

ON THE BUILDING OF BATTLEMENTS

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Tucked away in the middle of the Mosaic Law is, of all things, the following building code:

When thou buildest a new house, then thou shalt make a battlement for thy roof, that thou bring not blood upon thine house, if any man fall from thence.
De. 22:8

Now we know that the letter of the Law is not meant for the New Testament believer, but we understand that from its principle we can gain an insight into the Kingdom of God. Thus, from the prohibition of plowing with an ox and a donkey—just two verses below our text—Paul could admonish us to not be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers.” From another Mosaic precept, he instructs us that “muzzle not the ox that treadeth out the corn” means that we should materially support those who are laboring in the spread of the Gospel.

What can we, the citizens of the Kingdom, learn from a command to “make a battlement for thy roof”?

What is a battlement?

The first thing to settle is the definition of a “battlement.” The Hebrew word used for battlement comes from a root word meaning “to repress, or hold back” that is not used in any other place in the Bible. However, the context gives us a clear picture of the intention of a battlement: to keep people from falling off the roof, which in that culture was usually flat, and used for various purposes. So while the English word “battlement” has connotations of a defensive knee wall—such as might be found on top of the walls surrounding a castle or city—the whole gist of our text is simply that of keeping people from accidentally falling off the roof. And the builder of the house was responsible to see that an appropriate wall was built around his housetop. If someone fell off his roof because of the lack of a battlement, the owner of the house was responsible for his death.

What is a battlement not for?

This may seem to be a redundant question, but for the purpose of our study it will profit us to review a few things that a battlement is not intended for. First of all, a battlement is not a prison wall. In other words, the purpose of a battlement is not that of trying to make sure that the people on the roof can in no way, shape, nor form escape from the roof. Second, a battlement is not used to keep people on the street from getting onto the roof. Thirdly, a battlement is not meant to be used as a nice way to have seating all the way around the edges of the roof, nor a nice place to take a nap. Neither are they to be used for children as a place to play “follow the leader” and practice their balancing act. These are rather rudimentary facts, and it seems almost senseless to review them. Yet, as we proceed, we will find that many people are foolishly misusing battlements.

How tall should a battlement be?

Deuteronomy gives us no details on exactly how a battlement should look. God gave humanity common sense, and He expects us to use it sometimes. A three-inch wall simply will not serve to prevent someone from falling over the edge of a roof. In fact, such a ledge may well cause more falls than it stops. On the other hand, an eight-foot wall is unnecessary and will block off the fresh breezes and sunlight, making the rooftop an undesirable place to be.

An ideal height is somewhere in the range of the navel of an adult person. If it is much lower, whoever might happen to trip and fall against the wall will have the mass of his body weight to be higher than the top of the wall. The center of his gravity will be higher than the wall, making him unable to stop himself from going on over. While there is no reason forbidding one from building the wall higher, it is not necessary. Any person falling over a wall that is higher than his bottom rib had to be doing something abnormally

foolish. No one has ever accidentally fallen over a wall that was as high as his rib cage.

Building a spiritual battlement

From these few points, we will now move into the spiritual realm and determine what we can learn from this building code. First of all, the “house” that is being built by some man is the church of God. We, as believers, constitute this house, and Jesus is the master builder. But as coworkers with him, we also are involved in the building of the house, so the statute does concern us.

Let’s take it one step further. Instead of thinking in terms of the universal church of Christ, let’s look at a local congregation. Christ is building it, and we are his collaborators. His plan calls for a battlement, to keep men from accidentally falling off the roof. What does all this mean, in practical terms?

The battlement of the conscience

As men are called into the house to be a partaker of the benefits of its shelter and direction, there needs to be a “safety wall” built around its edges. This is the conscience, which warns men that “here is the edge; any further and you will drop off.” For those whose heart and goal is to stay on the roof, this wall is a blessing. Not that they need it every day, but during a lifetime of labors, sooner or later each person will likely make that stupid step backwards, or trip over that child’s toy, which would have sent them hurtling to the street. Thankfully, a wall was there to stop them!

As mentioned above, congregational battlements are not intended to be prison walls. If someone’s heart is not set on staying in the house, the battlement can seem like so much a nuisance; after all, they reason, are not we mature enough to know better than step off a roof?

