

The firm foundation. Jim Smith

The good foundation.

In South America, a man decided to build an hotel. It was to be many floors high, with many rooms, and it would make him a lot of money. But he was not content with this. In order to make more money, he did not dig deep foundations, but built the hotel straight onto the ground. When it was finished, it was a splendid building, and many came to stay in it. He was very happy, because he was earning so much money. He became a leading man of the city, and everyone looked up to him.

One night, many people were staying in the hotel, when it began to rain. It rained very heavily, and the ground became very wet. The guests in the hotel did not mind. After all, they were sleeping in one of the most modern buildings in the city, constructed to the highest standards. Then, in the middle of the night, the hotel collapsed, and over a hundred people died. The city was shocked, and the authorities ordered an investigation. Then they found out the truth. The owner, wanting to get richer, had failed to build deep foundations. When the rains came, the hotel could not remain upright. The ground became very wet, and it fell. They charged the owner with many crimes, and he was disgraced. Another man bought the land, and this time built an hotel on good foundations. But nothing could bring back the many people who had been killed by the greed of the first builder.

Many of God's leaders are a little like this hotel. They are following Jesus to the best of their ability, but are the foundations on which they stand strong enough to endure a long and strong spiritual storm? Some of God's leaders don't care. They are just looking for honour and praise. But in my experience, many of God's African leaders do care, and want to be sure that they are standing on strong spiritual ground. So what is the strong foundation on which we should build our lives? How can we be sure that we are standing on ground which will stand against any spiritual storm? We must look at the Bible for the answer.

Does it matter?

Does it matter? I hear over and over again in Africa "God can do it!" So if God can do it, why must I worry? It is this kind of shallow understanding and theology which has brought such weakness to God's leaders in Africa. Of course God can do it, but he will do it through me and through you. He said to Peter "On this rock I will build my Church," but the rock was not "God can do it!" The rock was the man Peter, changed and shaped by the power of God. We have responsibility for what we build and on what we build. I long for the day when African leaders can see beyond "God can do it," and start saying "God can do it, and he will use me, so I had better be sure that my life is worthy of

him, my foundations strong enough for Him to build on me, and my commitment to endurance strong enough to face and beat down every attack of the enemy.”

Good foundation. A Man of the Spirit

“In these last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.” (Acts 2:17)

The first foundation stone is a life led by the Spirit of God. This covers a number of areas:-

1. A man of power.

The Spirit of God is a Spirit of power. When God said “Let there be light,” there was light. When God spoke to the sea “Peace, be still,” there was peace and stillness. When God spoke to Lazarus and said “Come out,” Lazarus came out. When Elijah called down the fire of God on the sacrifice, the Bible says “Then the fire of the Lord fell, and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.” (1 Kings 18:38)

We lead lives of power. This doesn’t mean that everything we say or do works. Sometimes we feel and seem very powerless. When the rich young man walked away, (Mark 10:22) Jesus seemed to be powerless to stop him. There is a clear biblical framework to being a man of power:-

We need to know the will of God for every situation. This means a very close walk with him.

We need to walk humbly before God, never misusing that which we have had entrusted to us.

We have to accept that sometimes God does not release his power for reasons we do not understand. Sometimes we do not always have the full picture.

We have to accept that sometimes, power will be released at a later time.

Power! Power! Power!

But we believe in power. We believe that all things are possible with God. We believe that mountains can be pulled down, closed doors opened, strongholds pulled down, the sick healed and the dead raised. We believe that there is nothing in all creation which can stand in the way of the purposes of God. We believe in the dynamite of the Gospel.

On occasions we often feel helpless and overwhelmed. Our human emotions cry out for support and comfort, (Jeremiah: Jesus in Gethsemane) and we want to turn back. (Paul:

Jonah: Jeremiah) But when we have weathered these storms, we are still standing. We are men and women of power.

2. Lead by the Spirit.

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” (Acts 16: 6-8)

Paul had made a long journey to Bithynia. But when he reached the border, he must have been excited. At last, after all the journeying, he was almost at his goal. But as he lifted his foot to place it on the soil of Bithynia, God spoke, telling him not to enter. Immediately, he turned away, without argument or question, and soon found himself many days later in the most unpromising town of Troas.

Blown along

We are those who are led by the Spirit of God. The wind blows where it wills, (John 3:8) and we must be willing to be blown along. We are like men sitting in a boat, with a huge sail hoisted up. We sit and wait until the wind of the Spirit fills our sails, and blows us where he wills. This does not mean we are undisciplined, or rushing here and there on foolish missions, criss crossing the planet at great expense. The Spirit of God is disciplined. He knows where he wants us, when he wants us there and why. By our prayer and diligence in the Scriptures, we will be wise in our following. But in the end, we are open to the promoting of the Spirit of God.

Why did God change Paul’s direction so radically? We have no real right to know. We are servants, and he is the Master. If he wishes to move us from A to B, then that is his right. But God is gracious, and often explains his motives to us. In Paul’s case, God saw a great opportunity developing in Philippi, and he needed a man who would respond to the prompting of the Spirit, and go there. He knew Paul was such a man, and he set things in motion to bring Paul there. Once in Philippi, the Apostle moved quickly on to other opportunities and planted many Churches. Paul was a man led by the Spirit, and he went. The result was that he was blessed, and the work of God advanced.

