

Ps 127:1,2  
Hy 1B  
Ps 122:1,2,3  
Hy 29:1  
Hy 46:1,2  
John 10:1-18  
Lord's Day 21.54C; Articles 28, 29

Yarrow, June 13, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The church, we learned in the last two sermons on this Lord's Day, is the work of God. The Father has chosen particular persons to salvation and given them to the Son, the Son laid down His life to redeem these elect from Satan's bondage, and the Holy Spirit through the Word works faith in these redeemed people. More, after His ascension the Son from His heavenly throne gathers the believers together to be His church. This church gathering work is continuing today, and it will not be complete until the day of Christ's return in glory. Like a master Builder He constructs the "spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4) known as the church, collecting its parts from anywhere, everywhere. The doors may come from some ecclesiastical door factory on Yarrow Central, the siding from some ecclesiastical siding fabricator on Yale in Chilliwack, the lighting currently stored in New Life in Abbotsford, and the carpet coming from the mission field in China. For our part, we'd love to oversee how He gets it all together, love to oversee where the supplies today are, love to understand why He uses yonder (shoddy) fabricator, and so on. But we shall never understand the master Builder; we are but people and He is God. We can only believe that His work continues till the day of completion. Hence we say in Lord's Day 21, with joy and gratitude, that the church is very much the work of Jesus Christ...

This material from last week could leave the conclusion that it does not really matter where one goes to church –be it this church or Alliance up the road, be it New Life in Abbotsford or even no church at all– for Jesus Christ assembles the supplies for His spiritual house from whatever source He wills. Yet that conclusion would be distinctly unscriptural. For the Lord, sovereign God –and so sovereign Builder– that He is, always insists that His creature man *act responsibly*. Our responsibility in relation to Christ's church gathering work needs our attention this afternoon.

## **JESUS CHRIST HOLDS US RESPONSIBLE FOR WHERE WE GO TO CHURCH.**

1. The Responsibility we have,
2. The Obedience Christ seeks,
3. The Consequence that follows

### ***1. The Responsibility we have***

Sovereign God spoke His word of command, and the world came to be, instantly, without our help. In so doing, the Creator displayed His majesty. So great is His majesty that John the Baptist can tell the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him for baptism that God was able to raise up children for Abraham from the stones beside the Jordan (Matthew 3:9). The implication in relation to Christ's

church gathering work is this: He is very able to treat us as dead stones void of any responsibility; He just does not need our input or cooperation to get His church complete.

As it is, though, God in wisdom was pleased to give human responsibility a fundamental role in all of life, including His church gathering work. On the sixth day of creation Triune God consulted within Himself to “make man in our image, in our likeness...” (Genesis 1:26). God in turn fashioned with His own hands “the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). This living being was to “image” God, and that’s to say that he –unlike a rock or a rat– was to reflect to all creation what God was like. He was to reflect not just God’s divine *characteristics* (His holiness and justice and love and wrath and mercy, etc) but was to image also God’s divine *actions*. As a child in his actions will reflect to his observers something of the way his parent does things, so the human race was to reflect how his God was doing things. So God told Noah that He would one day destroy the world with a flood, and Noah had to reflect God’s plan to people around him by the things he did, specifically, by his building the ark. In His wisdom God wished His sovereign plan to destroy the world to be imaged on earth through the conduct of the man Noah.

This same principle holds true in relation to the church. The Lord Jesus Christ is busy gathering His church from any tribe and race and people on earth, all those the Father has given to Him. In the wisdom of God, this divine work of the Lord Jesus Christ needs to be imaged on earth through what people do. So, as Jesus Christ gathers, His people are *to gather along with Him*. We are, through our willingness to be gathered, to show to the world around us that Christ is in fact hard at work gathering His church.