But how many times has your conscience saved you in that weak moment? That time of temptation where you would have fallen to the street with a splat, except something hindered you? However, if you are trying to escape from the roof, the battlement is of little use: one hop or a stepstool will get you over with little effort. So it is with the conscience. If you really want to do something that is not allowed “in the house,” all you have to do is leap over the wall.

How to build a church conscience

How does a local congregation build a community conscience? Sure, building a personal conscience is easy; just read the Bible and let the Spirit guide you to the precepts that it contains. After a while, you have a personal conscience built up to what you have perceived as being the will of God. Even a family conscience is not that hard, if Dad and Mom and children are living in harmony. Dad takes the lead, Mom follows and supports, and the children respect them and allow Dad and Mom to specify what is good and right for the home. The children’s consciences are slowly built up to what Dad and Mom construct in the children. By the time the child is mature, he has a battlement built up within him that will keep him in those mistakes and close calls.

But all too often this same method does not work in local congregations. Why?

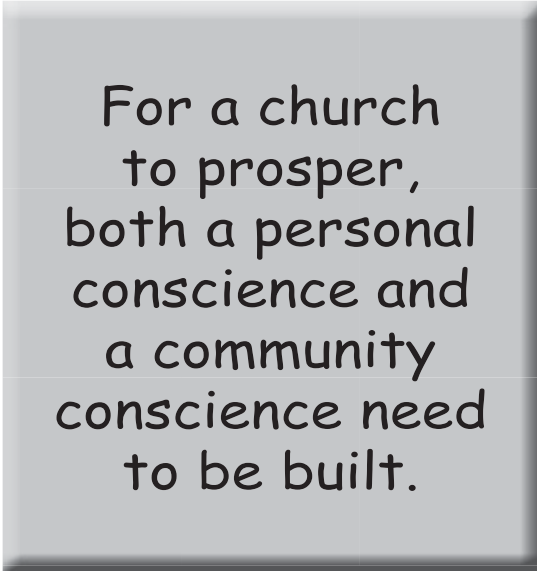
Actions and reactions

One of the biggest causes of failure in building a community conscience lies in reacting to others’ failures. People misuse battlements, and the next person reacts. For example, instead of using a church conscience to aid in mishaps, some have tried to use battlements as prison walls to fence in folks who obviously have more interest in what is going on in the street than in the activities of the

house. Seeing the youth lined up at the wall, leaning over and chattering with the people below, the builders laid a few more blocks on the battlement, making it head high. Then, when the same youth got some stools to stand on so they could see out and continue their communication with the people below, the builders built another layer or two on the battlement.

Did that stop those disinterested in the activities of the house from their activities? No, they simply got out some stepladders. Looking at this whole situation, some have shaken their heads and come to a conclusion: all this battlement building is useless! Determined to do things “the right way,” they moved down the street and decided that they were NOT going to use battlements to keep folks penned in. So they built a new house ... without any battlements.

“Who needs battlements?” they reasoned. “If a man is careful and minds his business, he can stay away from the edge. We just simply need to be mindful and be more faithful to warn each other, and no one will fall over the edge.” So they built “virtual” battlements, ever mindful that real



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battlements do not keep worldly folks in the house from fellowship with the world.

This is, of course, a reaction. What needs to happen to those whose heart is not in the activities of the house is that the elders need to gently but firmly take them downstairs and say to them: “It is obvious that your heart is on the street. Here you are, go. When your heart is changed, we welcome you back.” Hard decision, I know, but that is what the father of the prodigal son did. It was best for both of them.

Virtual battlements

Many years ago, I worked on a construction job in the State of Wyoming that required safety inspections by OSHA standards. One of the specifications was that any scaffolding over so many feet off the ground (I forget the details) had to have a safety railing around it. Now most construction workers look at OSHA rules like a lot of people look at the Bible: a list of rules that they try to see how much they can get away with, instead of how much they can better put into practice.

Since the inspector did show up about every day, we complied to the rules, at least outwardly. One incident stands out in my mind. We had built a scaffold about 20 feet high, but had not gotten around to putting the railing on yet. Suddenly, someone noticed that the inspector had showed up, and I was instructed to quickly build a railing for the scaffold. With a couple of 2X4s and some wire, I hurriedly tied on some uprights for posts, and with another long 2X4 I made a rail, tied on with a piece of wire. The inspector eventually made his way up to where I was working, and stood there looking over the situation.

