

3 BUILDING ON FIRM FOUNDATIONS

REVISED EDITION

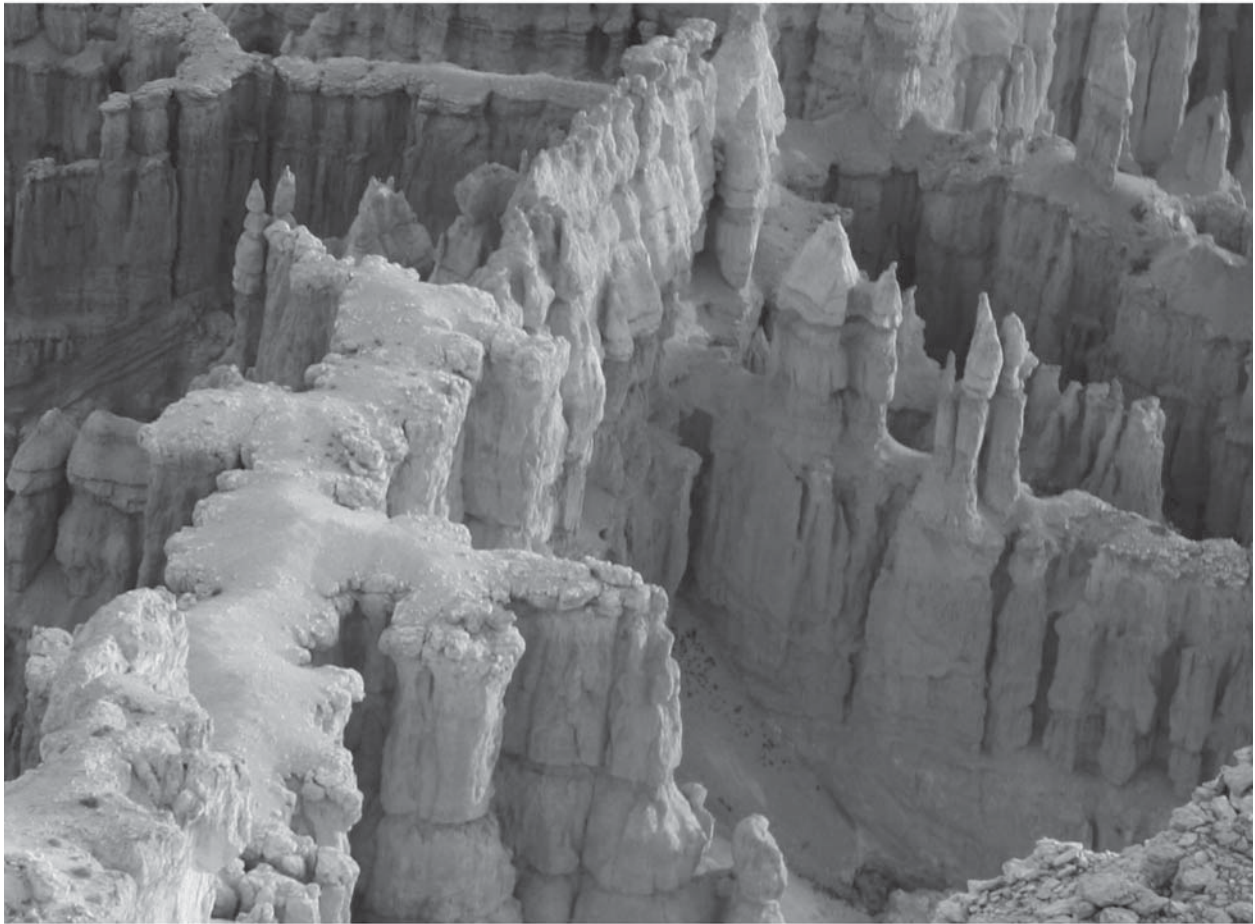


TEACHING NEW BELIEVERS:
GENESIS TO THE ASCENSION

Trevor McIlwain

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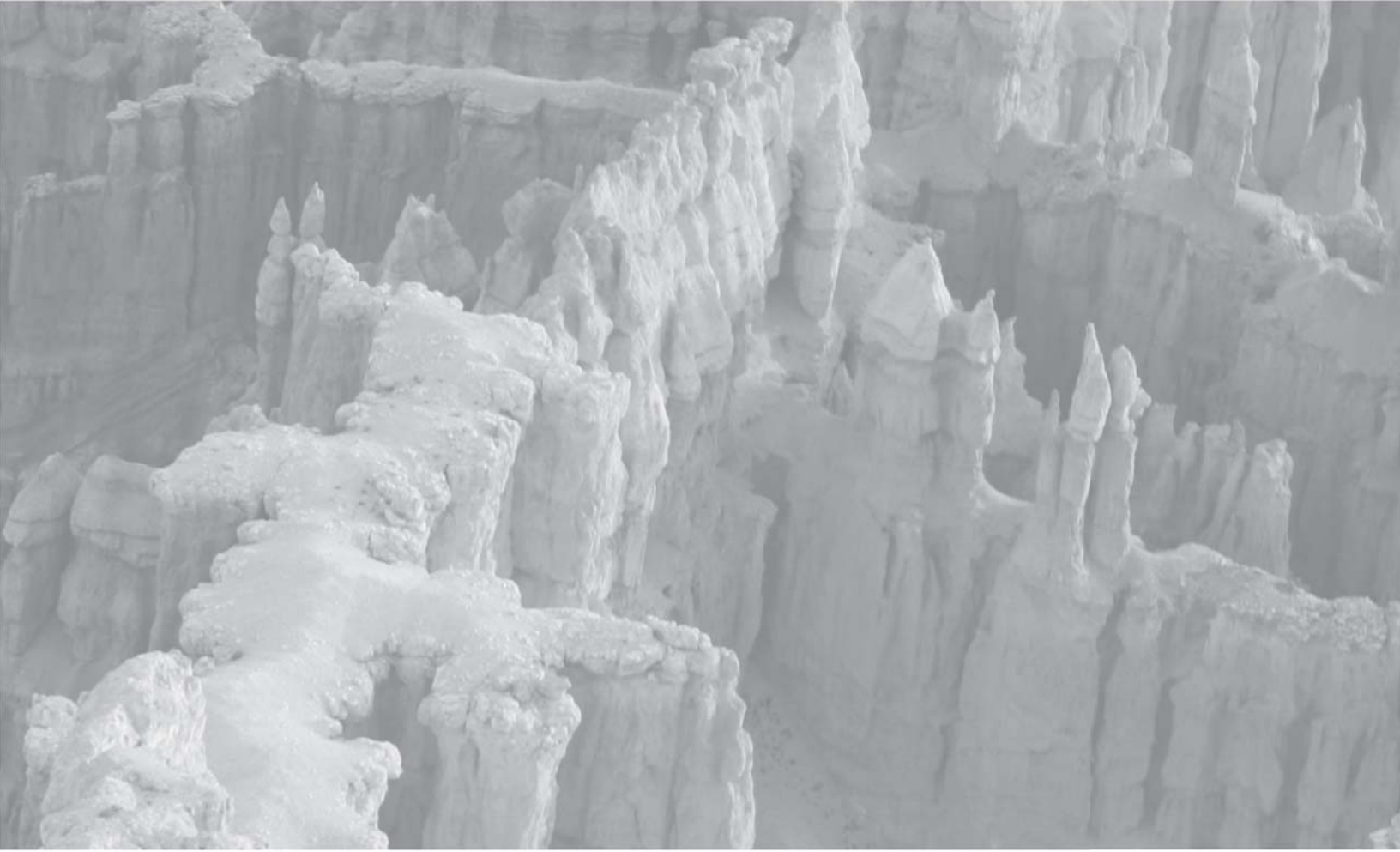
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Part 1



Preparations and Guidelines for
Teaching Phase 2

1

Preparation for Teaching New Believers

The news spread like wildfire! “The temple of the LORD is to be rebuilt in Jerusalem!”

The edict for the rebuilding of the temple of God in Jerusalem was proclaimed to the Jews throughout the kingdom where they were living as exiles. “*Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem*” (Ezra 1:3).

In response to this written decree by Cyrus, King of Persia, thousands of Jews left Babylon and made the long trek back to their own land to rebuild the temple of God. Two years later, they celebrated the laying of the foundations of God’s temple. “*And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: ‘For He is good, for His mercy endures forever toward Israel.’ Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid*” (Ezra 3:11).

