



Construction of the “Tower of Light” Austinville Church,
Austinville, PA



Olde Covert Church: Rescued,
Reopened, & Rebuilt –26 years ago.



Reconstruction of Belfry
Austinville Church
Austinville, PA

The Power of Grace to Rebuild the Church

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts. What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and shall bring out the top stone (the finishing stone, the last stone) amid shouts of grace, grace.” ~ Zechariah 4:6-7

For many years the temple had fallen into disrepair; people had ceased to visit the House of God to worship. A man named Zerubbabel was inspired to rebuild the church of that day and reinstate the worship of God. It is always a difficult thing to know how to build the church; however, whenever it is truly built it is built amid shouts of grace, grace.

Nearly 60 years ago we were traveling from the state of Washington back to my folk's dairy farm in Pennsylvania. As we drove across the Nebraska prairie, we came upon an abandoned church on old route 30, which had been the Oregon Trail. The church tugged at my heart and we stopped to sit and look at it for a while before continuing on our homeward journey. I have always remembered that church in its decay and neglect; it made a lasting impression upon my heart. Later, our daughter, Connie, by then a high school girl, painted a picture of it for me. It sits in our dinning room as my “mantra” and “touch-stone” as to the purpose of my life. It connects me with the words of my friend, Tom Hart, as we walked the streets of his boyhood town of Saint Francisville, Illinois. We stopped at an empty lot –and he said, “And this was my grandmother’s church; they closed it and tore it down.” I think it must have been the same kind of picture that Zerubbabel saw when the angel spoke to him. Neglected Churches often mean “empty souls.” I wrote my feelings down; here they are:

God Took the Land Back

Askew on its hinges, the door hangs ajar.
The wind whispers through, its light is a star.
The pulpit long silent and empty the pew,
The Saints have departed with scarce an ado.

Ridge stretching long-ward, taking its stand,
Crying in silence for the heart of a man.

Steeple yearns heavenward, still pointing the way,
And speaking to people who pass everyday.

The stoop settled slowly, then pulling apart,
Made home for the rabbit and horned meadow lark.
"Choir loft" sparrows sing hymns to our Lord,
In the absence of people now busy with chores.

The storms it has weathered have rotted their way,
Through siding and plaster --white, smooth, in its day.
The laughter of children, the crying of men,
Are no longer heard as I write with this pen.

Belfry now silent, it tolls not the time,
When neighbor afar did wait for its chime.
Through meadow and pasture to gather with friends,
Yet, now they must all their own business tend.

Weeds in the churchyard and wheat at the door,
A tree by the Vestry, with plaster strewn floor.
The times are now "plenty," folk have no lack;
It matters to few; God took the land back.

When Zerubbabel considered the mountain of obstacles that blocked the work of God, an angelic voice gave him **the message that would heal and build**. As Zerubbabel looked at the ruins, he was given the message that would revive the fallen church of his day. "What are you, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel you shall become a plain; and he shall bring out the top stone amid shouts of 'Grace, grace to it'" (Zechariah 4:7). **God's power is the power of grace.**

When Jesus came, the church had fallen into legalism and judgementality; to revive the church Jesus once again gave out the message of grace. At the time of Martin Luther and the Reformation, the church had to be called back to grace. "Amazing grace how sweet the sound." **Whenever the church leaves off with the message of grace, it falls into disrepair.** It is the message of grace that is so attractive. Mountains are leveled into highways by grace. How does the church expect to heal anything with an "ungracious," mean, tough, rough, unkind, critical, proud spirit? These are not our means and methods! We are the opposite of all of that. To leave off with grace and graciousness is tantamount to the church "committing suicide." Sometimes, the church seems overly busy with things that will kill its only important message.

Now back to verse 6, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts." God's first and greatest cause is his own glory. There was a time, before all time, when there was no day but the Ancient of Days, when God dwelt alone in sublime solitude. At that time, he determined that he would glorify himself by

creating. For the very highest virtue of God is for him to magnify himself in all of his greatness; **a lesser motive would make God less than Divine!**

The Bible brings glory to God, the angels sing glory to God. Even salvation, costly though it was, and of infinite benefit to all of us, had for its first object the exaltation of the being and attributes of God.

Now then, as this is true, it is also true that God has a church --and that church has been redeemed and exists to bring God glory. Now, the embracing of grace, kindness, and goodness --does bring glory to God! The things done in the church and by the church are for the good of man and the glory of God. Whenever God has worked in history the outcome has always been that people receive the profit and benefit, while God has received the glory and credit.

He led his people out of the slavery of Egypt; he received the glory --not Moses. In the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land, he received the glory --not Joshua. When the lion's mouths were closed, he received the glory --not Daniel. When Nineveh repented, he received the glory --not Jonah. **Yet, in every case man received the benefit.**

"Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne; hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own! Awake, my soul and sing of him who died for thee; and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity."

There is mainly one thing that is wrong with Satan, that is that he is against God. That is enough. The evil things that he causes are evil for the very reason that they are against God. God did not meekly step aside and let Satan take the throne; nor, will he, for he is God. He has existed without cause for all time; no other being can say that. Satan can never be God.

