

Going back to church

A sermon on Matthew 16:13–27

Stuart Blythe

Springburn Baptist Church was the first church in which I served as a minister. It is a small urban church in the north of Glasgow, Scotland. I was fresh out of college. Sunday by Sunday I was glad when people actually turned up. And the fear that people might not turn up did not go away when I moved to be a minister in a large suburban congregation. Others had built up the congregation, and I was worried that I might break it!

You can put my fears down to personal anxiety, narcissistic pride, or lack of faith. On the other hand, my fears had a wider social context. This context is the post-Christendom situation in which we in the Global North now live. Whether established politically, ideologically, or culturally, the old alliance between

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Christianity and national identity is over. We experience this changed reality in declining attendance at church, in the church’s decreasing cultural influence, and in low morale. It was a Christendom idea to say, “Build it and they will come”—provided you have enough parking and a good youth program. For many, however, the post-Christendom reality is: they are not coming.

Churches respond to this situation in various ways. In the United Kingdom some live in denial, carrying on as before, hoping that the “All Welcome” sign on the notice

board will finally draw someone in. Others respond by raging against postmodernism, consumerism, pluralism, individualism, and any other “isms” they perceive as a threat to the once-established social order. Still others respond with missional energy.

Missional energy takes various forms. It shows itself in programs for “reaching the unchurched” or for “reaching our commu-

nity.” Such programs are often accompanied by set materials and regional advertising campaigns, and are supported by area coordinators. In turn, other initiatives are happening, in “emerging church,” “messy church,” “missional church,” and “café church” expressions. In practice, what many of these groups mean by the word *church* is worship services, and what they are doing is alternative church services. These services often coexist next to more traditional ones and within the same church structures.

In a few cases, however, a group’s missional energy has caused them to completely restructure their way of being church. The argument they give for this sort of reformation is that the way we have traditionally done church has shaped our mission, but in the future mission should shape the way we do church. Put in theological language: they argue that instead of our ecclesiology shaping our missiology, our missiology needs to shape our ecclesiology.

People in local congregations may find it confusing and anxiety provoking to try to make sense of this reality and these missional options. Like young children trying to fly a kite without basic know-how and in the absence of wind, we may find ourselves expending a great deal of energy but ending up with disappointment. What to do? What to do? I suggest we try going back to church.

Matthew 16:13–27 is a passage we associate with the formation of the church.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole

world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

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But if we turn to this text to get some answers about mission—or indeed, church—we first of all find ourselves interrogated. “Who do you say I am?” Jesus asks. If this is a passage about church, Jesus first of all makes it a passage about himself. In questioning, he

elicits and receives from Peter the confession: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” As with Peter, our confession as disciples is surely present tense. In Jesus we find not simply the source of our salvation, the centre of our doctrine, the pattern of our discipleship, and the object of our worship, but we find the dynamic living presence of the one who comes to us and calls us ever again to recognise him and to follow him. In Jesus Christ we have one who takes priority over both church and mission.

Starting with Jesus, however, this passage quickly becomes concerned with that thing we name as church. For in response to Peter's confession, Jesus replies: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

Those of us in the believers church tradition see in Peter something of a prototype for our experience. Accordingly, we

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understand that at core the church consists of those gathered and gathering together confessing the person of Jesus Christ, a commitment normally marked by believers baptism. This association between confession and church in Matthew suggests that in the purpose and mission of God as expressed in the life of his Son, there is something primal about this thing we call church.

Recently I was involved in a discussion about mission and church. My conversation partners spoke passionately and attractively about the way mission was shaping their activities. I agreed with them on so many issues. At one point, however, I interrupted them and asked, "Who are the 'we' you keep

talking about?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You keep saying 'we' do this and 'we' do that, so before you do anything, there is first of all a 'we.' Do you mean by this 'we' what we call church?" My point was simply to suggest, not against the importance of mission but for the sake of our mission, that we cannot bypass the reality of what constitutes church as we seek to live as faithful witnesses to Jesus Christ. To be sure, the working of God in the world may not be exclusively dependent on the church. Yet what Jesus says indicates that this new sort of community has a particular role in the work of God's kingdom, not least as he adds the somewhat cryptic statement: "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."

Yet from this high point in Matthew 16, things go downhill. For within verses, Peter the representative believer, the very one who is praised for confessing the identity of the revealed nature of Jesus, is resisted by Jesus for articulating views that are attributed to Satan! From high praise to low place, godly revelation to satanic articulation, from foundation rock to stumbling block: it all happens so quickly, so easily, so unexpectedly, so scandalously.

A rupture is created as Peter is unprepared to accept the Jesus-defined implications of the way of the cross for life, personal and corporate. And so Peter takes Jesus aside, as theologian Stanley Hauerwas puts it, to get him “on message.” Yet, Hauerwas suggests, we should not be too hard on Peter, because he simply stands in the long tradition of those who from the time of Eden onward have thought they knew better than God what God desires.²

According to Matthew 16, the church may have a primal role in the purposes of God, but it too can yield to this temptation to know best what God desires. Not every expression of church is equally valid or ethical. The new community can become a power and principality for harm. For this reason congregations stand in constant need of critique and creativity in relation to the nature of their lives gathered and scattered. The source and resource for this critique and creativity, however, is to be found not in the latest program but within our very understanding of the nature of the church and its relationship to Jesus Christ as the Messiah.

Social movement theorists suggest that revitalising an organisation requires a rediscovery of the organisation’s “inner voice,” with an “innovative interpretation of this identity in a changed world.”³ Jesus is that inner voice of the church, which as confessing congregations we are invited to discern as we gather together with scripture and Spirit. To push the point harder—drawing on and paraphrasing the work of John Caputo in his book *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*—Jesus is the uncontainable inner truth of the Church which as he pushes to the fore should cause us “to reconfigure, reorganise, regroup, reassemble” our beliefs and practices, unless of course we are prepared to repress him in a kind of Peter moment.⁴

To suggest, therefore, that we go back to church as we face the present and future is not a call for traditionalistic denial. It is not

even a call simply for missional engagement. It is rather an invitation for those of us in the believers church tradition to draw deeply on our convictions about the nature of church, on its practices, and on the transformative presence of Jesus Christ crucified and risen, to guide us ever anew into faithfulness.

Notes

¹Quoted from NRSV.

²Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 151–53.

³Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church* (Sydney: Strand, 2009), 82–83.

⁴John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 29.

About the author

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