

Called Out For A Purpose

*'On this rock', said the Lord Jesus, 'I will build my Church'. Peter had just made his dramatic statement, putting into words what all the disciples had probably been beginning to understand over the last couple of years: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'. (**Matthew 16:13-20**) This was a point of no return; the Jewish authorities were adamant: if anyone declared that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the promised Anointed One of God, they were to be excluded from the synagogue (**John 9:22**). That did not just mean exclusion from religious meetings but social exclusion as well. Not surprising that Jesus immediately *'warned the disciples that they should tell no one that he was the Christ'*.*

The 'bedrock' on which the Lord promised to build had just been demonstrated. Peter had received revelation from the Father to show him who Jesus really was, had believed that revelation, and then had been certain enough to speak it out! His nickname (*Petros* – a stone or boulder) was appropriate. He was made of the same stuff as that bedrock (*petra*).¹

So, when we start thinking and talking about the Church, we need to know two vital facts:

1) It is the Lord Jesus himself who does the building. He may have co-workers, but he is the builder.

2) The foundation needs to be in place before any building can start.

We shall come back to these facts next week.

But what did he mean by 'my Church'? What did the disciples make of it?

The word translated 'church' in the New Testament is not a religious word. It was applied to any gathering of people who had been called out in some way and had come together. The word *'ekklesia'* simply means 'called out' and was used for both the riot in Ephesus and for the 'lawful assembly' (i.e. the courts) where it was suggested that any problems could be resolved.²

When the Lord Jesus used this word himself,³ he was clearly referring to the company of those who believed and followed him.

In New Testament times, many Jews could not read Hebrew fluently, so the Old Testament scriptures were also translated into Greek, the common language of the Roman Empire, and this word *'ekklesia'* turns up again in that translation (the 'Septuagint'), though this time with special meaning for the Jewish people as the nation who had been called out by God himself, and particularly in two settings:-

1) Referring to the time when the whole company of the people of Israel, who had just escaped from the slavery of Egypt, gathered at the foot of the mountain while Moses met with God and was given the Ten Commandments.⁴

2) Referring to the regular gathering of all of Israel to the place where God had chosen to show his presence, initially in the (very mobile) 'tent of meeting' and then in the temple in Jerusalem.⁵

Obviously, a gathering of people who have been called out depends on two factors: A call and the response to that call. There were occasions in the Old Testament when some of the tribes

¹ See *'Bedrock'* from www.justonecandle.uk for a short 'word study' on this.

² **Acts 19:32 & 39**

³ **Matthew 16:18 & 18:17**

⁴ **Deuteronomy 4:10, 9:10 & 18:16 & Acts 7:38**, where *'ekklesia'* is translated 'congregation' or 'assembly'.

⁵ **Joshua 8:35, 1 Kings 8:22** and many more!

of Israel did not turn up at the gathering as they were expected to. Trouble resulted because there was a clear understanding that it was necessary to respond to the call and come together.

Equally, there were strict rules about who could and could not be part of the gathering. The most important of these rules was that you had to be part of God's chosen people, the Jews, although right from the start there was room for outsiders who wanted to be 'joined to' the Jewish nation. In identifying with the people of God, in a very real way they were also responding to his call.¹ Throughout the whole Old Testament there are constant references to the congregation / assembly / gathering of Israel, translated into the Septuagint using the Greek word 'ekklesia' (more than 70 verses!).

So, there in Caesarea Philippi, as Jesus spoke about 'my Church', the disciples will have understood exactly what he meant: a group of people who had gathered together in response to a call – **HIS** call! And they could see the parallels in the history of the Jewish people down the centuries since Moses.

In the same way, if you were a Christian believer in, say, Ephesus, when Paul wrote to you about something he called the church ('ekklesia'), you knew exactly what he meant: a gathering of people who had responded to a call. And as this was the 'ekklesia' of the Lord Jesus Christ, it was understood that each member had responded to his call. If you knew the Jewish scriptures as well, you had the additional benefit of knowing that this word also described the assembling of God's own chosen people over the centuries of their history. A rich word indeed!

How did you know whether you were part of that church? Simple! If you had responded to the call of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, you were in. If you had not responded, you were not in.

So (for example) you could define the church in Ephesus in just four words: **In Christ, in Ephesus.**

For many years, I haven't seen the continuity between the LORD calling out his Chosen People in the Old Testament and Jesus calling out the Church in the New Testament. Quite recently, we were studying Romans in a small study group, and at the same time I was following up questions about the place of the Jewish people in God's plans. One passage really opened up to me: **Romans 11:17-26**, where Paul writes about the fact that Gentiles (non-Jews) who have put their trust in Jesus have been 'grafted in' to the 'olive tree' of God's Chosen People, Israel.

The simple truth that Paul highlights here is that **there is only one olive tree**. So if, like me, you are a Gentile, we who have been joined to Jesus have been grafted into the eternal purposes of God which we can see stretching right through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation! In a very real way, we have become part of what Paul calls 'the Israel of God'.²

The Christians in Galatia were probably mostly Gentiles, and the church in Rome was probably a more even mix of Jews and Gentiles, but in both letters Paul spells it out clearly: *"If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise"* (**Galatians 3:29**).

And Jews who trust in Jesus (whether in New Testament times or now) are simply responding to the call of God in the Lord Jesus, the fulfilment and continuity of many promises in the Old Testament³.

