

the TREASURY

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Enduring Foundations

A sermon preached at the General Assembly in Trinity, Wrexham by Revd Neil Kirkham on 8th July 2019

You'll be familiar with those hollow, Russian dolls that split in the middle. Don't you just hate them? They are so full of themselves!

Paul was writing to the church in Corinth, a cosmopolitan trading centre where people worshipped many gods. There was a plethora of temples to various deities. Although not a University City like Athens it was still permeated by Greek sophistry, art and culture. It was renowned for its immorality. The worship of Aphrodite led to temple prostitution and sexual immorality, whilst the commerce bred a love of money. You might be wondering what relevance this could possibly have for twenty-first century Britain!! Before you dismiss it please bear with me.

It's out of this culture that the new church emerges. Old habits die hard. I often wonder how I would react if I were suddenly plunged back into the atmosphere and ethos of a construction site. Would I revert to the surrounding culture? I hope after thirty years that I have moved on. This church, however, is new and still surrounded by the practices that it came out of and so constantly faces temptation. Paul has heard about their problems of jealousy, quarrelling, immorality, law suits in pagan courts, false teaching and syncretism with other faiths and cultures. Again all of these might be dismissed as irrelevant to the church in Britain today. We don't quarrel do we? Paul describes the church there as immature and



Revd Neil Kirkham and Revd John Dowber, both of whom will host the Association in the East 25th–26th September in Llandudno and Penrhyn Bay.

unspiritual. It was after all a new church. We can't use that excuse.

Paul begins by addressing the divisions and factions. Some claimed to belong to Paul, some to Apollos, some to Peter. In separating like this they were acting as mere men.

(I've omitted the story about the men's breakfast. It's funny but adds little to the theme.)

The apostle hasn't joined some feminist movement here that dismisses the male gender as totally foolish. He is comparing them as mere mortals, with a worldly view, to the thoughts of God. "Are you saved by Paul, baptised into his name, was he crucified for you?" The apostle describes himself as a servant – of God and of the church. He plays down the importance of individuals. He is not 'full of himself' and neither should they be. They are simply instruments who share what God has done.

We were privileged recently to hear the testimony of 'Richard' who came from a life of drug and alcohol abuse to becoming a disciple of Jesus. There was an enormous change in his life. We often speak of 'giving MY testimony' as if to say 'see how wonderful I have become'. Of course that's not it. It is a testimony of what God has done in my life. A good testimony shows the contrast between the before and after God has intervened. The picture before is the real me. What you see now is the difference God makes. Please don't elevate people.

There are lots of gifted leaders and we all have our heroes. One of mine was John Stott who, for me, had a high view of Scripture and showed a wonderful understanding and interpretation of it. However, he combined that with an application of God's Word that flowed from compassion and

humility. But he was a fallible human being like me and he would be the first to admit it. We all have Sunday school teachers and ministers who have inspired us and we give thanks to God for them as we have in this Communion service, but they were human. They didn't save us. Jesus is the one who saves and hence brings unity. We all need him and belong to him.

Paul goes on to use two illustrations from farming and building. It is vital to distinguish our role and God's role. We plant, water, tend, harvest but the miracle worked by God is the growth. That's the clever bit we can't do. I never cease to be amazed at how God can cram two wardrobes, a boat, dining furniture and a dresser into one acorn! As humans our tasks are different, all are important, and we are all working towards the same end – a spiritual harvest. Hence we have evangelists, preachers, teachers, prophets and apostles, not to mention church planters and the administrators whose gift makes it all possible. At the end of the day only God can change the human heart. We all share in the same joy when someone comes to faith. Here is the source of unity. We all need Jesus. We all serve Jesus.

Then Paul goes on to talk about building (I'm on more familiar ground here!). Again it's the evangelist who lays the foundation and others build on that. The only foundation is Jesus. I'm probably not the only one who is surprised at the worldwide spread of courses like ALPHA and Christianity Explored. These are foundational courses. Interestingly many long time church members have been

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blessed by doing them. When we began the ALPHA course in Llandudno some twenty years ago, many members said they would come "but don't expect me to say anything". After three weeks we couldn't stop them! We had one young girl, 'Michelle', who asked loads of questions. She wouldn't let us get away with anything. "What do you mean by that?" "Can you explain that, I don't understand?" Some of our older members were seen nudging her and saying, "Do you know I've always wanted to know that but been afraid to ask!" When I was educated in school we weren't encouraged to ask questions.

Teachers dictated notes and we were expected to memorise them for exams whether we understood or not. (Some teachers had, thankfully, moved on from that!). Consequently, even now, there are people attending church regularly who have never grasped the foundations of the faith and there are preachers getting frustrated that when they preach 'the deeper things' some people just don't get it because the foundation isn't there. They're trying to build on sand.

