

1 BUILDING ON FIRM FOUNDATIONS

REVISED CROSS-CULTURAL EDITION



GUIDELINES FOR EVANGELISM
AND TEACHING BELIEVERS

Trevor McIlwain

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Building On Firm Foundations: Volume 1: Guidelines for Evangelism and Teaching Believers — Revised Edition

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Dedication

With thankfulness and praise to God, this series of books is dedicated to my parents who, by their words and godly example, taught me that the Written Word and the Living Word are the only solid and lasting foundations for this life and for eternity.

Foreword

Jesus Christ commanded us to preach the Gospel to all people. Many barriers impede progress as we seek to share Christ among those who speak a different language and whose cultural worldview is widely divergent from those of us who seek to share the Good News of Christ. One of the most critical is the communicative barrier which tends to shut out or severely distort the truth of the Word when it is presented. Whether one is teaching the Word to a group of professionals in downtown New York City or to a group of Palawano tribal people in the Philippines, the basic problem is how to teach the precepts of the Word in a clear and understandable way.

Trevor McIlwain has addressed the most important of all world evangelization tasks – the effective teaching of the Word of God. How we teach God’s Word will have tremendous impact in terms of understanding or lack of understanding upon those who listen to God’s Word.

In these volumes, Trevor McIlwain presents a soundly biblical approach to evangelism and discipleship. For years, missionaries, who have been taught by Trevor, have been applying this teaching. The results, to the glory of our Lord, have been exceptional. What Trevor presents in these volumes is not unproven theory, but a practical and proven approach to evangelism and the grounding of new believers and maturing believers. This is based on meticulously laying solid biblical foundations and then building on those foundations.

In these volumes Trevor not only demonstrates the need for establishing proper foundations, but he also details how these foundations are biblically laid. As he states, “...I will endeavor to show that the Scriptures were progressively revealed by God within the context and framework of history. Therefore, the best way to teach divine truth in any culture is God's way, within the chronological and historical framework of the Scriptures.”

These volumes are written for any Christian who desires to know and teach the Scriptures. In a deeper sense, however, they are written by a missionary for missionaries. The barriers encountered in teaching the Word to people of other cultures are formidable. Trevor shows the way to penetrate these cross-cultural barriers by the careful and extensive use of Scripture. In evangelism, for example, the barriers will seldom be breached by attempts to lay the basics of the Gospel on whatever conceptual foundation the hearer may already possess. Such a shallow approach to evangelism has led to an abundance of those who profess, but do not possess, the truth of the Gospel of Grace. Even more sadly, shallow approaches have also unintentionally led to widespread reinterpretation of the Gospel. Such reinterpretation generates another gospel, as the Apostle Paul termed such error, together with another Jesus and another spirit (2 Corinthians 11:4). It is true that the unregenerate heart of man precludes the absolute elimination of error. However, the probability for the misunderstanding, misapplication, or reinterpretation of the Gospel will be vastly reduced if Trevor McIlwain's prescriptions for laying adequate biblical foundations are followed.

Those teachers of the Word who will most benefit from these volumes will be those who carefully note both the Scripture content to be taught and the biblical principles and precise techniques for teaching. Substantial lesson material is included for the instructional benefit of those who will teach. Trevor's intention for these lessons, however, is not that they should be used directly by the reader for teaching the Word. They are to be studied and digested and then used as resource material for the teacher's own preparation of lessons keyed directly to the individual or groups being taught. With some groups, the lessons may be applicable precisely as written. In general, however, adjustments will be necessary to accommodate variables such as culture, the discourse features of the language, education, age, existing biblical knowledge, and time constraints. Trevor would admonish us, however, to beware of shortcuts and to always keep in mind that the proof of teaching is not in what the teacher has said, but in what the people have actually learned. We are to teach so as to be used by the Spirit of God to clearly and firmly establish, in the minds of those being taught, the foundational principles of the Word necessary for salvation by grace, apart from works, and for living the Christian life.

In conclusion, dear Christian, I say read on, study, digest, pray over, and prove the content of these volumes in the light of Scripture. Then, above all, go teach and make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Richard Sollis
New Tribes Mission

Foreword for Revision

“The unfolding of your words brings light” (Psalm 119:130, NIV).

1984 was the year of the unfolding of Light for the Gerai people of West Kalimantan, Indonesia.

Sometime along our journey to *become* the prepared vessels that God would use to reach out to them with the Gospel, we discovered that the Gerai had lived in this historic setting for more than two centuries. “Tang Ulu,” which we estimated to have been under construction during the tumultuous years of the American revolution, was one of three remaining “longhouses” named for their long expanse of connected family dwellings under a single enormous roof. Even at our first sight of these imposing structures, we dreamed that one day the Gerai might gather on these huge connected verandas to hear the glorious Gospel of Christ.

