

“The Church’s Foundation” | Ephesians 2:19-22 (Part 1)

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

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I recently read an article in *Christianity Today* titled, “A Splintered Generation.” Its subtitle explains it’s point: “American evangelicalism has fractured along political and ideological lines, but there’s a way forward.”¹

There has been much written in recent years about evangelicalism and fracturing.

Traditionally, evangelicals are gospel-people who share not a denomination but set of convictions: *the Bible, the Cross, Conversion, and Missions*. An evangelical is someone for whom the Bible is the final authority, the cross of Jesus the center of gravity, and seeing others come to faith the driving passion.

What was interesting about this article was that the authors suggest that the splintering in evangelicalism is not due to differences about these convictions, but to “differing cultural sensitivities.” They explain,

As the cultural waves crashed over these [evangelical] communities and receded, they exposed that, often, the individuals gathered in these churches had many things in common—such as core theological beliefs, preferences in preaching and worship style, aesthetics, and more—but related to the cultural climate in radically different ways.²

I was studying Ephesians 2 the day I read the article. I couldn’t help but see connections.

Ephesians 2:11-22 is about the nature of the church where God has reconciled the irreconcilable—Jews and Gentiles. And it’s about their new unity, or oneness. In verses 19-22 Paul comes to the culmination of this thought about this and explains that God has not only brought Jews and Gentiles together but done so to build them, together, into something specific. He writes,

So then you [Gentiles] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph 2:19-22).

Christian togetherness requires grasping what God is building us into. Next Sunday we will consider what the structure God is building us into. This Sunday, however, we begin where all builders must—with the structure’s *foundation*. Paul explains to the Gentiles,

¹ Skyler Flowers and Michael Graham, “A Splintered Generation,” *Christianity Today*, May/June 2025.

² Flowers and Graham, “A Splintered Generation.”

you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the **foundation** of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (2:20).

What the *Christianity Today* article suggested to me, was that perhaps churches and Christian lives can unknowingly be built on a faulty foundation. The ground floor of a life or church may be filled with Christian decorum, but the foundation be made up of very different convictions. And when storms come, perhaps these different foundations are exposed. I found myself asking the question, Is Christianity the **foundation** of my life or simply decorations inside a house otherwise founded on other commitments?

I want to take some time now to consider what the foundation of God's people is according to Paul. We consider this foundation in three ways: **(1) The Foundation's Stones. (2) The Foundation's Date. (3) Standing Upon the Foundation Today**

I. The Foundation's Stones

A building's foundation is integral to its stability and shape. It also, however, is critical for its unity. If parts of a house are not built on the same foundation, over time the structure will suffer to stay together due to this.

In our passage Paul likens the church to a building—a house or temple—and it's foundation stones are made of people. He writes in verse 20,

built on the foundation of **the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus** himself being the cornerstone, (v 20).

Let us consider what Paul means by “apostles” and “prophets.” Who are they? In what way do they make the foundation?

Apostles:

The term “apostle” can simply mean “messenger.” It also, however, can carry a technical sense, as an official title for someone of great importance in the early church. This is what Paul here has in mind. These official Apostles were marked by three things.

First, an apostle was an **eyewitness** of Jesus. In Acts 1, when the eleven apostles are replacing Judas, the replacement must be an *eyewitness*:

one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us....one of these men must become with us a **witness** to his resurrection. (Acts 1:21-22)

Likewise, Paul, explaining his authority as an apostle, says,

“Am I not an apostle? Have I not **seen** Jesus our Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1).

Apostles do not merely believe in Jesus; they have literally seen Jesus.

Second, an apostle has been **commissioned** by Jesus. Luke opens Acts saying to his reader,

I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen (Acts 1:1-2)

And what command does Jesus there give to them—he commissions them as his witnesses,

you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and **you will be my witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

Third, an apostle is **empowered** by Jesus. When Jesus calls the original twelve, we read,

And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. ¹⁴ And he appointed twelve (whom he also named **apostles**) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach ¹⁵ and have **authority** to cast out demons (Mark 3:13-15).

