

## **Core Theology 4**

### **The Church**

The worship of God is presented in the context of the Church. The knowledge of God is presented primarily in the Bible. The Church is an agent of God's work in the world. God can act beyond the church. However, God, the revelation of God in the Bible and the knowledge of God in the church should agree. The Christian lives in the context of the church. The Christian fish lives in the sea of the worship of the church. It is very difficult to remain a Christian outside the continuing fellowship of the church. Christians are meant to build one another up in the faith and share life with each other in all its complexity and challenge.

#### The Witness to the Truth.

The church is not here to solve people's problems. The church is here to witness to the truth: Jesus Christ is the Truth. So the task of the church is to be faithful to the testimony of who Jesus is and what He can do. Jesus Christ was not continually counselling people. He intervened in people's lives with miracle and judgement, challenging them to follow Him. Part of the ministry of Jesus Christ is to forgive sins. The forgiveness of sins means the breaking of the bondage and powerlessness that comes from sin. This forgiveness releases the believer to solve their own problems. Solving people's problems is an endless task. If you have any success at it then there will be plenty there to take their place. The paradigm for the Christian is repentance, healing and following Jesus, not keeping our attention on ourself and wandering around in the oasis of our own experience. It requires a deep discipline to keep our minds off ourselves.

#### The Church determines the Canon.

The canon (= measuring rod) of the OT books was established by the Jewish community. A basic distinction is the books written in Hebrew and the books written in Greek. The books written in Hebrew make up the protestant OT. The Catholic Church adds the Apocrypha, which is the recognised books written in Greek. The NT consists of the four Gospels and Acts, the Epistles and Revelation. Gradually the church recognised certain books as canonical or standard for the faith and discipline of the church. The canon of the OT contains 39 books and the canon of the NT contains 27 books giving 66 books in all. The canon was finally established by 400 AD. So the church has decided which books make up the standard of Christian belief. In turn the Bible can be used to judge the church, although it is the church that has determined by what standard it shall be judged. It is very important to recognise that scripture did not come down from heaven on gold plates. God wrote the ten commandments (on stone for Moses), but everything else comes by the hand of man. This is the Incarnational principle: God works through human beings. Human beings see things into which angels long to look (1Pet 1:12). The deepest revelation of God is expressed through human beings. All the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily in Jesus Christ (Col 2:9). So there is this dynamic between Church and Bible: whereas the church decides the Bible, the Bible judges the church. Both the Church and the Bible testify to the truth of Jesus Christ. The Bible testifies as a text (propositional) and the Church testifies as a living incarnation of Jesus' truth in a particular place and time (experiential). The Gospel is totally and eternally relevant to any human situation and is shown to be so by the activity of

the church. This means that the church has to be true to the Gospel, which is a constant struggle.

#### The place of Tradition.

Every Christian church has some kind of tradition or history out of which it has come. We all act out of a background. The question becomes, What is the recognised basis for the church's behaviour? The Protestants say 'Sola Scriptura' (scripture only). The Catholics say the Apostolic tradition of the church as well as the Scripture is a determiner of faith. The Catholic Church regards its teaching function (or magisterium) as an authority for faith. Every church gives authority to its tradition and historical origins. That is why that church worships in the way it does. It is often very difficult to change something in a church (where the flowers go, what hymn book is used) if the people regard what is to be changed as altering some tradition. I think that the balance must be that we open ourselves to the judgement of scripture in the church. The Bible is our manifesto and our rationale for action. The church is the way we carry our beliefs into the world. Given any local situation, the church becomes the local expression of the Biblical principles. This is Incarnational. God becomes man does not mean that Man becomes God. This introduces a problem.

#### A Problem.

Hopefully, when God acts the church acts. Hopefully a faithful church is consistent with and in tune with what God is doing. The church is at God's disposal. Hopefully, we are always acting for God and in obedience to His Holy Spirit. However, this can be turned around so that we can say that when the church acts God acts. Whereas in the first scenario the church follows God, in the second scenario God follows the church. This creates a very high doctrine of the church which can lead to the belief (and doctrine) that the church is somehow divine and can speak for God. When the church speaks God speaks. This, for instance, is found in the Catholic Church when it says 'it is the ordained priesthood that guarantees that it is really Christ who acts in the sacraments' (Catechism of the Catholic Church, p 317). By the Apostolic tradition the sacramental work and service of the church is guaranteed to be apostolic and valid. How do we know that when we act God acts? According to scripture this occurs, principally, in the area of forgiveness of sins, as in John 20:23 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.' A wider authority is seen in Jesus statement concerning the confession of Peter. 'I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.' (Mtt 16:19) This is an extraordinary power. I do not think that this guarantees all that the church does. But it does suggest that when we exercise the authority of God, God honours that authority by binding what we bind and loosing what we loose. Our authority from God is to bind and to loose. If we identify our actions with the actions of God we may well bind ourselves. Our submission to God requires a sensitivity and faithfulness that means that we are doing what God wants, not God is doing what we want. Does the church have a ministry of binding and loosing? The church may well have abused its power by suggesting that people could buy their way out of Purgatory. This was the initial problem that sparked the Reformation. This was the presenting problem. (In counselling it is said that a person can present with a problem which is simply a symptom or a superficial avoidance of a much deeper problem in their life.)