Last week, as we tried to understand Christ’s church gathering work, we picked up on the picture Scripture uses of a construction site; Christ as Builder was building a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). It’s a picture we understand, for we’ve seen so many houses being built over the course of time. But the point now of our being created to image God is that we’re not lifeless drywall waiting to be installed, but we’re living drywall (or light fixtures or faucets) responsible to get up off the pile and fix ourselves to the wall. Since Christ is the Builder, we’re to build along with Him, reflect in our conduct what He is doing.

Here’s where we’re stumped. We drive past Ken’s new house, and we just can’t imagine a sheet of drywall wriggling itself off the pile, working its way into the bedroom and screwing itself onto the ceiling; drywallers could only wish it would happen! But in relation to Christ’s church gathering work, this *is* our responsibility as creatures created to image God. And yes, God has made us able to do what we were created to do – able, in a manner of speaking, to wriggle off the pile and fix ourselves to the wall. Note the reference in Genesis 2 about man becoming a “living being” (vs 7). Because God had breathed into him the breath of life, man was *alive* in a sense flowers and frogs were not alive – for they could never image God. To be sure, the human race fell into sin and so died spiritually. As a result we lost our ability to image God, lost our ability to reflect to creatures around us both what God is like as well as what God is actually doing. But it pleased God through the Holy Spirit to make us alive in Jesus Christ again (Ephesians 2:5), and that is why Peter can describe us as “living stones”. We’re alive, and so able to be responsible, able to work along with God in what He is doing. As living stones, like living drywall, we have a duty to work along with Christ Jesus in His church-building work, and that means concretely that we are responsible to work our way into the wall Christ is building.

Again, we have a lot of questions here. If the church is Christ’s work, why should I need to work along?? If He’s the Master Builder, He doesn’t need my cooperation to get the project done, so why should I get myself off the drywall pile and fix myself to the wall? Besides, just how am I to do it?! Emphasizing my responsibility doesn’t make sense....

Yet the Bible, congregation, is so very full of *commands*. Those commands are there exactly because God created us with the mandate to image Him, and that's to say that He has given us responsibility and now always holds us *responsible* to do what He requires. He never treats us as dead sticks and stones, not when it comes to His church-building work either.

Then it's true: we'll never understand exactly the interplay between His sovereignty and our responsibility. Ultimately, we're up against the fact that Christ is God and we but people. He is totally sovereign in all He does, also in gathering His church, and He certainly does not need us. Yet it pleases Him to use the responsibility with which He created us to accomplish His goals. Since that is His way of working it will not do for me to challenge Him; it is for me instead accept in humility that this is His chosen method of operation. So it's my responsibility to work along with Him in His work, and so image to others what He is doing. Should I refuse to cooperate with Christ in His church gathering work I am simply sinning against my God because I am failing to image what He is doing. This –like every other sin– is one from which I need to repent.

It all raises another question, and that's this: how exactly am I meant to cooperate with Christ in His church building work? It's fine to speak of living drywall and of getting off the pile and attaching yourself to the wall, but we're not drywall. So what's this responsibility look like in real terms? What does the Lord expect from us? It's our second point:

## ***2. The Obedience Christ seeks***

To get a handle on the responsibility we have in relation to the church, I need to get away from the analogy of the building and ask your attention for the analogy of a flock. John 10 tells us about a shepherd bringing his flock into the safety of the sheep pen for the night and in the morning leading them out again for pasture. The passage speaks too of false shepherds (called the "stranger" in vs 5, or the "hired hand" in vs 12), who abandon the sheep in the face of danger. Jesus, however, is the Good Shepherd who cares for His sheep perfectly, to the point that He lays down His life for the sheep (vs 15). It's to the sheep's advantage, then, that they follow the Good Shepherd and not some stranger or hired hand. As to how the sheep can recognize that the one leading them today is in fact the Good Shepherd instead of some hireling, well, the sheep know the Shepherd's voice. And they follow it.

