

Pre-Foundational Principles

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.
Church of the King, Mount Prospect, Illinois, September 11, 1988

Psalm 111 RSV

Praise the LORD. I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who have pleasure in them.
Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.
He has caused his wonderful works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy,
they are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and terrible is his name!
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have all those who practice it.
His praise endures for ever!

I think all of us agree that we need to be grounded in the foundational principles of the Christian faith and of our experience with God. The sixth chapter of Hebrews is a reminder that there are basic principles. Beginning at the first verse, the author says:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, with instruction about ablutions, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits (Hebrews 6:1-3).

So the writer speaks of foundational principles. He lists six of them as the basis for our understanding of God's work in our lives. We advance in the Christian life, and in our servanthood of the living God, only if we have some kind of basic or foundational principles on which to stand.

But what if the foundation is weak? Jesus compared the Christian life, a life in the kingdom of God and the service of God, to a man who built his house upon rock. It stood when the rains came and the winds blew against it. But there was another man, He said, who built his house on sand. It had no substantial foundation. It was like the man who built Bill and Kathy's garage, who used too long a beam; and it wasn't the right beam so he spliced it together. The materials were not what they should have been, and after a number of years the beams started to sag and the roof has started to bow, with whatever other structural damage is visible in that building as a result of using improper materials. No part of the building is more essential to the maintenance of its proper configuration than the foundation. "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Psalm 11:3). Unless there's a foundation for us to move in our Christian life, we have a big problem.

And there's a problem, too, for a church that's built on a shifting foundation, or no foundation at all. I've been part of churches that didn't have a solid foundation on which to build — "liberal" churches whose thinking was based only on what the theologians' opinions of the day happened to be. They had discarded the Scriptures as an authority to be taken seriously in deciding what the church should do.

Reading in the latest issue of *Christianity Today* I noticed that the Episcopal Church, with whom I've had some contact over the years, is struggling with the issue of whether they should ordain homosexuals

to be priests or ministers. If the foundation were the Scriptures the answer to that question would be plain. But, because the foundation has eroded, one person's opinion is as good as the next. That's the danger we encounter without the proper foundation.

Let's not point the finger, though, at liberal churches only. The same phenomenon can be found at the other end of the spectrum, in charismatic churches — churches that supposedly move with the Spirit, but which have neglected the need for a solid foundation of scriptural truth. What passes for the move of the Spirit is only the fancy of some leader who has gathered people to himself and forced them into believing he's the channel of the knowledge of the will of God. So, in either case, we encounter a shifting or insubstantial foundation and a church that is cast adrift. When we're talking about foundations, we're talking about solid doctrine grounded in Scripture. We can't ignore doctrine, because without it we drift. Without it, the house comes down, the beam sags. Without solid scriptural teaching we're not going to do what God has called us to do and to be, as His worshipers and His servants.

The Letter to the Hebrews refers to foundational principles, yet in the Scriptures we find a phrase, occurring in a number of places, "*before the foundation* of the world." When I studied this phrase and its implications in the various places where it's found in the Bible, I discovered that there are not only foundational principles but there are *pre-foundational principles*. Some principles are built into the structure of God's eternal plan to such a degree that we might speak of them as principles established before the foundation of the world. Of course, these pre-foundational principles are not inconsistent with the foundational principles. They really are foundational principles, viewed in another way. But we need to review these pre-foundational, or absolutely basic, principles upon which we stand as a church body. They're the principles upon which any worshiping Christian must really stand.

Let's examine, then, three groups of Bible texts that refer to the pre-foundational principles. The first group speaks of God the Father and God the Son before the foundation of the world, and of God's glory before the foundation. We don't have to open our Bible beyond the first page before we discover such a pre-foundational principle: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). No principle of our Christian life is more basic than the reality of God — His existence and His work of creation. That may seem self-evident, yet it's surprising how little you will hear this brought out in the doctrinal teaching of many churches. Isn't one of the basic questions whether or not God can be known as existing, being real, being the Creator? Indeed, the whole philosophy of our culture has been erected on another foundation: the premise that God is irrelevant, and that evolution, through time and chance, is the foundation for all that we see about us in the universe. This is the viewpoint of our educational system, our media, and all those who shape public opinion. Yet Scripture says, "in the beginning — God."