As I was on good terms with him, I laughingly said something like “Look, we have a railing. Just don’t lean on it; it might fall off!”

I expected a shake of the head and possibly a reproof with orders to build a real railing. To my great surprise, he just quietly answered, “That’s fine. All that railing is needed for is a warning to someone who backs up into it that he is near the edge. It doesn’t need to be able to stop someone from falling.”

I felt relieved and happy to hear that on that day. But there is another side to the story ...

Had I tripped over something on the scaffold that day and hit that “virtual railing,” it would not have saved me from a trip to the pavement 20 feet below. Had that misfortune occurred, my opinion of “virtual railings” would have probably bottomed out.

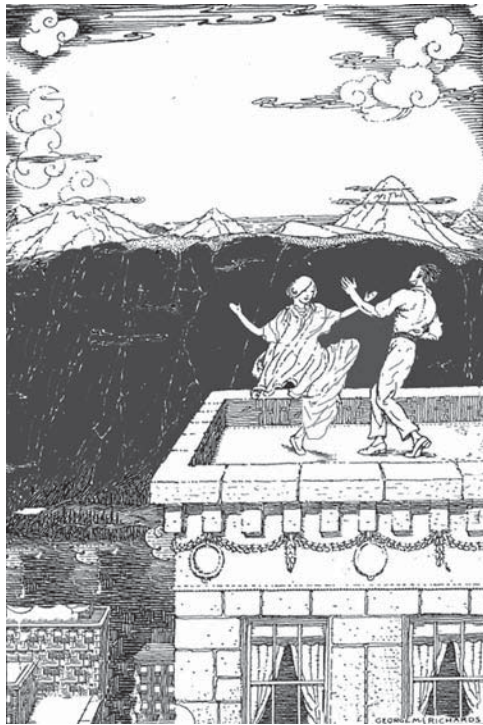
The big question

This brings us to an important question for builders of battlements: Does a “virtual battlement” meet the requirements of Deuteronomy 22:8? Does a 2X4 tied loosely on a wobbly stake provide enough protection against falling off a roof, so that whoever trips over the edge is guilty of his own blood? For a temporary construction situation as I told about, a virtual railing is acceptable, perhaps even necessary, since the workers have to constantly be reaching out of the scaffold to do their work. But for a housetop, virtual railings do not work.

Let’s look at a real historical example. About a century before Martin Luther came along, a revival of primitive Christianity occurred in Bohemia. Fashioning their lives according to the Sermon on the Mount, these brothers built communities of believers throughout the land. Whoever desired to be a part of these churches had to agree to align his life to the teaching of Jesus, and to live that out in practical ways. Not every aspect of life was spelled out, but the brotherhood had come up with some practical applications—a battlement to surround them—that a person had to agree to before he could join. One example was to not engage in dice-making. Dice were used primarily for gambling, and the brotherhood did not want to be associated with dice-making.

Time passed and along came Martin Luther. At first, Luther was not impressed with these Bohemian brothers—“sour-looking hypocrites and self-grown saints” he called them. But as time went on, he had a change of mind. He told them later:

Tell your Brethren to hold fast what God has given them, and never give up their constitution and discipline. Let them take no heed of revilements. The world will behave foolishly. If you in Bohemia were to live as we do, what is said of us would be said of



Hopefully these foolish
dancers learn
—before it is too late—
not to depend on a
“virtual” battlement!

you, and if we were to live as you do, what is said of you would be said of us.

“We have never,” he added in a later letter to the Brethren, “attained to such a discipline and holy life as is found among you, but in the future we shall make it our aim to attain it.”

History tells us that neither Luther nor his churches ever attained it. His virtual battlement was too weak to hold his movement from falling into the street. The lesson? Churches without battlements eventually go over the edge.

The next big question

How does a church build a real battlement? How is a conscience—solid biblical convictions engraved into the heart—built?