Test your leading

Be a man or woman of the Spirit, open to the promptings and leading of the Spirit of God. But be sure that you check and test those promptings by prayer and by the ministry of the same Holy Spirit. This will result in truly spiritual leaders. The world has enough people rushing around, claiming to be led by the Spirit, when they are really led by their own desires and purposes. Be quick in hearing, and ready in response, but remember that the first response of the Spirit filled man is prayer and ministry by that same Spirit.

3. A man with a pleading heart.

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” (Rom 8:26)

No man can lead until he can plead. Abraham learnt this, as he pleaded for Sodom.(Genesis 18: 16-33) Moses knew it.(Exodus 32:11-14) Amos learnt this as he pleaded for Israel.(Amos 7:1-6) Supremely, Jesus knew it in Gethsemane, as he pleaded with God for the strength to fulfill his calling. Leaders have to know how to go to the throne of God, pleading for those they lead. This is not a prayer from the head but from the heart. Sometimes there are not even the words, and on those occasions, the Spirit aids us in our pleading, Himself substituting words for those unknown sighs, which so move the heart of God. It takes many years to learn this part of our calling, and that’s OK. But we have to accept that it is part of the foundation of the man of the Spirit.

Good foundation. A man of the Gospel

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge, and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death, by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep hold of him.” (Acts 2: 22-24)

The man of God needs to be a man of the Gospel. Put simply, we believe that:-

There is no other name (Acts 4:12)

Peter clearly had this understanding. When he preached his first sermon, the heart of his ministry focused on the saving acts of Jesus, (Acts 2: 14-21) and he included these words “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” When he went to the Beautiful Gate, (Acts 3:1-10) he made it clear that the things of this world could do nothing: “Silver or gold I do not have.” I wonder if the man needing healing was disappointed when he heard this statement? But Peter continues “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk!” There was no other name which could heal. When he stood before the Jewish authorities, Peter makes things abundantly clear: “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:10)

The man or woman of God believes with Peter, that there is no other name by which a man can be saved, healed, restored and forgiven. There is no other name which can

restore a man to his right relationship with God. There is no other name by which a man can live his life. Alleluia!

But what is it exactly that we believe? I have found that many leaders, while believing totally in Jesus, have difficulty laying the biblical truths out in a simple way. So here is a simple outline, for your help and encouragement:-

The Good News

1. People sin. (Romans 3:23)

This spoils our lives. And there is nothing we can do about it.
Even if we try, we fail.

2. This separates us from God. (Isaiah 59:2)

So our lives never feel quite right.

3. God has an answer – Jesus. (John 3:16)

Jesus offers to cleanse us from our sin. (John 8:11)
Jesus offers to help us start again with a new life,
full of power and satisfaction. (John 10:10)

4. Jesus paid for our sin at Calvary. (John 1:29)

We can be free from our sins, and receive all that Jesus offers.

5. The resurrection of Jesus proves his claim to be God's Son. (Mark 8:31. John 20:1-18)

The resurrection is our guarantee that Jesus has done what
he said he would do.

6. The decision is ours. (John 5:24)

Every leader must have this material deep in his mind and spirit. If we don't know the facts, how can we ever make a defence, of ourselves or of those we lead?

Every leader must be living by the principles of this outline.

Every leader must be able to lead others to Jesus on the basis of this outline.

Every leader must be able to combat other religions and philosophies (Islam, Voo-doo, Fetish) by using the Gospel of Jesus.

Every leader must be careful never to compromise this teaching, to stop the cross of Christ being emptied of its power.

(1 Cor.12:20) This is so easy to write, but St Peter warns us to beware. He would have said the same, yet he compromised the Gospel, not before a mighty army, but in the presence of a few ordinary people. (Mark 14: 66-72)

Every leader must live and minister the Gospel in love. This is not as easy as it sounds. It is easy to speak out Bible verses, but not so easy to obey the commands to love, to obey, to serve, to sacrifice or to die.

The good foundation. A man of the fellowship

“Feed my sheep.” (John 21:17)

A Christian leader has to be a man devoted to the fellowship of God’s people. How does he show this devotion?

1. He has compassion on the sheep.

The Christian leader has to have great compassion for the sheep. Jesus had great compassion for the sheep. (Matt 9:36) He knew them by their names, and led them out. (John 10:3-4) He laid down his life for them. (John 10:11) We have to follow the same pattern. Sadly, many Pastors and leaders have lost their compassionate hearts. The pressures of the job, the desire for position, money, or status have crushed their compassion. Many have to seek again for the compassionate heart of Jesus, who knowing the foolishness and vulnerability of the sheep, loved and loved and loved, even to death.