Eyewitness. Commissioned. Empowered. That is an apostle. Their foundational role for the church is emphasized at the close of the Bible with the image of the final city:

And the wall of the city had twelve **foundations**, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve **apostles** of the Lamb (Rev 21:14).

Prophets:

A prophet is someone to whom God speaks directly. Who are these prophets in Ephesians 2?

Some have thought that Paul is referring to Old Testament prophets such Isaiah, Jeremiah. And without question, the church is built on the foundation of the Old Testament Scriptures and Prophets (see Luke 24:27). However, I think Paul has in mind more than Old Testament prophets here.

I say this because of what he writes a few verses later Ephesians 3:5 about the mystery of Christ being revealed:

the mystery of Christ, ⁵ which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his **holy apostles** and **prophets** by the Spirit. ⁶ This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph 3:5-6).

There is a sense that with the inauguration of the New Covenant by Jesus, accompanied by the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2), a fresh revelation is coming from God. Not a revelation that contradicts what the former prophets said—but rather completes it. Just as the Covenant made with Moses was accompanied by God speaking, so too, the New Covenant—at its founding—involves God speaking. Now, speaking specifically about his Son Jesus Christ, and doing so through these apostles and prophets.

The foundation, therefore, is the eyewitness and prophetic testimony of these first apostles and prophets. The church is not just built on them because they were the first to believe. It is built

on them because their *teaching* and *doctrine* become its abiding foundation. Recall in Acts 2 that the early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ **teaching**” (Acts 2:42).

So, what are the stones which make this foundation? Along with the inspired writing of the Old Testament, the foundation stones of the church are the Holy Scriptures, completed now by the prophetic words of the apostles and prophets.³

Two implications to draw out.

First, the foundation of the church is not a shared passion for a popular cause; it is not a denomination; it is not a charismatic evangelical leader or famous pope; it is not the backing of a nation; it is not an interest in unity and diversity. The foundation of the church is the *Word of God*, the witness of the apostles and prophets.

Second, the foundation of the church is the doctrine, ideas, specific content contained in Holy Scripture. Which means that doctrine and clarity of thought about Jesus and Christianity are a non-negotiable for true unity. Some say doctrine divides—better for unity is a vague but shared commitment to God. This is precisely *not* what Paul is saying here: the church is built on the witness and words, “the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Eph 2:20).

That is the *Foundation’s Stones*; next we turn to the *Foundation’s Date*—when was it laid?

II. When the Foundation Was Laid: In the early church by the eyewitness apostles

This point may seem obvious but is crucial. There is a sense in our passage that the building that is the people of God is *being built*—meaning, added to regularly, growing daily. This is not the case for the building’s foundation—that was completed in the first century, and it cannot be added to nor changed.

This is evident by the tense in our passage: “built on the foundation” in verse 20 speaks of a past action and of a foundation that is complete. But when it comes to the building, the sense is of something that is actively being worked on and growing: “the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple” (2:21); “you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God” (2:22).

The building is being built and growing. The foundation is not. It has already been laid. It’s datestone reads, “laid in the first century.”

Two further implications from this.

³ This is where Lloyd-Jones, *The Basis of Christian Unity: An Exposition of John 17 and Ephesians 4*, page 23, lands, “‘built (together) upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets,’ which means the teaching and the doctrine of the apostles and prophets.”

First, the foundation of the church cannot be changed or added to. In writing to the Corinthians about the church God is building, Paul states, “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11).

To the church in Galatia, which was being tempted to build on another foundation, Paul uses some of his strongest language,

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:6-8).

We are so desperate to hear from God, and in ways that meet our immediate needs, that we are susceptible to false prophets who come along and suggest an addition to, or a new, foundation.

The apostle Peter writes of the foundation of the Word of God,

we have the **prophetic word** more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, (2 Peter 1:19).

But Peter immediately adds,

false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies.... And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed (2 Peter 2:1-3).

We cannot add to this foundation.

A second implication is this: only by knowing this foundation well, can we discern true from false words today. And false words have and will come.