In the Basis of Union of the Uniting Church it is stated that Christ is present when He is preached among the people and that Christ reaches out to command attention and awaken faith (paragraph 4). This, however, can be used to imply that what is preached is what Jesus wants to say. Hopefully Jesus is present, as He promised, where two or three are gathered in His Name (Mtt 18:20). But He may be present for judgement as well as approval. Again it is said in the Basis that Christ himself acts in and through everything that the church does in obedience to the commandment (paragraph 6). If the commandment is said to be love, this can imply that God loves what we love. This becomes very relevant in the Sexuality Debate. God loves what the church loves. Or even, God approves what the church approves. Binding and loosing is a genuine authority and activity of the church as Jesus said. However, we must be very careful how we use it lest we discredit the gospel and bind (confuse) ourselves. Spirit forces (which we are binding and loosing) have profound effects in the spirit realm. People can be adversely affected by the misuse of the Spirit (Ananias and Sapphira Acts 5:1-11, sons of Sceva Acts 19:11-20).

#### The Use of Church in Scripture.

1. Jesus does not say much about the church. The word 'church' is only used in Mtt 16:18 and 18:17. Both these references are also about authority and binding and loosing. In Mtt 16:18 says that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the spirit force of the church. This assumes that the church is not part of the hellish force itself. The point of discussion in this passage is whether Jesus is referring to the Rock as Peter or the Rock as the confession that Peter made. In the second passage (18:15-20) the church is to be used for discipline.
2. The church becomes the place where the saved gather. 'And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).
3. In Paul's address to the Ephesian elders he says, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood' (Acts 20:28). There is a lot of doctrine in this verse. The Holy Spirit has made these elders shepherds of the flock. They have shepherd authority to care for and maintain (as a flock) the church of God which God has purchased at great personal cost (blood = life). The church is a purchased possession owned by God. 'They shall be mine' (Malachi 3:17).
4. A high doctrine of the church is revealed in Eph 3:10 'with the intention that the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by means of the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places'. These are things into which angels long to look. God in using the church for revelation, desires to reveal His manifold (rich, many faceted, like facets on a jewel) wisdom and capacity for existence. The flow is from God in heaven, to the church on earth, to the spirit forces in the heavenlies. This is the place of the church in the economy and eternal purposes of God.
5. In Ephesians 5:22-32 we have the teaching of Christ loving the church as His own body. Christian marriage is seen as comparable to the way Jesus Christ cares for His church, which He sanctifies, cleanses and washes, in order to present Himself with a glorious church without spot or wrinkle and holy without blemish. However, the church is not the Bride of Christ. The Bride of Christ is the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:9-10).

6. In 1 Tim 3:15 the church is described as 'the house of God, which is the pillar and ground of the truth'. The church is not the truth but the context for it. Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6). We look to the church for the place where the truth is dealt with and seen to be happening. The pillar is a support of a structure. The ground is the base or foundation for the structure. The church, therefore, can be seen as a place where the truth (seen as a structure) is properly found and supported. The truth will be consistent with the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of Jesus Christ. May all that we utter in the church be tested by the Holy Spirit lest we delude ourselves and no longer be the church, which is the place where the truth is recognised.

7. In Hebrews 12:18-24 we have a vision of the church as 'the general assembly and church of the first-born' (:23). This is the community of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Jesus Christ is the first-fruits and first born of the new humanity. The first fruits and the first born were always dedicated to the Lord (Ex 22:29).

8. The church is the place for healing. James 5:14 says that if one is sick that one should call for the elders of the church to come and pray for them and anoint them in the name of the Lord. The result is that the prayer of faith will save the sick, the Lord will raise him up and his sins will be forgiven. This is total healing. Jesus often dealt with forgiveness of sins in His healing ministry.

#### The Sacraments.

A sacrament has been defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'. The sacraments are a part of the ministry of the church to believers. They are structured liturgies (baptism, communion) that assert spirit truths of initiation and fellowship. Baptism (the rite of Christian initiation) is the recognition of our identification in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:1-14). Holy Communion recognises the continuing fellowship with and witness to Jesus Christ (1 Cor 10:14-22, 11:23-26). Communion is a feast. Mother Teresa would feed on the Mass. In John 6:48-59, Jesus describes Himself as the bread of Life. We feed on Him in this sacrament. Oswald Chambers speaks of being 'broken bread and poured out wine' for Jesus Christ. A sacrament was originally a 'sacramentum' or oath of allegiance taken by a soldier joining the Roman army. The church came to see the sacraments as radical commitments of the faithful. They are the established means of Grace. The Catholic Church has seven sacraments (baptism, communion (Mass), confirmation, confession, marriage, ordination, extreme unction). The Catholic Church has a very externalised form of worship. The sacraments structure the whole of the Christian's life, from beginning to earthly end. In the traditional teaching of the Tabernacle the priests served the Lord with a structured service or liturgy of sacrifice. In a similar way our worship can be viewed as offering the sacrifice of praise (Jer 33:11, Heb 13:15). A sacrament is a means of structuring our faith and its expression. The Protestant Churches have only two sacraments (baptism and communion) and some have none (Salvation Army). Communion can be viewed as the real body and blood of Jesus under the species of bread and wine (Catholic, transubstantiation) or as simply an emblem or sign of a faith activity. The Pentecostal churches have a very internalised form of religion governed by experience. Externalised religion has grace coming 'ex opere operato', mechanically, by priestly performance. Internalised religion sees grace as coming by faith. Possibly both are required.