



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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OUR BUILDINGS

By ANDY DIESTELKAMP

IN THE BEGINNING, GOD created..." From the beginning of Scripture we are told that God is creative. However, out of all of God's material creation, only humans are described as being created in God's image. By biblical definition, humans are simultaneously physical and spiritual beings. Unlike God, we are created beings with beginnings; but, like God, we are creative beings who have demonstrated our ability to build amazing things using the resources that God created.

Yet, this creative thinking and building with our own hands whatever we imagine is too often misused for our own glory rather than for God's glory. We have a tendency to identify with what *we* have created rather than finding our identity and purpose in a relationship with our Creator. We see this material inclination and the carnal rationale that comes with it manifested very early in human history. Recall that, despite God's instruction to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Gen. 1:28; 9:1,7), people instead said, "Let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4).

The problem is not in our being creative and building physical things. The problem is in our motives and in our propensity to find fulfillment in and identity with things of our own design and making *more* than with what God has designed and instructed.

Recall that God gave explicit instructions to Israel about the physical construction of a sanctuary to be built "that I may dwell among them" (Ex 24:8). Yet, even as Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving from God "the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of its furnishings" (v 9), the people in their impatience built something for themselves patterned after what they had seen in their bondage in Egypt and among the nations. A golden calf was fashioned, and it was declared, "This is your god, O Israel,

that brought you out of the land of Egypt" (30:4), and they proclaimed a feast to Yahweh wherein they "sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play" (vv 5,6). This tendency to worship God in a way of our own making is idolatrous and has persisted in every generation.

Yet, even the physical tabernacle and Solomon's temple eventually built in Jerusalem (along with the priesthood and its rituals and various forms of worship) were themselves merely types of that which would be ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Indeed, in his prayer of dedication of the temple, Solomon rhetorically asked, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You. How much less this temple which I have built" (1 K 8:27).

Israel's identification with its physical temple persisted even after it was destroyed and an inferior one was built in its place. Eventually the second temple was expanded and made more physically impressive in the days of the Herods. Clearly, the Jews took great pride in their temple. Recall that even the earliest disciples of Jesus observed to Him the beauty and grandeur of the temple in Jerusalem (Mt 24:1; Mk 13:1) to which Jesus replied, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mk 13:2). Indeed, Jesus said this would happen within that generation (v 30). To this present day, the destruction and continued absence of the Jewish temple remains a testimony to Jesus being the Messiah and the chief cornerstone of a temple not made with hands.

Following the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the earliest Christians came to understand that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world, that the weapons of their warfare are not carnal, and that God's *people* constitute the temple of God "being built together for a habitation of God in the spirit" (Eph 2:19-22). Indeed, the author of Hebrews observed that the covenant made at Sinai is now obsolete (Heb 8:13) and, therefore, so is the Jewish temple, its priesthood, and

all its rituals and modes of worship which were physical shadows of what are now spiritual realities in Christ.

Therefore, we should not find our identity in the things we build with our hands. As grand as the cathedrals built by men may be, they are not true sanctuaries. The vaulted ceilings, the stained-glass windows, the iconic art, the elegant vestments, the implements of gold, the lofty organ, and the elaborate furnishings are the imaginations and inventions of men. These may thrill those who worship with them, but they are at best impotent imitations of that which is now obsolete in Jesus Christ or are, at worst, forms of idolatry like unto the golden calves of apostate Israel.

From a biblical perspective, when we think of *churches*, we should *not* be thinking of buildings made with hands but thinking of groups of *people* who are committed to Jesus as Lord and to one another as saints. Churches are not made legitimate by physical measurements. A church does not establish itself only once it has accumulated enough money to own a building and meet societal expectations in appearances and performances. Indeed, putting a premium upon these material matters reveals us to be more carnal than spiritual. Jesus' plain words to the churches of Asia should have modern churches re-thinking their priorities and practices. To the affluent church in Laodicea, Jesus observed that many of them were spiritually poor, blind, and naked (Rev 3:17). To those in the church in Sardis with a reputation for being alive, Jesus told them they were dead (v 1). Yet, to the few who comprised the church in Philadelphia despite their "little strength," Jesus praised them for their faithfulness in keeping His word (v 8).

Let us not find our identity in material things of our own making but instead find our identity in Jesus Christ. Let us make sure that we are emphasizing what Jesus emphasized. Let us be certain that any building we do is not to our glory but to the glory of our Creator.

andydiestelkamp@gmail.com

IRON SHARPENS IRON

Reclaiming a Culture of Biblical Exploration

By MATT HENNECKE

SOMETHING SEEMS to have quietly gone missing in many local churches these days, and I'm afraid its absence is doing real harm. The deep, Word-driven discussions that once marked fellowship among serious believers—wrestling together over marriage and divorce, the Lord's Supper, the head covering, institutionalism, and a dozen other substantive questions—have, in many congregations, largely disappeared. In their place is a kind of precarious peace.