We found it easy to love the Gerai people, but we were continually amazed at the complexity of their view of the world in which they lived. They believed in ever-present and unpredictable good and evil spirits, in numerous guardian beings and in the spirits of the dead. Their belief in multiple gods had effectively insulated the Gerai mind **against** any concept of one true and personal God.

Our missionary team of three families was one of several teams on the verge of sharing the Gospel with a previously unreached people group in this part of Indonesia. We all faced barriers to the people understanding the Gospel.

In God’s providence and perfect timing, Trevor McIlwain came to teach a seminar. He shared with us the simple yet profound message of how the faithful and purposeful chronological unfolding of God’s story of redemption lays the foundation of truth that allows the light to shine into even the darkest intellect.

We will never take lightly the privilege it was to witness firsthand the Gerai people being genuinely transformed by the unfolding of the truth. We still marvel. This message which at first seemed so strange to them found a home in the deepest part of their understanding. Their hearts turned in grateful response to the One who had loved them and sought them out before they even knew He existed.

Throughout the years since chronological teaching resources have been available, the story of how tribal peoples like the Gerai have turned to Christ could be repeated many times over.

Readers and teachers of the *Building on Firm Foundations* series will find many improvements in this revised edition.

- A more user-friendly format, whether you are teaching or reading for personal study.
- Easier adaptation to other languages and cultures around the world, a welcomed change for those in cross-cultural teaching.

- Improvements in style and presentation gleaned from the input of users worldwide and an excellent staff of revisers and reviewers.

As this revised edition is released, it goes forth with our sincere prayer that the message contained in these volumes will continue to impact a world which is still vastly unreached. In this ever-changing and complex world, the need for clear foundational teaching and the effective telling of His Story has never been greater.

Larry Goring
New Tribes Mission

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My thanks also to all who are participating with me to revise the series. Thanks to Ruth Brendle without whom this revision would never have been possible. Thank you, Ruth, for all your hard work, helpful suggestions and patience. I also appreciate many others for their messages of encouragement and advice, including Carol Kaptain, Theo Enns, Mike Mikolavich, Don Pederson, Larry Goring, and my son and his wife, Paul and Linda McIlwain.

Finally, my deepest gratitude is to my gracious, heavenly Father for giving me the privilege of having a part in the world-wide ministry of preaching the Gospel to unevangelized people and the teaching of His Word to His Church.

Part 1



Why the Scriptures Should
Be Taught Chronologically

1

The Master Builder's Plan

With a thunderous sound, the walls cracked and crumbled. Timbers splintered. The roof buckled, falling into pieces. Floor after floor crashed one upon another, crushing, trapping, killing the tenants. In a few moments, the high-rise apartments were reduced to rubble.

How had the disaster happened? The building looked sturdy. Why would it collapse with no warning?

Subsequent investigations proved that the builder had not followed the proper building specifications and plans. Willing to gamble with the lives and the safety of human beings for the sake of money, he had cut corners and economized on many parts of the building.

The depth of the concrete had been reduced, and not all of the steel reinforcements required for the foundations had been laid down. Thus the foundations were inadequate for the height and weight of the building. The walls and floors lacked the necessary steel rods to hold and strengthen the building.

The builder had disregarded the design specifications that the architect and engineers provided. He had followed his own way because it was easier and quicker and brought him greater profit.

The results? Sorrow! Destruction! Death!

Just as this builder carelessly ignored construction standards and specifications, many Christians all over the world carelessly disregard the Master Builder's plans for building His Church.

In most instances, evangelism, whether mass evangelism or personal evangelism, is not being done according to the biblical plans given to the Church by the Divine Architect. Likewise with the preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Many who are engaged in the work of building the Church are so engrossed in their own ideas, schemes and passions that they do not stop to consider if they are working according to God's divine directions or whether their work will pass His final scrutiny.

God's work of building His Church

God is the Builder of His Church (Matthew 16:18). But He has chosen His earthly children to be partners together with Him (1 Corinthians 3:9).

The Christian's work in building the Church is similar to that of a building contractor. Just as a contractor is responsible to follow exactly the plans given to him by the owner of a building, so we are responsible to follow God's plans for building His Church.

God is the true builder of all things. *"For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God"* (Hebrews 3:4).

God builds everything according to His eternal plans. He will not change. He will never accommodate man's ideas or change His plans to go along with current trends. He will never permit any change in the specifications which He has laid down for all He has planned to do in what we call time. His work always has adequate foundations; He builds carefully, patiently and precisely. He refuses to take shortcuts in anything He does, and He never uses inferior materials or methods which are contrary to His holy and perfect nature.

