

Building Without Pretending

We know that throughout the last 2000 years Christ has been building His church. He said he would (Matthew 16:18), and He is actively building it today. We are told that there are more Christians alive today than at any other time in history! As a born again believer, you and I are part of that building, but... are we being used by Christ in that building process? Does Christ consider you and me as one of His “co-workers”? (1 Corinthians 3:9). After our many meetings, seminars, conferences, visits, letters, books, tapes and efforts have long been forgotten... will anything of eternal value remain? Have we been spending our energies in sustaining a set of religious procedures? Are we investing our resources in working out our own religious agenda? Could it be possible that, in “that day”, the sad truth could come to light that we have been **pretending** most of the time? (Acting Christian devotion... playing church... protecting human interests... serving without true love...). When it comes to building, I am sure we all aspire to build well. I find the events surrounding the building project of Elisha and the company of prophets in 2 Kings 6:1-7 particularly instructive.

1. Dependence - knowing what and when to change

The events in the “Elisha and the floating axe-head” story are set in a context of blessing and growth. The Lord was calling more young men to devote themselves to Him and the prophetic ministry. These were responding and the place where the company of prophets met was progressively feeling too small. Some felt the time had come to build bigger living facilities in order to take on board the God given growth, and set themselves in a position where God could continue to bless and add.

Is it still effective? There was clear evidence that God had blessed the company of prophets in its current location. Why change now? Notice that things that were effective or necessary yesterday, may no longer be effective or necessary today. This does not negate the fact that they were effective or necessary then. It is not a criticism on past servants of God. This is particularly evident with evangelistic methods on the mission field. As a the son of a missionary in Colombia, I recall my father using those large 16 mm “Life of Christ” films in the open air as a tool to attract large numbers of people to hear the gospel preached. With the expansion of the electricity network into more remote mountain areas, the arrival of colour and then

cable TV, the availability of videos and Internet, the use of 16 mm films has become less and less effective. It is time to move on. It is time to look for new tools. The same gospel message but presented in a new external form.

Change? What? When? Elisha was the senior man of God within the company of prophets, but somehow he didn't notice the need for change. The initiative came from the younger prophets. As time elapses, we all get used to the current state of affairs. We grow to feel comfortable with some - maybe strange - behavioural patterns in our assembly. We can become complacent about poor quality bible teaching. We can become passive in our evangelistic witness (let the sinners come!). Somehow we are no longer so concerned that no "fresh blood" has come to Christ and joined our fellowship over the last 5 years. It is usually the younger generation and the new believers who notice "needs" and "odd things", ask the difficult questions, and who sometimes propose change. Elisha could have easily criticised the younger prophets. The current installation had served well for many years, why change? Maybe next year there would be fewer prophets. He could have judged their motives: "Aren't you willing to be uncomfortable for God's sake?" or "Who is the leader here, you or me?" or "You only want a bigger installation to please your flesh, to increase the status of prophets in Israel". But instead Elisha simply said: "Go".

Change calls for dependence: In itself, change is neutral. Neither good nor bad. We must explore carefully the reason for change. Does the motive for a change honour the Lord? Does the proposed change clearly violate Scripture? Is it practical? Form and content are not the same, but both are important. The meaning of Scripture remains unchanged, though its applications may well vary as the principles are made effective in different and changing cultures. God's strategy for tomorrow may well be different from His strategy for today. After the victory at Jericho, Joshua could well have concluded "I now know how God knocks down walls". He could have then set off to march around the walls of other cities. But God had other plans. To work in step with Almighty God we cannot simply repeat the past. We must be open to listen, open to something new, open to the Lord's leading, open to change.

2. Guidance - willingness to assume risk

As a senior member, Elisha is to be admired. There was a risk involved in joining these enthusiastic younger prophets. Something could go wrong. If they stayed where they were, Elisha would clearly feel safer and in control. In moving on to something new, there was the risk of losing what had proved to be a blessing in the past. If things went wrong, Elisha, as the senior partner, would be the main target for criticism in Israel. But Elisha was willing to take that risk. He not only said "I will", but he also "went with them". He accepted the young prophet's invitation with no apparent list of preconditions. He identified himself publicly with this new venture.