That voice. Last week I mentioned that the Lord created the world through His Word; God's word is effective to get things done. Jesus Christ spoke and the storm at sea stopped, He spoke again and dead Lazarus came alive. On Pentecost Day Peter spoke, and 3000 came to faith. It's not surprising, then, to read that the faith one needs to be saved "comes from hearing ... the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). That's why Paul commands Timothy to "preach the Word ... in season and out of season" (2 Timothy 4:2). Accordingly, the church has understood for centuries thereafter that her duty and calling is to preach that Word diligently and faithfully. It's understood: Christ gathers His own through the Word and so Lord's Day 21 says, "I believe that the Son of God ... gathers ... by His Spirit and Word ... a church chosen to everlasting life."

But, congregation, if the Lord is pleased to gather His church "by His ... Word", then the people He created to image Him must reflect this reality in their conduct. How?? Simple: if He gathers *through the Word* God's people are duty-bound to *perk their ears and listen*; refusing to listen when God speaks simply does not reflect to others what God is doing. It's because we're to reflect His manner of working that the Lord commands people repeatedly in Scripture to make a point of *hearing, of listening*. To close your ears when God is speaking, or to tune out or to walk away, is simply an affront to God; it's disobedience that requires repentance. So here's a decision to make, a decision flowing from the

responsibility with which the Lord has created us, and that decision is this: will we make a point of *listening* whenever He speaks? That's the *obedience* that follows our *responsibility*.

But deciding to listen has within it a second decision. You can't listen to what someone says if you're not within hearing distance of his voice. That brings us to the question of *where* Christ is speaking, where you can hear Him. In relation to Christ's church-gathering work, that is a critical question since He gathers His church through His Word. To help get our minds around that question I draw your attention again to John 10.

The Lord Jesus Christ in this passage says that the Shepherd from time to time "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" of the sheep pen (where they spent the night) so as to lead them to the pasture for the day (vs 3). The shepherd "calls", "and the sheep listen to his voice" (vs 3). They listen because they recognize the voice, and they respond by following him to the pasture to which he leads them.

The Good Shepherd has ascended into heaven and so His personal voice is no longer heard on earth. In its place He has given the Bible and instructed particular persons to proclaim that Word in today's world. Sovereignly, graciously, then, Christ from heaven above causes His voice still to be heard through the preaching of the gospel. Where, though, is this voice of the Lord heard in Chilliwack? There are some 60 churches in town, and all will have a Bible and somewhere along the line someone in that church will open that Bible to read it and perhaps also explain a portion. Does that make any church in Chilliwack a reasonable place to go to hear Christ's Word?

The answer to that question has to be No. For not every church in town in fact speaks Christ's word. There are many in our city, and indeed across our nation, who are called to preach the Word of Christ but who in fact don't speak that Word; rather, in the name of Christ they speak a message different than Christ's message. To say it with the vocabulary of John 10: they are strangers or hired hands.

Here's now the responsibility of the sheep and the obedience Christ requires: after the sheep have spent the night in the safety of the sheep pen, they need to discern whether the one calling them in the morning is in fact their own shepherd or a pretender. That requires a decision. If in fact it's their shepherd who calls, the sheep are to get up and follow him to the pasture of the day. But if the one who calls is a stranger or a hired hand they are not to follow – for their own safety's sake. To take that analogy to the church: the sheep of the Lord need to discern whether the one calling them is in fact a faithful shepherd-under-Christ or is actually a pretend shepherd, one who can't be trusted. The faithful shepherd-under-Christ will speak the words of Christ; this shepherd's words will have the flavour of Scripture, will sound like Christ as He has revealed Himself in the Bible. The pretend shepherd will also speak, but his words will not have the flavour of Scripture, will not sound like Jesus Christ. Here is a decision the sheep of the Lord need to make: is what I am hearing the Voice of the Good Shepherd or is it in fact the voice of a pretender. Where it's the voice of the Good Shepherd you hear, the sheep are duty bound to follow, to listen – for it will never do to disobey or ignore the Good Shepherd; to disobey or ignore would not image His method of working. On the other hand, where it's the voice of a pretender you hear, the sheep are duty bound, for their own safety's sake, to ignore that call, and wait for the voice of the Good Shepherd. That's the simple consequence of the fact that the Good Shepherd gathers His church by His Word.

