

2

Jesus and the Church

How many times does Jesus mention the church? I've asked that question in a number of forums (Reformed University Fellowship, Sunday School, Drug Court Bible Study, Sunday morning pulpit, various conferences, etc.), and gotten answers ranging from thirty-six to six. Surprise is the typical response when I reveal that Jesus in the whole of His earthly ministry mentions the church, specifically the *ekklesia*, only twice.¹ Initially this seems to confirm the bias of those who say they admire Jesus but have minimal regard for the church. The church, they say, is man's invention. Jesus said little about the church. He didn't intend to found a church. We've built an ecclesiastical mountain out of an exegetical molehill, they insist. We follow Jesus, they claim, but have discarded the millstone that the church has become around His message.

What should we say about this? Simply that Jesus' words about the church must be weighed, not merely counted. Essentially, Jesus says two things about the

1. We are setting aside for now Jesus' extensive teaching on the Kingdom or Reign of God, which bears upon, but is not coextensive with, the church.

Who Needs the Church?

church: In Matthew 16:18 He says, 'I will build my church.' In Matthew 18:17 He says, 'Tell it to the church.' Take them in order.

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

Having heard Peter's great confession of Jesus' identity, what does Christ promise to build? His church. Anything else? No. He promises to build no other earthly institution, no other worldly entity. He is not building a school, a business, a charity, or a legal enterprise. He attaches His personal pronoun 'my' to no other earthly entity. He does not speak of 'my' nation, or family, or business, or political party. He does not attach His name or reputation to a political cause or movement or legislation. Jesus sums up His entire mission as church-building. This is His chief concern. When we arrive at the end of the Bible, we find that the work that Jesus came to do, that of building His church, has been completed:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. 21:2).

The church, the 'holy city,' the 'new Jerusalem' (cf. 3:12; Gal. 4:26), the 'bride' of Christ (cf. 21:9; 19:7; Eph. 5:22-32), descends from heaven, pure, perfected, completed, 'in all her glory' (Eph. 5:27, NASB). What is Jesus doing, incarnation

and post-incarnation, through His atonement then and His mediation now? Building His church.

What is Jesus using this church to do? It is His tool, His weapon, by which He will batter down the 'gates of hell' and destroy the devil's strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4). Hell's 'gates,' its powers, will not 'prevail' against the church as it pursues its mission. The powers of evil that were dealt a death blow through the cross (Col. 2:15; Eph. 1:21) will see their destruction consummated through the activities of the church. This eradication of evil will be realized both in individual hearts through gospel proclamation and on a worldwide scale through missions (Matt. 28:18-20).

TELL IT TO THE CHURCH

Let's move to the second reference.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (Matt. 18:15-17).

What does Jesus want us to tell to the church? He speaks of the problem of a sinning 'brother' who refuses to heed admonition, who refuses to repent. His obstinacy must be revealed to the church which must act to disassociate him: 'Let him be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector' (Matt. 18:17).

Who Needs the Church?

What is assumed or implied by this second reference to the *ekklesia*? More than most have imagined. The church that Jesus envisions has: 1) standards of belief and conduct to which participants are expected to conform; 2) membership, with clear guidelines about who is to be included or excluded; 3) a process of discipline which evaluates misbehavior and errant beliefs; 4) a form of government; 5) meetings at which a pertinent matter may be discussed; 6) officers who administer the whole. Jesus speaks in these two passages of committing to the church the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19) and the power of binding and loosing (Matt. 16:19 and Matt. 18:18; cf. John 20:23). The church that Jesus envisions has concrete existence, bricks and mortar, one might say. It is an organization. It is an institution. It has members. It has leaders. Its members are committed to each other, to their leaders, to the Triune God whose church it is, and to the church itself as something greater than the sum of its parts.

The church that Jesus builds is not merely an informal gathering of believers at a coffee shop to pray and share Scripture verses. Such meetings are self-selecting; the church is not. Participants choose those with whom they will join in such meetings, typically according to common interests. However, the New Testament church looks nothing like an organization built along lines of affinity, except affinity for Christ. The numberless multitude in heaven consists of believers 'from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages' (Rev. 7:9). Many of the problems found in the New

Testament, with which the apostles and the epistles were dealing, arose precisely because of the diversity of age, class, and ethnicity of the members of the church (e.g. Acts 6:1-7; 15:1ff; Gal. 1-3; Titus 2; James 4; etc.). Informal gatherings also lack accountability. One may simply stop participating and walk out of the lives of those with whom one has been involved.

Because Jesus' words imply membership, standards, leadership and discipline, they suggest the mutual accountability and mutual responsibility of covenanted relationships. When leading evangelicals say, 'Don't go to church: be the church,' their leading is misleading. The gathering of two or three in Jesus' name is the same entity that excommunicates (Matt. 18:20, 18:17). We repeat: that entity has a government. It has a form of discipline. It has membership. It has standards of belief and conduct. One can be included or excluded from this church with eternal repercussions (certainly implied by the keys mentioned in Matt. 16:19; see also 1 Cor. 5:12; 6:4). It has meetings in which it is constituted as the 'church.' 'When you come together as a church,' the Apostle Paul says. 'As a church' indicates the church assembled formally, officially as a congregation under the direction of the elders (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:18; 5:4; 11:17, 20, 33, 34; 14:26). This is not to be confused with when private Christians 'come together' informally, unofficially, or spontaneously. Informal gatherings of Christians may be helpful. Interdenominational community Bible studies may be edifying. However, they are not the church. The intimate bonds created through group Bible studies and

Who Needs the Church?

prayer primarily are meant to be forged in the context of the church to which we belong, where we can depend on others and others can depend on us, where I have covenanted to be there for you, and you for me.

Don't merely count Jesus' words regarding the church. Weigh them. Like silver. Like gold. How can I commit to the church, one may object, when the church is so flawed? It is so shallow, so corrupt, so hurtful, so compromised, many insist. Indeed, we concede, at times it is. However, our question is, did Jesus not know this? When He established the church, did He not know that there would be problems? That there would be rivalry and infighting? That there would be hypocrisy and hurt? Of course He did. Nevertheless, He said what He said, calling us into the church and to be devoted to its people and mission.

We suffer today for lack of an ecclesiology. A family leaves a congregation with which it has been associated for over a decade, without warning and without explanation. The members who are left behind are bewildered. They may have sacrificed for that family during a time of crisis. Prayers were offered, visits made, meals cooked, funds given, and baby-sitting provided. Gone. Why? Because they, like so many others, see the church as a voluntary association, like a health club, rather than a commitment, like marriage.

A serious hole exists in our Christian discipleship if we are not fully committed to building the church as Jesus envisioned it, where I am accountable to others and they are accountable to me; where I am responsible to others and they are responsible to me; where I can count on them, and they can count on me.