

## Unless the Lord Builds the House

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, November 4, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Ruth 4:7-17; Psalm 127; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13, 17-20; Matthew 23:1-12.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Do you remember what Barbara read from the Book of Psalms? "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." The Bible has a lot to say about building. Remember how once ages ago some people said, "Come, let us build ourselves a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves." The Lord came down and destroyed the tower of Babel, scattered the people and confused their language.

Or remember how King David wanted to build a temple for the Lord but the word of the Lord came to him saying, "You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood in my sight on the earth." It was left to Solomon, David's son, to build the temple.

Remember also what Jesus said about building. "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

Or again Jesus told a story about two builders. One built a house on sand and the other build a house on a rock. The rains came down and the floods came up. The house on the rock stood firm but the house built on sand collapsed.

Remember also how Jesus said to Peter, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

All this helps to explain what the Psalmist meant when he said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." The Christian

faith involves this realisation - The futility of human effort that doesn't rely on the will, the power, and the love of God. True religion, one famous theologian wrote, is the feeling of absolute dependence.

This is true of a nation as well as of a house. The year is 1787 - over ten years after the Revolutionary War. We're in Philadelphia at the Constitutional Convention. The Moderator of the Constitutional Convention gives the floor to Benjamin Franklin who rises to speak.

"In the beginning of the contest with Britain", he begins, "when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayers in this room for Divine protection. Our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered.... And have we now forgotten this powerful Friend? or do we imagine we no longer need his assistance?.... We have been assured, sir, in the Sacred writings, that 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall proceed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: we shall be divided by our little partial, local interests; our prospects will be confounded; and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a by-word down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter, from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing government by human wisdom, and leave it to chance, war, or conquest. I therefore beg leave to move that henceforth prayers, imploring the assistance of heaven and its blessing on our deliberations, be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business...."

Not bad for a Deist who was not an orthodox Christian by any means. And if he sensed the futility of human effort apart from God's blessing, how much more should we who call ourselves Christians? Today, when we're hearing so many discouraging predictions of a recession, and just two days

before an election, and divided by our little, partial and local interests, and with thousands of troops in Saudi Arabia, and at the point of despair of establishing government by human wisdom and in danger of leaving it to war, the message of the Psalmist takes on new urgency. As a nation, do we realize, as Benjamin Franklin did, the futility of any human undertaking that doesn't rely on the will, power and love of the God we know in Jesus Christ?

And if this is true of a nation, it's just as true in our every-day lives, in our work, and in our families. How can we enjoy security in our town, happiness in our families, satisfaction in our work apart from the blessing of the God we know in Jesus?

When I was a boy I enjoyed building model airplanes. I'd buy a balsa wood kit and glue and paint. I'd painstakingly follow the directions, carefully use my exacto knife to cut out the parts then glue and pin the pieces in place. Now I'm a man with a family but what I learned from building model airplanes still has value. To build a model airplane, carefully follow the directions. To build a family, I need to read and follow the directions in the Bible, the Word of God. I need to seek God's blessing and guidance and rely on God's will and power and love that I've come to trust because of Jesus.

Now I find myself leading a congregation through the process of physically building a new church. I feel the excitement that I felt as a boy whenever I started building a new model. And I feel all the more that we need to really study and know the master plan found in the Bible. We need to give expression to our dependence on God through our prayers. We really need to know what the church is for... that we exist to carry out a mission in the world that no other organization in the world can fulfill... *A mission that involves our work, but also our dependence on the Word and Spirit of God working in us.*

Do you feel inadequate to do this? Do you worry, as I do, about how this church is going to be built? Do you feel, as I do, an increasing sense of the *do you think only of the physical matter*

futility of undertaking this task apart from the blessing of the God whom we know in Jesus?

Kennon L. Callahan writes in his excellent little book, Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, "Effective long-range planning builds on a God-given hope that is prayerful and powerful. In prayerful ways- open to God's power- the long-range planning committee genuinely prays, 'What is God calling us to do- as His people?'"

But, Callahan, goes on, "It is strange to me that so many committees do not pray. They study statistics and charts. They draw up long lists of problems and needs. They fail to see the strengths that God has provided them. They discuss their options for the future more like amateur sociologists than 'called-of-God Christians.' And they wonder why they fail." It seems like Callahan is saying exactly what the Psalmist said, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain."

