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THE CHURCH WON'T GO TO HELL- BUT CLERICS WILL!

Today's Bible Text: Matt. Chap. 16

Extracts:

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I the Son of Man am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus answered, and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for *flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but My Father who is in heaven*. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and *on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it*" [Matt. 16: 13-19]

On Sunday, 31 May 2009, a gun man entered a Reformation Lutheran Church in Kansas, USA, during service and shot to death one of its ushers, Dr. George Tiller who was nationally known for performing late-term abortions in his clinic.¹ A few days later, a Kentucky pastor of New Bethel Church, invited his flock to bring guns to church, ostensibly to mark America's next Independence Day, July 4th!

In respect of the first story, some people have expressed sympathy for the loss of life but wondered how that church had seemed to turn a blind eye to the doctor's medical practice that flew in the face of the Christian doctrine on the sanctity of human life. On the second story, some people believe that a church does not need human weapons for the protection of its members if in deed it was under God's protection. In both cases, the blame is hardly on the church of Christ but on the judgment and choices of their pastors/clerics.

When a church has spiritual problems, who will go to hell for it- the church or its clerics? That is the subject we shall examine in this week's study.

¹ Story based on the following sources: George Tiller killed: Abortion doctor killed at church, AP/Huffington Post, 05-31-2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/31/george-tiller-killed-abor_n_209504.html ; and Dylan T. Lovan, "Ky. Pastor asks members to bring guns to church," Salon.com/News Wires, Jun. 4th, 2009; www.salon.com/wires/ap/us/2009/06/04/D98K30U01_us_guns_in_church/html

1. Background: Jesus reveals the Church

Even after the Pharisees and the Sadducees had seen Jesus heal the daughter of the Canaanite woman and feed four thousand men (besides women and children) with only seven loaves of bread and a few little fish [Matt. 15: 21-39], they still challenged Him to show them a sign from heaven. He refused. Instead, He drew their attention to a story they were already familiar with, the sign of Prophet Jonah in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights. He called them “a wicked and adulterous generation,” warning His disciples to beware of their doctrine (of hypocrisy) [Matt. 16: 1-2]. In deed, Jesus was troubled by the lack of faith exhibited by those He had encountered, even including His disciples who had as yet not perceived nor understood His divine mission.

That was the setting when Jesus came with His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi on the Mediterranean Sea north of Joppa. He asked them who men said that He was. They replied that people saw Him as a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or any other one [vv. 13-14]. That should not surprise you because even today, many people, including some Christians, see Jesus as a great teacher in the category of Muhammad or Buddha or Confucius. His own people in Galilee saw Him simply as the son of the carpenter [Matt. 13: 55].

Jesus then turned to His disciples, those that had been close to Him for three years, those who had seen the signs and wonders that He had performed. Of course, He was not the first miracle worker in Israel. Yes, He raised people from the dead, so did Elijah [1 Kgs 17: 19-24] and Elisha [2 Kgs 4: 32-36]. He miraculously fed people with a few loaves of bread, so did Elisha feed one hundred men with twenty loaves of barley bread [vv. 42-43]. Therefore, He would not be surprised if His disciples answered Him the same way as the people had presumed about Him. However, to His pleasant surprise, Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” [Matt. 16: 16].

That was a profound confession and Jesus immediately recognized that it did not come from Peter’s “flesh and blood” but that it had been a revelation from His Father in heaven [v.17]. Therefore, it was also an opportune moment for Jesus to reveal His church. He told Peter [vv. 18-19]:

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

The word, church, comes from the Greek word, *ekklésia*, which means “the called out ones.” That suggests that Christ’s church had been under construction for much earlier than when it was revealed to the disciples. For example, Abraham and his family were the first group of people that God called out to go and establish a holy nation in Canaan [Gen. 12: 1-3]. Abraham’s descendants that

were enslaved in Egypt were in due course “called out” of there under the leadership of Moses.² Stephen, one of the seven deacons stoned to death in the early days of the post-Pentecost era, spoke of the children of Israel coming out of Egypt as “the church in the wilderness” [Acts 7: 38]. Just as the called out ones are expected to become born-again, by receiving water and Holy Spirit baptism [Matt. 28:19; Jn 3: 3, 5], so were the children of Israel in the wilderness for “all were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” [1 Cor. 10: 2].