The culprit, I suspect, is conflict avoidance. Perhaps with good intentions, we've stopped talking about hard things. The result is a false peace and an "echo chamber" where the same familiar phrases and thinking circulate without examination, and the congregation gradually loses both the appetite and the skill for deep study. That's not a strength. It's a danger. Jude tells us to "contend for the faith" (Jude 3). I don't hear much contending these days.

Over the years I've come to some different conclusions about certain passages of Scripture. When I share my thinking with my brothers and sisters in a Bible class, it's as if I've thrown a grenade. The reaction is often swift and emotional, with little or no consideration of my thoughts. When I've offered to share my study in writing, no one takes me up on the offer. It's as if many of my brothers and sisters demand adherence to the "conventional thinking" and aren't interested in biblical examination.

The fear of offering a different view has, it seems, even impacted gospel preachers. Many times, over the last few years, I've sat across from a preacher at a local restaurant and heard him remark, "I'd never say this from the pulpit, but I think a better understanding of this verse might be..." Why would a preacher be afraid to share his thoughts more widely? There may be a host of reasons, but the fear of being labeled a false teacher or being "fired" may be some of the reasons. These preachers felt comfortable sharing their perspective with a friend but didn't have the same confidence in their brethren to put it on the table for discussion and examination.

I remember a different culture. As a young man, I sat in discussions where brethren genuinely sharpened one another—insights offered, tested against Scripture, and refined. Those conversations made us better students of the Word, and I believe their absence today has weakened us.

The good news is that the model for raising

questions and examining them cordially already exists. Acts 15 reveals a volatile, high-stakes doctrinal dispute handled with openness, courage, and ultimate submission to Scripture. The result was clarity, unity, and a strengthened fellowship. That's the template I think needs to be resurrected in many local congregations. Churches that cultivate this culture—where questions are welcomed and alternative views are examined without fear—actually protect the family of believers. I think such a spirit of open, non-fearful discussion helps keep members from going "off the rails" by holding a view they're afraid to expose to wider and wiser consideration.

Here are some suggestions for building a congregational culture that welcomes and examines questions openly and without fear:

1. Study Acts 15 together and examine the model for how to discuss challenging questions openly, cordially, and without fear.
2. Launch a Bible study group specifically designed to examine hard questions—no topic too sensitive—with the Word always the final authority (John 17:17).
3. Train church leaders and members to distinguish between *disagreement* and *disloyalty*. Teach them how to *contend* for the faith without being *contentious*—"...to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people" (Titus 2:3).
4. Genuinely thank people when they ask tough questions or suggest possible alternative views and thus create an atmosphere that welcomes them.
5. If your study has led you to a possible "new interpretation," offer it gently and not as a declaration. Instead of insisting you're right, invite your brothers and sisters to consider it *together* and give them time for consideration. Say things like "here's a thought for consideration" or "might this be a better way of understanding this verse?"
6. When you hear a "new take" on a passage, guard against giving an instant critique. Take time to reflect before weighing in. Say things like "that's interesting, I'll need to think about that" or "thanks for sharing your thoughts—let me study that." Be careful not to respond harshly lest you discourage a brother or sister. Follow Paul's advice to "let your speech always be gracious" (Col. 4:6).

Yes, when iron sharpens iron (Proverbs 27:17), there are apt to be some sparks, but that's good if we genuinely listen to and treat each other with respect and love. There may be certain venues where asking questions or sharing alternative perspectives may not be wise, but here's the thing—the Word can bear the weight of any examination. The question is whether we trust the Word—and our brethren—enough to ask them.

mjhennecke@gmail.com

'Filthy Rags'

By AL DIESTELKAMP

THE PROPHET ISAIAH offered a prayer of national repentance. In it he declared, "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags..." (Isa. 64:6).

No doubt, this vivid word picture would have been very familiar to the people of Judah as they relied on using rags to cleanse themselves from bodily discharges. Isaiah describes the hypocritical displays of righteousness of his people as "filthy rags" which are unable to cleanse them. I couldn't help but think about how well this fits our own nation's outward reliance on a religious heritage while sin is ignored and flaunted.

I'll admit, I like it when I witness influential or famous people publicly express faith in God. I like it when athletes give verbal praise to Christ or point upward toward God. I like it when national leaders express reliance on God. However, when the same mouths use vulgar language that needs to be "bleeped," it proves such "righteousness" as merely "filthy rags."