What an exciting time! Surely such enthusiasm and progress would continue, with the temple building steadily rising from the foundations. But that’s not what happened. The next few chapters of Ezra describe how the work on the temple which was done under the leadership of Zerubbabel and others came to a halt (Ezra 4:1-4, 24). Years later, the foundations remained very much as they did on that day of joyous celebration. The foundations were there, but the building operations were practically at a standstill.

Shouts of joy and praise to God resound today throughout the world as the foundations of churches are being laid. These are not mere temporal buildings like that which the Jews erected in Jerusalem. These churches are part of His great, eternal, spiritual temple. Songs of praise for all eternity will be heard in this temple to the Lord Jesus Christ. Those whom He has saved by His precious blood will sing, “*You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation*” (Revelation 5:9). This eternal temple of God is constantly being extended as God’s faithful servants teach His Word to the lost. Exciting advances are being made in those places where His children – for the very first time – are

laying foundations for new churches by teaching previously unevangelized peoples and tribes in remote places of the earth.

Laying the foundations for a building can be exhausting. When the foundational work is completed, it is very easy to become discouraged or to relax, not realizing that what yet needs to be done is also vitally important. This is what happened after the foundations were completed for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Following this time of great joy, the nation of Israel became dispirited in their work. Their discouragement was the result of the cunning plans of their enemies who were determined that the temple would never be rebuilt. The reconstruction work came almost to a standstill. The foundations had been well laid, but the construction of the building barely advanced.

This illustrates one of the dangers you face after teaching Phase 1, Genesis to the ascension. In having laid firm foundations for saving faith, you've invested much time and effort to ensure that people have clearly understood the story of the Bible and that they perceived through it the holiness and righteousness of God, their own unrighteousness, helplessness, and hopelessness, as well as God's provision for them in Christ through the Gospel. After investing so much, you may be discouraged by some cunning move of your enemy, Satan. He is determined that the building of the local church will be hindered and delayed. You face the danger of relaxing your efforts, contenting yourself with the knowledge that the people to whom you minister have rested by faith on firm biblical foundations for salvation.

The rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem was not resumed in earnest until a search was made and the written record of King Cyrus was found. This document revealed that, not only had Cyrus decreed that the foundations of the temple were to be laid, but he had also decreed that the building must be completed. Cyrus had also stipulated that all *"the gold and silver articles of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the temple which is in Jerusalem"* had to be returned to their place (Ezra 6:5). Once King Darius realized these words had been written, he commanded, *"Let the work of this house of God alone; let the governor of the Jews and the elders of the Jews build this house of God on its site"* (Ezra 6:7). And what was the result? *"And they built and finished it, according to the commandment of the God of Israel, and according to the command of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes king of Persia"* (Ezra 6:14).

Likewise we, as builders of churches which are part of the eternal, spiritual temple of God, have the written command of the King. When the Lord Jesus gave His divine mandate to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, He also said that we must teach believers *"to observe all things that I have commanded you"* (Matthew 28:20). It is only when believers are taught that they will be able to function as a New Testament church – as the Lord intended.

Paul, a faithful co-laborer of God in building the church in Corinth, wrote to the Corinthians, *"According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ"* (1 Corinthians 3:10-11).

After people have trusted in the Savior, it is your privileged responsibility to teach these new babes in Christ the Word of God in order to bring them to *"the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ"* (Ephesians 4:13).

Unfortunately, many groups of believers never progress far beyond the foundational stages of their faith. Why? Because there is a great deal of confusion among Bible teachers, both at home and on the mission field, regarding the true structure of the local church. Many churches begin as evangelistic meetings and gradually develop into a “church.” The result is that many people who begin attending Gospel meetings continue to attend “church” even though they are still unsaved. Two classes of people, saved and unsaved, make up the congregation. So within the structure of the church gatherings, the preacher must endeavor to teach the believers while continuing to evangelize the lost.

But is this according to the teaching of the Scriptures? Is bringing the unsaved to the church meeting the best way to evangelize them? Is having a mixed group of believers and unbelievers in the church meeting the best way to teach the believers and establish them as a New Testament church? From my own experience and, more importantly, from Scripture, I do not believe having a mixed group of believers and unbelievers in church meetings is the best way to work with either group.