Building a battlement consists of solid teaching of biblical principles, backed up by real-life applications to those principles. At the same time, it is made known that there is a line—or in this case a wall—that is not to be crossed on purpose. Whoever willfully climbs over the wall will not be allowed to climb back in, without genuine repentance. In this way, the person on the roof cannot claim that he never realized the danger. When he makes that forgetful step backwards, something will stop him: the teachings and admonishments that he received. When he trips over the toy on the floor, that pure doctrine with practical applications will be as a “battlement” to stop him from going all the way over.

The battle over written standards

Some churches have tried to build a stronger battlement by having a written standard that all members must adhere to. While the example of the Bohemian Brethren may have seemed to be just that, I do not think that all their applications were written out. The bottom line is, one would need a fat, fat book to spell out all the real-life applications to biblical principles.

Let’s consider dangers on both sides of the “written standards” issue. There is a danger with written standards, namely that only those applications that are spelled out become the battlement. In other words, suppose that we have 25 applications spelled out on a paper, but the reality is that biblical applications touch hundreds of other areas of our lives. The danger is that one can begin to think that there are no further applications than those that are written down.

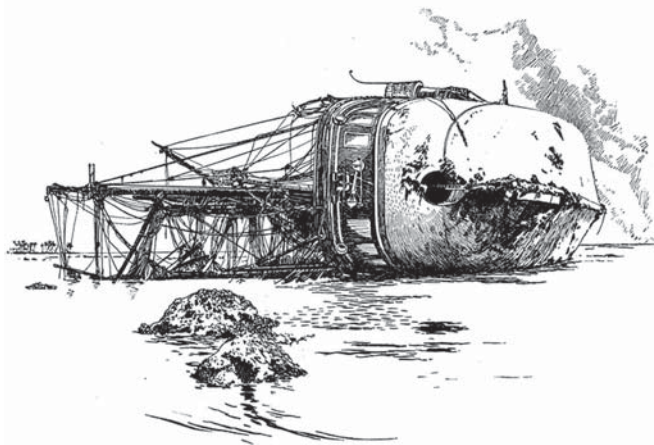
Now the reverse: there is a danger in not writing out any applications, namely that people get the idea that the congregation has no expectations. Everyone lives by his own application without regard to others.

I have seen both kinds of shipwreck; it is a toss-up as to which one is more disastrous. Let’s look at a real life example of both kinds.

Applications without principle

It is common knowledge that some Mennonite churches have a standard that all cars be black, some even requiring a black bumper. While some may snuff their noses immediately at such a requirement, I am slow to do so, even though I currently drive an all-white minivan.

Back when cars first began to be mass-produced, some of the Mennonites looked at the issue of horseless carriages and decided that there was no inherent spiritual harm in these contraptions, and that it could be consistent with Christian character to use them. Others were not sure about that and stuck to horses. However, those that did decide to use the motorized vehicle decided that if one did get a car, it should be a plain one, not all spiced up with fancy colors or shiny accessories.



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Henry Ford had said concerning his product: “The customer can order any color of car he desires, as long as it is black.” And so every car that rolled off his new assembly line was black, just like all John Deeres are green. Keeping in line with the biblical principle of simplicity and modesty, the first Mennonites to get vehicles kept them simple: plain ol’ black cars.

Time moved on, and as cars began to be more common, some worldly folks wanted to stand out from the crowd and began to want other colors of cars besides plain ol’ black ones. Ford Motor Company caught on, and soon one could order other colors. Then came accessories: running lights, reflectors, chromed mirrors and bumpers, and a host of other options. The Mennonites, or at least some of them, kept right on using plain ol’ black cars.

More decades passed. Cars kept evolving, and the customer kept demanding more and more options, and car companies kept competing for the market by adding more

options. By this time, so many people wanted such a variety of colors, a solid black car was just one option out of maybe 25, and chrome bumpers became standard equipment.

Fast forward to 1985 ... I am visiting a Mennonite congregation that requires black cars. On my visit to this particular congregation, I learned how the system operated. All of the young men would wash and wax their cars on Saturday evening, preparing them for the Sunday morning lineup, where they were all parked side by side in one gleaming black row. Once while riding with a friend that attended there, I became very puzzled when he turned onto a gravel road and began to drive about 10 mph—something extremely out of place for one who usually was on the other end of the speedometer. At my question as to why, he remarked, “Well, I already washed my car (it was a Saturday afternoon), and I don’t want to get it dusty before tomorrow. I am driving slow so I don’t stir up dust (and get my car dusty for the lineup tomorrow morning).”

