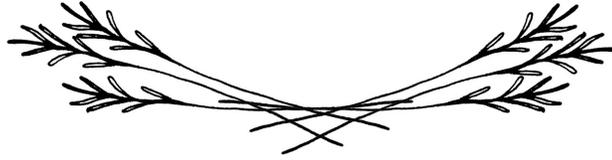


WEEK 13

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH



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In the famous passage in Matthew 16:18, Jesus states that he will establish his church, and in Acts 2 we see the fulfillment of that promise. Peter preaches that Jesus was the Savior, and that he had been crucified and resurrected. Many people believe and respond. Acts 2:40 states that about 3,000 souls were added to their number that day. The church is established in a big way, but now what? What are those people to do now? The church has never existed before. So what is this church to do?

We probably need to specify what the word “church” actually means. The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the word we translate as “church” is the Greek *ekklesia*. This compound word comes from the two Greek words that mean “out” (*ek-*) and “to call” (*klesia*). Many people erroneously define *ekklesia* as “people who are called out.” This way of thinking about the word may make a good point in a sermon—“the church is called out of the world”—and this teaching does appear in the New Testament (John 17:6; Rom 12:2), but it is not the word *ekklesia* itself that tells us that we are not to conform to the world. The history of a word (i.e., the etymology) may help us understand its meaning, but not always. Meanings of words change over time. For example, the English word “awful” combines the two words “awe” and “full,” and it originally meant “full of awe,” but these days “awful” has the opposite meaning. At the time the New Testament was written, the word *ekklesia* did not mean “called out”; it

simply meant “the assembly” or “group of people.” In Matthew 16, Jesus is simply saying that he will establish his group, his people.

Now we see the fulfillment of the promise Jesus made in Mathew 16 as the church is established and the community comes together in Acts 2. That early group begins to encounter difficulty very soon because they really do not know what the group they just joined is supposed to be doing. In all the teachings of Jesus, he never lined out the day-to-day workings of his church. Modern Christians may be surprised to realize that while Jesus talked a lot about the establishment of the “kingdom of God,” he never detailed the practical implementation of it. We have records of hundreds of Jesus’s teachings; never in those stories or parables does he lay out exactly how the church will function, nor does he give detailed instructions of the administration of his church.

It’s shocking, really: Jesus established his church but gave very little or no instructions as to what this church should do. Think back on the instructions of Christ. He teaches almost entirely on our relationship with God, our relationships with other people, or the nature of the church/kingdom of God. There is almost nothing about how that church/kingdom would function in the real world after his ascension. We would have done things differently. If we had wanted to establish a group of people that would exist for thousands of years, we would have given detailed instructions on how that group should carry out its day-to-day affairs. Jesus does things differently (cf. Isa 55:8).

The church is established in Acts 2, and its members begin to function as best they can. That early group was doing the same thing we are doing today: they were attempting to discover the mission of the church. They were asking the same questions

and involving themselves in the same discussions and studies that occupy us today. They were struggling to understand what it meant to be part of this assembly that belongs to Jesus. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Because of this belief, we have repented, been baptized, and the Lord has added us to his church. But now what? What do we do? What is the mission of the church? What am I supposed to do now that I have been added to the church?

The book of Acts chronicles the spread of the Gospel and the establishment of congregations of the church of Jesus. It also gives us valuable insight to the work of the early church. Throughout the book of Acts and the epistles (letters written to the first churches), the Holy Spirit gives us clues and detailed instruction concerning the work and day-to-day activities of the early church. We can see the very earliest actions of the church in Acts 2:42–47. They ate together and prayed. They praised God, lived in peace, and they met each other’s physical needs. They looked to the Apostles for direction and continued in their teachings, while having fellowship with each other.

As the early church matured, the role of the church developed. In Acts 6, we see the church growing, but a problem arose. The Grecians felt that their widows were being neglected. The church needed more organization in benevolence. The church selected men to oversee the benevolence program so that the ministry of the word would not be neglected. The apostles continued to teach and evangelize while the newly selected men oversaw this new and neglected area of work.

This passage reveals several important truths. The work of the church involved study and teaching of the word, and the church took care of its members. The text refers to these two major works as (1) ministry of the word and (2) serving tables. After the resolution of the conflict, numbers again started to increase (Acts 6:7). We should think

of conflict resolution as a work of the church. Sometimes people will say, “Two of the most important works of the church are (1) saving the lost and (2) keeping the saved, saved.” Much of the work of the church can fit into these two large categories, but much more is involved.

The early Christians had the Apostles to help guide and teach them how each congregation should function. They wrote down their instruction, which can now guide us just as it did the first Christians. The majority of the New Testament consists of letters written to congregations, for the most part giving detailed and specific instructions on the issues each congregation faced. It is our responsibility to study those letters and to make sure that we are functioning as a group according to the instructions given to the church.

It is interesting that Jesus thought mainly about the actions of the individuals and that he did not teach much about the actions of the assembly. Could it be that in many ways the church is to act like an extension of the individuals who make up the church? Jesus taught us how to be the individuals we need to be. If each of us will act the way we should, and do the things we should according to his teachings, we may be surprised to find that we are fulfilling the mission of the church.

Questions For Discussion

The church is referred to in the New Testament as many different things. Each of these comparisons/metaphors carries with it certain ideas that help us see the purpose and mission of the church. For the following verses, discuss how the metaphors used help us envision the purpose and mission of the church. Think about these questions for each metaphor:

What is it?

What does it do?

What is its purpose?

What is the point of comparing it to the church?

Soldier/ An Army

(2 Tim 2:4 KJV) No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.

A Flock

(Acts 20:28 KJV) Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

A Body

(Eph 4:11 KJV) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; (12) For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:

A Bride

(2 Cor 11:2 KJV) For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.

A Family/household

(Eph 2:19 KJV) Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

Citizens/A Community

(Eph 2:19 KJV) Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

Church

(Matt 16:18 KJV) And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.