



new creation teaching ministry: tuesday night studies 2009

the things we firmly believe

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Study 11: 'I Will Build My Church' (TTWFB, sect. 2; chh. 1-3; pp. 137-151)

Introduction

Through this term we are going to be looking at the second major section of *The Things We Firmly Believe*, which Geoff Bingham has titled 'The Church, The People of God, The Kingdom of God'. These three groupings are on one sense the same grouping, but in another sense they have subtle differences. Having lived in a society that is basically individualistic, we often thinking of the groups to which we belong as something *extrinsic* or even *inessential* to our real being. In fact, we find our personhood more deeply in the context of other persons (TTWFB, p. 137). It is impossible to understand yourself as a Christian except as you understand yourself to belong to the church, to be one of the people of God, and to be a member of God's Kingdom.

The Fact of the Church; the Question of the Church

For those who have grown up in Christian homes in the 'Christianised' West, the fact of the church may be taken for granted. It has existed within our cultural roots for nearly 2000 years! It has exercised a lot of power or influence in our community. It has taken on certain identifiable forms, and has prominent and recognisable buildings and 'employees'. It is almost impossible for us to imagine a world without church, and in many ways to imagine 'church' in some way other that we have experienced it. For others who have grown up in a non-Christian setting, and who have become Christians at a later point in life, the fact of the church is not so self-evident. And its shape or form may not be so clearly defined.

Just because a thing exists doesn't mean that it *should* exist. Did Jesus actually form the church? If so, did he give it a particular form? If he formed a church was it a new thing, or did it have some connection with Israel's history? Did he even oppose Israel's history in forming the church? If Jesus didn't form the church, was it the invention of the apostles, or even of Paul?

The Church Before the Church

In Acts 7:38 Stephen refers to Israel as they wandered in the desert as 'the church (or 'assembly' or 'congregation') in the wilderness'. The Greek word for 'church'—*ekklesia*—is the same word that is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Hebrew word for 'congregation'—*qahal*. Both words have the idea of being called together. Another Old Testament word, '*edah*' was also used to speak about the congregation of Israel, but not always in its gathering together.

Israel was the people of God, over against all the other people in the world. Israel was not God's *favourite* people but rather His *chosen* people, who were chosen to do His will. Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6 speaks about this purpose of God for them:

‘Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.

Israel had the privilege of being the people of God, and also the responsibility of being holy to the Lord before the nations. They were to reject the idols of the nations that surrounded them, worship the living God and serve Him. This was the heart of Israel’s life, and was well known to them. Every time the Law was read to them, this truth would have rung in their ears again and again. Failure to fulfil this responsibility brought cleansing judgments to Israel. Going even before Israel’s calling, Adam and Eve were intended to be the parents of a large family that would spread to the ends of the earth, serving and honouring God as they went (Gen. 1:26ff, 2:15). Israel was chosen as a priestly people among the nations in the face of failure of Adam and his children to fulfil the command of the Father. And yet Israel too failed in its mandate to be the holy people of God before the nations of the world.

John the Baptizer and Jesus

When we come to the New Testament, John the Baptizer appeared in fulfilment of prophecies that predicted the arrival of a messenger before Messiah came. He gathered some disciples, people who heard and heeded his command to repent because God’s Kingdom (the decisive exercise of His rule in the world) was near. In calling Israel to repent, John was saying that the old people was corrupt and needed renewing. This was undoubtedly offensive to many who heard him, especially those who had a vested interest in the way things were, the *status quo*.

When Jesus appeared, he preached the same message—God’s decisive action of rule was near at hand—and people were called to repent and believe the message. He too gathered a small group of followers around him. What is perhaps surprising in the gospels is the lack of all evidence of Jesus working to form this group of followers into an organised and distinct body. He and they continued to be part of the Jewish worship at the Temple at major festivals. He taught in the localised synagogues according to custom there.

What Jesus *did* do was prepare his followers not for some structure and organisation they would inherit and need to maintain, but rather for the task that they were called to perform. He taught consistently about the Kingdom of God and called his disciples to proclaim this Kingdom with him. His last act on earth was to commission them to proclaim the Kingdom’s gospel—the call to repentance and forgiveness based on his Lordship—right out to the ends of the earth, and so to make disciples from all nations.

Jesus was not a radical zealot who came rejecting what had been and instituting something entirely new. The fact is that all the people of Israel should have been in on this Kingdom task and Jesus gave them every opportunity to come in on it, by hearing his message, and coming into the Kingdom by turning to him for the forgiveness of sins. However Israel largely remained proud and presumed that it was already the true people of God, but denied its very reason for being the people of God by refusing to believe in their promised, and come, Messiah and to join with this Messiah in announcing the Kingdom of God. And yet, there were those surprising ones who heard him, and who believed, and who gathered to him. Those who did so were sinners, foreigners, the demon-possessed, and each of them came to see that belong to the Kingdom was essentially a matter of receiving the forgiveness of sins.

What Jesus Said About the Church

When we start to look at the Gospels we find that in only two places—Matt. 16:18 and 18:17—does Jesus actually speak about the church. Jesus did give teaching about *the flock* (John 10 and 21), *the vine* (John 15) and *the family* (John 11 and the Sermon on the Mount). These were all pictures of the collective of his followers. What is clear though is that Jesus knew that he would be crucified, rise and then enter into glory, and also that he trained his disciples so that they could go out to the world. There was a matter bigger than ‘church’—the matter of the ‘Kingdom’—that was to be the context in which the church would be understood. *We can’t understand what the church is apart from an understanding of what the church is called to do.* Geoff Bingham says:

It is his whole mission which matters, and that is the preaching of the Kingdom. If there is going to be a church, *it is not going to be the Kingdom.* The church will be the means by which the Kingdom is proclaimed. The Kingdom is not just a grouping of people, or even God’s people. The Kingdom is the reign and rule of God coming upon people... **Thus, if we wish to find Jesus’ teaching on the church, it must be compounded from all that he says in regard to the service those who follow him will give.** It must be in regard to relationships with God and fellow man. It must be concerned with the message of the Gospel, and with the outworking of God’s plan for history. (*TTWFB*, p. 151)

Questions:

1. When you hear the word ‘church’, what are the thoughts or pictures that first of all come to your mind? What are the experiences you have had that give rise to those thoughts and pictures?
2. Why did God call Israel to belong to Him? What were their privileges in that relationship? And what were their responsibilities?
3. Jesus seemed unconcerned about forming a church ‘structure’ but more interested in having a people who knew clearly their relationship with him and the task he was calling them to. What would you say is the relationship we have with Jesus and the task he has called us to?
4. What is the difference between ‘the Kingdom of God’ and the church? How are the two inter-related?