



The Story Of Salvation

NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010

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30. The Letters for the Church

Churches, formed by the gathering of those who converted when they heard the preaching of the gospel, sprung up all over the place. From the New Testament record itself we know that there were congregations from Jerusalem into Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, across to Crete, and then in Greece and Italy. Undoubtedly there were many more communities that are unnamed and unknown to us, other than those mentioned in the Acts and the Epistles.

The word “church” does not appear in the first four chapters of Acts; it is found first in Acts 5:11. However, even then the language speaks mainly of men and women being added to the Lord, rather than to the church (Acts 5:14, cf. 2:47). When speaking of the church, the emphasis is on the organic reality of the people of God, as they live and move in God, rather than an organisational entity.

As we have read through Acts in the previous couple of studies, the church is seen as the gathered people of God whose primary concern is the proclamation of Christ, the good news of the Kingdom of God, and the care and concern for each other in various needs, whilst praying to and worshipping the Lord Jesus. Their life together is to be typified by holiness, truth, love, goodness and justice. In all this, they are equipped by the Holy Spirit with power for action that often includes miraculous signs and actions, healings, deliverance of people from demons, even the raising of the dead. All of this is with a view to the proclamation of the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The church is, then, the continuation of the plan of God that a community of men and women would be with Him as peers in the working out of His plan for the world. At the beginning, Man and Woman had been created in order to bear the image of God in the world and to bring the earth to fullness and submission to the glory of God. Israel had been chosen as a priest—nation to God, and through the law given to Israel the glory of God would be made known in the world. Now the church appears in that plan, and is there for the display and proclamation of salvation in the world. Just as the first man and woman were to be the image of God, through lives of holiness, truth, love, goodness, and justice, so now the church in union with Christ (the new Man and the new Bride) are to be this in the world. Just as the first man and woman were commanded to fill the earth and to subdue, so now the church, in union with Christ and by the power of the Spirit, is to take the gospel to the ends of the earth and so bring men and women to submission to the Father of love, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The epistles were written to the churches with this in view. Always in the minds of the writers of the various letters (Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and the anonymous writer of the letter to Hebrews) is that the church fulfil her commission and task in the world by being all that Christ has made her to be in his saving work. For this reason, the epistles always restate clearly the gospel that formed the church as the backdrop to the various issues that the church faces in its life before God in the world. It is clear in the letters that those matters of holiness, truth, love, goodness and justice are the points at

which the church comes under attack from the evil one. In a moment we will explore a little just how those issues are the focus of the letters, using Romans as an example.

Before then, though, it is important to note that the letters are written by apostles, or carry apostolic authority. There is clearly an expectation of obedience to the things said in the letter. The apostolic authority did not lie in the person of the apostle *per se*, but rather in his re-presentation of the truth of the gospel. The apostles were not a band of dictators (benevolent or otherwise) in the churches. Their only authority was the gospel itself. In fact, rather than taking complete control of the life of the churches, the apostles seem to only deal with those issues where the truth of the gospel in the life of the people seems to be at stake, those issues of holiness, truth, love, goodness and justice. Many issues are left as matters of freedom for the churches.

The other thing to say about this is that the writers of the epistles were not interested in the theological education and development of these congregations *per se*. Rather, the most important thing for them was “faith expressing itself in love” (Gal. 5:6). (Of course, there was a deep connection between the gospel by which love is poured into the heart, and the life of love in the people of God.) Theological sophistication is no substitute for genuine and gentle love, forgiveness and reconciliation, holy living towards one another, just and gracious dealings especially where there are difficulties, and a good-hearted desire for the benefit of others ahead of oneself.

“The Epistles are concerned with refuting false teaching and stating afresh that which is true. They are also combating problems which arise in the various churches from time to time. The Gentiles who lived in an immoral society have to learn to discern that which is moral and godly over and against what they have previously known. Relationships within the church are most vital, for the very nature of the church ... is that of the body of Christ, being members one of another.”¹

The letter to the Romans is the most extensive treatment of the gospel in the New Testament. Paul carefully works out a rationale of the *kerugma* (as he does also in shorter form in Galatians), showing just how it is that righteousness is by faith in the action of God in Jesus Christ, and not by human works. It is this justifying work in Christ that breaks the power of sin in the life of believers, not law-inspired efforts, and even though believers still find sin dwelling in them, the Holy Spirit empowers them for holy living towards God. What God the Father has done in Christ is so complete that believers can have assurance for the future, knowing that nothing will separate them from the love of God. (This summarises, rather inadequately, Romans 1-8.) The issue that seems to be in Paul’s mind through the letter is the relationship between Christians of Jewish and of Gentile backgrounds (Rom. 9-11). Love and goodness must mean that neither party (especially it seems that the Gentile believers in Rome needed to hear this) can take a superior position to one another. Especially this will express itself in respect for the sensitivities of each other’s consciences (Rom. 14-15).

The other exhortations in Rom. 12-13 also deal with the holiness, love, truth, goodness and justice issues. All is from the mercy of God (12:1; hence the thorough re-telling of the gospel) and is an expression of life in Christ (Rom. 13:14).

Holiness expresses itself in no longer conforming to the pattern of life of the world, from which Christ has rescued the church into his own holiness (12:2-3). The salvation Christ has brought is coming soon to its great goal, and so holiness in life means in particular

¹ Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Salvation History*, New Creation Publications:Blackwood, 1977, 2008, p. 90

the leaving aside of the darkness of sexual immorality, debauchery, jealousies and fighting (13:11-14).

Truth expresses itself in lack of hypocrisy, and, rather, genuineness in life. “Love must be sincere... Never be lacking zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord... Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody... Let no debt remain outstanding... “ (Rom. 12:9, 11, 17; 13:8).

Love is the virtue over all virtues. Where love is present, holiness, goodness, truth and justice must be in action. Love means a readiness to be forgiving, to be devoted to each other in active, serving reality where the honour of others is more important than our own position (Rom. 12:10). We help those who we find in need (Rom. 12:13). The one continuing debt we have, and must have, is to love—we can never think that we’ve cleared ourselves of that responsibility, that we’ve “done enough” (Rom. 13:8ff). Love towards those outside the community of faith means a refusal of all thoughts of revenge, but rather a determination to bless even those who do us harm (Rom. 13:14ff).

Essential is a humble heart—not thinking too highly of oneself, and ready to honour all, regardless of their social standing (Rom. 12:3ff, 17b). Whether this is “love” or “goodness” is not really important—it is all of a whole. Certainly goodness means we refuse to be overcome by evil, but rather overcome evil by good (12:21)—i.e. our response to those who are hard and difficult is to be as good as God’s response was to us who so evilly tried to overcome Him in the murder of His Son!

Justice means a good relationship to authorities, an *unrebellious* spirit. And this extends to the faithful payment of dues that are required (13:1-7).