

BIBLE TEACHING SERIES - 'I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH – Jesus CHAPTER TWO - PREPARATION FOR THE BEGINNING

Introduction

In chapter one of this Bible teaching series we saw that the church is not a man made organism, but is a God-ordained and God-constructed entity. Jesus said that He would build His church. When things go wrong in a church, whether it be hypocrisies, greed for money, the veneration of leaders to the point of idolatry, division, or any number of other failures, the reasons are never God-based. Failure is always caused by human disobedience, sin, and human based ideas and practices that are contrary to the Bible.

To ensure success in the church today it is imperative that we study the life-principles of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts. Most of this study series is based on this book.

Acts chapter one takes place after the resurrection of Jesus and before the Day of Pentecost, a 50-day period. It begins with words that Jesus spoke to His followers prior to His ascension. There are five key areas to consider.

First, Jesus Appeared

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days. Acts 1:1-3

First, and foremost, the church began with personal encounters with Jesus the risen Christ, (note: "he presented himself"). The church is not just a religion among many others in the world. Instead, the church is made up of people who know Jesus personally. We don't have the benefit that early believers had with actual physical appearances of Jesus. Nevertheless, Holy Spirit awakens individual consciousness to His presence and many come to faith as a result.

Personal relationship with Jesus through prayer, Bible reading and connectedness with others in the Body of Christ, His church, is paramount in importance. The church's practice of worship, teaching of the Word, prayer and mission are designed to offer praise and worship to Jesus, and in turn experience His presence. A modern term one hears today is "presence-based worship". It is a good term.

God calls every believer to a daily and growing relationship with Jesus. He calls the church to similar corporate experiences as those who are "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...(Eph 2:19).

When Jesus appeared He gave infallible, convincing proofs of His resurrection. He does the same today in the most personal and wonderful ways. Have you had such encounters with Jesus?

Second - Instructions (commandments)

....after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen
Acts 1:2

We cannot stress too strongly the importance of understanding that the church is not built on subjective human oriented ideas or direction. The church must be built on the commandments of God found in His Word. Some say that since Jesus came the commandments are no longer in force - that we are no longer under law but under grace.

However, Jesus said that He did not come to abolish the Law, He came to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). The wonderful truth is that through the empowering grace of God, we can live lives that are consistent with all the commands of God since we are more than over-comers through Jesus. (Romans 8:31-32)

As an example, to demonstrate that God's commandments in the Old Testament are valid today, consider the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:1-20 with similar New Testament counterparts

COMMANDMENT-1 Have no other Gods before me. Matt:4-10, Matt:6:24

COMMANDMENT- 2 Don't worship idols. 1Cor:10:7. 1 Cor.10-14, 1John 5:21

COMMANDMENT- 3 Don't take the Lords Name in vain Matt:6:9, Phil 2:9-11

COMMANDMENT- 4 Remember the Sabbath to keep it Holy. Heb. 10:16-31

COMMANDMENT-5 Honour your father and mother. Eph. 6:1-3

COMMANDMENT-6 You shall not murder. 1 Jn. 3:10-16, 1 Peter 4:15

COMMANDMENT-7 You shall not commit adultery. Heb:13:4, 1 Thess. 4:3-8

COMMANDMENT- 8 You shall not steal. Eph.4:28

COMMANDMENT-9 You shall not lie. Eph. 4: 25-27, Col.3:9-10, Rev. 21:8

COMMANDMENT-10 You shall not covet. Eph:5:3-7, Heb: 13:5

Both the commandments of God in the Old Testament, the instructions of Jesus in the New Testament and all the New Testament books, are valid today. A church must be diligent in its pursuit of Bible knowledge and give the greatest attention to obeying it. Churches that do otherwise devolve into things like legalism, traditionalism, false doctrine, immorality, and idolatry. Many churches close.

When it comes to Old Testament commands, it is important to distinguish between moral laws and ceremonial laws. Ceremonial laws had to do with sacrifice and worship instructions. When Jesus came, ceremonial laws ended. No longer do we offer animal sacrifices for sin or observe the associated religious rites. Jesus is the Lamb of God, He is our Passover. (More on this in a future chapter.)

Third, The Kingdom of God

He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. Acts 1:3

The "kingdom of God", also translated, "the kingdom of heaven" is a major theme of the teachings of Jesus. He taught that the Kingdom exists in both present and future states. There are several topics found throughout the Bible that describe both states. I will mention two in this study that apply to this present age.

First, the kingdom of God exists in contrast to and opposed to the "world". 1 John 2:15-17 states:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

These are strong words indeed. Use of the word "world" in the New Testament usually indicates an order of things that are evil. These are organized systems under Satan, who uses unbelieving people who are opposed to God and His church. (1 John: 5:19). Jesus spoke of the world hating both Him and those who follow Him. The world operates on the basis of ungodly thoughts, feelings, attitudes, motives and goals. It does not seek to promote God's glory or to recognize the lordship of Jesus.

In the prayer of Jesus for the church in John 17: 6-19 we read:

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. 7 Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. 8 For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. 9 I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. 10 All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. 11 I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. 12 While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by [that name you gave me]. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

13 "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. 14 I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. 15 My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. 17 Sanctify them by [d] the truth; your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. 19 For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

Jesus was literally "in the world" physically, while at the same time was never a part of the evil that is in the world. He was here on a mission - to win the world. We are here on the same mission. Our life's purpose and greatest joys are not found in the things of the world - they are found in fulfilling our callings in God's kingdom through the church.

