

The Builder and the Foundation

My Lancastrian grandfather migrated to Western Australia in 1912. My Lancastrian grandmother followed in 1914. They and their first two children lived under canvas for some time, until their tent eventually settled in a little country town called Brookton. Brookton is not built on sand-dune like Perth. It is built on clay, which holds the water and makes a perfect mud. In fact, Brookton's clay proved suitable for brick-making, which my grandfather soon took to, digging, forming and sun-drying the clay, until he could build a modest mud-brick house for his growing family. This house was built without any more foundation than Brookton's clay soil.

Later, my grandfather was involved in the production of kiln-fired clay bricks, and built another house, with foundations, but I never knew him to live in it. My father lived in it though, after he married.

But early in the 1950's, my father began work on a new house he himself would build for his family, the house that I grew up in. Apparently he was particular about house foundations, and this is how he built them: He surveyed the perimeter. He dug trenches around that perimeter, into the heavy Brookton clay. He built wooden baffles to create flat runs on the level. He mixed the concrete, poured it into the trenches and levelled it. Within this outline, he built low brick plinths to hold wooden floor joists.

By the time my father had died, in his 80's, and my mother had decided to build herself a smaller brick house, the Meckering earthquake had changed building regulations for foundations. The concrete slab laid for her house, had to sit on a small plateau of sand, built up on top of Brookton's clay.

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My grandparents' original tent is long gone. My grandparents' sun-dried clay brick house is also long gone. Only the houses with proper foundations remain standing, one of my grandfather's, one of my father's, and one of my mother's.

But every house had been very deliberately built, a great investment of sustained focus and applied skills, a passionate and personal application of effort, in other words, hard and sometimes painful work, driven by the desire to provide for and protect the family.

And this is something the apostle Paul could apparently identify with.

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In today's epistle reading, the Apostle Paul used vocabulary from the work of building. He used the word "foundation" a lot, and referred to various building materials.

But Paul was not writing about anything physical. He was using words about physical things to refer to something spiritual. He was using metaphor. When he called himself "a skilled master builder", he was not referring to digging trenches. He was referring to his

apostolic preaching, to his sustained application of focus and skill in calling forth this fledgling Christian congregation in Corinth.

And, as if he were a building inspector, Paul went on to warn his co-workers in the faith in his absence, saying, “choose with care how to build”, “for the work of each builder ... will be revealed”.

It was not the local town council that would come around and stick a CEASE WORK or CONDEMNED notice on unsatisfactory work. It was God who would test their spiritual building, to see whether it was built of anything of enduring spiritual value.

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For Paul disagreed with some factions in the congregation at Corinth about just what was of spiritual value. They thought they were building with “gold”. He knew they were building with “straw”, and that their “straw” would be consumed in God’s testing fire.

Metaphorically speaking, their spiritual “building” would end up like those material buildings consumed in the recent NSW fires, the whole structure destroyed, until misshapen and blackened sheets of zincalume lay on the ground beneath their owners’ feet, no longer able to provide a roof over their heads, none of it fit-for-purpose.

Those who build spiritual houses, have always to build fit-for-purpose-in-the-event-of-divine-fire, according to the apostle Paul.

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The city of Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans a century and a half before Christ, but from 44 BC, the year Julius Caesar turned himself into a dictator, Corinth was rebuilt as a Roman colony. The rebuilt city became very wealthy and very proud of its reputation for vice. Perhaps it was the Las Vegas of its time.

But when Paul got there, about 20 years after the Crucifixion, enough Corinthians in more humble circumstances received his preaching of the gospel, “Christ died – Christ has been raised”, to form a Christian congregation. But being born in humble circumstances, doesn’t necessarily make you humble. Sometimes, it produces the most “aspirational” people of all. Perhaps there was some human inevitability in many of the socio-economically lowly new Christians at Corinth being much more interested in the “Christ has been raised” part of the gospel, than in the “Christ died” part.

Their spiritual enthusiasm leapt quickly over the Crucifixion. They considered themselves already ascending to heaven with their risen Lord. It no longer really mattered how they behaved in this world, because they felt themselves already dwelling in the next. In this detachment from this world, in this over-estimation of their current participation in the resurrection, some became libertine and some became ascetic.

They thought their focus on resurrection very, very wise, pure gold. Paul thought it pure straw, as many aspirational theologies are. In ancient Corinth, as in some sectors of the contemporary church, their relation to reality was distorted, as were their relationships with

others. Paul warned that they were destroying the very community that God had been building for their spiritual protection.

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When Paul challenged the Corinthian Christians to become fools, he did not mean that they should become irrational or unthoughtful. He meant that God's wisdom takes a very peculiar form, the crucifixion of Christ, which looks really foolish to the world. It appears to be the opposite of aspirational, but this was where the Corinthians needed to focus their enthusiasm: Not in pretending to have imitated Christ's resurrection ascent, but in really imitating Christ's descent into a world that crucified him.

Such a descent, if it is not to express a misplaced masochism, must be undertaken in great spiritual freedom and power.

So Paul encouraged them with a reminder that all things were theirs, including life and death, including the present and the future. Though they were poor and lowly in human terms, founded on Christ, they lacked nothing truly valuable.

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Ultimately, God is the "skilled master builder", and the foundation God has chosen to use for this build, the Church, is Jesus Christ, who took this world so seriously it crucified him, and this the Church is called to proclaim. Our true participation in God's build, our building one another up, cannot by-pass our following the crucified Christ, for only a house with foundations remains standing.

Amen.

Margaret Tyrer