

LTS – Principal's Inaugural Lecture – 14th October, 2008

The Local Church: A Little Heaven on Earth?

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Introduction

The first students at the London Theological Seminary began their studies here on Monday 3rd October, 1977, 31 years ago - there were six of them. At that time, there was no principal. There was a Resident Tutor, whose name was Philip Eveson. The work developed and grew and in October 1985 Hywel Jones became the first Principal of the Seminary. He was succeeded in 1996 by Philip Eveson, who of course remained as Principal until this summer. Over those 31 years, around 370 students have attended the course here – with the current intake, the number is almost 400 - and now ex-LTS students are ministering the Word of God, pastoring churches and doing missionary work throughout the United Kingdom and in many other countries of the world. It is therefore a very great privilege, which brings with it a very great responsibility and challenge, to stand before you this evening as the new Principal of LTS. So far, 10 days into the new term, things still seem to be holding together. In fact, we are most encouraged by the current student body – both in terms of numbers and, most importantly, in terms of their clear determination to come here to give themselves to their studies in order to prepare for gospel ministry. This is a very exciting time to be at LTS, with plans for new developments and, particularly, the prospect of a new library and enlarged lecture room which we hope will be built over the coming months – a project begun, I might add, under the vision and initiative of my predecessor, Philip Eveson, and for which we are very grateful to the Kensit Memorial Trust, the owners of this property, for agreeing to undertake. In all of the work here, we do ask for your continued prayers. It is spiritual work, for the kingdom of Christ, and it will prosper only insofar as the King is pleased to bless it. So please pray for us, and for me as I take up this work to which I feel so unequal.

My subject this evening is the local church. Books about the local church today generally fall into one of two categories. They either deal with questions of church government and polity – do we have bishops, are elders equivalent to pastors, whom should we admit to church membership, and so on. Or they deal with very practical questions, like how best to organise and lead a worship service, how to attract more people into our meetings, and so on. Only

comparatively rarely do we consider what the Bible has to say about the purpose and characteristics of the local church – how does the local church fit into God’s overall plan, as revealed in Scripture; what role does the local church play in God’s great scheme of redemption; and what does this tell us about the characteristics of the local church on the ground: what she looks like and what it is like to belong to her. It is these questions that I want to try to open up a little this evening. Those of you who are familiar with the work of Greg Beale will realise that some of what I have to say owes a great deal to his writings.

To help us in our thinking, I want to describe the experiences of two individuals. I assure you that they and their situations are entirely fictional, but at the same time I suspect that their stories are lived out up and down the country in our local churches.

John is a young man just out of university, where he had been converted and had attended a fairly large church, with a substantial student attendance, where the preaching was good, the music lively and well-done and the services generally well-organised and structured. He now has a job in a reasonably large town in central England, where there is just one, sound evangelical church, which he joins. The congregation is rather small in number and rather elderly, there is only one other person there of his age, the preaching is sound but a bit dull and the music is rather traditional and, if he is honest, poorly executed. John is faithful to his new church and keeps on there, serving as he is able, but he feels somewhat let-down, after his experience of church life at university – is this it, he asks himself as he looks round the congregation one Sunday morning, for the rest of his life?

Mary is a retired schoolteacher. She was brought up in a Christian family and has always attended her local evangelical church. When she was little, she attended the flourishing Sunday School there, which had a variety of departments and activities, led by stimulating and committed young teachers. When she was converted and became a church member in her late teens, she remembers the church as full, the congregation faithfully attending twice on Sunday and many of them coming weekly to the prayer meeting. There was a love for Christ and his word which was evident in the meetings – in the way people sang and attended to the Scriptures as they were read and preached. Today, however, many people just come once on Sundays and never to the prayer meeting, which is thinly attended on the whole. Church members seem to have so many other commitments, which sometimes seem to take priority

over everything else. She still enjoys church, but she feels rather sad – something has been lost and she is afraid that it may not be recovered.