2. The building blocks of Christ’s church

Let us pay attention to two critical declarations made by the Lord, namely:

a) *The church is built on “this rock”*

We can look at this from its ordinary meaning and its spiritual meaning. Some people arrogate “this rock” to Peter. In that sense, Christ has built His church on Peter and his successors, leaders of the early church and beyond. However, soon after the event that we are discussing, Jesus revealed to His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and the chief priests and scribes, and thereafter be killed. However, He would be raised from the dead on the third day [Matt. 16: 22]. Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God and the things of men” [v. 23]. How could the rock on which Jesus would build His church be called Satan a few minutes later? Therefore, the rock here is referring to something beyond a human being. We know historically that building Christ’s church on human beings has bred controversies, leading to the multiplicity of denominations that we have today.

The word of God says that “no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, *which is Jesus Christ*” [1 Cor. 3: 11]. We are also told that the rock that Moses struck in the wilderness to provide water for the children of Israel was a spiritual rock “and that Rock was Christ” [1 Cor. 10: 3]. If the church is the body of Christ [1 Cor. 12: 27; Eph. 1: 22-23] of which Jesus is the head, then that body has to be anchored on a spiritual platform. Therefore, the rock in Christ’s statement does not refer to Peter (or *petrus*), a masculine word, but to the rock (*petra*), a feminine word. So, *the rock in Christ’s statement refers to Peter’s faith in Him, the kind He expected of all members of His church*. It was spiritual and it came to Peter from His Father in heaven. Without faith, it is impossible to please God [Heb. 11: 6], and only those who have received Jesus (as Lord and Saviour) have the right to be called children of God [Jn 1: 12].

² This section is based on “Let’s Go To Church,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 5 No. 24: 5 Sept. 2004; pp.2-4

b) *The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church!*

God has given His only begotten Son “to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” **[Eph. 1: 21-22]**. Therefore, the collectivity of all true believers (that is, those who believe in and fear Him) makes up the church, “the body of Christ and members individually” **[1 Cor. 12: 27]**. So, no matter where true believers worship, we all recite the same Apostles’ Creed and belong to “one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all” **[Eph. 4: 4-6]**.

A church of that type cannot be destroyed by Satan and his wicked forces. Such a church is a school where you learn the word of God **[1 Sam. 2: 11, 18, 26; Lk 2: 46]**, a gas station where you replenish your spiritual gas tank **[1 Sam. 19: 23]**, a hospital where the sick are healed **[Ex. 15: 22-26; Mk 1: 22-25; Jam.5: 14-15]**, and a sanctuary where you can seek rest and peace of mind **[Ps. 27: 4]**. That is why the church has apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers that God has placed there “for the equipping of the saints, for the work of the ministry (and) for the edifying of the body of Christ **[Eph. 4: 11-12]**.”

As long as we are under that body of Christ, Satan cannot prevail against us. He will try, as he did to Peter, soon after he had confessed the divinity of Jesus (discussed earlier) and when he caused Peter to deny Jesus three times during His trial. In the end, Peter prevailed. After the descent of the Holy Spirit on him, Peter became bold and when his adversaries “saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled (and) realized that they had been with Jesus” **[Acts 4: 8, 13]**.

From the forgoing, we can conclude that the problem is not with the church but with the people who lead specific congregations and those who condone their excesses. Let us go more deeply into the matter.

