

God's Congregation, the Pillar and Ground of Truth

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The Congregation, its foundation

Matthew records for us a discussion between Jesus and his disciples:

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

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.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Matt. 16:15-19

Jesus Christ promises that he is building his congregation or church on this testimony of Peter, that Christ is the Son of the living God. The congregation is not built on a weak or poor foundation. But the chief corner stone is laid by the best of builders. That corner stone is Christ Jesus. It will not fail. It cannot be shaken by even the strongest of earth quakes. The winds and storms of this world will not cause it to fall because it is founded on a rock that is sure.

To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed. I Pet. 2:4-8

For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: Eph 2:18-21

Jesus promises that the very gates of hell will not overcome His congregation. It is His body. It is His kingdom. The head of the body is in glory. The members of the body are still here on the earth as a battling congregation. He is the king in his kingdom. He rules through his own. This is not a democracy that we are participating in as believers but rather we have been gifted citizenship in the kingdom of God.

One of the battles on the last heresy was the doctrine of the local congregation. Many who fell into a false spirit believed only in the local congregation as their Mother. They did not have any concept of the entire congregation of God as being the Mother of us all. Since they were only dependent on the local congregation for help, support and understanding, they could not see beyond the faults and errors of the local brethren. Therefore, in their understanding, the mutual congregation could not be perfect or errorless nor could it be trusted.

However, when we look at the congregation of God as being the holy, spiritual city, Jerusalem, then we see something else. It is lowered down from heaven by God to be the dwelling place of all his children. The prophet beheld this wonderful city and marveled, “And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.” Isa. 33:24.

Paul also marveled at the freedom of a child of God, dwelling in Jerusalem: “But Jerusalem which is [from] above is free, which is the mother of us all.” Gal. 4:26

John was also able to behold the beauty of this holy city. He wrote in Revelations 21:2-3, “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”

Is it not good to be an inhabitant of a city and kingdom with such wonderful caretaking and promises?

God promises to keep us as his people. Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not be able to overthrow this city. The journey is certain and the destination is assured when we endeavor in faith to the end.

The Congregation and the Word of God

We confess in the third article of the creed:

I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

Luther explains this briefly in the small catechism:

I believe that I cannot of my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me through the gospel, enlightened me by his gifts and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith; even as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian

Church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the true faith: in which Christian church he daily and richly forgives me and all believers all our sins and at the last will raise up me and all the dead and grant me and all believers in Christ everlasting life. This is most certainly true.

The Holy Spirit is the third person in the Godhead. It is all powerful, just as the Father and Son are. People who doubt the oneness, sanctity and perfection of the congregation basically doubt the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

Jesus promised,

“Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you.” John 16:13-15

The Holy Spirit leads and guides the congregation of God into all truth. That is why the children of God have said, as the apostles said in Jerusalem, in describing their decision to the gentile believers in Asia minor: “For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, ...” Acts 15:28

God reveals his will in his congregation through the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit there is no life and no salvation. The Spirit affects through the Word the power to be born again. For anyone outside of faith, the depth of the Word of God is hidden. It enlightens such a heart to understand that he is far from God and without eternal life. It causes a person to seek for a merciful God. However, life is only found when an unbelieving person can hear the Word of God preached from the congregation of God. “Faith comes by hearing and hearing by and through the Word of God.” (Rom. 10:17) Only from the congregation of God is the gospel preached with its life-giving power.

Each and every child of God has been empowered to preach this “ministry of reconciliation,” to preach the forgiveness of sins. However, in matters pertaining to doctrine and issues in the congregation, we all have our own but differing gift. We are all members of the body of Christ and all members are needed in the body where we all edify one another. None of us is perfect but the mutual congregation is perfect.

“For we are laborers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.” I Cor. 3:9-17

Individual believers can err. Servants of the Word can err. Even local congregations can err but the mutual congregation is perfect and errorless.

For the same reason, that is why it is so important that each of us is preserved in sound doctrine within the congregation and that we hear what the spirit reveals on timely topics. If we have a different understanding then it is important that we humble ourselves for love's sake to be at one with the congregation.

Believers in the Congregation

The inhabitants of the spiritual city of Jerusalem have the wonderful portion of having continual access to the fountains of grace. No one has to lament that they are poor and weak because we have the forgiveness of sins, even though we do lament continuously and daily because of our sin corruption. So porous is our vessel that it seems that it does not contain the gracious water of life for even a moment. We are always hungering and thirsting for more.

Paul instructed:

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. I Tim 3:15

In Paul's epistles he often gave clear instructions on Christian life. So, also in our day the Holy Spirit gives us instructions on matters that come before the congregation of God. These are such things that pertain to the righteousness of life and the preservation of faith. Following the exhortations regarding the endeavor and the many other instructions will save no one. Rather they exist for the purpose that no one would lose living faith.

Each child of God is responsible for his actions at his own place of watching. We are all building this house of God. Of course we want to remain in the mutual love and understanding of the congregation. When we review such decisions as television, sports, Halloween and entertainment videos, it is easy to rationalize some specific aspect on each of them. Naturally, asking and seeking for understanding is not wrong. When we ask in a spirit of childlikeness then God can bless. If God does not give understanding, we must be content with what he gives. It is important to remember that the carnal mind is enmity against God. Rationalizing leaves no room for faith and is dangerous. Those that do so endanger their own life of faith and perhaps the faith of their children as well. It is better for the sake of mutual love that we humble ourselves to the will of God as the Spirit reveals it in the congregation. We should ask ourselves, who am I to resist the understanding of the Spirit in the congregation of God. If we do not understand something, in humble obedience we can ask God to reveal it onto us. It is important to understand that the work of the Holy Spirit in the congregation of God is to give birth to faith and to preserve faith. The gospel nourishes and refreshes faith. It keeps us on the narrow way of life. It keeps us in the righteousness of faith so that we will one day attain eternal life in heaven.

When we err, we have an altar of grace to come to where we can wash away the defilement and errors of sin.

The Security of a Child of God

The child of God has a wonderful place of refuge in this evil world.

For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. Rom. 14:17

The children of God battle a three-fold enemy. The work of building must continue while we are in battle. That is why it is often so exhausting. The weapons of warfare are in one hand and the tools of building in the other. But, even under such tiring conditions, it is good to be in battle on the side of the Lord. It is good to build the house of the Lord. Even if we tire in battle or err in our building, the congregational mother takes care of us. As the prophet experienced, we find the error to be in us, not in the congregation. It is pure gold.

And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep, And said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps, which are upon the top thereof: And two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl, and the other upon the left side thereof.

So I answered and spake to the angel that talked with me, saying, What are these, my lord? Then the angel that talked with me answered and said unto me, Knowest thou not what these be? And I said, No, my lord. Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.

Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain: and he shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it. Zech. 4:1-7

The work of the kingdom will go forth and succeed. Your own salvation is assured. It is not because of personal might or understanding, nor because of any earthly power but because the Spirit of God dwells in your heart by faith and is in the kingdom of God as a live and guiding spirit.