



new creation teaching ministry: tuesday night studies 2009

the things we firmly believe

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Study 17: The Church and the Sacraments

(*TTWFB*, 2:16-18; pp. 205-215)

The Eschatological Community

The church is called by theologians the *eschatological community*. Eschatology is the study of those things that belong to the end, the matters that are involved at the end of history. (The Greek word for the end is *eschaton*.) When we say that the church, God's people is an eschatological community we mean two things: firstly, that it looks forward and is moving towards the end time, and secondly, that the powers of the end are flowing into the church now.

We tend to think of history and time having a one-way flow. The future is dependent on what happens before. That is the way it is normally in human affairs. In fact, though, what happens now is dependent on the future that belongs to Jesus Christ. Jesus has been raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father. There he is not locked into our world and our time frame. He is called the first-fruits (**1Cor. 15:20, 23**); that is he is the beginning and promise of the future for us all. Whenever he acts among us—and he is with us until the end of the age—help for us to reach the future comes to us from him who is our future. Our future is what he already knows; we will be with Christ in the presence of the Father.

Jesus sends this help by the Holy Spirit. In **Acts 2:14ff** Peter explained to the gathered crowd what had happened when the Holy Spirit descended on the believers. He related it to the prophecy of Joel 2:28-32, and by so doing he was saying to the crowd that the last days (v. 17) had begun. The Holy Spirit is given to strengthen and help the church in these last days until the 'great and glorious day of the Lord' (v. 20) when all of history is brought to its goal and fulfilment.

The sign of the Spirit's presence is that God's people prophesy. *Prophecy* is the essential activity of the last days—i.e. by the Spirit God's people would be declarers of just what God had done, was doing and will do. **Revelation 19:10** says. 'The spirit of prophecy is the testimony of Jesus.' All of God's actions are focussed in Jesus Christ. So, the essential activity of the people of God in the last days is to be telling of all of God's action in Jesus Christ.

Right now, Christ is working out the plan of God for creation. Paul describes it this way in **1Corinthians 15:20–28**.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet". Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Currently Christ is destroying all rule, authority, and power, and every enemy. This is through the proclamation of the gospel by His people, but Jesus is the one doing the work (see **Rev. 19:11–16**). God's people are with him in this task; we proclaim not only the forgiveness of sins but also the defeat of the evil one, the enemy and all his hosts, and the final judgment of all his works. So we need also to be equipped with spiritual weapons, which are not all like earthly weapons, but which fill us with divine power for the pulling down of strongholds (**2Cor. 10:4**). In the wider passage Paul refers especially to meekness and gentleness! When we look at **Ephesians 6:10–20** we see that the armour of God includes truth, righteousness, gospel peace, faith and faithfulness, salvation and the word of God, and prayer in the Holy Spirit. No other army fought like this!

God's people are people of hope. We are people who long for and desire the completion of God's plan for the world. We eagerly anticipate the coming of the Lord Jesus at the end—**Rev. 22:20**. This thought comes through especially in Paul's Pastoral Epistles (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). What we see there is that this hope is the basis of and motivation for godly living in the present age:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (**2Tim. 4:7, 8**)

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (**Titus 2:11-14**)

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in his own time—God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no-one has seen or can see. To him be honour and might for ever. Amen. (**1Tim. 6:12-16; cf. 2Tim. 4:1ff**)

At the end, when Christ appears, we will become full sharers in the glory of God (Rom. 5:2); we will be finally conformed to the image of Christ; in our resurrection bodies, there will be no trace of indwelling sin; we will inherit all the promises of God, the Kingdom of God, the world, all things! Until then we are to be the waiting church, an active waiting which is marked by a preparation for, and a preparedness to, meeting the Lord.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper

Baptism (or christening) and the Lord's Supper (or the Eucharist, the breaking of bread, holy Communion) have special significance in the life of the church as they are actions which Christ gave to the church (e.g. Matt. 28:18-20; 26:26-29). These actions have over time become known as sacrament. Some see links between them and two Old Testament practices, circumcision and the Passover feast.

Baptism is closely linked with the gospel. It arose when John announced the imminent coming of Messiah. He called Israel to conversion, because the end of the ages, the Kingdom of God was right at hand (Matt. 3:1-2). John's call to baptism was linked with repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as well as the coming judgment of the world (Luke 3:3, Matt. 3:11-12). John was saying that the Christ was coming for all this. So, baptism was a very physical way of identifying yourself as one who believed the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus commanded his disciples to baptise those who believed, and so the practice of baptism and its meaning continued. In Acts 2:38-39 Peter responded to the conviction of sin in the crowd by urging them to repent and be baptised in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, and promising

the gift of the Holy Spirit as they did so. In Acts 22:16 it means to wash away your sins. Baptism also signified adoption by the Father, and union with Christ, and so inclusion into the new people of God (Gal. 3:26-29). In Romans 6:1-6 it is linked with dying and rising with Jesus Christ. In Acts 10:47 baptism for the Gentile household of Cornelius makes sense because the gift of the Spirit had been poured out on them as they believed, just as it had on the church at Jerusalem. As well as signifying our faith in Christ, the Spirit also works in baptism, effecting the spiritual washing and renewal that is the promise of baptism (Acts 22:16; Titus 3:5). The Holy Spirit is the seal of our inheritance, the guarantee of what lies ahead for us, and so baptism is the beginning of the future for us.

What are required for baptism are repentance and faith in Christ, and these are *closely* linked with baptism, not separated by some process of improvement. What flowed out from baptism, the fruit of baptism, were, by God's grace, forgiveness, cleansing, justification, incorporation into Christ's body, regeneration and sanctification. Finally this all culminates in final glory. This all means that we are now to renounce sin, the flesh, the world and the devil. Who would want to go on living in this, given the redemption that is ours in Christ? Given that, there is still the need for the active participation of the will, moved and sustained by the Spirit of God, to take hold of the renunciation of all these things, and to take hold of Christ, to 'put on Christ' in a life of love, service and proclamation with all God's people. Looking back to our baptism, we are encouraged to look forward to the goal of Christ's saving work, and that gives us the motivation of hope towards holiness.

Likewise the Lord's Supper is closely linked with the gospel. It is a meal given to remember Christ's giving his body to be broken and his blood poured out on the cross for the salvation of the world, for the establishment of the new covenant and the securing of the kingdom. The forgiveness of sins is signified to us in the meal, and we are refreshed and renewed in that forgiveness as we take and eat and drink in the meal. The remembering is not simply remembering though, for the one we remember is not dead and buried, but dead, buried and living again, reigning in heaven with the Father and pouring out the Holy Spirit so that we may know fellowship with them. Right now, Christ is assuring us of the total forgiveness of sins. Also, the supper is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet at the end of the ages, when we will enjoy rich, free and full fellowship with God our Father, with Christ by the Spirit. So we look back in thanksgiving, we celebrate in the present joy of salvation and we look ahead to the fulfilling of all this at the end. Of course, faith and repentance are the needed conditions for all this to come to us in blessing. The Lord's Supper is not simply a private matter (and nor is baptism). In both we are expressing union with Christ and so also union in love with his body, the church. In Corinthians 11 the church in Corinth had forgotten this, and the Lord had acted in strong judgment, such that some had become sick and some had died. What was wrong was that in meeting and eating together, the rich had ignored the poor, feasting away while their poorer brothers and sisters went hungry.

In both baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus Christ is acting through the Holy Spirit. We should approach these things with awe and joy, knowing that his work in these gifts is there to sustain and uphold us in the fullness and joy of salvation until the very end.