And there's the crucial question: how do you know which voice is the voice of the Good Shepherd? There are some 60 pulpits in town, and that would mean that each Sunday some 60 voices are raised in town calling the sheep to come follow. The expectation is that these 60 voices all would

lead the sheep to graze in the rich pastures of God's word. But do they all do so? Which shepherd are you to follow??

I trust the answer is obvious. If you wish to follow the Good Shepherd, you need to discern whether the voice you hear calling you in fact has the same sound as the Lord's own voice. In the circumstances that means: is this voice, is this preaching, Biblically faithful? Or might it be that this preaching, this voice, gives a foreign twist to the Bible, or perhaps even ignores a portion of Scripture? Here are decisions to be made, and *basic to making a responsible decision is that we know our Saviour and so know what His voice sounds like*. This requires broad Bible knowledge! It's our responsibility: since the Lord gathers His church through His Word, it is imperative that His people be in a position to judge whether the voice they hear is in fact *His* voice. A pulpit that gives the flavour of Scripture well is where I'm to be, and a pulpit that does not give the flavour of Scripture is not a place where I am to be – simply because I'm not to follow a hired hand or a stranger, no matter how smooth or talented that hired hand might be.

This is why the church through centuries of history has consistently spoken of the faithful preaching of the Word as the first mark of the church. How do you know which of the 60 churches in town is the one you are to attend? You need to check the pulpit, that is, you need to recognize the Voice of the Shepherd. A church that does not open the Scriptures faithfully, a church where the preaching does not sound like Scripture itself, a church that ignores or twists or belittles a portion of Scripture, is not an assembly to which the Lord calls you. Then the people of the pew of that church may be very decent Christians, even very God-fearing. But the first and central criteria in determining where I am to go to church focuses on the pulpit, on whether the sound you hear is in fact the Voice of the Good Shepherd. Face it: if Christ isn't there, if the voice you hear isn't His voice, you don't want to be there – for there is no safety with a hired hand. More, if Christ isn't there, your being there does not reflect what Christ is doing.

The second mark historically used to find where one needs to go to church is directly connected to the first mark. For the second mark –the proper use of the sacraments– is simply the voice-of-the-Shepherd-made-visible. Holy baptism rightly understood is nothing else than the proclamation of the good news of God's bond of love with sinners and therefore the gospel of the forgiveness of sins for the undeserving; what else does the water of washing portray! Similarly, the Lord's Supper rightly understood is again nothing else than the good news of Christ's sacrifice driven home to undeserving sinners; why else would broken bread and poured wine be distributed to sinners for their consumption! At the heart of the sacraments is the voice of the Good Shepherd, and where that voice is heard –and in this case seen– the sheep of Christ wants to be.

Again, historically a third mark is used to determine where one is to go to church, a mark again directly connected to the Voice of the Shepherd. Where someone tags along to hear the voice of the Good Shepherd, yet does not obey the admonitions and instructions of the Shepherd (let me say: refuses to eat from the grass of the pasture to which the Shepherd leads, or refuses to drink from the creek to which the Shepherd brings the flock), that person is in fact thumbing his nose –or blocking his ears– at the Shepherd. Such conduct does not image the Shepherd; such a person follows out of custom or superstition, and so this person shall not inherit the treasures that come with belonging to Jesus Christ. Love for that lost sinner –and that's the love that God has shown in Christ– requires that this disobedience be made clear to the sinner, and that's the purpose of church discipline.