Somewhere along the line, the application lost some of the principle ...

Principles without applications

A scene comes to my mind that illustrates the opposite ditch. I was relaxing in my house one Sunday afternoon when a single, young man came to visit us. Knowing him well, I could tell he was disturbed about something. But rather than ask him about it, I thought I would just let it come out naturally. He chatted small talk for a few minutes, then suddenly burst out, “I thought this church didn’t have any standards?!”

He was referring to the fact that the congregation did not publish a written standard.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He spilled out his story. He was from a far western state and was planning to go visit his family. At the same time, he found out an elderly lady in the congregation was planning on visiting the same state. As neither of them had much in material means, immediately the idea clicked in their minds: Why not him ride along with her, help her with the driving, and split the costs? They immediately made plans to leave in a couple of days.

But their plans were squashed by a concerned minister in the congregation. Hearing of their plans, he approached them and said, “I trust both of you, and know you mean well, but I do not think it would be a good testimony for an unmarried man and woman to drive 1500 miles together.”

The young man came to my place to let off his steam. “She’s old enough to be my grandmother! You can’t tell me

this church doesn’t have a standard!” He was thinking that no written standard meant no congregational applications to real-life, everyday situations; a sad mistake to make.

Rodeo in the church

For a final story, I will relate a true situation, as I was told it. The bishop of a conservative Mennonite church was once questioned why he did not want his church to take the no-written-standard approach for his congregation. “Why, it would be a rodeo!” he exclaimed.

Some ten years later, this same bishop had a change of heart concerning the matter.

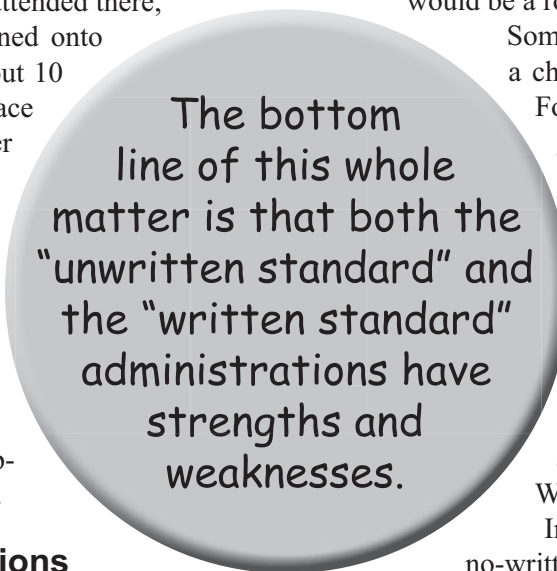
Following a brothers’ meeting, the congregation decided to do away with a written standard. When he was later reminded of his earlier statement and asked the outcome of that decision, the bishop replied, “Why, we had a rodeo! The very next Sunday all the clothes came out of the back of the closets!”

Let’s park here on this incident, and look at it with an objective mind. Which type of administration failed?

Immediately, we see the failure of the no-written-standard approach. The very next Sunday, the people of the congregation “took their liberty” and dressed themselves in clothes that, according to the bishop’s words, were not in line with the principles of a converted heart. Their changing from a written standard to an unwritten standard did not help them one iota. But upon a closer look, we also see the failure of the written standard administration. While the worldly clothes did not openly appear, they were there in the back of the closet all the time. In this case, both types of administration failed to deliver the people from their carnality.

The bottom line

The bottom line of this whole matter is that both the “unwritten standard” and the “written standard” administrations have strengths and weaknesses. The reality is that there is no type of church administration that can change a carnal heart, if that heart has decided to love what this earth holds out to him. When the members lose their interest in the business of the house and turn it towards the going on in the street below, a common response is to just add on another layer of rules, turning what was supposed to be a battlement into prison walls. On the other hand, others want nothing to do with “rules” and so they sigh and breathe a prayer, hoping that things will turn out alright in the end. And so the battlement turns into a yellow warning



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tape stretched around the perimeter of the rooftop, printed with “We recommend that you do not step beyond this line.”

Whose conscience rules?

Does individual conscience trump the community conscience, or does the church conscience overrule each individual’s perception of right and wrong? Again, we find extremes on both ends, and plenty of shipwrecks to learn from.