How was your last Sunday? How is your local church? Maybe, like John and Mary, you do have rather mixed feelings about it. And in a sense that is natural and inevitable – our churches are full of sinful, weak, inconsistent people – just like us – and so of course they are far from perfect. But there is, I think, a real danger here - the danger of falling into an overly critical and negative way of thinking and talking about our local churches. We can, if we are not careful, simply focus on the evident – and real - weaknesses in our churches, comparing them, perhaps, with other, larger, or more apparently successful, churches. We wish our churches were full of young people, young families, with vibrant singing, powerful and moving preaching and real commitment. Yet, so often, they are not. And we can become very discouraged and disillusioned as a result.

Sometimes, of course, there are things in our churches which do need to be changed. Antiquated language, whose meaning most people have forgotten; stock phrases, which never had any real meaning at all; odd little traditions and quirky ways of doing things in the services, which serve no real purpose other than to amuse or bemuse newcomers. These things have no place in the worship of almighty God. Poor preparation of meetings, a failure to make people feel welcome, Scripture-reading which can't be heard by half the congregation – these things do need to be put right; there is really no excuse for them.

But often these are not the real source of discouragement in our churches today. The fact is that, for many of us, our churches are rather small, and sometimes rather elderly; we can't necessarily afford new buildings and equipment; the singing isn't necessarily all that it might be; people are very busy today and often the commitment is not there that once, perhaps, there was. But what should we do about it?

Well there are many things which can, and often should, be done. But one thing I am convinced that we do need is a fresh, biblical vision of the local church – of its place in God's plan for the redemption of mankind. We need to be stirred again, from Scripture, to see something of the wonder that is the local church, something of her extraordinary place in the unfolding of God's amazing plan of redemption. We need, I suggest, a far higher view of the local church – of our own local church – than I suspect we currently have. That is my theme

this evening, and I hope it will encourage you to greater commitment, love and faithfulness in your own local church and, in the goodness of God, to an increase both in spiritual growth and in numbers.

What I want to present to you, then, is a biblical theology of the local church, as the place in this age and on this earth where God comes to dwell with man. I will seek to show you, from the whole sweep of Scripture, how it has always been God's great plan, to save for himself a great multitude of people from all corners of the world, that he may come and dwell forever with them and they with him. Then I want to show what this means for the local church – what should the church on this earth be like, in the light of this theology; what should its main features and characteristics be? Then finally I want to draw some practical conclusions for us today.

1. *God's plan to dwell with mankind*

In the beginning, we are told in Gen. 2, God 'planted a garden in Eden' for man to live in, with his wife Eve, to 'work it and keep it'. We can picture them there, working together, in love and harmony and righteousness, in that well-watered garden – watered by the river which flowed out of it, with the tree of life standing in the middle of the garden. All was perfect. There was no flaw, nothing to make them afraid – Adam had named the beasts, thus indicating his superiority and power over them. There was no disease, no suffering, no natural disasters and no death. Instead, there was the wonderful prospect before them of fulfilling the great work which God had given them to do – to be fruitful and to multiply, to fill the entire earth and subdue it, having dominion over all that moves. Adam and Eve were to extend the cultivated delight of Eden across the entirety of the globe. That was their work and they delighted in it.

But, we are told, in the very chapter of Genesis which records the tragedy of their fall, there was another wonderful feature of their experience in the garden. We are told, after their terrible act of disobedience, that 'they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden'. This is not presented as something unusual – as if God had just come down to check up on them, in the knowledge that something had gone awry. No – this was normal. God walking in the garden – the very garden in which Adam and Eve had been placed to work. This, we are led to believe, was their daily experience – communion with their God, in the delight of Eden. Daily fellowship, living and intimate concourse with the God who created the

universe and whom they worshipped and adored. Only on this occasion, after their sin, the meeting would lead, not to delight, but to tragedy as they were expelled from the garden and barred for ever from its grounds.

But this opening scene of the Bible tells us something of great importance – God loves to walk in Eden – the very language of verse 8 in that third chapter is intended to convey something of God’s delight, as he walks there ‘in the cool of the day’. He is, as it were, refreshed; he enjoys this time, in this garden that he has made, where he has placed his creatures who bear his image. He has come to have fellowship with them.

This sets a pattern which we can discern clearly throughout the story-line of Scripture. Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden, sin and death enter in and create a massive barrier between man and God, but that does not prevent God from unfolding his everlasting plan – his plan to dwell with mankind. Let us just alight briefly on some of the main highlights in Scripture which demonstrate this theme.