Mixed congregations in Palawan “churches”

My initial work in Palawan was with “churches” which came into existence as a result of a people movement prior to our arrival on the mission field. Following this earlier movement to Christianity, attending church was the accepted thing to do. The unsaved church attenders, although sincere, were unawakened by the Law to see their sinfulness and helplessness before God. Many of the Palawano people were depending on their own righteousness for salvation. They considered church attendance to be a major contributing factor in their salvation.

Teaching in these churches, with both saved and unsaved in attendance, was frustrating! I wanted to teach the believers, who after many years were still babes in their faith. But at the same time, I also felt a great responsibility to teach the unsaved religionists. Although I should have been progressively teaching the believers more and more of the truths of God’s Word, I was constantly drawn back to preaching the Gospel and its foundations in an effort to meet the needs of the many church attenders who were still unsaved.

When I focused my teaching toward the believers, there was always the danger that the unsaved in attendance would take comfort in scriptural promises meant only for the true children of God. This is, in fact, what the unsaved religionists in Palawan had done for many years.

This problem is as prevalent in Western churches as it was in Palawan. Many preachers fail to emphasize that God’s promises are meant only for the truly converted. As a result, the lost take false comfort from the promises of God which He meant only for His children. This is seen perhaps most clearly at funeral services. Scriptures are read, promises are emphasized, and assurance is given of eternal bliss even though the majority of those gathered may have no biblical basis for finding comfort in God’s promises.

Many preachers, unlike their Master, bend over backwards not to offend the unsaved. They preach in such a way that the division between the saved and unsaved is not clearly seen. I can remember my great disappointment when listening to an otherwise excellent sermon preached in an evangelical church in Australia on the promise, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5). Gathered before the preacher was a society conscious congregation. The preacher went to great lengths to emphasize the

certainty and strength of God's promise, but never at any point did he sound the warning to the unsaved religionists who were present that the promise did not apply to them and that, unless converted, they would be forsaken by God forever.

When endeavoring to teach believers in mixed congregations in Palawan, I constantly qualified my statements by explaining that God was speaking only to His children and that the promises did not apply to those outside of Christ. This need to qualify every promise and statement became wearisome. I longed that only those who were believers would gather as the church, in accordance with the teaching of the Scriptures. If the congregation was made up only of believers, then I could teach them and rejoice with them as those who testified of dependence on Christ alone as the basis for their acceptance by God.

In addition to frustrations in teaching, I faced the dilemma of how to handle times of singing and prayer in these mixed groups. How could I honestly ask the whole gathering to sing to the glory of God or bow together before God as Father in the name of the Lord Jesus, when I knew Jesus was not the Savior of many present and that God was not their Father? The worship of the unsaved is an abomination to the Lord, for they draw near to God with their lips but their hearts are far from Him (Proverbs 28:9; Mark 7:6).

Because of the frustrations of trying to minister to the mixed congregations in Palawan, I turned to the Scriptures to consider its teaching regarding the local New Testament church. How I desired to build the Palawan churches according to the plans that God, the Owner of the Church, laid out in His Word!

The Church in the New Testament

The Greek word *ekklesia*, translated "church" in the New Testament, refers to the whole company of redeemed during this dispensation. In addition, it is also used to define each local body of believers. (See 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, 27-28; Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:25; Matthew 18:17 and 1 Timothy 3:15.) The word "church" in the Scriptures does not refer to a building in which the children of God met. Keep in mind then, that when I use the word "church," I am speaking of the universal Church of Jesus Christ or the local body of believers and not the building in which they gather.

The Lord intends that the local assembly of believers should be a miniature or copy of the universal Church. In order to reflect that they are already part of the universal Church, believers must be separate from the world. They are to meet together around the Person of Jesus Christ. "*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*" (Matthew 18:20).

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the local church presented as a mixed group of saved and unsaved. It is very clear from the book of Acts that the apostolic churches were distinguishably separate from the unbelieving world. As soon as there was a positive response to the Gospel, the apostles or evangelists taught the believers to gather together for the purpose of teaching, worship, prayer, the observance of the Lord's Supper, and mutual fellowship (Matthew 28:20; 1 Corinthians 11:23; Acts 2:40-47).

