

Ps 11:1,2
Ps 65:2,3
Ps 48:1,4
Hy 32:3
Hy 40:1,2,4
1 Peter 2:4-10
Acts 15:36-41
Lord's Day 21.54B

Yarrow, June 6, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In the first sermon on this Question & Answer of the Catechism, we made confession of the Biblical fact that the church is the work not of people but of God. From the entire human race that through the fall was enslaved to Satan, God the Father had chosen certain persons to be His people. He gave these elect persons to the Son, and sent His only Son into the world for their salvation. The Son in turn went to the cross to atone for their sins, and then poured out His Holy Spirit to apply this redemption to the elect.

The Son, however, has done more than lay down His life for the elect; ever since His ascension into heaven He has been busy directing world history in such a way that all those whom the Father has given to Him indeed get to hear His Word and come to faith. More, after these persons have come to faith, the Son gathers these persons into His church. Lord's Day 21 catches all this material with these words: "I believe that the Son of God ... gathers ... a church chosen to everlasting life." Church: that's God-at-work.

Yet we look around us and see so many churches in town..., and it all gets so very confusing. Some 60 churches in town – and they are all the work of the Lord? Or are so many of these churches in fact the devil's work?? And what shall we say of the Christians of town who don't go to church at all?? We seek to understand..., and find ourselves truly confused.

In this second sermon on the subject of the church, I want to ask your attention for *how* the ascended Lord gathers His church.

THE ASCENDED CHRIST GATHERS HIS CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD.

1. The Manner of Christ's work
2. The effect of people's sinfulness
3. The instruction for us

1. The Manner of Christ's Work

If the church, then, is the ongoing work of God the Son, how does He do it?? Does He use a broom to sweep His people together onto one pile? Does He use dogs to gather His sheep into a flock?

The Lord God created the world through His *word*. That is: He spoke, and mighty things happened; a world that did not exist suddenly came into existence (Genesis 1). The Lord *spoke* to Abram, and an amazing thing happened; a man left the land of his birth to go he not where, in order to become a blessing to the nations through a child he did not have (Genesis 12:1ff). Jesus spoke, and

dead Lazarus was alive (John 11:43), spoke again and the demoniac was freed (Mark 5:8), the leper was cleansed (Matthew 8:3), and the man of Bethesda walked (John 5:8). In like fashion, the Lord Jesus Christ before His ascension told His disciples to *preach* the gospel to all nations – and we understand that ‘preaching’ is not sweeping or herding or driving but is *speaking*. So the apostle Peter on the day of Pentecost *spoke the Word*, and many hard hearts were broken in repentance so that 3000 came to faith (Acts 2). It was the one thing the apostles consistently did; they ever and again *spoke*, voiced the word of God to any who would hear, and the Lord blessed their preaching so that those chosen to life came to believe in Jesus Christ the Saviour.

This, congregation, is why Paul could write as he did in Romans 1. Says he, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (vs 16). That gospel is effective, gets things done. Later in the same letter he explains *how* the gospel works: “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” (10:14). His conclusion: “faith comes through hearing the message, and the message is heard through the *word* of Christ” (vs 17). Hence the emphatic instruction of Paul to Timothy: “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage” (2 Timothy 4:2).

How does Christ gather His church? Lord's Day 21 echoes God's revelation in Scripture on the point: “I believe that the Son of God ... gathers ... *by His Spirit and Word* ... a church chosen to everlasting life.”

Does the Lord, now, complete His church in one go, as soon as He speaks His Word? Back to Genesis 1; when the Lord spoke and called light and rocks and trees into existence, was His work instantly complete? Yes, it was, in the sense that light came to be, and so did rocks, and so did trees; “He spoke,” says the psalmist, “and it came to be; He commanded, and it stood firm” (Ps 33:9). But we also understand that not *all* light was instantly there, for tomorrow the sun would generate new light, and tomorrow a volcano would spout out new rock, and tomorrow a seedling would become a new tree. Point: there's dynamics in what God does; though He certainly created trees on the second day, He did it in such a way that the trees He made would grow and more trees would come in the course of time. We see it around us all the time.

So it is too with the work of the Son in relation to the church. The Son caused (and continues to cause) the Word to go out into the world. The word is effective to get things done; those whom the Father has given to the Son come to faith. But all the elect do not come to faith at the same time, if only because not all generations are born at once. Nor do all the elect come to faith early in life; there are those who don't repent until old age. There are even those who do repent and believe, and yet refuse to join the Lord's church – or even any church. The point: there are dynamics in Christ's church gathering work. The church is a *work-in-progress*, and it will not be complete until the day of Christ's return. On that day the vision John saw in Revelation 14 will come to pass; all the elect (that's the symbolic 144,000) will be together in one place, the final gathering of all the people of God. That's the church complete. Meanwhile, the Lord's work continues on, and this ongoing character of the Lord's work is caught in Lord's Day 21 when it says that “the Son of God ..., *from the beginning of the world to its end*, gathers ... a church...” From generation to generation, from year to year, that work keeps on going. And that's something we see with our own eyes, for children are added to the church through baptism, and young people respond to their baptism through profession of faith, and others are added to the church in the course of time through adult baptism, and so on. In the church there is constant change, ongoing growth, development, *dynamics*.