"Why is it", I ask myself, "that I find it easier to work than to pray, especially with other people?" Why is it that we Presbyterians, especially those who are most active and hard workers seem to eat the bread of anxious toil when the Lord wants to give us sleep.

I was reading about the Korean church in the latest issue of Presbyterian Survey. Last year 90,000 Koreans were converted to Christ and became Presbyterians. What are the reasons for the amazing growth of Protestant churches in Korea? And then I read, "All across Korea thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of Presbyterians and Methodists and other Christians get up at 4 a.m. and come to church daily for the dawn prayer meeting. The general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Korea says, 'What is the thing that makes the difference? It's the dawn prayer meeting.'" In Korea there's a powerful sense of the reality of God among Christians and a sense

of the futility of undertaking the task of building the church apart from reliance on the will and power and love of the God they know in Jesus.

The house I grew up in was built almost entirely by my father. He started building it during the depression years in the thirties. He worked 40- 50 hours a week on the railroad and came home to work on the house. He got started on the house when he received a long delayed benefit given to WWI veterans. He used that money to buy some land, dig a cellar and lay a foundation. Then the money ran out and the house-building was put on hold.

But my father had a very good friend who'd served with him in France. He was a Jew and he owned a liquor store in Wilmington. We called him Izzy. My family dearly loved Izzy and when he died we mourned as if he had been a father or an uncle.

My father wasn't a drinker, except for a beer every once in a while, but he'd often stop by the liquor store to visit Izzy. Izzy would always ask, "How's the house coming, Acky." And my dad would proudly inform him of the progress. But one day my dad had to tell him that the building was on hold until he got more money. To my dad's surprise, Izzy took out a check book, tore out a blank check, signed his name at the bottom and gave it to my father. My father asked, "What's this?" "Take it and fill in whatever amount you need to build the house. Pay me back, without interest, when you have the money." My dad wanted to give him a promissory note but Izzy flatly refused. "Do you think if anything happened to you, Acky, I'd take your house and put your wife and kids out?"

And so our house got built- a beautiful, two-story, white frame home that I grew up in. I remember sitting in the living room and hearing my dad tell the story over and over again about how our house got built through the

generosity of a Jewish liquor store proprietor and how he couldn't have done it without Izzy.

That makes me think how dependent you and I are on another Jew who once turned water into wine. How dependent we are for the physical building we hope to build... how dependent we are as a nation on the undeserved blessings that God has poured out on us despite our decadence and materialism... how dependent we are on this Jew for the blessings of a happy family life... and meaningful work. How dependent we are upon this Jewish carpenter to build us up spiritually as the Body of Christ.

One final word. This past Wednesday was not only Halloween, it was also Reformation Day. I believe that the Reformation was the historical working out of the truth of what the Psalmist wrote, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Reformation Day celebrates the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. This was a great historical movement associated with Martin Luther in Germany, John Calvin in France

and Switzerland and John Knox, in Scotland. *John Keith writes in a recent Presbyterian Outlook, "The emphasis of the Reformation was not on what people do, but on what God has done. It was supremely a message about God's intentions for his creation and what God has done for the salvation of human beings."*

The Reformers preached to men and women who were burdened, like the people in the days of Jesus, with religious rules and regulations and obligations laid upon them by religious leaders. At the heart of the Reformers' message was that *that* God had come down in Jesus, to lift the heavy burden, God's favor and love can't be earned but is given freely and that the Christian life flows out of forgiveness. Like Paul, the Reformers worked night and day proclaiming the Gospel and urging, encouraging and pleading that people might lead a life worthy of God, who had called them into his own kingdom and glory.

And yet, despite all their work, they preached that all our religious efforts don't earn God's favor. God's favor is a gift freely given and made possible through the work of Christ who died for us and who took upon

himself our sins. Good works, therefore, are a grateful response to God's love shown to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Not even faith is a good work that earns us salvation. Rather faith is a gift that a gracious God freely gives to those who don't have it and which he increases as we become more and more aware of God's free and unmerited forgiveness and acceptance.

These Reformers proclaimed that it's futile to build a church or to attempt to live the Christian life apart from the Word and Spirit of the Living God. The church is built up, and the Christian life is lived, by the Word and Spirit of the Living God living in and working through God's people. May God's Spirit work through us to build up our families, our work, our nation and our church as we recognize the futility of all human endeavor that doesn't depend upon the Word and Spirit of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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