Let's look at some texts that bring this out. I refer you, first, to Psalm 90:1-2: "LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." God is from everlasting to everlasting; He is before all things and He is after all things. The thought is echoed in Psalm 102:25: "Of old thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands." In the beginning, God; and in the end, God. Even the heavens will wear out, like an old piece of clothing that you put in a bag for the Amvets or the Purple Heart Veterans to pick up, or try to palm off on somebody for fifty cents at your next garage sale. The heavens will wear out, but God will endure forever: "I am He, I am the first, and I am the last. My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together" (Isaiah 48:12-13).

Before the foundation of the earth, God is. The pre-existence of God is evident in creation, as Paul says in Romans, chapter 1. The fact of God's reality is evident in what He has made; because *things are* we know that *God is* (Romans 1:20). But it's not only the pre-existence of God the Father and Creator to which the Bible attests. Another book in the New Testament, opens with the same phrase as Genesis, chapter 1. The Gospel According to John begins this way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made (John 1:1-3). God the Son is also there before the foundation of all things, and the Scriptures bring this out in a number of places. I refer you to Colossians, chapter 1:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or

authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15-17).

There is no separation between God the Creator as Father, and God the Creator as Son. They are One, and the Son is before all things as well as the Father.

Consider some other Scripture passages. Peter states, “He was destined before the foundation of the world but was made manifest at the end of the times for your sake. Through him you have confidence in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God” (1 Peter 1:20-21). Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world but appeared, as Paul says in Galatians, at the right time: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:4-5). Jesus, when he prayed to the father before His arrest in what we call the “great high priestly prayer,” prayed with these words: “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me [Jesus’ disciples], may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24).

Within the being of God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — before the foundation of the world, and before anything had come into existence, there is a *communication*. Within the being of God there is a love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. And this love, and communication, and fellowship are, in fact, what resulted in the creation. For the creation itself is nothing other than the expression of God’s love through the Spirit and through the Son, that things should be. We’re not going to explore that thought in detail, but simply leave it at that. The creation of the world and, indeed, the redemption of the world — being brought back from sin and separation from God at the price of Jesus’ blood — are the result of the love of God within His own being before the foundation of the world! So Jesus Christ, when He speaks in the Revelation, says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Revelation 22:13). Thus we have this pre-foundational principle of God and His glory, the Father and the Son, before all things. The first principle is *God*.

What’s our response when we hear a truth like this, and come to understand who God is? There’s obviously only one response, and that response has to be *worship* — the acknowledgment of God as the Creator, the acknowledgment of the Father as Him who upholds all things, and of the Son to whom and through whom and in whom are all things. That is what we call worship: the acknowledgment of God’s being and greatness and majesty and glory. Therefore we are, first of all, a *worshiping church*, because no other human activity can so well bring out the foundational nature of God’s existence as can worship: serving Him, giving Him honor and praise, declaring His glory and His majesty.

There can’t be any compromise with this principle. We have to learn how to meet with God face to face, to behold Him, to celebrate His presence and His being. We have to learn how to let it be so, in our assembly, that — as Psalm 50 says — “out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth.” The radiance of God must come forth in the midst of His people as an act of worship. The Psalmist cries, “Send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!” — in other words, to Zion. Then he says, “I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God” (Psalm 43:3). Worship can’t be passed off as an afterthought.

There are churches that function that way, though. Some churches function around fellowship. Others function around a message and a preacher and a pulpit; they tack on a few preliminaries — a couple of songs, a first and last verse of this and a first and last verse of that — and call it worship. Friends, that can’t be! That doesn’t express the foundational principle, “He is before all things.” We have to be, first of all, a worshiping church, with worship at the heart of our purpose.

There’s a second group of texts we must explore, texts that speak about the Word of God before the foundation of the world — God’s declared purpose, His expression of Himself through words and ideas. I refer you to Proverbs chapter 8, which speaks about the wisdom of God:

The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth; before he had made the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world. When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the

deep, when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a master workman . . . (Proverbs 8:22-30).

In 1 Corinthians 2:7 Paul also speaks of wisdom, “a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.” Here is the pre-foundational wisdom of God, a body of knowledge that concerns Him and which we call that the Word of God. We can see, in other Scriptures passages, that the word of God is everlasting. Consider Isaiah 40:8: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand for ever.” The same thought comes up in Psalm 119:89: “For ever, O LORD, thy word is firmly fixed in the heavens.” Jesus declared, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35).