2. He protects the fellowship.

David spoke for all Pastors and leaders when he said “Your servant has been keeping his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from it’s mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by the hair, struck it and killed it.” (1 Samuel 17:34-35) Our job is to guard the sheep against anything that would harm and destroy. It’s a dangerous position, and often a thankless one. We protect, and they don’t say “thank you!” But even so, we must go on

watching and protecting. It is our calling and our commitment to the fellowship of the body of Christ, for which he was prepared to give his life. (Ephesians 5:25)

3. He serves the fellowship.

We are servants, just as Jesus was a servant. (Mark 10:45) We are called to sacrifice ourselves for the body. Some Pastors don't like this idea, believing that they are called to some position in the body. We are called to a position in the body – we are called to serve. Ephesians 4 makes this quite clear:-“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers to prepare God's people for works of service.” (Ephesians 4: 11-12) We are called to serve the body and to equip the body for its task, not called for our own benefit and promotion.

African Pastors find this teaching very hard. They see the words “servant” and “serving” as very low and insignificant words. They so often want position and power, to be looked up to and respected. This is a deceit of the enemy. For the highest position in the kingdom is that of a servant. It was the position Jesus took (Phil 2:7) to achieve his saving work. When we serve the body, then we are truly like Jesus. But some say to me “the body are so hard. They make things so hard for me. If I am not strong, they will get out of control, and even throw me out!”

Brother or sister in Christ, you are misunderstanding the word “servant.” It is not a weak word but a strong one. As a servant, Jesus broke the very gates of death. By serving, we are not letting the body control us. On the contrary, we are putting ourselves in a position where, by our service we can build and equip the body. Great power can be released in and through us. “Servant” is a powerful word.

4. No limit.

Many of us will have studied Philippians 2 verses 5 to 11. They are very encouraging verses, but also, for Pastors and leaders, very challenging ones. For here we see clearly that when Jesus set out on his salvation ministry, he set no limit on what he would have to do to fulfill it. He was prepared to serve even to death, so that God's will might be done. Those of us who follow in his servant-leader footsteps must make a similar commitment. What is this commitment?

20 hours a day?

It is not to work 20 hours a day, every day, neglecting our families, our health our food and our rest. Many leaders in Africa think that this is what Jesus asks of them, and it is certainly what many in the body expect of us. But it is impossible to live this way. I know we are all eagerly looking forward to being in heaven, but we do not have the right to speed up our journey there! Living in this crazy way merely exhausts us before our time. I believe in service and hard work. I also believe in my commitments to my family, to my

body and to the pleasures of enjoying time in God's creation, free of my ministry responsibilities.

A way of life

The total commitment asked of Pastors and leaders is a commitment to follow Jesus, and to serve the body in every way, until Jesus himself either calls us home, or releases us from our responsibilities. "Total commitment" is a way of life, not a measure of how many hours we have worked. I am totally committed in my mind and spirit to serving the body of Christ. Within this commitment, Jesus allows me time for other people, other experiences, and times of rest and refreshment. This is a balanced total commitment, which produces, over the years, true men and women of God.

The good foundation. A man of endurance

"The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." (Acts 5: 41)

The man or woman of God must have the strength to last the course to the end. Many hard experiences come to us, as we lead the sheep. Not all of them can be swept aside with the expression "God can do it." Some of them are really tough, and have to be endured. The Apostle Paul said this about spiritual warfare:-

"Finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's evil schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6: 10-12)

I suspect that most of those reading this already know of these verses. But take careful note of the next one:-

" Therefore, put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand."

The Apostle is saying that one of our great defenses is simply that after the enemy has thrown everything at us, we are still standing and he falls exhausted on the ground. To achieve this position, we have to learn to endure.

This is a problem for Africa. We like action now! Waiting is seen as frustrating, and goes against our nature. But enduring is action– it is the action which refuses to yield,

whatever happens. Sometimes we have to endure for days, sometimes for years. But as we endure, we are triumphing.

How do we develop the strength to endure? It does not come quickly. Little by little, God exposes us to situations which do not yield easily to us. At first we get frustrated because we cannot easily overcome. But little by little, we learn the ability to endure, and the situations against us are broken. Then the Lord allows tougher and tougher situations to develop, and we have to reach out for more and more endurance. Slowly we achieve the position of hardened soldiers, who are not going to yield, whatever the situation. Then the Lord can really begin to use us.

Study Time

1. Study The Acts of the Apostles. Take careful note of the lives of Peter and Paul. See how they grew in strength, as they overcame the obstacles in their paths. This study might take you some weeks, but it will give you a good understanding of the experiences of a man of the Spirit.
2. Study Peter's speech in Acts Chapter 2. Think about the Gospel message he preached. Can you find other references in the New Testament to support what he said? As you study, pray that the Gospel message will sink deeper into your spirit. Think back over the last months. Is there anything you can remember which compromises the Gospel you share and preach? Ask for forgiveness, and courage not to compromise in the future.
3. Study the life of Nehemiah. (Chapters 1-6) Check the various obstacles put in his path, and the way he overcame them, so that he could finish his task.
4. Study Jesus in Gethsemane. (Luke 22: 39-46. Mark 14:32-42. It's worth studying both passages.) Notice how hard Jesus has to struggle to win through to victory. One of the keys to his victory was his ability to endure the struggle to the end. Pray that God will so teach you, that you also do the same.
5. Study Ephesians 6: 1-11. Think in particular about the armour we need, and how we use it.