

## “Where Jesus Is”

Terry L. Johnson

*This is the fourth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”*

Some will not be convinced by what we’ve said about the church so far. That Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Mt 16:18), and says nothing about building anything else isn’t persuasive for them. That He said, “Tell it to the church” (Mt 18:17), and intended all that in the way of structure that is implied by that phrase, and all that the Apostles understood by that phrase, still fails to resonate. The keys of the kingdom? The power of binding and loosing? No, some still are not persuaded.

We’ve saved what is perhaps our strongest argument from Jesus’ direct teaching for now. Jesus says in the same Matthew 18 cited above that “where two or three are gathered in my name, *there am I among them*” (Mt 18:20). Where is Jesus today? One might assume that because Jesus is God the Son, He is present anywhere and everywhere. Indeed, He is! He is *omnipresent*. Our interest, however, is not in His *omni presence*, but His *blessed presence*. Granted, that too can be manifested anywhere. We mustn’t tie God’s hands or restrict Him in any way. He may make His blessed or favorable presence known on the golf course, at the pier, or on the back porch.

The serious question for our consideration is, where has He *promised* to be present? The issue is not where He *might* be present but where *will* He be present because He has *promised* to be present. The answer Jesus gives is, in His church, where two or three are gathered in His name. He has promised to be present in the assembly of His disciples, even the most humble of those assemblies. The question then must be, do I wish to be where Jesus is? Dare I miss out on the opportunity to be where Jesus promises to be present? Remember, we’ve made the case that the church as described in Matthew 18:15-20 cannot be regarded as an informal, ad hoc, irregular gathering of self-selecting believers. It has a structure, a membership from which one may be included and excluded; it has standards of belief and conduct to which one must conform; a form of government by which decisions are made; and a system of discipline by which the privileges of membership may be limited or removed. We can see the implementation of these principles at work in the apostolic church as the Apostle insists that the church “remove the wicked man from among you” (see 1 Cor 5:1-13), and in which they urge mutual support and accountability (Eph 4; Rom 12; 1 Cor 12).

We are given a glimpse of the post-Ascension church as Christ walks among the seven “lampstands” which are the seven churches (Rev 1:20-2:1). The churches are not merely the Christians in a given region, but actual churches that are assessed as collective entities. They are identified as the churches at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev 2:1-3:22). Repeatedly they are called upon to take collective action in connection with institutional failures. Christ is there, speaking to them, dealing with them on the basis of their collective responsibility. He is present with His assembled church.

So, again, we ask, do we wish to be where Jesus promises to be? Calvin warns, “Whoever either neglects the sacred assemblies or separates himself from his brethren and is slothful in cultivating unity demonstrates by this fact *that he cares nothing for Christ’s presence.*”<sup>1</sup> Do we

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, II:232, my emphasis.

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wish to sit at His feet and be taught? Do we wish to enjoy fellowship with Him? (see 1 Jn 1:1, 2). Do we wish to experience His presence? Jesus identifies Himself as “living water” that quenches the thirst of the soul (Jn 4:14; 7:37). He identifies Himself as the “bread of life” that satisfies the hunger of the soul (Jn 6:35). He urges us to come to Him and find rest for our souls (Mt 11:29). He promises that whoever comes to Him will no longer walk in darkness but will enjoy the “light of life” (Jn 8:12). Where may we experience these blessings of His presence? At church, where two or three have gathered in His name. Again, we cite Calvin: “The first thing to realize is that *those who desire Christ’s presence will meet in His name.*”<sup>2</sup> Where is Jesus? He is wherever His true church is. He is in the midst of the assembly of His people. Is this not where we need to be as well?

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., my emphasis.