So we see that the Scriptures speak not only of God before the foundation, in His glory and in the love between the Father and the Son, but also the of God’s wisdom before the foundation of the world. They speak of the eternity of God’s Word that will not pass away. God’s Word is the extension of His presence, just as our word is the extension of our presence. We can make our presence felt in a remote place by sending our word to that place by letter, by telephone, through the Internet or other media. We can make our word the projection of our presence right in our own immediate environment. That’s how God is. His Word is the extension of His presence, and when it comes to us we know He is here. And His Word, like God Himself, is before the foundation.

Scripture is God’s written Word, the expression of His purpose, His promise and His description of human life. But there is also the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. They go together; the written Word directs us to the incarnate Word. The word of Scripture directs us to Him who is the Word made flesh, who was in the beginning and through whom all things were made. The written Word directs us to Christ, and this written Word is given through the Spirit. 2 Peter 1:20-21 is an expression of this thought: “First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” So when we speak of the Word of God we’re speaking of the activity of the Holy Spirit, revealing the purpose of God. And wisdom and truth, as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, comes from the Spirit:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,” God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

No eye has seen it, no ear has heard it, the heart of man hasn’t conceived it — but God has revealed it by the Spirit: the body of truth that partakes of the mind of God and reveals Him to us.

What’s our response to the second pre-foundational principle, the Word of God and His wisdom before the foundation of the world? Obviously, our response has to be to take the Word of God seriously — to study it and teach it and seek to order our lives by it. Therefore we are not only a worshiping church but also a *teaching church*. Our primary path is that of a worshiping church, but our walk has to be balanced by the fact that it’s the Scriptures that teach us *who* we worship, and *how* we worship Him.

We can’t ignore the whole counsel of God. And it will be the Scriptures themselves that we study and teach — not somebody’s charts or study Bible notes, and not the doctrinal overlay of a denominational tradition. We need the boldness to see what God really teaches through the Scriptures. Nothing can take the place of an honest investigation into what the writers of Scripture, moved upon by the Holy Spirit, intended to say. We must be willing to make the effort of intense study involving, perhaps, even an acquaintance with the original languages, Hebrew and Greek. Such is the importance of being able to accurately handle the Word of God.

We have, then, God’s glory before the foundation and God’s Word before the foundation. But there is a group of texts that speak of another reality: *God’s people* before the foundation of the world. This is a the third pre-foundational principle: God’s people, “the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16), those chosen to be His church. I refer you to Ephesians 1:3-4: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has

blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.”

Before the foundation are God the Father and Son, in their glory, and the wisdom and truth of the Word of God. But God’s people are also before the foundation, chosen in the beloved — in Christ. This is expressed in Revelation 17:8, which refers to “the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.” Again, Revelation 13:8 mentions “every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain.” In older versions this is translated “the Lamb who was slain before the foundation,” and I think there’s a theological truth there. But the correct translation of the Greek is probably, “Everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb.” Now if there are some whose name was *not written*, then there are some whose name *has been written* in the book of life before the foundation. God has chosen and called a people before the foundation, so the existence of God’s people itself is one of the pre-foundational principles.

Paul alludes to this in Romans 8:29-31 when he speaks about predestination:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us?

We don’t need to get into a discussion of predestination, because the principal truth here is that God ordained, before the foundation, that there should be *a people* chosen in the beloved. And I believe God chose the people, and you and I choose whether or not to belong to that people! So we don’t need to get hung up on what predestination means. It just means that God, before the foundation of the world, has chosen that there should be a people with whom He would enter into a relationship through Christ.

In Matt. 25:34 Jesus says, speaking about the judgment, “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” There is a kingdom, an administration of God’s relationship with his people and with his creation, that God has prepared before the foundation of the world. And another word for the kingdom — if you study the Scriptures in their entirety — is the *covenant*, the relationship that we have with God our Father and King. We may say, then, that God’s covenant with his people whom he has chosen in Jesus Christ is one of the pre-foundational principles. As Psalm 111:9 states, “He has commanded his covenant for ever.”

What’s our response to this? In a third place, we’re a *covenanted church*. We’re a church that functions as a people together — not as a pastor deciding we’re going to do this or that, not as a closeted board of elders that make all the decisions while everybody else stands around the edges. We’re a body that mutually shares the responsibility not only for the support of the church but also for its direction in certain critical areas. The apostles functioned this way. The early church may have had leaders who summed up the proceedings, but in the last analysis the summation was this: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” (Acts 15:28). There was a covenanted structure of decision making, and that’s how we operate in this congregation, whether it comes to selecting officers or appointing people to carry out various ministry tasks, such as teaching the children. Those with a burden, and a gift, for a particular area of ministry we regard as those whom the Holy Spirit has called, unless further insight or subsequent events rule to the contrary. If something happens that necessitates a change, I think all of us would agree that the pastor has to play a key role; the church isn’t a free-for-all. But I like this covenanted structure, in which we share in the decision-making and the responsibility.

