

Pako Evening Service: 18/09/2016

Scripture Readings: Acts 3:1-16; Eph 1:1-14; Sermon: "We're called"

Congregation, one of the things that seem to be a stumbling block for non-Christians to embrace the Christian faith is the number of different churches in society. Inevitably the question comes up, "Why the Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Uniting, Reformed, AOG, City on a hill church and many others?" Well, before we become too parochial about the Reformed churches, the short the answer is that Jesus uses them all to build the universal church! And that is why we need to be very careful about tearing down and criticising other denominations.

I once attended a Christian men's breakfast where a guest speaker did nothing else but tear down and criticize what was wrong with another denomination. In fact, this speaker irritated me to such an extent that after listening for a while I quietly raised my hand. He eventually noticed and giving me the opportunity to speak, I asked, "Sir, don't you think there are any Christians in that denomination?" And he answered after gathering his thoughts, "Yes, there probably are." I then said to him, "Then surely they are precious in God's sight for His Son gave his life for them and since that is the case we should be very careful what we say!" For the truth of the matter is, that Jesus uses many denominations to build the 'one holy catholic.'

Interestingly, someone asked me recently why we recite that line in the Apostles' Creed that states we believe in the one "holy catholic church." Well, I must confess, when I was a child, I didn't understand this phrase either. My parents were quick to tell me that I wasn't a Roman Catholic, but a protestant. Strange! On the forms that asked what religion you were at school we wrote down 'protestant.' We didn't say Catholic - for that was a no, no. And we didn't say reformed, for that didn't mean all that much either! Protestant that's what we were first and we were proud of it!

Oh, just in case you are confused about the phrase, "one Holy Catholic Church", we understand that to mean we believe that the church is universal! Wherever God's elect people are gathered, there is the church. The church is the bride of Christ, and is made up of Christians from all over the world and from many different denominations. There used to be joke that there was only reformed people in heaven, but that is wearing thin, so I wont go there.

Now some of you may be chuckling at this, but we're not all Christians are on the same page here. Once I did a sermon on John 6:37, and someone came and said, "John, I appreciate what you were trying to say, that who ever the Father draws will come and that Jesus will never drive them away, but if people are truly Christians, then they should join the Reformed Church for we are the only true church!"

Now that particular person was extremely serious and meant every word he said. Well sometimes you can be extremely, seriously, wrong! When it is all said and done, membership of the one universal church of Jesus Christ is really the only membership that counts and lasts. That does not mean that our membership to our local church has become obsolete or unimportant. Not at all! However, we are first members of the universal church of Jesus Christ. We first belong to Jesus Christ and then we belong to the local church as it gives expression to that membership.

So let's be thankful that the Lord uses many churches and denominations to save his people. Heaven is going to have Christians from all churches, nations, tribes and languages (Rev 7:9ff). When we profess that we believe in the "one holy catholic church" we are actually stating our faith that says Jesus is building his universal church. But that leaves a question. What is required to be a member of the universal Church? Well, let's start at the beginning. You need to be among that number that the Father has chosen before the foundations of the world were put in place to be his special people, his called out ones!

And then secondly, you have to be the recipient of God's amazing grace in your life so that you will respond positively to the Holy Spirit's call on your life to run to God's Son as your Saviour. The Holy Spirit needs to change your mind set, your will if you prefer, from resentment towards Jesus Christ to lovingly embrace him as your Saviour and Lord. That means believing Jesus in the Son of God, and that He brought the church into existence when He gave his perfect and sinless life as a sacrifice on the cross for her and rose victoriously from the dead.

If any of those elements are missing, you would not be saved and you would not truly be a living member of the church. You may be regarded as a member of a local church, but not the true church universal. There is a difference you know. Some people love to be part of a church family. Good fellowship, cared for when you're not doing too well; a place where you can get some warm fuzzies and so on. But that doesn't mean your part of the true, universal church. People who do not really believe in who Jesus is and what he did, are not part of the true church.

Thankfully, Jesus continues building his church through the work of his Word and Holy Spirit. That is what is so encouraging about new members joining the church. It's not because we are all so nice and loving and thereby reflect our Christian faith in action, but what builds the church is the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ and to him must go the glory! And I wish to stress that for today there is so much stress on church growth and church planting that we tend to forget that Jesus builds his church through his Word and Spirit. It is not John Zuidema or the Church Council, or any other human invention or program that builds the church. Sometimes we forget that! That doesn't mean we cannot do things to make the church more welcoming and friendly, but ultimately, real spiritual growth can only come by Jesus building his church.