Can there be obedience without risk? Surrendering to the Lordship of Christ is a risky business. At conversion, don't we voluntarily hand over control of our life to Jesus? Will He only lead us along well used paths where we shall feel constantly secure, comfortable and not exposed? Has Christ promised to explain and justify to us each one of His demands? In my student days I had a poster on my bedroom door which read "Ships are safe in the harbour. But that is not what ships are built for." We have not been created, called and redeemed to "play it safe". Every new

step of faith, every new endeavour has an associated degree of suspense. If we are to limit our service to our “comfort zone”, if we are to limit our ministry to “what has been done before”, many saint would miss his God given mission. Noah, for example, would never have built an ark. Moses would never have stretched his staff over the red sea. Peter wouldn't have risked visiting Cornelius. Martin Luther wouldn't have stuck his neck out. William Carey wouldn't have taken the lead to bring the gospel to the pagan world in India. Hudson Taylor wouldn't have pioneered new unconventional missionary methods in China. Jim Elliot wouldn't have died trying to evangelise the Aucas. Although each of these men was acting in harmony with the Lord, each was willing to take on the risk of possible “apparent failure”. To repeat the past is sometimes the Lord's will for us, but it can also be a protective shield against possible criticism. Like Elisha, if we are to build well, we must be willing to assume the “risk” of obedience. The Lord only guides those who are willing to accept the risk of obedience. It is part of walking by faith. Are we willing?

3. Team Work - the divine preference

Our Lord is Sovereign. Although there are patterns to how He usually works, He is not tied to these patterns. Sometimes God calls and anoints an individual for a particular task. Like Isaiah or John the Baptist, the Lord may require of us to stand alone and faithfully live out our calling. But in Scripture, and in history, we observe that the Lord delights to work through teams. I would suggest that the Christian who prefers to serve the Lord alone, who avoids team service, limits what God can do through him or her. Let's reflect on some of the dynamics between the wise Elisha and the younger company of prophets.

Younger wisdom: As remarked earlier, the younger generation is usually the first to notice the need for change. Maybe the young prophets observed the inefficient use of time as they joined the long queues for the toilet and showers in the morning. Perhaps they slept badly due to tight uncomfortable sleeping conditions. We can have legitimate reasons for change, our motives may be spiritual, we may even have the mind of Christ for the goal ahead, but if we are not careful, we may sin with our critical attitude or our self centered way of implementing change. We notice that the prophets sought **dialogue** with Elisha. The proposal and its reasons were discussed. They sincerely wanted Elijah's backing to the project. I can't imagine the prophets saying: “We have had enough of this old place. With or without Elijah, we are going to build a new campus!” Pressure of this nature does not foment good team work! Notice that the prophets were not satisfied with Elisa's **agreement**, they wanted him onboard. One of the prophets asked Elisha: “Won't you please come with your servants?” Perhaps Elisha was not very good at chopping down trees. Perhaps he was not very hot at campus design. Perhaps he would slow down the walk to the river Jordan. But they still wanted his **presence** with them. The younger are wise when they seek to involve the older ones. Mature and spiritual older brothers and sisters are an asset on any team.

Older wisdom: Change is usually threatening, more so to certain temperaments, and particularly so to the older generation. Older people are more inclined to paint a wall than to knock it down. Older people start very few new business ventures. If advanced in years, it is well possible that Elisha did not particularly have the energy or the “vision” for a new construction project. It would be easy to stop the initiative.

He could have argued: “The current location has served us well. You are showing a spirit of ingratitude with the Lord’s current provision”, or he could have argued: “We prophets are called to devote ourselves to the spiritual building up of Israel, not to material buildings”. But instead, we notice that Elijah **listens** and engages meaningfully with the prophets. He supports the project privately and says “Go”. Notice he does not say “I will go and supervise the project”. Every construction project has its share of problems. But Elisha shows **confidence** in the company of prophets. He trusted them. When asked to join them, he replied “I will”, and he went with them. Dear older brother and sister, your physical presence is still very important. Not so much to supervise or control, but to encourage, to balance, to inspire confidence among those with more vision and energy.

Wisdom in times of Crisis: Most endeavours in the Lord’s service have their crises. Here too. Perhaps due to inexperience, over-enthusiasm or even carelessness, a junior prophet loses his axe-head in the water, presumably somewhere deep in the river Jordan. In moments of crisis we all feel uncomfortable, and it is so natural to seek someone to blame. If only he had been more careful. If only he hadn’t used borrowed things. The flying axe-head could easily have killed a fellow prophet! Was this a divine sign that we should stop the work? I’m sure Elisha must have thought some of these things, but not a word of rebuke. “Where did it fall?” he asked, and then, with God’s help, found a solution to the crisis. In your assembly, in your service, in your family, crisis will come. Times of crises can either split or further strengthen and unite your team. These are times of opportunity. In crises, keep calm, remain spiritual, and be wise.

