, preached and applied as the very bread of God to feed the souls of the people. It is the Word of God for life, every aspect of life, and the preacher has the responsibility to show the people how comprehensively this Word applies to them.

Not all will agree that working through books of the Bible, balancing Old and New Testament, giving full place to the Gospel narratives, and tackling epistles such as Romans at regular intervals, is necessarily

the best way. But the one thing that must be done is to deal with all the Scriptures and so preserve a true balance of Biblical truth for feeding, guiding and instructing the flock of God, enabling them to grow up into Christ ready for sacrificial service, and at the same time equipping them to discern and to stand against all the false messages that riddle and corrupt present-day society. It can only be described as tragedy that there are men in the ministry for many years who have never once, for example, led their people right through even one of the Gospels, or through the glories of Paul's Letter to the Romans, or for that matter led them through a systematic study of the Apostles' Creed, let alone the Westminster Confession of Faith.

It is recorded in Scripture that an educated man from Ethiopia was reading his scroll of Isaiah's prophecy when Philip, led by the Spirit of God, came to him and asked if he understood what he was reading and of whom the Scriptures spoke. His reply, 'How can I understand except someone teaches me?' is a heart-cry that is echoed many times in our own generation. To ignore that cry or to fail to answer it by presenting dry husks rather than the bread of God, is to fail in what Jesus commanded, 'Feed my sheep'. It is recorded in the Old Testament that a revival of true religion in the time of Josiah took place as a direct result of the re-discovery of the Word of God in the House of God. A church that has lost the Bible is a church that has nothing to say that will be of saving help to society. But a church built on the Word of God is a church that will know what it believes. It will never be an impersonal religious gathering but will grow to be a family and a fellowship whose hunger will be both met and yet also stimulated by the good Word of God. It will bring into being churches that are marked by a sense of the presence of God, churches that are centred on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. In a lost and lonely generation that is increasingly frightened because there is nothing to live for, nothing to be sure about, nowhere to go and indeed no signposts to show the way, there will gather again to Jesus all the lame and the blind, the needy and the oppressed. When such find a Saviour and learn his love and gracious power they will not only rejoice, they will teach their children and their children's children after them, and the church will go on being built.

All that has been said in this article has been the foundation and inspiration of a systematic ministry of the Word of God in the same congregation for nearly thirty years. In measure at least it has proved itself, as even its critics would concede. These basic principles of ministry and the vision of its possibilities were learned by sitting under such a ministry in Gilcomston South Church, Aberdeen for six years. These decades of experience have brought the conviction that a truly Biblical ministry is the ideal and creative context for pastoral counselling, not least because it makes people willing to be helped and brings them under the gracious influence of both Word and worship. Systematic preaching is demanding. It calls for a rigorous ordering of

priorities and an equally rigorous refusal of distractions. But once a man sees the true glory of the on-going work of the local congregation and is prepared under God to give himself to it with gladness of heart, that man will know he has in very truth the privilege of being a fellow-labourer with God in the building of the church.