Following are several references from Acts which clearly show that the first church, which was in Jerusalem, was comprised only of professed believers. The story begins in chapter one of Acts after

the apostles witnessed the ascension of the Lord Jesus. Those who saw Him leave this earth returned to Jerusalem to wait for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8, 12). The Holy Spirit filled all who were gathered on the day of Pentecost so it is clear that the following Scriptures are speaking only of believers. They alone were gathered together as members of the local church.

- *“they returned to Jerusalem”* (1:12)
- *“when they had entered, they went up into the upper room”* (1:13)
- *“These all continued”* (1:14)
- *“they were all with one accord in one place”* (2:1)
- *“there appeared to them...and one sat upon each of them”* (2:3)
- *“they were all filled”* (2:4)
- *“added to them”* (2:41)
- *“they continued”* (2:42)
- *“all who believed were together”* (2:44)
- *“continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart”* (2:46)
- *“added to the church”* (2:47)
- *“they went to their own companions”* (4:23)
- *“the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul”* (4:32)
- *“great fear came upon all the church”* (5:11)
- *“none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly”* (5:13)

Paul’s description of the churches to whom he addressed his epistles also shows that he expected that only born-again people would be part of local churches.

- *“To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints”* (Romans 1:7)
- *“To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus”* (1 Corinthians 1:2)
- *“To the churches of Galatia.... I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ”* (Galatians 1:2, 6)
- *“To the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus”* (Ephesians 1:1)
- *“To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi”* (Philippians 1:1)
- *“To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse”* (Colossians 1:2)
- *“To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ”* (1 Thessalonians 1:1)

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper help to identify believers as being different and separate from the world (Acts 2:40-42).

Church discipline also helps identify believers as being separate. Paul said that it is not the responsibility of the church to judge those who are outside the church but those who are on the inside (1 Corinthians 5:2, 12-13). This admonition by Paul clearly indicates that he had taught the Corinthians to meet as the temple of God, separate from the world (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Build the Church according to God's plan

When God ordered Moses to build the tabernacle, He itemized every detail. The Lord carefully stipulated the particular materials from which each part of the building and its furniture had to be made. Gold, silver, copper, fine linen, blue, purple, and scarlet thread, goats' hair, rams' skins dyed red, badgers' skins, shittim wood, onyx, and precious stones were chosen by God to be used in the construction of this building which was to be His dwelling place in the world. God commanded Moses, "*And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain*" (Exodus 25:40).

Likewise, the Lord Jesus specified the materials to be used in the building of His dwelling place on the earth. He has not left us to decide on the materials to be used. Our responsibility is to follow faithfully the Lord's directions clearly given in His Word. Peter wrote that Christ is the chief cornerstone, elect and precious, and he reminds believers that they are living stones who are built onto Christ who is the head of the corner. "*You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (1 Peter 2:5). (See also Ephesians 2:19-22.)

As the Lord's servants and builders of His Church, we are responsible to teach those who have been converted through our ministry. We are to teach them who they are – the called-out assembly of Jesus Christ. We are to teach them that believers are to join together in fellowship to worship God and to learn of Him. We are to teach the church to gather together in order to function as a New Testament church and so fulfill the Lord's purpose for it in the world (Ephesians 4:7-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 Peter 2:9).

Teaching, fellowship and worship – not evangelism

The believers in New Testament times met separately from the world. They gathered together to fellowship in Christ, to be taught the will of their Master, and to worship the Lord under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 14:21-23; 20:7).

Christ did not command His disciples to invite the unsaved to join them in their times of worship so they would hear the Gospel. Instead, He commands the Church to go to the world and take the Gospel to the unsaved wherever they are (Matthew 28:18-20).

The apostles and the early Church set this example for us. They went out to reach the unsaved where they were in the ordinary course of their lives (Acts 5:42; 8:26-40; 16:13).

If we follow the example of the early Church, we will not invite unbelievers to the church's times of worship and Bible study. We will go to them where they normally meet or we will convene evangelistic teaching sessions at a different time to the worship or teaching times of the church. Whether these evangelistic meetings are held in the same building used by the church, or in some other place, is