What analogy shall we use to explain the point? We read together a portion from 1 Peter 2, where the apostle wrote about “the living Stone” and about “living stones”. Stones, we know, aren’t alive but lifeless. But Peter calls Jesus Christ the “living Stone” because He is the stone cut with no human hand from the hill in the vision of Daniel, that stone that rolled down the hill and grew and grew to become a mighty kingdom filling the whole earth. In the crib of Bethlehem and on the cross of Calvary Jesus Christ appeared so insignificant – a lifeless little stone like there are a million others. But Jesus Christ triumphed over sin and Satan, arose from the dead, and so God exalted Him to His throne at His right hand – a living Stone now dominating the world. Since Christ can be called a “living Stone”, says Peter, “you” –Peter’s addressees, the Christians scattered throughout the world– can be compared to “living stones” who are “being built into a spiritual house.” That “spiritual house” is nothing other than the church; as the “living Stone” grows to fill the earth, He gathers the lifeless stones the Father has given Him and makes them alive through His Spirit and Word. These ‘living stones’ He adds to His church; by His mighty hand they are “being built into a spiritual house.”

“Being built into a ... house”: what picture, brothers and sisters, does that phrase generate in your mind?? Ken, with Alana’s approval, is *building a house* just down the road, and the fact that he’s “building” means the house is not yet done. Part of it is done (the roof is on) and part is not done (the windows aren’t in). The bits and pieces that make up the house aren’t even all on the construction site, for the lights are still in the store and the paint is still in the factory and the kitchen cupboards haven’t even yet been made. We call it Ken’s house, even though Ken can’t yet live in it; we understand that the word ‘house’ in this context describes the incomplete building – the building with its parts scattered around town, and some of its parts not even constructed yet. That’s construction; there’s change, progress, dynamics. And Ken can’t wait till it’s done so he can move in.

So it is with the church. The ascended Christ is busy building “a spiritual house” – and that house is commonly known in Scripture as the church. It’s still under construction, and so is currently incomplete. For the sake of the argument: the roof is on, but the windows aren’t in – and so I can’t quite see in the eye of my mind yet what the completed structure will look like, be it vinyl siding or brick veneer, be it beige or blue. The doors of the building Christ shall one day complete are today (for all I know) in an ecclesiastical factory on Yarrow Central, and the sink is being prepared in another ecclesiastical factory on Yale Road, and the carpets may well be imported from the mission field in China and the cupboards need yet to be born. Christ Jesus the Builder brings His materials in from all over the world, from any tribe and race where the Father has given Him elect people. Some components for His house He prepares in the Mennonite Brethren Church and other parts He prepares at New Life in Abbotsford and still others He prepares in no church at all and still other parts He prepares in our midst, in this church.

Am I pushing the analogy too far?? Is it unscriptural to say that there are Christians in other churches who will make up part of the great assembly on the last day, the church complete? In another place of Scripture our Saviour compares the church to a flock, of which He Himself is the Good Shepherd – John 10. For the safety of His sheep He as Shepherd gathers His sheep night after night into a sheep pen. But, says Jesus to His disciples, not all His sheep are in fact in that sheep pen. Vs 16: “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to My voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.” Notice the future tense: “there *shall* be one flock.” We understand the picture: the flock of the Lord is not complete in Jesus’ day, for some of His sheep are scattered elsewhere – perhaps on their own, perhaps clustered in a little group under those trees over there. It may even be that some sheep of the Lord are seeking refuge in a flock of goat on yonder hill. In the course of time Jesus Christ as the Shepherd will collect His sheep from wherever they may be, and

bring them to His flock. I know: when we're talking about gathering sheep, the term 'construction' is the wrong term, but you'll notice that the dynamic is the same; things change, there's progress – and the situation right now is not how the Lord will lead it to be on the last day. It means: some children of God are today are scattered through various flocks throughout Chilliwack, churches of different colour and of different spiritual health. Other children of God seek protection with some goats, and still others insist on being alone. The point of the picture? The flock of the Lord is not complete, not in Chilliwack either.

This, congregation, is the way that Christ is busy in this world. He is the master Builder, constructing His church today, assembling the many "living stones" the Father has given from hither and yon, constructing them all into one complete house. He is the Good Shepherd, calling His own by name, in the course of time gathering them all together into one flock.

