

## Study 5

# An Outward-Looking Church



*Tissot, Jesus walks in Portico of Solomon, c1890*

## Key verses:

<sup>46</sup>Every day they continued to meet as a group in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Luke tells us elsewhere that early believers enjoyed meeting together at the eastern edge of the outer court, known as Solomon's Colonnade, where, in typical Jewish fashion, they would discuss matters of faith and offer worship to God. As Jews, they not only considered Jerusalem to be their city, but the temple to be their sanctuary.

However, they also shared meals in their homes with elements of worship and prayer. Their joy overflowed into every element of daily life.

At this point in the development of the early church their newly found faith and way of life was seen in a positive light by the rest of the population, and indeed we are told that every day people heard what was being said, believed and joined the growing fellowship of believers in Jerusalem.

But sadly, this would soon change, with increasing opposition and persecution, as Luke relates later in Acts.

### Group discussion:

Q) How is the local church perceived in your area, and how connected with the community? Would you like to see changes?

Q) How important to you is the building where you gather for worship?

# Jesus Christ and the church

*Read Ephesians 2:17-22, 1 Peter 2:9-10*

Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, a mix of Jews and Gentiles, Paul is keen to stress that through Jesus, everyone has access to God the Father by one Spirit. They can all enjoy the privileges of belonging to a fellowship of believers with a faith built on a firm foundation, laid down by both apostles and prophets, and with Christ as the chief cornerstone, the one that binds walls together, and makes for a building fit for the Holy Spirit to live within.

In the East, people considered the cornerstone more important than the foundation, and often had a royal name inscribed upon it. Jesus Christ is not only at the heart of the church, but the stone that holds it together, its strength and power.

Paul, in his letter to Peter, applies various terms to the church that were originally used to describe Israel, such as a 'chosen people', a 'royal priesthood', and a 'holy nation'. It is not that the church might replace Israel in God's plans, but that the church connects with the Old Testament and sees within it evidence for the coming of Jesus for all nations.

It was always God's plan to bless the entire world through the nation of Israel, and the church is now a part of that bigger picture, bringing the message of Jesus to all people.

## Group discussion:

Q) How does the church reach out to the current generation growing up, who have perhaps no family connection with church and faith?

Q) How does the thought of Christ as the cornerstone speak into your own faith experience?

## A worshipping people

*Read Revelation 1:4-6, Hebrews 10:19-22*

In the opening words of Revelation, the author is addressing seven representative churches in the Roman province of Asia (now the western side of Turkey). Jews considered seven to be the number of completeness, and here they represent the variety of obedience and disobedience in the church that were common then and in generations following.

His greeting comes in the name of Father, Spirit, and Son, with Jesus Christ described as 'the faithful witness', a reference to his faithful obedience and witness to God's kingdom and



Jerusalem Sepulchre, photo Berthold Werner

salvation, even to the point of death. It is through the salvation that Jesus offered through his sacrifice that the church finds the power to become the 'holy nation' and priesthood that Paul talked of earlier, and worship is a fitting offering in response.

The writer of Hebrews follows the same theme, in saying that because of the truth he has taught them about Jesus, and the salvation that Jesus brought, those who call

themselves believers should live their lives according to those truths, drawing near to God with sincere hearts and with the full assurance that the worship and prayer they bring is an acceptable offering.

### Group discussion:

Q) What do you see as the key elements of worship?

Q) A key doctrine of protestant churches is 'the priesthood of all believers', echoed in the verses from Revelation. What does that phrase mean to you?

Q) Truth is often a vague word in politics, but how do you see it in the Bible?

## An outward-looking church

*Read Matthew 28: 16-20, Romans 10:11-15, Acts 16:6-10*

At the very start of his own mission, Jesus sent the disciples out with instructions to go to the local Jewish villages and towns and teach, minister, and heal. It was very much on-the-job training, with some limitations, but they came back excited at what they had seen, and for Jesus this was proof enough that eventually they would become the apostles who would become the planters of the early church. Now, at the end of Matthew's narrative, we have their commissioning, a call to 'make disciples of all nations.' Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey the teaching of Jesus.

That call would apply, as it still does, both to those like Paul, called to travel far and wide, and those who will stay nearer to home and spread the Good News. And the promise is that for those who follow their calling, Jesus will be with them in Spirit 'to the very end of the age.'

In the opening words of Romans 10, Paul admits that at the heart of his own call as an apostle is the desire for all the Israelites to be saved but adds that the Good News is for all people, regardless of race, saying, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' This is not a limited-issue offer, but the messengers are still few, and how can people believe if they have not been told?

'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

At the heart of the early church was a desire to share the good news, both locally and further afield. It was by sharing, by becoming an outward-looking fellowship of believers that they achieved that which Luke reports, 'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

### Group discussion:

Q) What do we need to enable us to share our faith with confidence?

Q) Congregations are often small today. How can a small group become mission-minded?

Q) What has looking at the life of the early church taught you?

## Pause for thought

Spend some time this week praying for the worldwide Church of God, of which we are all a part. Pray particularly for those Christians who daily face persecution, that they might find strength in adversity.

## Prayer

Help us, with simple words,  
to explain the warmth  
within our hearts  
that we experienced  
in that first encounter  
with your love and grace -  
the Spirit's flame,  
still burning bright within -  
that others, in their own  
journeys of discovery  
might reach out and touch  
the hand that's always there,  
and be embraced by love.

You call us to leave all things,  
you who had nothing.  
You call us to be servants,  
you who came to serve.  
You call us to share the load,  
you who carried our sin.  
You call us to speak your word,  
you who lived it daily.  
You call us to be followers,  
and in your strength, we will.