4. Borrowed tools - we have what we need

On losing the axe head, the concerned prophet did not cry “Oh my lord, I’ve lost my valuable tool”. As he worked chopping down those trees, there must have been something else in the forefront of his mind: “The tool I have in my hands does not belong to me”, or “I am effective here only because I have been lent this axe head”. On losing it, his first concern was “Oh my lord, it was borrowed”. There is a clear lesson here for Christian ministry. As Christians we work with borrowed tools. Are you administratively or musically gifted? Can you think or communicate clearly? Do others, young or old, feel at home with you? Have you been entrusted with a car, a home, financial assets? Why do you think the Lord gives us such things? Aren’t we really administrators living and working with borrowed things? Like the hard working prophet, may that also be at the forefront of our minds: “The tool I have in my hands does not belong to me”.

5. Lost - do you have what you had?

In Scriptures the theme of losing things is recurrent. A shepherd loses his sheep. A woman loses a coin. Joseph and Mary lose boy Jesus for a few days. The church at Ephesus was in danger of losing its “lampstand”. In our story, the young prophet was working hard, with the right company, on a good project, yet he lost his axe-head. He then ceased to be effective.

Collective loss: After getting married, we moved to a different part of London and joined one of the assemblies in the south of London. We visited the homes of local

saints, in the happy process of getting to know each other. I vividly recall the comments of an elderly sister: "If you would have been here 50 years ago" she said, "you would need to arrive early if you wanted a seat at the assembly meeting". It was again one of those occasions when I felt that I was born too late! But now on Sundays we could have 4 chairs each, and there would still be some to spare. My dear brother and sister, as assemblies we can lose things. Perhaps you immediately think of losing "doctrine". That is clearly possible. In our teaching and in our practice of Christianity we can depart from biblical orthodoxy. This can be done when we fail to distinguish between principle and application, Scripture and tradition. Doctrinal departure can also be brought on by pragmatic and careless imitation of the current "mood" be it religious or secular. But we can lose more than doctrine. By insisting on order, we can lose life. Our meetings can be technically correct, but dead. We can turn inward looking and lose the passion to bring the lost to Christ. We can become religious "Civil Servants", concerned more with religious procedures and red tape than spiritual reality and health. We can become a subculture and cease to influence and attract those around us. We can become over-critical and judgmental, and lose the joy of true Christian fellowship... Are we collectively losing things?

Personal loss: It is easier to recognise failure in others, but let's turn the searching light on ourselves. Perhaps we can look back at years of Christian life and recall those happy days when there was enthusiasm, joy and freshness in our walk with the Lord - when we were used by the Lord to bring others to know Him, when by His grace we were instruments in the Almighty's hand for the edification of fellow believers. But then something happened. Perhaps we began to feel pleased with ourselves and then self-confidence set in. Perhaps we began to compete with other believers, trying to be more successful, more "spiritual" or more "correct" than they. Maybe we were hurt by some difficult brother or sister, and since then we carry a root of bitterness. Maybe you have seen so many inconsistencies, sin and cover-ups among believers that you have become a bit cynical. You now find it difficult to believe fellow believers. It could have something to do with illicit sex or incorrect use of money, or simply that we became too busy at home or at work (or even in the assembly), and our passion for Christ began to cool off. We know it. Our devotion and service isn't what it used to be. We have lost our axe-head. We have lost our "cutting-edge". Do you identify with some of this?

6. Stagnation - the curse of pretending

With some time to reflect and a bit of realism, it is not too difficult to identify things we are in danger of losing, and joys, ministries and opportunities we no longer have. It is more difficult to determine what to do about it. As in the case of the shepherd who lost a lamb, the woman who lost a coin, and the prophet who lost his axe-head, the first step is **recognition** of loss. The alternative is to deny reality. To pretend. To stagnate. Imagine the young prophets happily swinging their axes making good progress in the forest. We can nearly hear them joking, laughing and singing as they worked and perspired under the middle-eastern sun. Then something fairly insignificant happened. There was a small "plop" in the river Jordan. Did the other prophets hear something? Did anyone else notice? But one young prophet had, at that point, lost his effectiveness. Without recognition of loss, his work would never be the same again. The prophet now faced a choice: to continue swinging the stick

(perhaps looking for smaller trees or bushes to retain a feeling of progress), or to face up to the reality of his loss. We also may shamefully and painfully admit our loss, or continue working hard, pretending.