I have so many questions. I can understand that builders in our midst are very able to oversee the building project and know exactly where to get the right supplies and the right trades to get an excellent project. But I'll also admit that I for one could not oversee the building project, and wouldn't know where to go for the right trades or the right supplies; the picture for me may well look so very confusing. So it is with the Jesus Christ. As I survey how He the Builder is constructing His church, it looks to me so confusing, so unorganized; I'd love to oversee His project, but I can't. The church scene in today's world looks so messy.... Similarly, I puzzle why He would take supplies for His house from a shoddy manufacturer as the Potter's House or the United Church or the Pentecostal Fellowship. If He wishes to draw His living stones from such groups, can't He cause His Word to be faithfully proclaimed there?? But I realize that I don't need to understand; I'm just a creature, and He is Sovereign Lord. Wisely, perfectly, He gathers His church, assembles into one everyone whom the Father has given Him, everyone for whom He died. And I believe –for He revealed it in His Word– that the church He is today constructing will one day be complete, and it shall be "very good", cause for eternal praise.

We come to our second point,

2. The Effect of People's Sinfulness

In seeking to understand *how* the Lord gathers His church, I have in the first point laid considerable emphasis on Peter's analogy of *building*. The analogy helps (as it must, given that it's Scriptural), but it also raises other questions. Specifically, the supplies a builder brings onsite are all dead, lifeless bits and pieces; drywall, wiring, paint, cupboards, etc, do not grow, do not move, do not change; they're lifeless and require the labour of the builder (or tradesman) to get them into place and make them function. The people the Lord works into His building are not sticks and stones, for they're alive, they grow, they change; God even created us to have responsibility, to *take* responsibility. How does this reality affect the picture?

On this subject of human responsibility, I shall need to speak of the *duty* people have to *join* the church of the Lord, speak too about the criteria one needs to use to determine which church to join. But that topic is too big, and too important, to address in the time I have left today; the Lord willing I will come back to that in a subsequent sermon. Meanwhile, there is a reality in our common humanity that we need to understand if we wish to come to grips with why Chilliwack's church scene is as it is.

The Father has given particular persons to the Son, and the Son has laid down His life for these people. The ascended Christ has also poured out His Holy Spirit so that these elect people He redeemed from Satan's bondage might be changed, renewed, enabled to image God again in this fallen world. Have these people, however, been immediately perfected?? The Biblical answer, of course, is No. So

Paul could tell the Romans that he can't do what he wants to do; there is that sinful nature that keeps welling up inside and making him do what he isn't supposed to do (Romans 7). So the *Heidelberg Catechism* says in Lord's Day 23 that we are "still inclined to all evil", and add in Lord's Day 44 that "in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of [the] obedience [God requires]." This reality has a profound effect on the Lord's church gathering work in our day.

How so? Turn with me to Matthew 20. From His group of 12 disciples –and they were being groomed for leadership in Jesus' church– two came to Jesus with their mother to ask a favour. What the favour was? In their mother's words: "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom" (vs 21). Of note to our point now is the reaction of the ten. Vs 24: "when the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers" – and we understand that! For James and John appear to be in it for themselves, and that makes me jealous.... Selfishness, an ego: how damaging that is for interpersonal relations, and that's true in the church of Jesus Christ also. And make no mistake: if such egos could exist among Jesus' disciples, they surely exist too in the church, with all the fallout of that.

We see something of that in the passage we read from Acts 15. The passage describes two leaders, Paul and Barnabas, determined to check up on the churches the Lord had gathered through their preaching. But they couldn't agree on who to take along.... The result was that the two men parted ways, and we don't read of them working together again in the rest of Acts. No, this episode did not generate a split in the churches, but it surely generated tension and perhaps (for the short term) some distrust.

When Paul said farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus he foretold what would happen within this church in time to come. Said he, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29f). The apostle John, who later served as minister in Ephesus, relates in his first letter about how there came a split in the church of his day. He writes of certain people that "they went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (1 John 2:19). Does that mean that those who went out in John's day all showed themselves to be obvious heathens, apostates?? Not necessarily; for all I know those who left continued to insist that they were Christians.

This is the kind of thing that has happened so often in the course of history. Disagreement, character clash, ego: these factors and so many more have generated tension to the point that brothers have walked out on each other. That's one very real human factor in explaining how come there are so many churches in town today.

To be sure, there are other factors. An obvious one in relation to Chilliwack is the fact that Canada is a migrant society, and migrants took with them their language and their traditions. It is no doubt that this bitter fruit of the Tower of Babel has contributed to the number of churches in town.