Second, the kingdom of God stands in sharp contrast to the political systems of this world. This has created several debates among Christians as to how we are to relate to politics, politicians and governments of the world in general.

At the time of Jesus, and later during the life of the early church, the Roman Empire dominated a vast portion of the civilized world. The Roman Empire and its impact on Christianity and its beliefs were enormous. Rome carried out ten waves of persecution against Christians, the first of these began by Emperor Nero in 67 A.D. He instigated the torture and death of believers, many times as sport, in order to deflect criticism of himself. During this first purge, the apostles Paul and Peter died a martyr's death. The tenth and last of these persecutions began under Diocletian (284 to 305 A.D.). All during

this period, in spite of the concentrated efforts to stamp out God's truth through the martyrdom of countless saints, believers in Jesus continued to multiply. The persecutions by the state finally ended in 313 A.D. when Constantine, in his Edict of Milan, legalized Christianity and ended the violence.

The response of Jesus and the early church to Roman authority was truly amazing. Jesus never criticized the Roman government and even gave honour to Caesar. In Mark 12: 13-17 we read:

Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴ They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵ Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." ¹⁶ They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

Jesus never taught His followers to practice violence or attempt political overthrow. He never showed hatred towards the Romans or spoke evil of them. One Roman law required subjects to carry a Roman soldier's armour for a mile if commanded to do so. Jesus taught His followers to not only carry the equipment for the required distance but to offer to go a second mile, thus blessing the soldier.

As persecution against the church increased, there is no record in the New Testament where the church took up any political crusade. To the contrary, Paul wrote:

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— ²for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. 1 Timothy 2:1-4

Roman authorities were notorious for killing Christians by feeding them to lions, crucifying them or impaling them. To pray for, make intercession for, and give thanks for such people would go against every natural human instinct.

Just as Jesus taught the way of peace so too did Paul and other New Testament writers. Unlike the Old Testament, the New Testament clearly teaches that the kingdom of God is not advanced by violence or war.

What has emerged as an important issue for many Christians is whether-or-not the use of force is ever legitimate. A group known as Anabaptists are strong pacifists. They will not fight in a war or believe that Christians should be police officers for that means carrying a gun. Today, Anabaptists are mostly found in Mennonite and Brethren groups. They are not to be confused with most Baptist groups. During past wars countries such as Canada practiced conscription, meaning that men of age were required to enlist in the military. Anabaptists were excused based on what was termed "conscientious objection".

So, if Jesus taught the way of peace, is military service for Christians forbidden or is it legitimate?

To answer this it is critical that we understand the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. At the return of Christ the Bible, in Revelation 11:15 states:

The seventh angel sounded his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, which said:

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

It is very important to understand the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. (Some translations use "kingdoms of this world", or "powers of this world".) There will come a day when all worldly kingdoms, powers, authorities and political systems will end. The kingdom of God alone will remain and endure in both heaven and earth.

In the meantime, since we live in the world, we have responsibilities to the world. This should never be at the expense of living under the precepts of the kingdom of God or the lordship of Jesus.

In the Old Testament, God enacted moral laws designed to manage sin. When it comes to the New Testament, God did not abandon this principle. The Bible states:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. Romans 13:1-7

In civil society punishment against wrongdoers involves force and in some instances, deadly force. Note the expression, "Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason" (v.4).

Notice that those with authority in the Roman Empire were referred to as God's servants. Thus, it stands to reason that becoming a police officer or being in the military is God ordained.

In the "kingdoms of the world", sin and evil abound. God cares about the many victims of crime, abuse, violence, bullying, war and every other form of

evil human aggression. Civil and criminal laws are designed to manage sin and evil. When those laws are just and right they should be obeyed and leaders should be honoured.

The Romans were cruel, tyrannical and murderous but they were the ones that the above text was referring to. So, why did God tell believers in those days to submit to them? The reason is that many of their laws were designed to keep people safe, to make for peace, and to establish a just society. It was only when attempts to force Christians to renounce their faith in Jesus and declare that Caesar was Lord that resistance was justified. Such resistance was to be non-violent and peaceful.

Civil governments today are often fraught with corruption, greed, immorality and partisanship. At the same time there are many honest and good politicians and others in authority and many good laws are enacted and enforced.

Christians should be involved in politics and seek for change when needed. However, we should never abandon to greater principles of the kingdom of God in order to affect change. Love, joy and peace are the essential elements of the kingdom of God and must always be our motive and modus operandi - as those who are in the world but not of it.

Fourth, Holy Spirit Baptism

. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:5

Giving the Holy Spirit His rightful place in both the church and in the world was a key directive Jesus gave the early apostles. (More will be said about this in future chapters.)

Fifth, Restoring the kingdom

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. Acts 1:6-7

The followers of Jesus were fixated on an immediate earthly expression of the kingdom of God as it related to their national identity. Jesus did not nullify the legitimacy of their desires. Instead, He directed their focus onto the mission of the church to reach the world today. This should always be our primary concern.