Another aspect of the covenanted nature of our church is that we’re supposed to bear one another’s burdens, including through prayer, in order to fulfill the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). If anyone has a particular need other members can help to meet, we’re covenanted to respond. For example, I’d be happy to find some time to help Bill repair that garage roof with the sagging beam. I would want to do it because I think that’s the kind of thing that expresses what our church is about. And perhaps there’ll be something that I’ll need Bill to come and help me with, or another one of you. That sharing is part of what we have to move toward in our life as a covenanted body.

So we have these three pre-foundational principles. Some things are just so basic that we can forget them if we’re not careful to articulate them from time to time: God in His glory before the foundation of

the world — we're a *worshiping* church; God in his truth before the foundation of the world — we're a *teaching* church; and the people of God called before the foundation of the world in Jesus Christ — we're a *covenanted* church, a body in mutual relationship.

Now these foundational principles work together. They don't function in isolation one from another. In several Scripture passages we see the three principles functioning simultaneously because God Himself has put them into a package — interestingly enough, these three and not really any others. Look at John 4:23, the words of Jesus Christ to the woman in Samaria. He's speaking about worship here, but he says this: "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him." If you have worship in spirit, you're talking about a worshiping church. If you have worship in truth, you're talking about a teaching church. And if you have God seeking people to worship him, you have a covenanted church. They're all here.

Look with me also at Colossians 3:15-16: "And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Do we have all three principles here? Yes. We have "the one body" to which we're called — the covenanted church. We have "the word of Christ [dwelling] in you richly" — the teaching church. And we have "[singing] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts" — the worshiping church.

We could find a few other passages to express the combination of these three pre-foundational principles, but let me turn to Psalm 149, verse 1: "Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful!" Here's the worshiping church. Now skip to verse 5: "Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy . . ." Here again is the worshiping church, but here also is the covenanted church, "the faithful" — The Lord's *hasidim*, those whom God has called into His covenant and who are recognized as belonging to Him in a special way. Finally, verse 6: "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands . . ." What is the two-edged sword? It's "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Ephesians 6:17), the weapon wielded by the teaching church.

These, then, are the three pre-foundational principles: the church at worship, the church proclaiming and teaching the Word of God, and the church bonded to the Lord and one another as a faithful community. Psalm 111, with which we began this message, also puts these three principles together; let me return to verses 7-10, where the Psalmist mentions three things that will endure forever.

*The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy,
they are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant for ever.
Holy and terrible is his name!
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
a good understanding have all those who practice it.
His praise endures for ever!*

Three things endure: the Lord's precepts, the commandments and wisdom of His Word; His covenant with his faithful people; and His praise and worship.

Did the apostles understand the importance of linking these three pre-foundational principles? Yes, they did; turn with me to Act 2:42. After Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, thousands gathered and entered into the community of Christ — 3,000 souls, we're told. What did those people do after that first Christian sermon, when the church was born? "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They were a teaching church, devoting themselves to the instruction of Christ's apostles. They were a covenanted church, sharing a common life of fellowship — the Greek *koinonia* is stronger than mere casual fellowship; it signifies a deep community symbolized in "breaking bread" together. And they were a worshiping church; the literal Greek says they devoted themselves not to prayer as such, but to *the prayers* — a more formal and corporate act of worship, for we read that they went daily to the Temple and were worshiping God there.

We see clearly by this time, do we not, the pervasive influence of three pre-foundational principles: God the Father in His eternal being and glory; the Word of God, His wisdom, the expression of His purpose; and the people of God called into being before the foundation of the world, chosen in Jesus Christ. We hold these principles in balance. Though worship is primary for us, worship is never what it ought to be unless the other principles are combined with it.

We hold these principles in faithfulness to the Lord. They're not optional; we can't decide to do away with any one of them or our life and witness will become distorted. The beam will start to sag; the foundation will begin to erode. So we pledge ourselves to God that we will abide by these principles, and make them the center of our life as a church, and never walk away from them. As long as we walk with them we'll be on a solid footing, for we'll never find any ground any more solid than these pre-foundational principles to which Scripture so clearly attests.

Sermon text ©2009 Richard C. Leonard
Bible text © as applicable.