The point? The Lord Jesus Christ is busy gathering His church, building His house. But the "living stones" He uses remain sinful creatures. God created us with responsibility, and that's to say that our sinful actions have consequences. That ongoing sinfulness makes such a mess of the Lord's building project.... That mess shows up inside congregations as well as between churches. We've seen a bit of that in the little bit of heat some of us have noticed in relation to the organ we have. We've seen more of this mess in the hurt some of us have experienced at the hands of brothers office bearers who have dropped the ball on some pastoral matter over the years. We've seen something of this mess in churches of town who won't talk to each other. In fact, nobody is above this mess, nobody who does

not contribute to it. That includes ourselves, each of us individually as well as our congregation as a whole.

Then Abraham Kuyper could speak about the plurality of churches as such a wonderful thing, and even compare the multitude of churches in a given town to a delightful garden of many flowers – pluriformity– but the Lord speaks so differently in His Word. “There is one body and one Spirit –just as you were called to one hope when you were called– one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...” (Ephesians 4:4ff). But that unity is broken because of sin, be it the arrogance that prompted the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel or the selfishness that insists on own way today or even the blindness that comes from our self-inflicted depravity as such. The effect of human sinfulness is so profound in explaining the ecclesiastical scene of Chilliwack....

This brings us to our last point:

3. The Instruction that follows.

We have, then, two realities. The one is that the Lord our Saviour is constantly at work building His house, gathering His church. The other is that the living stones the Lord is using remain inclined to evil. The instruction?

The first is the utter need for humility! This humility is so needed because in the final analysis the completion of the church does not depend on us, and so we’re never to think or act as if it does. More, it will never, ever do to look down our nose at others as if we are somehow better. That is true within this congregation in relation to the person sitting in the next pew, and it is equally true in this congregation in relation to other churches in town. That the Lord would give us a place in the church He is building so that we as living stones are being built into His house – what an incomparable privilege that is! To look down my nose at another because I’m included and he is not is arrogance totally foreign to those renewed by the Holy Spirit – and so is an attitude that requires repentance. Similarly, for us as congregation to look down our collective nose at other churches in town as if we’re a notch better or more acceptable to God is arrogance equally foreign to the renewing work of the Spirit – and so also requires repentance. That we may be included in any way in the Lord’s church gathering work *requires* at attitude of humility – if only because inclusion is God’s grace alone.

On top of that, our ongoing depravity means that we of ourselves contribute to the mess on Christ’s construction site just as surely as the next person contributes to the mess. Then yes, we most surely need to speak from God’s Word about the promises and obligations that come with Christ’s ongoing church gathering work, and we most surely need to *act* obediently in the matter too (and, as I said, I want to come back to that matter another time), but all our speaking and our acting *must be characterized by obvious humility*. This is the clear and necessary consequence of the first two points of this sermon, and so we do well to examine ourselves in relation to this attitude, and make the necessary corrections.

There is a second instruction that follows. We find the brokenness of Chilliwack’s ecclesiastical scene not only confusing but also discouraging. Add to the mix an awareness of our own contribution to the messy picture, and the whole thing gets thoroughly demoralizing.

Yet that’s a reaction the Lord our God would not have us adopt! It is simple fact that we are weak, and we can’t begin to understand why the master Builder builds as He does. It’s also a fact that we contribute to messing things up badly. *And* it’s a fact that Satan uses these weaknesses of ours try to destroy the Lord’s church gathering work. But here’s the promise of the gospel: Jesus Christ through His

work on the cross has triumphed over sin and Satan, has in fact crushed the devil so that he is bound. That is why—as Jesus said to Peter— “the gates of hell will not overcome [the church]” (Matthew 16:18).

Yes, it takes time for the Lord to gather together all whom the Father has given to Him. To the eyes of men, as the confession has it, the church “may look very small and as extinct” (*Belgic Confession*, Art 27). But Jesus prayed for the unity of His own, asked the Father to grant that the sheep of the flock now scattered around town and throughout so many churches (or no church) might one day be united into one flock, one body (John 17:21). And the Father certainly hears! The master Builder of the Church of God cannot have His project frustrated. On the last day, when Christ returns on the clouds of heaven, the church will be completed, and all the brokenness and conflict and division we now see will be gone.

That is why all who hope in Him may and must stay optimistic, despite the confusion and the mess the eye sees. Well does Lord's Day 21 say that “I *believe* that the Son of God ... gathers ... [His] church.” With the eye of my body I see so little, so very little, that’s glorious about this work of the Son. But that’s OK. I don’t *see* Christ’s sacrifice for sin; I believe it. And I don’t *see* Christ’s church gathering work; I believe it. And in faith I am confident that His work continues, in Chilliwack and around the world, till the day of Christ’s return in glory. Then the house He’s building today will be complete, and I shall delight forever in its glory.

Point? Keep your eye on Christ the Builder; the church is *His* work.