Consider Moses. The people of Israel are brought up out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, by the mighty hand of God. They have been commanded to go to Sinai, where God will meet with them. And there God comes down upon the mountain, in great glory and power, and there he speaks to his people the Ten Commandments. There Moses goes up the mount to meet God and there, in an extraordinary passage in Exodus 24, we are told that Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and 70 of the elders of Israel went up the mountain ‘and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.’ (24:11). What do these extraordinary few verses tell us about our God – that he delights in the fellowship of his human creatures: there they are, eating and drinking in his presence!

Then of course Moses is to make the tabernacle, the place where God will come down to meet with him and with the people. As the tabernacle is set up for the first time and all is complete, God himself comes down in a great cloud covering the tent, and, we are told, ‘the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle’, so that Moses could not enter it. God dwells among his people, appearing as a cloud over the tabernacle by day and as a fire within it by night (40:38). And yet there is distance, still, between God and his people. After the incident of the golden calf,

God had said to them that they were to go up to the promised land, but ‘I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.’ (33:3). The tabernacle itself was hedged around with restrictions and barriers. The people did not have direct access into it – Moses went in on their behalf. And their access to God was mediated through the complex system of priests and sacrifices and offerings which are set out in the Pentateuch. So the great lesson of the tragic consequences of sin had to be learned by God’s people, as day by day and year by year they knew that their God was with them and dwelled amongst them and yet he was at a distance from them, always approached through death, sacrifice, ritual and ceremony.

Let us come to Solomon, then. The people of God now are settled in the Promised Land. After the battles and bloodshed of David’s time, there is peace – ‘the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon (1 Kings 2:46), the people prosper: ‘Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea. They ate and drank and were happy’ (1 Kings 4:20); and they were ruled by a wise king, so that ‘people of all nations came to hear the wisdom of Solomon’ (1 Kings 4:34). In the midst of these great blessings, which appear to be a fulfilment of the promises God made to Abraham so long before, Solomon, by God’s command, builds a temple to the Lord. He describes it as ‘a house for the name of the Lord my God’. With great solemnity, the ark of the covenant is brought up to the finished temple and placed in the Holy of Holies, and, we are told, ‘when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.’ (1 Kings 8:11). God’s glorious presence, in the form of the cloud, came down – just as it had at the establishment of the tabernacle in the wilderness, under Moses.

God dwells with his people – yet, as in the wilderness, there is distance. Still there is the priestly system, with its daily slaughter of sacrificial animals, its offering of incense, its washings and ceremonies and rituals. The people may approach so far, but no further – and never near the Holy of Holies itself, where the ark rests, representing the very presence of God. There only one man may go – the High Priest – and that only once a year, in fear and trembling, on the day of atonement.

Throughout these OT accounts, then, we see God’s plan unfolding. He saves a people for himself and he comes to dwell with his people – and yet there are barriers and restrictions.

There is distance between God and his people, driving home the message of the seriousness of sin, the massive barrier erected by man's disobedience, between mankind and the living God. And things seem to get worse: towards the end of the OT era, we see the temple in ruins, Jerusalem devastated and the people of God in exile; some return and re-build the temple, but it is nothing like the former one in its glory. Many wept and mourned, yet God was preparing the way. He does not dwell in temples made with hands. No building of stone can contain him. He has something far, far more glorious in view.

So we come to the NT and the coming into the world of a baby boy, born in Bethlehem – who is given by Matthew a name of tremendous significance – the name, Immanuel, meaning, we are told, 'God with us' (Matt.1:23). The OT has ended with the people of God much reduced in size, power and wealth; no glory cloud had descended upon their rebuilt temple. Had they lost for ever the glory and presence of God? No. Here comes one, says Matthew at the beginning of the NT, who is himself 'God with us'. No need of temple now – Jesus himself is the temple, the place in which God dwells with man. No longer do we look to a building or to a glory cloud. Now we have dwelling amongst us, says John, the one who was with God and who is God. John tells us, 'the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us' – he "tabernacled" (the word is the same as the word for the tabernacle or tent of Moses's time) – 'and we have seen his glory' – just as Moses and Solomon did when the cloud came down – but this time, not in a cloud, but in a man. God dwells among men, walks and talks with him, shares their joys and suffering – God comes down and lives amongst us:

God the invisible appears:

God, the blest, the great I AM,
sojourns in this vale of tears,
and Jesus is His name.