Paul's role has been to lay solid foundations. He does go on to teach and build up through his letters but primarily he was establishing churches in Asia Minor and Greece. He didn't stay long; three years in Ephesus was the longest (not twenty-seven years in Llandudno). Other people like Apollos and Timothy would build on the foundations.

At this point it is worth celebrating the work going on at Bala. The staff there, for many years, have been laying solid foundations in the lives of young people in Wales and building on it. I don't suppose many of them will still be attending Bala when they're fifty or sixty. Other people will build on the foundations as well. However they are preparing a generation of future leaders for the Church of God in Wales. That's worth celebrating.

However, what we build with is vital. Gold, silver and costly stones are things which last. Wood, hay and straw go up in flames. Pam and I are members of the National Trust and have recently visited Uppark whilst on holiday. They were nearing the end of a twelve month

refurbishment in 1989. With two days to go a roofer with an oxyacetylene torch, whilst putting the finishing touches to the lead flashings, met with a few wood shavings, carelessly left in the attic. Five years and £20M of insurance money later it was restored once again.

Photographs showed that only the shell of the building, made of brick and stone, survived. All our work will be tested on the day of judgement but there are smaller tests which give us an indication of how we're doing – a bit like a mock GCSE. The real exam counts but the mocks show us whether

we're on the right track.

Similarly tests in life show us whether faith is solid and real. When we have to close a chapel and the members decide to call it a day and have a lie-in on a Sunday instead, we cannot but wonder if the foundation and building of faith were really in place.

In Llandudno the Welsh-speaking churches courageously decided to come together in one building. It meant that the Annibynwyr Chapel in Deganwy Avenue closed and was replaced by a block of flats. There is a plaque on the wall that states, 'Here

stood Deganwy Avenue Chapel' (with dates and details). Underneath it says, 'BUT the Word of our God stands forever'. This is the material with which we build that will stand the test of time.

As we come to the table we remember that it's not about us, it's all about God. We all have different roles and areas of service, but only Jesus saves. Knowing that salvation we share in the common task of building his Kingdom, relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, and investing our time, effort and gifts in the things which are of eternal value.

Diary of a WAG

(Wife As Guest)

by Beryl Matthews

The clock has struck midnight, the ball is over, and I'm back in the kitchen. Hopefully Brian will be back in the garden, as it's missed him.

Now that it's time to say goodbye, I'd like to thank everyone who made it possible for me to travel with Brian, starting with the CEC conference in Serbia last June. At that time we were both reluctant to fly, but we really enjoyed the long flights to India and Taiwan. I'd also like to thank all those who said they enjoyed reading these diaries:- a little bit of encouragement goes a long way.

Now that all the Assemblies are over, I suppose I could give each one a score, but if Wales didn't get full marks then there could be trouble! Each Assembly has had its strengths, and I have learnt something from every one. What I have really appreciated is hearing about how the Church is supporting people according to their needs, whether or not they are Christians, trying to bring "life in all its fullness", as Jesus offered us all. The fellowship in all the countries has been amazing. We have a common bond even when we don't have

a common language.

As well as the visits which I've written about during the year, there have been opportunities to meet the Mizoram Synod Choir again and also a group of visitors from Shillong. Time spent with these people was a real joy.

I don't intend to give an account of the General Assembly in Wrexham, as there will be a full report of this. What I do want to do is to mention the three things which were most important to me. The first must, of course, be that Brian was able to give his

day for me to take some visitors out for a short trip to the aqueduct. We were a group of WAGs:- Ruth from Scotland, Margaret from the URC and Sarah Morris, wife of our General Secretary. Norah, from Ireland, had taken her son out, so couldn't join us. This outing was the third thrill of the Assembly. Our guests loved the aqueduct and were fascinated by the name Froncysyllte which they mastered very well. As you can imagine, we had plenty to talk about over coffee, but no secrets will be revealed here.



Mrs Samantha Hodgins, Mrs Ruth Sinclair (Scotland), Mrs Beryl Matthews and Mrs Christine Hodgins

valedictory address in our home church, and that our youngest daughter, Ros, also took part in the service, albeit somewhat reluctantly! I would like at this point to thank the minister, elders and members of Trinity who worked together to ensure that both services were so meaningful and memorable.

Secondly, I was really pleased that our minister, Revd David Jones, took the morning devotions at the Assembly, even though I missed the first one because the car wouldn't start and I had to walk! The second car was needed that

The year has involved a lot of work for Brian, and although he has enjoyed it, I'm sure he's glad to be handing over to Marcus, in the knowledge that he, too, will make the most of the privilege of serving as Moderator. As for me, I can only admit that the role of guest has not been a taxing one and I have really loved it. Thank you again for allowing me to accompany Brian on so many unforgettable occasions.

Beryl Matthews is a native of Monmouthshire who has lived in Wrexham for the last twenty-five years.