Islam is based on the belief that the angel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad in the seventh century with a fresh revelation. Now the Quran, not the New Testament, is the foundation for the people of God.

Mormonism depends on fresh revelations received by Joseph Smith in 1820, involving things not recorded in the Bible. Therefore, that faith offers *another foundation* other than that of the “apostles and prophets.”

This offer of a fresh, newer, more relevant foundation can come in subtler ways.

About ten years ago I was waiting outside the doors of a theological library for it to open. A woman next to me, also waiting, struck up a conversation. We soon learned that we worked in very different types of churches—I identified as theologically conservative and orthodox, she as theologically liberal and progressive. She asked me a pointed question about the ethics and

anatomy of marriage. I quoted a view Bible passages and asked her how she interpreted them. She responded by saying that despite what those passages said, she believed the Holy Spirit was guiding the church into new revelation about these matters that was different, beyond, what was written in centuries past. To buttress her position, she quoted Jesus words about the Holy Spirit in John 16, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

This really brings the matter of foundations to the fore, doesn’t it. How do you know if a so-called word of prophecy or spiritual inclination that someone has for you is from God? You must test it by the Scriptures, by the foundation.

If we lose the foundation which was already laid, the church is left adrift upon the subjective experiences of the most winsome and powerful people.

Here then are our first and second points: The *Foundation’s Stones* are the Apostles and Prophets and the New Testament Scriptures that are their witness; the *Foundation’s Date* is the close of that period.

A closing question for final last point: how do we stand upon this foundation today?

III. How We Stand Upon the Foundation Today

Much could be said, but I leave us with this.

We stand on the foundation by belief, by faith. The great distinguishing mark for those inside the church not ethnicity nor nationality—it is belief. To stand on the foundation, put your faith in the teaching of the apostles. What is that teaching you ask?

The apostle Paul has just enumerated much of it for us in Ephesians. It is the teaching that without God’s help, we are “dead in our sins” (2:1), under the dark sway of the world (2:2) and “under the wrath—the rightful judgement—of God” (2:3). Deny the doctrine of our fall, or the doctrine of God’s judgment, and you are not standing on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

But praise God it that is not all. We believe in the teaching of Jesus’ deity, that he was the divine Son of God, and that by his blood our sins are forgiven. “By the blood of Christ” we have been redeemed and reconciled (Eph 1:7; 2:13).

And the apostles and prophets teach us that it is not our moral goodness nor good works that save us—but that God’s forgiveness and love are offered freely, they are grace, “by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:5).

Friend, might I ask you what foundation you are currently standing on? If it is anything other than this Gospel, you can run into this house of God and find your footing on Christ today. You simply need to do what Jesus calls for, “Repent and believe” (Mark 1:15). Which means, acknowledge the ways you have not honored God and others, asking God to forgive you and transform you, then give your life to Jesus.

I opened with reference to the article about evangelicalism and disunity, splintering. The others reasoned that this was not due to doctrinal difference, but rather to “differing cultural sensitivities.” These matters and days can be complicated. But I would simply close now by leaving the Falls Church Anglican, and you, with this question: if we got down to the deepest parts of the foundation of this church, of your life, would we find something “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (2:20). Or, the muck and mire of human opinions that will one day be washed away. Let us stand on the only foundation that will never fail.

Small Group Questions

1. If someone asked you what the foundation of your life was, what would you say? Would it be commitment to your family, or to a nation, or to a cause, or to a vision of success or happiness? What is your foundation?
2. Read Ephesians 2:19-22. Read verse 20 again where Paul talks about the “foundation of the apostles and prophets.” In what ways do other cultural or personal commitments sometimes compete with the apostolic witness about Christ as the foundation of your life? How might you regularly evaluate and realign your life on the foundation of Christ?
3. The foundation of the church is the Word of God, the witness of the apostles and prophets. How does sharing doctrinal convictions about Jesus affect a church’s unity? What happens to a church if unity is sought apart from doctrinal clarity—so, for example, in a shared passion for a cultural issue or political hope?
4. What are some modern “new foundations” that people build their faith upon?
5. How can you lovingly help a friend that has drifted from the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets?