

The Doctrine of the Church in Hebrews

Although the word *ekklesia* (church, assembly or congregation) appears only twice in the epistle to the Hebrews (2:12; 12:23), the letter is not without significant material that contributes to our understanding of the church. We must look more widely than mere word studies to associated ideas and how the doctrine of the church connects to the other loci such as Christology, soteriology and eschatology.

The letter enhances our vision of the church by showing us the New Testament church in relation to the Old Covenant people of God, Christ, one another, and the eschatological people of God.

The relationship of the OT people of God to the NT church

Hebrews shows both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Testament people of God.

The Old Testament saints are the *paterej* (fathers) of New Testament believers (1:1; 3:9) and provide a witness to the life of faith (12:1).

It is the church, “the seed of Abraham”, rather than angels, whom the incarnate Christ helps (2:16). Although in the order of creation, angels are superior to human beings, in

the order of redemption the church is superior to angels as they are ministering spirits sent to aid those who will inherit salvation.

The Spirit speaks the Old Testament Scriptures to the New Testament church in the present (3:7). Both the Old and New Testament people of God have had the gospel preached to them, are urged to combine it with faith (4:2) and warned of the dreadful consequences of unbelief, which many in Israel exemplified (3:7-19).

There is continuity too in the goal of the pilgrim people of God in both Old and New Testaments. The hope of New Testament believers is described in terms drawn from the Old Testament, such as the eschatological Sabbath day rest (4:1-11). The Old Testament believers were looking not only to an earthly fulfillment of the promises to Abraham (6:13-17), but, like the New Testament church, they “were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.” (11:16) Jesus will bring many sons to glory (2:10) who will enjoy the inheritance (9:15; 11:8) of riches in Christ.

The household of God is a prominent metaphor for both the Old (8:8,10) and New Covenant (10:21) church in the epistle. Moses was a faithful servant over God’s house, but Christ was faithful as a son over that house (3:6). This chimes with the familial language of the epistle where Jesus is described as the brother (2:11f, 17) and God as the father (12:6-11) of believers, whom the writer often addresses as “brothers”.

Yet the church in this age lives under a superior covenant to that experienced by the Old Testament church (8:6). Believers are now perfected in a way that Old Testament believers were not (10:1) and are able to draw near to God with a new confidence (10:19-25). Members of the New Testament church have the covenant written on their hearts (10:16).

It is striking that much of the language of the Old Testament cult is transferred not directly to the New Testament church, but to Christ. There is no special caste of priests within the New Testament church but Jesus himself is the great High Priest who fulfills the types of the Old Testament. The writer is at pains to show that the Levitical order was only ever provisional and contained within itself signs of its own inadequacy. For example, the Old Testament sacrifices had to be repeated, forming a constant reminder of sin and showing that no ultimate solution had yet been provided (10:1-3). Under this better covenant, Jesus is a sinless (7:26f) High Priest forever (6:20; 7:3, 16f, 21), whereas in the Old Testament church the priests had to offer for their own sins, died and had to be replaced. Every believer now has access to the throne of grace (4:16), whereas under the Old Covenant only the priests had a limited access to the Holy Place in the earthly sanctuary. The church depends on the once for all sacrifice of Christ and under the New Covenant offers no sacrifice except the “sacrifice of praise” (13:15).

The relationship of the church to Christ

The writer to the Hebrews sees believers constituted members of the church by their faith-relationship to Christ. The church is made up of Jesus' brothers (2:12); note the use of *evklhsi,a* in verse 12. It is emphasized in that the church consists of men and not angels, hence the necessity of Christ's becoming a man (chapters 1 and 2). The church's members are those who are sanctified and perfected and draw near to God through Christ's saving work. Christ continues to intercede for his church (7:25).

Christ himself is said to sing God's praise in the midst of the *evklhsi,a* in 2:12 quoting Psalm 22:22, which uses the Hebrew *qahal lh'äq'*, which refers to the cultic festival gathering. This seems to look forward to the final heavenly gathering of the people of God. We might even say that Jesus is the true worship leader!