Pretending is still hard work: One of the greatest dangers in Christian service is to carry on working without the axe-head. We hold on to the axe-handle, and we swing it as hard as we have always done. We work hard, we bring up a sweat, we make the right noises, but our tool is blunt. We've lost that cutting edge! We carry on with our bible studies, conference, worship meetings, visits... but without the same joy, without the same passion, without the same effectiveness. In fact, in our pretending, we are at times tempted to force visible results. We may try to pick up the trees others have cut down. We can become critical of those who display real joy in their Christian life. We sometimes judge the maturity level of those who still show passion in their Christian service. If we are honest, we sometimes feel a bit envious of those who are still cutting trees down. My dear fellow believer, this need not remain so. Our God is in the business of restoration. But we must start by admitting that something has been lost. We must admit to ourselves and to the Lord that "joy unspeakable" is no longer a normal feature of our Christian experience, that our Christian service is driven more by duty than by passion, and that there is now little evidence of the hand of the Almighty God on our service. The restoration process begins, as we freely confess our failure to the Lord.

7. Restoration - the human and the supernatural

"The man of God asked: Where did it fall?" As is always God's path for restoration, we are called to return to the point of departure. Let's look back. Where did we lose that cutting-edge in our service? Since when have we been trying to do God's work with the axe-handle? We must go back to that bad attitude, that selfish project, that new material ambition that grabbed my heart, that unrighteous act, those little lies and defamations to promote or defend God's work, that careless attitude, that unresolved interpersonal conflict... and confess it to the Lord. It was only after the prophet "showed him the place" that God began to act and to restore.

The necessity of the supernatural: Restoration is not simply a matter of changing methods or adopting a new strategy. Assembly revival will not come because we have changed our seating arrangements, we've adopted a new hymn book, use musical instruments or change the timetable of meetings. Neither is it a matter of simply "doing" what we used to do before. It is not simply a matter of going to more meetings or reading more Bible. The prophets didn't all dive into the water with goggles; neither did they try to poke the axe-head out of the water with a hook or a stick. Recuperation was not by human skill. If we desire to see again the supernatural hand of God over our life, our personal service and our assembly, we must cry out for divine intervention. The God we adore is a God of miracles. Only He can restore our axe-head.

The necessity of the human: Most miraculous events are somewhat odd. Why did Elisha cut a stick and throw it on the water to make the axe-head float? Why didn't he simply say the word: "Axe-head float!?" And if the axe-head could float on water, why didn't it go further and fly into the prophet's hand, or better still, fly onto the axe handle where it belonged? Even with the miracle, the prophet still had to "reach out"

and “lift it out” of the water. This combination of the supernatural hand of God coupled with human obedience is quite striking: If Moses would not raise his rod, the red sea would probably not part in two. But the rod didn't do it. It was the hand of God. Without walking round Jericho, the walls would probably not fall. But the walking and shouting didn't do it. It was the hand of God. Without Naaman washing himself 7 times in the Jordan, God would probably not heal him of leprosy. But the washing didn't do it. It was the hand of God. Without Paul and Apolos planting and watering there would be nothing to grow. But it wasn't the planting and watering that made the seed grow. It was the hand of God.

Conclusion

If we are to be used in building something of eternal value, we must constantly force ourselves to stop pretending and to be real. To enjoy a genuine revival in our soul and in our assembly, we may well need to implement some changes. Without these changes there may never be a revival. But the changes in themselves will not generate a true revival. **We desperately need the hand of God.** We need a miracle. We need divine intervention. The early church grew, “people believed and turned to the Lord” because “the Lord’s hand was with them” (Acts 11:21). If we are to live a joyful Christian experience, burn with passion in serving our Lord, be used by Christ in some way to build up His church, we may well need some changes in our perception of God, in our style of living, in spiritual disciplines... but above all we need the supernatural Almighty hand of God on our lives. Do we really want that? It is the only alternative to pretending.

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