On the rocks of “church conscience only,” we find the remains of congregations who are like mindless zombies, able only to quote the 35 rules of the statute book. As to why Statute 25 states that such and such should be done, these folks can only tell you “because that is the way it has always been, and that is what the church says.” As far as any personal convictions to shield them from danger while operating outside the sphere of the 35 written rules—which is actually the majority of the time—they have none. And so a whole list of inconsistencies stare them in the face; but they are blind to them, since the rulebook has obliterated any personal conscience.

Meanwhile, on the reefs of “individual conscience only” we see the flotsam of congregations who have rejected any community conscience. Many of these ships have hit these reefs by trying to make really, really sure they miss the rocks of “church conscience only.” Their only compass was each man’s own opinion, and the ship wrecked because some turned the rudder right while others were turning the sails to make her go left.

The community conscience

Any group of people working together has to come to some common agreements. If two carpenters are building a house, one cannot make his walls eight feet tall while the other builds his section seven feet tall. One or the other has to give up his will, or the house will be one big mess.

In the same way, any congregation of believers has to develop a “community conscience.” Can a church survive if one member is telling everyone to get involved in politics and the next is telling everyone it is a sin to get involved in it? Will a congregation prosper if some families have a conscience against contemporary music, while other families

invite the children over and have them listen to it, telling them there is nothing wrong with it?

A brotherhood has to come to a common consensus on the basics of real-life, practical issues. Whether they then administrate this consensus by “written standards” or “unwritten standards” is somewhat beside the point. As mentioned, both administrations have strengths and weaknesses.

Submitting to my brother’s conscience

In 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, Paul gives us a great secret to achieving our goal of unity. The key phrases are “Let no man seek his own, but every man another’s *wealth* (well-being),” and “why is my liberty judged of (ruled by) another *man’s* conscience?”



The ship wrecked because some turned the rudder right while others were turning the sails to make her go left.

An example of being ruled by another’s conscience would be the case of the young man I mentioned earlier who was thinking to travel with the older lady. His conscience gave him liberty to do that, but his brother’s conscience did not. Whose conscience was to rule? According to Paul, the concerned brother’s conscience was to override the young man’s “freedom,” since his brother did not feel comfortable with the situation. This is called submission, a word our human nature hates with a passion. Needless to say, any congregation that does not practice this type of brotherly submission is headed for a shipwreck.

Romans 14 also deals with this submission. The verse often misused in this chapter is the following: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy

Ghost.” In a situation where there is a clash of opinions on an issue, this verse often comes up, with one side telling the other: “The kingdom of heaven is not about such issues, so I do not need to listen to you.” However, that is exactly the opposite of the meaning of that verse.

Paul is really saying, “Since the kingdom of heaven is not centered on what a person eats or drinks, then why do you fuss when your brother tries to forbid you from eating something? Submit yourself and give it up for his sake! It won’t hurt your walk with God to give it up, since the kingdom is not centered on that!”

A final word on the conscience

Before leaving this theme, a warning is necessary. Don't depend entirely on conscience—either community or personal. The conscience is not the final rule of authority in the Christian life. Jesus the Word and the Holy Spirit are the final authorities; the conscience is only a tool in their hands. Some people make the grievous error of letting their—or the community's—conscience be their lord. In fact, such people are idolizing the conscience by making it lord of their life. These folks never grow in their Christian life, and usually end up drifting into more and more worldliness, slowly but surely, since their conscience has no outside input. Let Jesus—not your conscience—be your Lord. Let Him define your battlement, not your battlement define Him.

To depend on the conscience without the lordship of Jesus is like Eutychus in Acts 20, who misused the windowsill. Windowsills are not beds. Neither are battlements. Don't sleep on them!

In conclusion

The conscience—both personal and community—is our battlement, a safety wall in times of weakness and mishap, and a gentle, constant reminder of the line between the roof and the ground below. Used correctly, they are a great blessing. Remove them, and you may someday find yourself lying on the pavement below, one mangled mess.

May we recognize there are “diversities of operations” and be careful in condemning those who don't “operate” exactly like we do. May we act—and not react—when we see others misusing battlements. And finally, may God bless you as you build battlements for your house! ~