

Zion's Foundation

"His foundation is in the holy mountains" (Psalm 87:1).

It is necessary to read the rest of the psalm to learn that the foundation mused upon by the poet is the foundation of Zion, the city of God, the church of the living God. Depending upon the sense considered, the church may be the redeemed of all time everywhere, or it may be a particular local congregation. We wish to take it in the latter sense, and that, not in the simplest manifestation ("where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I"), but in the sense of an established body of believers that has some degree of permanence to it. It is true that a band of believers may meet for a period of time and then, for some reason, disband and scatter. The fact that they did not continue certainly does not mean that they wasted their time, or were not in some sense a church. But the Lord's letters to the seven churches in Asia tell us that a church is a gathering of regenerate believers in the manifest presence and blessings of the Lord, and, unless it falls under judgment, should endure over time. This will be true only if it has God's foundation. My attention was recently brought to focus on this foundation by a preacher's question, "How should one go about planting or starting a church?"

The various carnal foundations, the criteria that are usually employed by men soon came to mind. Make certain you have a good location with proper demographics, a pool of people from which to draw converts or proselytes. An attractive and appropriate name. In order to have credibility and fraternity, get in a large, respectable denomination. Better yet, secure its sponsorship. In order to ensure doctrinal stability and purity, adopt a confession of faith, a creed, so that people will know what is to be believed. To protect property and polity, draw up a well-thought-out constitution and by-laws. Take measures to ensure a desirable membership, adequate financing, and attractive and successful program, and a competent staff.

Now, I have been around long enough to know quite well, that these, the best of men's foundations, will ensure nothing but a well-oiled religious abomination. They are worthless so far as bringing into existence a "habitation of God through the Spirit." Some of the worst and sorriest of ecclesiastical pretensions have glorious names, and some of the most vital and powerful, an obscure name. Denominations, the best ones, cannot breathe spiritual life into dust which man has piled together. Some of the most blasphemously apostate churches yet profess an orthodox and evangelical creed. No one believes it. And if a body of people must have a rigid constitution and by-laws to compel them to do what is right, it may as well disband and turn everything over to the devil anyway. The saints are governed by grace, not by law. Only *God* may be looked to for finances, ministers and fruitful gospel ministry.

The fact of the matter is, terms such as "church planting," "starting" or "founding" a church, are activities *alien to the gospel and are a perversion of the great commission!*

Too often a man wants to start a church so that he can have a ministry, a position, to make room for himself. Likewise, denominations and movements wish to plant churches in order to broaden their base of power and finances, to propagate their particular views (which, of course, are the only correct views), or to distinguish themselves as approved of God. Nor may churches found churches. Biblical churches have a sister relationship, not a mother/daughter one. Ecclesiastical succession is barely removed from Roman Papal succession.

We are not told to plant churches, but to preach the gospel, teaching men what Christ commanded us. That is what the early apostles did. That is what the persecution-scattered Christians did. They met with people and bore witness of Jesus Christ. An itinerate preacher might spend a few days, weeks, months or years in a place, teaching the word of God. Then he would leave. At some time later, he, or someone else, would return and find a vital functioning church there; one that had been established *by the Lord Himself*.

If I start a church, it is up to me to keep it going and make sure it stays pure. If *God* starts one, I have no such burden. He is perfectly able to sponsor what He undertakes. My own responsibility goes no further than my obedient and fervent ministry to God's flock. Then if He should choose to judge it, or remove His lampstand, I will not be caught opposing God by trying to keep some has-been going.

Where, then, may God's foundation of Zion be discovered? The psalmist tells us it is in *the holy mountain*. If we are to consider this psalm in the literal Old Testament sense, then these mountains mean no more than those hills upon which Jerusalem was situated. But if we are to reap the spiritual treasures of this figure, we must take those mountains as metaphors of that which is immeasurably vast, immovably fixed, awesome and glorious to behold. And they are said to be *holy*, that which pertains to God Almighty alone.

The foundation of the church is in god Himself, the glories and perfections of His attributes. It comes out of His **Eternal** Being, conceived in His **Sovereign** will, according to His perfect **Wisdom** and exhaustive **Omniscience**. It is established after Him in His glorious **Holiness**, in His flawless **Righteousness**, by His irresistible **Omnipotence**, forever fixed in His **Immutability**. It is founded in the Purchase of the Person of Christ in particular. Zion gained her first identity as a gift from the Father to the Son.

God's churches are founded in His eternal decrees by which He purposes and bring t pass all things. In these decrees are the elect, those particular persons whom He chooses to save, and those for whom Christ died and whom the Holy Spirit calls and seals. A church can come into being only in that place where God chooses to put a witness of Himself and His gospel. Large or small numbers of people (prospects) mean almost nothing. Certainly the world was well populated at the time of the Flood, and Sodom had multitudes of unchurched persons. *God's* churches may be found only in that place on earth which God chooses to bless with His truth. We must certainly take note that vital living churches are not found everywhere. It is not without cause in God's sovereign purpose that Moslem nations are closed to Christian churches. God "laid (Esau's) mountains waste." Nor has God's will been frustrated in the spiritual wastelands of other nations. The New Testament bears unmistakable witness to the fact that God forbade His gospel to be preached in some places, that Christ refused to work miracles in some places, that some places are cursed, left desolate and marked out for judgment. We should not fail to take note of the increasing spiritual desolation of the British Isles, once filled with mighty churches of Christ. How, then, we should view with alarm, the decline of true churches in this country, and how blessed is that place which God yet chooses to bless with His truth!

Others of those "holy mountains" are those particular ones of all His elect whom He may choose to build up and make strong, to feed strong meat and prepare for special ministries. He determines the particular *kind* of church each one is. Though they all have the same Lord and same Spirit, each one is very different from all the others. God has a *particular and unique* ministry in each church. Only He can know what He wants raised up in a given place.

The holy mountains of God's foundation even reach back into His providence throughout the lives of each and every member that is brought into a particular church. Every sorrow, every joy, every triumph and defeat shapes this living stone to fit in its place in the building. The spiritual gifts bestowed upon each Christian are preparation and enablement for his function in a particular church with its unique ministry.

So what is the young man to do who wishes to start a church? Forget about starting a church. That is god's business, not yours. You do not have access to the holy mountains in which is the foundation. You haven't a clue as to where God would have a church or what sort of ministry it should pursue. Preach the gospel to anyone who will listen to it. Attend gatherings where opportunities may arise. Gather people and conduct gospel meetings, Bible studies and prayer meetings. If God is pleased to put a church together, He will do it without fail, and it will be the right kind. He will bless it with His presence and power. He will supply

its every need, and it will stand. If God does not put a church together, then you have lost nothing, for you have done what He commanded you to do. He *will* bless His word. And your labor of love will not be forgotten.

-C.M.