The first account in Scripture of God's building work is when He created the heavens and the earth. *"By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth....For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast"* (Psalm 33:6, 9). God was the Creator Builder of all things, seen and unseen. The theory of evolution is Satan's lie, foisted on foolish, unbelieving man. The theory of evolution is contrary to the nature and character of God because God leaves nothing to chance. He is always in full and complete control of all His works. He created everything according to His perfect plan, and He declared that it was all good (Genesis 1:31).

Later in the Scriptures we have the account of God's command to Noah to build an ark. God did not command Noah to build the ark and then leave Noah to formulate his own plans. Rather, God told Noah exactly what must be done. Noah, God's faithful workman, did everything just as the Lord commanded him (Genesis 6:22).

When God chose to dwell with Israel, He commanded Moses to build the tabernacle. And how was Moses to build it? *"For He said, 'See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain'"* (Hebrews 8:5). Every detail, from the silver sockets which were the foundations for the boards of the tabernacle to the outer coverings of badger skins, was to be made exactly according to the divine pattern shown to Moses on Mount Sinai. Scripture assures us that Moses was faithful to Him who appointed him (Hebrews 3:2).

God's work of building the heavens and the earth was done by the power of His Word. Noah and Moses followed the words of God in all that they built. Likewise, God's present work of building His Church is also being accomplished through His mighty Word. *"For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ"* (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The building of the universe was the work of God alone. He did not use any angelic or human agent. But the great work of building the Church, like the work of building the ark and the tabernacle, has been committed to His children. *"We have this treasure in earthen vessels"* (2 Corinthians 4:7). *"We are ambassadors for Christ"* (2 Corinthians 5:20). *"You shall be*

witnesses to Me... to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God has chosen to bring His Church to completion through the teaching of His Word by the members of the Church.

If the ark and the tabernacle had to be built exactly according to God's plan, should not the Church also be built according to His plan? Surely the Bride of Christ is of even greater importance than the ark or the tabernacle. The use for the ark came to an end, and the tabernacle was superseded by the temple, but the Church is to last for eternity. Therefore, *"If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are"* (1 Corinthians 3:17). Every man's work, in relationship to the building of the Church, is going to be tried by fire. It will all come under the scrutinizing gaze of the Great Master Builder whose servants and co-laborers we are.

Whether we are seminary professors, pastors, missionaries, Bible class leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, or concerned parents wishing to see our children taught the Word of God, *"We are God's fellow workers."* We must therefore be wise, taking careful note to see if we are doing our work as He has commanded (1 Corinthians 3:9-23).

Building as a wise master builder

Paul refers to himself as a wise master builder (1 Corinthians 3:10). He laid the foundations of the Gospel on which the Corinthians' faith and hope were built, and he warned the Bible teachers in Corinth to be careful how they built on those biblical foundations which he had laid (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

As a new missionary, I had a similar responsibility as Paul had. I was responsible to lay the foundations of the Gospel and build up the individual members of the body of Christ in a remote island of the Philippines. I desired to be a wise master builder like Paul, but I wasn't sure how to be wise and careful as I built. I prayed for answers as the following questions gripped my mind and guided my search:

- By what standard did Paul judge his building methods and work and thus conclude that he was a wise master builder?
- How can all subsequent builders be sure that they are proceeding in the correct way and that their work will meet with divine approval?
- Has God only told us what to teach in His Word, or has He also shown us how to teach?
- Which is the clearest, most simple, and yet most comprehensive method of teaching the Word of God to prepare people for the Gospel and to teach them God's way of salvation?
- How can we be sure that the foundations we lay, on which others are to rest their faith, will see them safely into Heaven and stand firm in the great day of testing?
- How should we teach in order to build up God's children and lead them into the knowledge of the whole counsel of God?
- What checklist shall we use to determine if we are making headway and whether the building is being brought to completion in accordance with the divine plan?
- How can church planters know if they have done all that they should have done?

Years passed before I understood the answers to these questions. Why did it take so long? Because traditional Bible teaching methods influenced my thinking. I found the answers I needed when I finally looked to God's Word alone.

The effectiveness of biblical principles

After the Lord had shown me the biblical teaching principles that I present later in this volume, He then opened opportunities for me to share these principles with others who were also searching. In 1980, I taught a seminar for missionaries in the Philippines. These biblical teaching principles excited and gripped the hearts of my fellow missionaries who were struggling with problems identical to those I had faced in evangelism and in the planting and development of churches to spiritual maturity. These missionaries returned to their work with fresh enthusiasm, for they now had clearer guidelines and precise goals for their teaching ministry.