2. Clerics are something else!

Jesus told His disciples, “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” **[Matt. 18: 20]**. Some clerics have taken that statement quite literally! So, today, you have churches of all shapes and sizes, ranging from the Catholic Church with over a billion members to family chapels with exotic names! No matter its size, location or claims, we can discern the following types of churches today:

a) *The commercial enterprise*

In this type of church, the owner/founder is actually taking advantage of the tax shelters enjoyed by religious organizations in most countries to run a tax-free business enterprise. . Such churches may have beautiful buildings, attract church-goers (not necessarily worshippers) and provide shelters to those doing shady deals in government or the private sector. They attract sorcerers and diviners who have the chance to exchange the more attractive titles of “pastor” or “prophet” for “fetish priest” or “magician” respectively! But for the power of the Holy Spirit in Paul, the girl that prophesied with the spirit of divination could easily have been given a prominent place in any church lusting after money [**Acts 16: 16**]. Jesus rebuked the church of Thyatira for allowing a woman with a Jezebel spirit that called herself a prophetess “to teach and seduce (God’s servants) to commit sexual immorality, and eat things sacrificed to idols” [**Rev. 2: 18-20**].

b) *The convenient church*

Some churches “specialize” in a few issues of morality as if other aspects of spirituality do not matter. For example, the same church that vehemently condemns same-sex marriage or abortion does not condemn fornication, adultery or divorce among its members. The church that elevates one particular spiritual gift frowns at other gifts of the Holy Spirit exhibited elsewhere. The word of God is quite clear. If you are guilty in one sin, you are guilty in all [**Jam. 2: 8-10**]. You are either hot or cold but if you are lukewarm, God will spew you out of His mouth [**Rev. 3: 15-16**].

c) *The backslidden church*

The convenient church can easily become backslidden where the church has conformed to the standards of the world. When you begin to hear of gay ministers and congregations for the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) community, you then wonder what Bible they read there! Recently, a group of clerics in a Protestant church vowed that they would no longer officiate at marriages unless same-sex marriages were also permitted to be solemnized there. It is such churches that God gives up as reprobate and “those who do such things are deserving of death, not only (for doing) the same but also approve of those who practise them” [**Rom. 1: 26-32**].

d) *The fruitful church*

The fruitful church exhibits the fruit of the Holy Spirit- “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness (and) self-control” [**Gal. 5: 22-23**]. They enjoy rest and are edified, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they are

multiplied [Acts 9: 31]. The early church demonstrated such qualities under the leadership of the apostles [Acts 2: 41-47].

Clearly, the character of a congregation is influenced to a large extent by the integrity (or lack of it) of its leaders, the clergy. That was why God held Eli the priest responsible for the moral tone of the house of God at Shiloh. Young Samuel was being raised there. Yet, Eli's sons "lay with the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle of meeting" [1 Sam. 2: 22]. God sent a prophet to warn him to check his sons' excesses, saying, "Those who honour Me, I will honour, and those who despise Me shall be lightly esteemed" [vv. 27- 30]. Eli apparently did nothing about it and his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, died in one day [1 Sam. 4: 17]. In the same house of God, Samuel grew in stature, and in favour both with the Lord and men" [v. 26] and he became an established prophet of God and the Lord "let none of his words fall to the ground" [1 Sam. 3: 19]. Samuel was not punished. When the Philistines defeated Israel and seized the Ark of God, the Lord defended His own integrity when He unleashed a plague of boils on the Philistines. In the end, they were forced to return the Ark to Israel *voluntarily* and with trespass offerings to match. But Eli's family lost the priesthood forever [1 Sam. Chaps. 4-6]!

3. Conclusion: The church will not go to hell!

The church, as the body of Christ, cannot go to hell. It is made up of those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life [Rev. 20: 15] but "the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and *all liars* shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone" [Rev. 21: 8]. Therefore, no matter in which congregation you find yourself, always remember that the just shall live by his faith [Hab. 2: 4; Rom. 1: 17]. The soul that sins shall die [Ezek. 18: 4]. So, look up to Jesus, not your pastors, priests, bishops, evangelists, or whatever they call members of the clergy who hold leadership positions in your church. Why should you accompany others to hell?

The church of Christ will never go to hell. Bad clerics and their followers will!