

TO TEAR DOWN, IS TO BUILD

Edmund Ho
Translated by Peggy Cheung

“A time to tear down, and a time to build.”

By the time you are reading this, the theme of our Church for 2008 “Building God’s House, Proclaiming His Word” should have been up for more than a month. But what are we “building”? How? And who is really “building” this house?

Allow let me make a counter-suggestion then: when facing ourselves, other brothers and sisters, and the world, before talking about “to build”, we cannot but first talking about “to tear down”. To tear down what? Let me tell you, seriously, the three most important facets:

To Tear Down the Pride of Thinking You Know Enough about God

Followers of the Lord cannot stop knowing God. Because what we need to know are not bundles of doctrines and rules, but a person, namely, God Himself. And what we need to build is a relationship. Interaction in the relationship cannot be stopped. Once it is stopped, the relationship will cease to exist.

Do you realize that Christians today prefer to know God from others’ testimonies, rather than through His own words? We say reading the Bible, having Bible studies in fellowship, and going to Sunday school are boring and time consuming, while other people’s testimonies aired on television are so dramatic and interesting! The problem is that we are replacing God’s own words with someone else’s experiences! Can we understand a person by simply reading articles in the tabloid? Of course articles in the tabloid are dramatic and entertaining, but in the end we still not spoken to that person, not even given an eye contact. By replacing the Bible with testimonies, we are just entertaining ourselves by bluffing how much we *know about God*. It is just not *knowing God*.

Sunday school and Bible studies in fellowship are opportunities provided by the church. The issue remains as to how we understand our faith. When Paul was at the end of his life, he still asked Timothy to bring him his books and parchments to the prison (2 Timothy 4:13). This was because Paul recognized the need of continuous renewal in his relationship with God. And during such process the person will always see how insufficient s/he is. Let us ask ourselves, when we are at the end of our lives, will we still hold on to the last chance to know God?

Let me give you an example: once we only view God as the God who saved us, then things in the world have nothing to do with us or with God, as He is only the one who solves my problem of life after death. What we forget is that God is also the Creator of Heaven and Earth. Since God never give up on this world, we have no right to hide ourselves from matters of this world – matters concerning

justice, socio-economics, and the environment, just to name a few. These remain as our concerns and are part of our calling. Christians who lack involvements in these matters clearly indicate that they do not understand how rich their faith really is.

Our relationship with God needs renewal, all the time.

Indeed, our faith needs to be continuously rectified and renewed. The content of our faith will not change, yet we should respond to the ever-changing circumstances with the abundance of our faith. Not only that, our understanding of God is often one-sided and limited. Sometimes we think we know everything we need to know since we have been going to church for so many years. We think the sermons every Sunday are all somewhat similar. Thus we hear, but we stop listening; we look, but we stop seeing. Even our hearts become numb to matters of faith. We stop pursuing growth, thinking our faith is just that. Until one day we encounter an overwhelming experience. Then we realize our faith cannot help us to cope with our ever-changing lives. And we mistakenly think that our faith is useless. What we don't realize is that our faith is not useless, rather ...

Another example happened at the end of 2006. It came to my attention that few brothers and sisters of our church experienced resentment and helplessness. They saw someone they love going through much pain, but they were not sure if anything was done by those who were responsible for caring at our church! Yet the deeper problem relates to their certain assumptions about faith: when someone is in crisis or in pain, the problem will quickly be resolved once someone comes out and helps. Didn't we all pray together? Don't you know much about counselling? How come his/her problem was still not resolved? Why was s/he still not getting any better?

We think we know God; we think we have much confidence in understanding the problem of pain. Unfortunately, at that very moment, a faith that has never been rectified or renewed, becomes useless.

The thought to preach on Lamentations was sprouted under such circumstances. I believe the true problem, is not that the issue cannot be resolved, but we erroneously think that the only way to deal with pain in our lives is to "resolve" it. This is the answer from those who think they know God. However, this is not the message in Lamentations, or the Bible, or from God.

Never deny the weaknesses in human nature. Do not be afraid to show them. Show them all to our God without any fear, as this is the greatest privilege and the greatest comfort to God's children who are suffering. "God is with us" is the persistent message we see in Lamentations. The wounded persist to cry to God – because they insist that He had walked through all these Himself. He totally understands, accepts, comforts, and even takes on our sorrows. He leads us

through the dark trail of grief and to the promised land, the place which can never be reached otherwise.

So the only thing we can do to “build” God’s house is to “tear down” ourselves – our pride, our prejudice, and the attitude that we think we know enough about God.

If we do not seriously spend time and effort to read and understand God’s words; if we do not really know God, then the emptiness in us cannot be shielded by building of any size.