Seminars were also held in Bolivia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Senegal, Thailand and the USA. These initial seminars majored on evangelism, and as missionaries returned to their work, they began to follow biblical guidelines for evangelism. The missionaries laid down firm foundations for saving faith in Christ by teaching a chronological overview of the Bible story, beginning in Genesis and concluding with the ascension of Christ.

The results were immediate and lasting. Many people from various tribal groups have come to a clear understanding of God's nature and character, their own sinfulness, helplessness and hopelessness, and Christ's all-sufficient saving work through His death, burial and resurrection. Their understanding of God's plan of salvation and the certainty of their faith far surpassed that of many others who had professed conversion previously. Furthermore, through chronological teaching, many sincere tribal people, who had previously professed Christianity, came to realize that they had misunderstood the missionaries' message when they were taught previously. They are now trusting in a message which they clearly understand.

One of the first reports of great blessing came from Bob Kennell and George Walker. They had followed these scriptural methods when teaching the story of the Bible to the primitive and previously unevangelized Bisorio tribe in the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. The Bisorio people responded to a message which they clearly understood from the Scriptures. Theirs is no blind faith, based merely on what the foreigner said. Instead, it is based on a clear understanding of the God of the Bible and the history of redemption.

Confusion about laying foundations

Christ and His Gospel are the only foundations which God has ordained as a basis for the faith of guilty sinners (1 Corinthians 3:11; 15:1-2). Nevertheless, there is great confusion even among Christians regarding these foundations and the correct way to establish them through preaching God's Word.

In the construction of any building, the foundations are the first part of the structure to be prepared. The majority of Gospel preaching, however, is usually done with very little foundational preparation. This lack has contributed to a multitude of false professions and the uncertainty of many new Christians about the foundations of their faith.

Another mistake Bible teachers tend to make is failing to teach the Bible consistently as one book, just as God has prepared it for us through progressive revelation. Teachers of the Word carefully devise and prepare outlines, but few stop to consider that the Bible has an inbuilt teaching outline which, if followed, will give a clear, uncomplicated, comprehensive coverage of the entire Word of God.

Many teachers approach the Bible as if it were a treasure chest full of beautiful, precious gems. We assume that these jewels have not been given a definite pattern or design. We think that the responsibility is ours to arrange the jewels in some order which will enhance their beauty and cause them to be better appreciated. While recognizing the value of the Scriptures, many Bible teachers fail to see that there is a definite, divinely-given teaching outline which runs through the entire Word of God. We therefore proceed to arrange the Scriptures into what we consider to be comprehensive and lucid outlines. This is a basic mistake. Admittedly, good Bible teaching outlines are helpful; but too much time is spent developing methods and theories for Bible teaching, and insufficient time is given to simply teaching the Scriptures as they have been written.

The majority of Christian teaching emphasizes individual doctrines of the Bible rather than presenting the Bible as one complete, interdependent revelation of God. Heresies, misinterpretation, overemphasis of certain Scriptures, and denominationalism can, in most cases, be traced to this lack of chronological and panoramic Bible teaching.

After many years of listening to nonsequential, topical, doctrinal sermons, most of which are based on isolated texts, many church members still do not know the Bible as one book. Often-repeated verses and some doctrines may be known; but the Scriptures, according to their divinely-given historical structure, are seldom understood.

This is equally true in Sunday school programs. Children are usually taught stories from the Bible out of chronological order, and large portions of God's Word are never taught to them at all. Even a faithful Sunday school pupil is unlikely to graduate with an overall knowledge of the Bible.

The approach when teaching the Scriptures to people in other lands without previous Bible knowledge has been similar. Few changes are made to the methods used in the homeland. Insufficient time is generally given to teach the Old Testament background and foundations for the Gospel. Syncretism of heathen and Christian beliefs is often the sad result. Many in foreign lands who have professed Christianity do not understand the Gospel, nor do they understand the Scriptures as one book.

Many missionaries are so eager to preach the Gospel that they feel it is an unnecessary waste of time to teach tribal people too much of the historical portions of the Old Testament Scriptures. Nevertheless, these Old Testament historical sections form the basis for a clear understanding of the coming of Christ and the necessity of His death, burial and resurrection. The Old Testament Scriptures, correctly taught, will prepare the heart of the believing sinner to receive the Gospel in true repentance and faith.

Objective and overview

This book records my frustrations, my search, and also my joy at discovering divine teaching principles and guidelines in the Word of God. Additional volumes of *Building on Firm Foundations* contain clear, simple, yet comprehensive lessons for the unsaved and the children of God which follow the flow of biblical history from Genesis to the Revelation.