Our text is divided into three parts: First, "not by might." Second, "nor by power." Third, "but by my Spirit."

This work of rebuilding the church would not be by "might, nor by power." There is a difference between the two words. Hebrew scholars tell us that "might" may be translated "army." It signifies the *collective power* of a large group of people fighting on the same side. We've seen that over and again.

The second word, "power," indicates the movement of a single individual working alone. So, our text could read, "Not by the combined might of people laboring to assist each other, nor by the separate power of any single hero, but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

First, let's consider the collective might as represented in a show of force as numbers of people are gathered together. "Not by might." The church has never been preserved, nor has its interests ever been promoted by human armies. Perhaps the greatest enigmas of the church were the armies of Constantine, the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the Conquistadors. Violence against those it seeks to win can never serve as a proper foundation for the work of grace. The gospel will always proceed in spite of human armies; never

through them. It was Roger Williams who said, "Forced religion stinks."

You cannot conquer people for Christ. You cannot force people to Christ. What makes Christianity real is that it comes from the heart; true Christianity is not the kind that is imposed upon people. The essence of Christianity is that it is voluntary. In our Christian ministry we must try hard to keep it that way: You give **if you want**; you serve **if you want**; you come **if you want**, and so forth. Of course, we do want you to, but it must come from your own heart.

Now, we can understand this word "might" in still another sense, that is *great corporations* of people. This notion is not strange to the church in America, where majority is the power of everything. While the losers may be squashed in this manner, no hearts are won. And the minority soon becomes the majority to repeat the whole maddening cycle all over again. It is the tendency of groups of Christians to compete with, rather than assist other fellow-Christians. It is the nature of things that organizations of people are quickly overtaken with a spirit of self-preservation that becomes self-serving.

In order to look at God's work in a *universal* manner, we need to believe that it is "not by might". There are no divisions in the body of the Church. There are Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and a host of others whose hearts all belong to our Lord, who have grace in their hearts, and in whom the Spirit of God works.

"It is not by might," but neither is it "by power." You know that, after all, the greatest work has been done by the "ones"; the hundreds do not often do much. It is the "ones" in the church who do the work, and it shall always be so. It is the single individuals that have all the initiative. Look at the leaders of the last age. There was but one Luther, one Calvin, one Whitfield, one John Wesley, one Charles Wesley, one Spurgeon, one Ruth, one Deborah, one Samson, one Gideon, one William Randolph Hearst (who was behind the success of one Billy Graham), one R. G. Letourneau, one Mother Theresa.

If you have a committee, you need to make sure there is one person on it who will do the work. Someone has aptly said, "God so loved the world that he didn't send a committee."

There is scarcely anything done by a committee because what is everyone's business is no one's business. It is rare that ten people will all choose to pull on the front of the wagon, though they may all decide to shoot at the same deer.

So it has been, that great works have always been accomplished by the individual. Perhaps it is because God works with one individual at a time; Christian faith is between one person and God.

However, it is not by "power" either; it is not by the individual. "It is by my Spirit, says the Lord." Think of the change that came over the Christian church when the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost. There has never been even one heart changed or softened without the Spirit of God. There has never been a heart warmed without God's Spirit. **The Spirit of God is the heart of the Church.** The work of the church has always been *heart work!* The Spirit of God is the great keeper of the Church.

It makes no difference how tricky we are, how persuasive, how intellectual, how eloquent; we cannot do God's work without God's Spirit. We can do something, and it will be religious, but it won't be God's work. Hearts are not awakened without God's Spirit.

The fruit of God's Spirit is exactly what the Church needs, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). You ask any person, and he or she will tell you, that without question, that sounds like proper church work. How can you tell if God's Spirit is around? Well, people actually demonstrate these traits.

So then, "Not by the combined might of many people laboring to assist each other, nor by the separate power of a single hero, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." **That is as it ought to be; for the work of God is not just an ordinary thing.**

The method of God's Spirit can be described as grace. The law condemns; grace saves. Harshness destroys and roughens, while grace soothes and smooths. There are always mountains before the church; they have always been leveled into plains and smoothed over by grace. There have always been stones to be repaired in the walls of the church; they have always been repaired by grace. Amid shouts of grace, grace, the mountains are removed and the church is repaired and kept in repair. It is not like "Thanks for the grace –but, we'll take it from here."

God's work cannot be done without great quantities of grace. Grace is God's gift to the Church, "It is the gift of God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Ephesians 2:8). May this ancient message revive God's church today as it did in the day when Zerubbabel was called to reinstate the worship of God into the temple.

When there is nothing going on in the heart, you may be sure that there is nothing going on in the church.

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed."

"Thru many dangers, toils and snares I have already come; 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

Nobody has a bigger story to tell than the story of grace; it must continue to be the story of the Church if the Church intends to remain in the ***heart business.*** Hearts are God's chief business. He heals them, He changes them, He softens them, makes them new, lifts them, and fills them with love.

He does it amid shouts of grace, grace. May the church be quick to reclaim its message! **Amazing Grace.**