I know of vacant churches who will only call a particular minister if that minister has been responsible for church growth in his current congregation. And sometimes even ministers need reminding, that it is the Lord who builds his church and not in the first place programs or worship styles or other growth techniques. Hardly a week goes past without me receiving some invitation to attend a seminar about 'growing a church' or 'training church planters' or 'empowering leadership' to build your church. Oh I know these people have good intentions, and yes God uses people and programs, but first we need to realize that Jesus builds his church and without his blessing we labour in vain (Psalm 127).

When the Apostle Peter made that wonderful confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus didn't say to Peter, "Now go and build my church!" He didn't say that, on the contrary he said, "I will build my church!" Even when Jesus restored Peter in John 21, Jesus doesn't, "Now go and build my church." No, what he says is, "Go and feed my sheep." In other words, I will build the church, just go and feed my sheep. We have lost the emphasis somewhat. When Peter healed the crippled beggar in Acts 3 people came running from everywhere. But Peter says to them, "Don't stare at us, the person who was really at work here was Jesus Christ."

Similarly, when we read about the great missionary's achievements in Acts, or in the world today, we should not just look at the missionaries, we should be thinking, that is the kind of Lord who is building the church. When we look with the eyes of faith you will see that, "the Son of God...gathers, protects and preserves for Himself, by his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, a community chosen for eternal life – the church! This glorious truth that you and I have been chosen by God, and gathered by the Son of God for eternal life, even before the foundations of the earth were laid, should cause us to leap and jump for joy, like the crippled beggar in Acts 3.

Do you see? The work of conversion and bringing people to faith is the Lord's work. It's when God's Holy Spirit makes a person's heart receptive to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. And true believers today and true believers that lived in the past belong to the 'holy catholic church.' All are chosen by God and gathered by Christ into the holy Catholic, universal Church!

Now the emphasis is on true believers! People who gather together for worship but do not recognise Jesus as God's Son and Saviour and that He rose victoriously from the dead cannot call themselves the church! They are either cults or sects, but not the church! Now the question could be asked, "If we are members of the universal [catholic] Church, why join a local church?" Sometimes people piously say to you that they belong to the universal church and are not particular fussed in which church they have their earthly membership.

But this argument is flawed and is really a false dichotomy. I am convinced, that belonging to the Christian Reformed Church of Geelong and belonging to the holy Catholic [universal] Church is one of the same. We should not try and drive a wedge between them. Your membership of the Christian Reformed Church of Geelong allows you to give shape to your membership in the universal Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Head of the universal church, but also head of this church.

What Jesus commands must be done and what he speaks must be said, and his promises must be preached and his gospel proclaimed, not only in the universal church but also in the local church. And the Christian Reformed Church of Geelong is in the business of being obedient to Jesus our head. And hopefully, in all our weaknesses, we are striving continually to become more like the church that Jesus Christ wants us to be so that we will reflect a holy Catholic Church.

Now let us not forget what Ephesians 1:3-5 states that Christ gathers the elect of God. We do not enjoy the privileges of church membership because we are qualified, but because the Father has graciously chosen us even before the foundations of the earth were laid. Just imagine if church membership depended on our qualifications. We could set all sorts of conditions, from a correct 'spiritual' level and experiences, to the right I.Q, or even to the right works, dress or whatever else you would like to add.

Thankfully, our membership is a matter of God's gracious election. We become members because God chose us, sent his Son to die for us to pay for our sins, and the Holy Spirit quickens us to new life and membership! We are not members because we are so lovable or because we have been born on the right side of the tracks or have the right genes! A church that doesn't teach God's election cannot continue to teach sovereign grace. For if we are saved by anything else other than God's choice then we are not saved by grace.

And because we know from God's word that God has chosen us and saved us in Christ, given us his Holy Spirit we may know that he protects us against the evil one until we reach eternal life! Despite our weaknesses, He protects us till we join the church triumphant.

Where does missions come into this scheme? Well, Scripture doesn't teach that we should all become hyper Calvinistic, by that I mean open the doors at the back and if people walk in good and if they don't tough. It's not like that, for Jesus has called his church to be active and to make disciples in thankfulness. For when we are thankful we become active and we become visible! And remember, wherever the true church is visible, Christ has lit the light and as a living member we wish to show the light all around!

And hence we have a huge responsibility. We are to be obedient to the great commission. We are to use our God given resources well. We are to pray together, read the Scriptures together, and teach one another. And yes, we can make use of various programs and outreach tools, but it will always remain the church of Jesus Christ, for he builds.

So whatever you do, don't rob the Lord of his glory, thinking that you have to build the church. Yes, you are an instrument, but the Lord builds his church and he has been doing so from the time of Pentecost and beyond. Congregation, Jesus is building his church and we are pleased and humbled to be part of it. And we pray daily that he will bless this local church as it strives to be an active member of the universal church, to His glory and to the benefit of the called out ones. Amen.