Speaking of the use of the tongue, James writes: "With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing..." (3:9-10).

It is easy for us to see the hypocrisy that is all around us; but just as Isaiah's words were primarily meant for God's people (not the Gentiles) in his time, we as God's people today must take heed to the principle being taught. If we rely on our own righteousness instead of the righteousness revealed in God's Word, "all our righteousnesses are filthy rags" and are unable to cleanse us.

aldiestel@gmail.com

Once Defiled, Now Blessed

By NOAH DIESTELKAMP

IN THE SUMMER OF 1834, a Mr. Nimrod Murphree posted this advertisement in a Nashville, Tennessee, newspaper: “*To all Nations, Languages and People, Greeting—Know ye, that I, Nimrod Murphree, of the City of Nashville, and the State of Tennessee, have discovered perpetual motion.*” In a subsequent issue, another paid for an ad in reply to Mr. Murphree, quipping, “*Probably Mr. Murphree has succeeded in handing himself over the Cumberland River, or a barn yard fence, by the straps of his boots.*” Almost 200 years later, we still have not achieved perpetual motion, and I suspect Mr. Murphree did not manage to hoist himself over the fence.

While the phrase “pull himself up by his bootstraps” is often used to communicate a need to “figure it out” and “do something unassisted,” we know that the phrase describes a physical act which is literally impossible. No amount of pulling on our shoes will do the trick! The post-exilic Jews

found themselves in a somewhat similar situation during the time of Zerubbabel. By God’s grace, they had been allowed to return to the land and had begun the work of rebuilding the temple. But by the time of Haggai, that work had stopped and the people said, “the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD” (Hag. 1:2). God sent the message to the people via Haggai that their lack of diligence and respect for the temple of the LORD was something worthy of repentance and gave them clear direction, saying, “Consider your ways. Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified” (Hag. 1:7-8). Just a few verses later, we are told with beautiful simplicity that, all together, the leaders and people “obeyed the voice of the LORD their God” (Hag. 1:12). However, what at first might sound like a nice “comeback” story wherein the Jews just needed to “put in a little elbow grease” and “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” takes a turn in Haggai chapter two.

In chapter two, God called upon the Jews who had seen Solomon’s temple before it was destroyed, prompting them to compare the two. “Is it not as nothing in your eyes?” asked God. The people’s work, though admirable and obedient, could not bring back the glory of Solomon’s temple. God pointed this out to help them understand a very important truth: the true glory of the temple was the presence of God. “Be strong,” He told the people, “Work, for I am with you... My Spirit remains in your midst” (Hag. 2:4-5). With this He promised that this temple would indeed be filled with His glory, to the extent that “the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former” (Hag. 2:9). The Jews could take heart in the work they were doing, *not* because they did such phenomenal work, but because *God would bless their work and fill the temple with His glory.*

In the following section of chapter two, God commanded Haggai to inquire of the priests regarding laws of cleanliness and defilement. Haggai was to ask the priests whether holy meat could, by physical contact, make other food holy. The priests answered that it could not. Haggai’s second question asked whether a person who was unclean could, by physical contact, make food unclean. This time the priests answered it would, indeed, make the food unclean. The point God was making through Haggai was “So it is with this people... and so with every work of their hands. And what they offer there is unclean” (Hag. 2:14). The Jews were defiled, so their offering—and even their work on the temple—was defiled. Yet, just as God’s glorious presence could fill even an unimpressive temple, so, too, could He offer blessing to a defiled people. In Haggai 2:15-19, God observed that these defiled people had been without His blessing for some time. Yet, in response to the people’s obedience, God said, “From *this day on I will bless you*” (Hag. 2:19).

The Jews were a defiled people building a defiled temple in a defiled land. In such a situation, there is no “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps,” there is only defilement and despair. The only remedy to their situation was God’s presence and blessing. In the time of Haggai, God offered His presence to the Jews when they obeyed Him in reverence (Hag. 1:12-14). Under the new covenant, we experience the fulfillment of this! Through Jesus, we—who *were* defiled—are *now* blessed. We are temples of His Spirit, purposed for His glory! Did *we* accomplish this? Did *we* grab our bootstraps? Thank God the answer is “NO!” Along with the Jews and their temple, our lives are privileged to be a testament to the *glory of God* who blesses penitent and obedient hearts.

nadiestel@gmail.com

INFLUENCING OTHERS

By SCOTT MILLER

CHRISTIANS HAVE the ability and responsibility to influence the world for good. Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet (Mt 5.13 - ESV).”