Hard, then, to determine where one is to go to church? Will any of the 60 pulpits in town do? No, there's a decision to be made here. And we're responsible to make that decision! Since the Lord gathers His church, and does so through His Word, the people of God are duty-bound to be where they

can hear that Word, that voice of the Shepherd. By our being-where-He's-heard, and humbly listening to that voice, we image to those around us how the Lord is pleased to operate. For He gathers His church by His Word.

### ***3. The Consequence that Follows***

Where does this lead? Simple: you and I –and all God's people– are duty bound to join the church of the Lord Sunday by Sunday. "Join" is not a matter first of all of getting your name on the membership role; "join" is first of all a matter of being with the flock Christ is gathering. He's building His church and you see something of it each Sunday as the children of the Lord assemble together around the voice of the Shepherd. It is your obligation and mine to be where Christ is speaking, to join the assembled flock.

Traditionally, the people assembled in this building come here because, well, this is where our parents have taken us, this is where our contacts are, and this is where we're comfortable. Other people in other churches of town go to their churches for exactly the same reasons; that's their habit, that's where their friends are, that's their comfort zone. But none of those are reasons that stand before God and so none of these can ultimately be the reason why you're here. We are responsible to image God, and on the point in question this means that we need to be where Christ is working, where the Voice of the Shepherd is heard. The application is this: if what you hear from this pulpit does not sound like the Voice of the Good Shepherd, you're not meant to be here. It's His voice, it's the Word you need.

This, of course, puts enormous obligation on the preacher and on the elders. The preacher must open Scripture, and open it obediently, humbly, faithfully, plainly. He will, of course, never do it perfectly; every preacher in this life remains a limited and sinful creature. Yet exactly because he is called to preach the Word he's obliged before God to do his utmost in bringing that word clearly and faithfully, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And the elders must assist the minister in doing so. Most importantly, the congregation must pray persistently for the minister that he receive the insight and faithfulness and humility to speak only the Word of God –and nothing else– from the pulpit. To speak human words, be they according to the preacher's taste or according to the hearers' taste, is simply disobedience to the Good Shepherd and fails to reflect how Christ Jesus does His church-gathering work.

Again, it will not do to leave this flock of Christ to join some other flock in town. Until the day of Christ's return there will undoubtedly be squabbles amongst the sheep of Christ's flock, but tension with other sheep is never a reason to leave the flock of the Lord. Since Christ is building His church, we need to build along, and since He's building through His Word we need to keep listening for His voice and submitting to all He commands. Leaving the flock because of the people means you walk away from the Voice of the Shepherd. That is simply wrong.

Perhaps you say: but I'm going to another place where I also hear the Voice of the Shepherd; after all, there is no way that Christ is busy only in *this* church. Christ is certainly sovereign and indeed free to 'grow' His children wherever He pleases, and He is even able to make any of us grow more in Him somewhere else; that's possible. But His sovereignty, what Christ is able to do, never takes a dot away from our responsibility. Our responsibility is and remains to be where Christ is speaking, Sunday after Sunday, and you know where Christ is by whether the Scriptures are faithfully opened. Then in your personal opinion you may think that Christ's voice is heard just as well in Sardis Community Church or in Northview. But here you do wisely, and therefore rightly, to seek the opinion of others before you head off to another church. After all, there is too much at stake; for your own growth and nourishment, and

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your family's growth and nourishment too, you need to be where Christ's Word is clearly and faithfully heard.

Jesus Christ gathers His church in today's world, and that thought is so very exciting and encouraging. He includes us in His church building work, giving us a place in His spiritual house. More, He even gives us the responsibility to build along with Him; what a wonderful privilege! So I confess with Lord's Day 21 that the Son of God gathers a church by His Word, and I reflect that delightful work of my Saviour by making it my business to gather where He works.

So many questions remain, and so much of His church-gathering work seems to me so incomplete and so confusing. But I realize: I don't need to understand it all. I simply need to respect what He has revealed, and obediently work along with Him. One day, soon, His work will be done, and then I'll understand it all – and praise Him for it eternally.