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To Tear Down the Barrier that Seems Not Repairable

The longer we have been Christians, the more conflicts we encounter with brothers and sisters, and the more walls we build among ourselves. We build walls because we have been hurt before, because we need to remind ourselves “beware of dogs, no trespassing”.

“I’ve known him/her for so long. Nothing can be changed.” We tell ourselves and warn others...

Sadly, the Church is supposed to be the best place to understand and practice “grace”. But over the time, we forget what “grace” really means. Instead, our relationships become a “you-scratch-my-back-and-I’ll-scratch-yours” relationship – one that based on exchange more than anything else.

In such relationship, we keep waiting. We wait for others to say “sorry”, “I was wrong”, “please forgive me”. Or perhaps we have simply given up because “there is no way”, “s/he is like that, why don’t you accept that fact and just give up?”...

What is the result? In church we are bounded by these “relationships” (or the relationships given-up). Given up, does not mean you have let go. Rather, it is like a time bomb. When something happens, our defensive mechanism will be triggered and we will do something even more stupid, or say something more inappropriate. Tiny things are blown up completely out of proportion.

We cannot forgive. Rather, we are bounded up and tied up by these “relationships”...

This reminds me of a hardly noticeable short letter in the New Testament. It is the most realistic and most concrete example of “grace” among Christians – the letter Paul wrote to Philemon. Philemon’s run-away slave Onesimus became a Christian. He was willing to go back to Philemon, as this was part of the meaning of being a follower of Christ. Paul urged Philemon to welcome Onesimus and not

to treat him as a slave. “No longer a slave, but better than a slave, a dear brother” (Philemon 16). In those days, this was the equivalent of asking Philemon to free Onesimus. Onesimus illustrated the meaning of “grace” by returning, and Philemon showed “grace” by freeing Onesimus. Both of them acted as such because of their reverence for God. And because of this grace, Christ, the first who granted grace, freed them both!

Do you know it is such a freedom to give up your rights? This means you are freed from your anger and grudge. You are no longer angry or bitter because others do not treat you the way you want to be treated.

In April (of 2007), we started a group of ten brothers and sisters to study the book “Experiencing God”. After six months of being together learning, we shared the same vision from God: the relationships between brothers and sisters in our church need to be renewed. Yet it costs to renew. This means once again we need to face the problems and broken relationships we might not want to face before. This could be you, or could be those who had conflicts with you.

Do we have the guts and courage to forgive? Or to say you are sorry? To really let Lord free you, those who owe you, or those you owe?

How to build God’s house? Instead of saying “you do your part, I do mine; stay away from me and I from you”, we need to reconnect different body parts with God as the head.

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To Tear Down the Wall of “Retreat from this World”

Brothers and sisters, if we listen carefully to those Christians in Africa and South America, they will tell us honestly that the North America they see is no longer a Christian country, but a western culture behaving almost the opposite. They see great greed and arrogance. The virtues mentioned in the Bible – the self-sacrificial lives and love shown in Christians – are hard to find. On the contrary, all they see are addictions to senses and emotions, insatiable pursue of self-satisfaction, and lives of indifference towards almost anything.

Most importantly, they see through our empty religious language, those Christian jargons we put above everything.

Some Christians may want to escape from the society and hide in the church for comfort and healing. But this is never our calling. We have our own jobs. We have to find out our position in this society as a Christian, and we have to do everything we can in this position. If we want to live a life being separated from the society, we will lose our credibility as we say one thing on Sundays but do something else in the other six days.

Brothers and sisters, we can not afford to keep retreating and surrender the otherwise neutral media to XX (feel free to write down any anti-Christian party you hate the most). When they say something, you then start protesting, or hold some discussions and yell out “Moral collapse! The Lord is coming!” Is this going to be helpful? NO! We need to go back to the media and use them well. In the past you gave that up, so please don’t whine about others use it to broadcast something you don’t like because you gave up the right to voice out in the first place. The only solution is to refuse to be an angry martyr, or a by-stander going with the flow. It is our mission as ambassadors of Christ to reclaim the right to speak to this world.

I really don’t see any other way out.

What are the specific actions for this mission? They are the simplest actions. For example, the self-sacrificial love, righteousness, and hope in Christians. These are not mysterious at all. We need to build concurrence among ourselves. Not just do it once in a while, but let this be the core of our lives. We need to build consensus: recognizing that these are the most important thing in our lives, knowing well these are not the core of those of this world. These are never the focus of their lives.

If we can develop the sense of having self-sacrificial love, righteousness, and hope to be our core values and carrying them with us all the time, then we are doing the work of subverting the world. We have to understand, such subversion from Christians is not a battle in flesh and blood. Those who subvert are not fighting with the flesh. They are doing only one thing, which is to prepare the soil bit by bit. So that people’s heart will gradually look upon faith and hope, and wait for the appearance of Christ.

We wait, because the One who builds, has never been and will never be us, but God alone.

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