We are to bring the flavor of God to a bland and bitter world. David challenged, “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps 34.8 - ESV).

What makes Christians different? How do we influence others for good?

Ultimately, it’s when we become like Christ and are conformed to his image (Rom 8:29) in the way we think, speak, and act. It is in the gracious words we say; the kind and sacrificial deeds we do; the sincere attitude of humility and forgiveness we portray; the unwavering trust and faith we display in God always; and the inner peace and joy we have that

cannot be taken away regardless of our circumstances.

When we *really* live like this, people notice. Some won’t like the light we shine in their dark places and will actively seek to keep us quiet. Some will be indifferent and treat us as odd background noise. But others will see Christ living in us and desire to know more as they come to realize we have something they are missing. We have divine purpose in our lives. Our lives have meaning beyond the grave. We have a peace and joy that can only be found in Him that sees us through the difficulties of this life



because of the hope we possess of the life to come.

May God use us to influence others to “taste and see” that the “Lord is good.” That they, too, can realize their true purpose and meaning in life as God designed and intends for all people. It is the greatest gift that we can share and the only one that has benefits in both this life and the life to come.

hawkifanz@gmail.com

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ANDY DIESTELKAMP, *Editor*
323 E. Indiana Ave., Pontiac, IL 61764
(815) 374-3717 • andydiestelkamp@gmail.com

AL DIESTELKAMP, *Editor-Emeritus*
260 N. Aspen Dr., Cortland, IL 60112
(815) 785-0401 • aldiestel@gmail.com

Web Page: www.thinkonthesethings.com

260 N. Aspen Drive
Cortland, IL 60112

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The Fishing is Good

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

MY BROTHER-IN-LAW Tom Sater became an avid fisherman. At his recent funeral, it was recounted how—when he came home—my sister would ask, “How was the fishing?” His answer was always the same, “Even if the catching was bad, the fishing was good!” If we love fishing, this will always be the response.

It occurred to me that this is how “fishers of men” should feel, too! The apostles, the first “fishers of men,” felt “entrusted with the gospel” (1 Thes 2:4), the “message of reconciliation” committed to them by God Himself (2 Cor 5:19). It was a blessing and a responsibility: “...Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Cor 4:1-2). If we love fishing, this will always be the response.

Paul saw being a servant of the gospel as part of the “gift of the grace of God” (Eph 3:7-8). He felt unworthy, but Christ, “...considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service” (1 Tim 1:12-14 NIV). We are saved by grace to serve. If we love grace, we will love fishing.

The fishing is good because of Who we are doing it for. We are not fishing for ourselves but for God. We are “...His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...” (Eph 2:10). Whether or not we personally like fishing or consider ourselves good at it, we do it because it is the will of our God. We try to give it our best and try to get good at it because God gave us His best. And eventually we actually like it because our hearts, minds, and desires change to be those of Christ’s (1 Cor 2:16). This will be our response as we come to love fishing.

The fishing is good because of Who we are doing it with. Paul considered himself and others to be “God’s co-workers” (2 Cor 6:1 NIV). Even when Paul was alone, he knew, “...the Lord stood with me and strengthened me...” (2 Tim 4:17). Imagine being God’s co-workers, working with God Himself! Fishing with God! This is why we love fishing!

The fishing is good because of what is being offered. In the gospel, there is no fake lure or hook with a sharp barb. It is the “gospel of the grace of God” (Ac 20:24), the “gospel of peace” (Rom 10:15), the “gospel of your salvation” (Eph 1:13), and the “good

news of God” (Rom 1:1 NIV). We love fishing because we get to share the eternal life we have found in Christ with others who desperately need it.

The fishing is good even when the catching is bad. God is glorified in the fishing and not only in the catching. God is glorified when the light of the gospel shines in dark places, even when people continue to love the darkness (Jn 3:19-20)). We tend to judge the effectiveness of the fishing by the catching and become discouraged when the catching is bad—when people don’t respond to the gospel. People who love to fish find satisfaction in the fishing—period. Yes, they find joy when there is catching, but the catching isn’t the only point. Like the planting and watering in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7, God says, “Fish!” and He gives the increase. And isn’t this the point of the great catch of fish in Luke 5? They had fished all night and caught nothing, “...nevertheless at Your word I will let down the net...” (5:3-10). Fish when the Lord says fish, even when the catching seems unlikely or non-existent. We fish. The Lord provides the fish. Even if the catching is bad, the fishing is good!

davdiestel@yahoo.com

*Tom would have liked this lesson.
He loved fishing - both kinds.*