The relationship of visible and invisible church

Hebrews appears to describe a group of believers who have experienced many of the privileges of being Christians: they "have been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, have shared in the Holy Spirit, have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come" (6:4-5) and they have "received a knowledge of the truth" and "have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant" (10:26-29). Yet they are in danger of falling away, such that it is impossible for them to repent, and ultimately being lost.

Nevertheless, it is the clear teaching of the New Testament that all true believers will persevere to the end and that it is impossible for a genuine believer to lose his salvation (John 10:28; Romans 8:30, 39; Philippians 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5).

Unless we suppose that the writer to the Hebrews is speaking of a necessarily empty set (genuine believers who fall away, though there can be no such people), it seems best to conclude that those spoken of were never true believers. We should therefore think of the epistle to the Hebrews as addressed to a visible church or churches which contain a mixture of believers and unbelievers. It is only the true believers who are members of the invisible church and enjoy all the lasting, inner blessings of covenant membership. Those who are in danger of apostasy are members only of the visible church and the covenant in its objective aspect. Though they are not members of the invisible church, they enjoy some of the blessings of association with the people of God for a time.

This reading allows the warning passages to be given a genuine force. The recipients of the letter must continue to trust in Christ and not draw back, thus showing themselves to be genuine believers. Those who ultimately reject Christ show that they had never fully received him and face judgement.

Relationships within the church

Hebrews also gives insights into relationships within the church.

The writer to the Hebrews has no notion of a privatized Christianity. As the prominent second person plural imperatives and first person plural subjunctives demonstrate, the Christian life is lived out in fellowship with other believers. The church addressed had experienced something of this fellowship as they stood together in the face of persecution (10:32-34). In 13:1 the church is urged to continue in brotherly love. Christians are to exhort one another daily (3:13; 10:25) and, even more strikingly, as they are to “consider Christ” (3:1), so also they are told to “consider one another” (10:24). Mutual edification is given as the reason for Christians meeting together.

Hebrews thus suggests a model of every member ministry, but this does not mean that the church lacks structure. 2:3-4 seem to speak of a foundational ministry of those who heard the Lord, presumably in particular the apostles, which was confirmed by signs and wonders. Even at the early date of this letter, which was probably written before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, 13:7, 17 suggest a recognized leadership who teach the Word and have authority in the congregation.

13:15 suggests something of the worshipping life of the church as the author exhorts the readers to join with him in “continually offering to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name.” The successive verse makes it clear that for the writer to the Hebrews, worship is a matter of life as well as of lip since he says: “And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

The Epistle to the Hebrews makes little mention of the sacraments. The mysterious reference to “baptisms” in 6:2 may be a reference to ceremonial washings.

Although the Reformers debated whether or not discipline is a proper mark of the church, the writer to the Hebrews is clear that discipline of the believer by God is a mark of authentic Christian life (12:7-11)!

The relationship between the church on earth and the church in heaven

12:22-24 allow consideration of the relationship between the church on earth and the church in heaven.

Mount Sinai, which, as it recalls the people of God gathered around the word of God, is paradigmatic for the doctrine of the church, is contrasted here with Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, to which believers are said to have come. God speaking to his people who are to respond in faith, whether from Sinai (12:19) or from the Heavenly Jerusalem (12:25) remains foundational to the church.

The perfect proselhlu,qate of verse 22 indicates that believers here on earth already have fellowship with the church in heaven. In keeping with the inaugurated eschatology of the New Testament, this present reality is an anticipation of the gathering of church of the great final day.

The use of *evklhsi,a* in 12:23 is also noteworthy since here the term refers to the universal church, whereas most frequently it is used in the New Testament of the local congregation. Since all believers around the world have come to the heavenly church, all believers thus also enjoy fellowship with one another.

The notion that Christians have come to the heavenly church coheres with the fact that Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus' entry into heaven has secured access to heaven for all those who trust in him.

Conclusion

Without the epistle to the Hebrews, our doctrine of the church would be impoverished and it is difficult to imagine the letter without that which is pertinent to the doctrine of the church. The indirect manner in which teaching about the church is conveyed in the epistle suggests that the church is in fact central to the Christian faith: though the epistle is far from being a doctrinal treatise on the church, a doctrine of the church emerges naturally as the writer expounds his own themes occasioned by the needs of his readers. By heeding the warnings and exhortations of the letters, the readers will ultimately form part of the church at rest.

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