Peter, writing his letter primarily to Jewish believers, underlines the same message and adds an extra level of understanding. In **1 Peter 2:4-10**, he writes *"coming to Him as to a living stone"*

¹ **Numbers 15:15, Deuteronomy 23:1-8, 1 Chronicles 13:1-8, Nehemiah 13:1-3**

² **Galatians 6:16**. See also **Galatians 3:7 & 29, Romans 9:6, Philippians 3:3**

³ One of the best examples is **Jeremiah 31:31-34**, quoted in **Hebrews 8:8-13**

which has been rejected by men, but is choice and precious in the sight of God, you also, as living stones, being built up as a spiritual house into a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” and “you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God’s OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY”. (The capital letters are quotations from the Old Testament.)

Right from the earliest days in the wilderness, after their escape from Egypt, the Israelites were aware of the presence of God in their midst. First, the awesome and terrifying Presence at the top of the mountain, where only Moses went, but still the people pleaded not to have to face the LORD like that again ¹.

And then, the LORD’s plan to live there with his people. He gave Moses detailed instructions to build the tabernacle or ‘Tent of Meeting’. In **Exodus 25 - 31**, on the mountain and at the same time as he gave Moses the tablets of stone with the commandments, the LORD specifies every little detail of this special tent. But right at the beginning of that passage, **Exodus 25:8**, he sets out his simple but awesome plan: *“Let them construct a sanctuary for me, that I may dwell among them”* ². **His purpose was to have a presence on earth among his people.**

When the tabernacle had been built, with all the details completed, it was still just an elaborate tent, until the moment when the LORD took up residence. See **Exodus 40:34-38** and **Numbers 9:15-23**. The ‘sons of Israel’ would not move on in their travels until the cloud and fire were ‘taken up’ from the tent – they couldn’t have done even if they wanted to, because the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle and no-one could go in, not even Moses!

It was the same with the temple that was eventually built in Jerusalem many years later. King David had wanted to build it (**Acts 7:46** and **2 Samuel 7**) but it was Solomon who did so, as the LORD promised to David in **2 Samuel 7:13**. Again, everything was completed in glorious splendour, but it remained simply an amazing building until, once again, *‘the glory of the LORD filled the house of God’* (**2 Chronicles 5:14**), so much so that the priests simply could not stand there in the temple! Then Solomon prayed and asked the LORD to make the temple like a sort of ‘local headquarters’ on earth, in spite of the fact that *‘heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house which I have built?’* (Read **2 Chronicles 6**!) The LORD answers by once again filling the temple with his glory, and again the priests could not even enter the building (**2 Chronicles 7:1-3**). The LORD certainly made his presence felt!

Again, many years later, when ten of the twelve tribes of Israel had been taken off to Assyria (never to be heard of again) and the remaining Jewish people (the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, plus a few Levites) had been exiled to Babylon for 70 years, some Jews returned to Jerusalem and started to rebuild the temple, with encouragement from the LORD via his prophets, Haggai and Zechariah. Zechariah receives a message from the LORD : *“Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,” declares the LORD. “Many nations will join themselves to the LORD in that day and will become my people. Then I will dwell in your midst . . .”* (**Zechariah 2:10-11**) It looks like Zechariah was seeing further into the future than the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem!

Into the New Testament, and the theme continues! We may be familiar with the idea that our individual bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit ³, but Paul also writes about the Church being *‘the temple of the living God’* (**2 Corinthians 6:16**) – and he is definitely NOT talking about a

¹ **Exodus 20:18-21 & Deuteronomy 5:22-27**

² See also **Exodus 29:45,46, Leviticus 26:11-12, Ezekiel 27:37**

³ **1 Corinthians 6:19**

physical building! He expresses concern that the 'temple' there in Corinth may be in danger of serious damage if there is division, wrong foundations or wrong 'building' (**1 Corinthians 3:16,17**). More about that next time.

Perhaps one of the clearest passages is in **Ephesians 2:19-22**, where he writes: "*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a **dwelling** of God in the Spirit.*" Forgive the Greek detail, but that last word 'dwelling' is really special; it means a place to make a long-term residence, somewhere to settle down. Paul is saying that God is building the whole Church worldwide AND building the believers in Ephesus into a place where he can establish his presence locally. Wow!

I believe that is exactly what the Lord still wants to do with his church in every location in these days too.

Paul, writing to Timothy, describes the local church as the 'house' or 'household' of God (**1 Timothy 3:15**) and we have seen how Peter picks up the same theme in **1 Peter 2**, saying that we are being built up as a spiritual house and linking that back to the tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament.

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So, where is all this leading? How will God's plan – to have his presence on earth – be realised? In **Revelation 21:1-3**, the apostle John sees *'the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and he will dwell among them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be among them . . ."* The bride is a picture of the Church so there, right at the climax of the age, the Church and the presence of God on earth are closely connected!

We may feel that this all seems far off and wonder how we are involved on a day-to-day level. In previous times together, we have looked at our own personal spiritual development, especially in the light of what our Father has done for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our own individual spiritual growth on proper foundations is vital, but it is not the ultimate goal of the gospel. It is as we are **built together in fellowship** that the Lord is able to build his Church. We need to explore this process and see how it will work out in our own lives in relationship with each other, in Christ.

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We are being built into a temple,
Fit for God's own dwelling place;
Into the house of God which is the Church,
The pillar and the ground of truth,
As precious stones that Jesus owns,
Fashioned by his wondrous grace,
And as we love and trust each other,
So the building grows and grows.

Ian Traynar, 1977

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