But if Jesus Christ is seen as the place pre-eminently where God dwells with man, even that is not the whole story. Amazingly, in view of what we have seen so far, the NT tells us that the Christian is to be regarded, also, as the temple of God, and this in two different, but complementary ways. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, tells us – in a passage dealing with sexual immorality - that the body of the individual Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit – the very dwelling-place of God (1 Cor. 6:19). We should be very careful, therefore, says Paul, not to defile it. This is an extraordinary statement. Yet it is coupled with another, equally important and significant for our purposes this evening, to the effect that the church,

considered as a unity, is the temple of God and that God's Spirit dwells within her (1 Cor. 3:16). Speaking of the church as a whole, Paul says, 'Do you not know that you are God's temple, and that God's Spirit dwells in you?'

The church, then – not a temple - is now the dwelling-place of God – the church, of course, as a community of God's people and not a building. No longer is there a building specially set aside as the place where God's name is; no longer are there sacrifices and priests and rituals and restricted access to God. The one great sacrifice has been offered, once for all, the veil of the temple has been rent, once for all, our great high priest has come – Jesus Christ – and has made perfect atonement for the sins of all his people, once for all, to reconcile them and bring them to God. Jesus Christ – the temple of God on earth – is now risen from the dead and ascended into heaven and sits at God's right hand. Where then is God's dwelling-place now on earth? It is, says Paul, the church – God's people on earth.

It is this extraordinary fact which I want us to dwell upon a little longer this evening. And in order for us to do so to the greatest benefit, we need to take a brief look into the future, to the end of the story, at least as we know it. The apostle John was granted a vision which must have, figuratively speaking, blown him off his feet. He saw the new heavens and the new earth, the holy city, the bride of Christ – the consummation of all things. And, at the end of the age, he heard this declaration: 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.' (Rev. 21:3-4). There it is – the end of the story – the consummation of God's glorious plan – God dwelling with man, forevermore. A new heavens and a new earth, the place where God and man dwell together. As they did in Eden, without sin, without suffering, without death – but this time for ever.

This is our destination, if we belong truly to the church of Jesus Christ, through repentance and faith in him. And notice it is, most emphatically, a corporate destination – we will, of course, retain our individuality – we certainly do not merge into some kind of ultimate undifferentiated oneness – but the picture language is very much corporate – a city, a bride. And so what I want to argue now, in the second part of this lecture, is that the church on earth, as the dwelling place of God, is a reflection – a pale, imperfect reflection, certainly, but

nevertheless a reflection – of what she will be, in perfection, in the new heavens and the new earth. And I want to argue that the characteristics that we see there, in that final state, as it is described for us in the closing chapters of the Bible, are characteristics which we should be seeking to cultivate and grow in our local churches here on earth, as we look forward to the end of the age and the consummation of all things.

2. The church on earth

There is, as I have indicated, a real correlation between the characteristics of the church in her final state and the local church in this age. Let us examine some of these. As we do so, I want to urge you to remember that we are consciously to seek to see these things, to make them real in our own local church situations and lives.

1. Life

The descriptions of Eden and of the new Jerusalem include a combination of images, involving a tree, water and fruit, which together speak of life. In the middle of the garden of Eden stood the tree of life, the fruit of which Adam was free, prior to the Fall, to eat; a river flowed out of Eden ‘to water the garden’; and through the middle of the street of the new Jerusalem flowing from the very throne of God, was the river of the water of life and on either side of it stood the tree of life ‘with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month’ (Rev. 22:2). How do we understand these images in our age? Out of the believer’s heart, said Jesus, speaking of the Holy Spirit, flow rivers of living water. The local church, then, is a community of people in whom is *life* – the very life of God, given by the Spirit. What, then, is a lively church? Not one necessarily with lively music and charismatic leadership, but one full of people who are themselves filled with the Spirit – people who are truly *alive*.

And how will we tell such a church, when we see it? Well it is quite clear, in Scripture. It is not to do with style of worship, but with quality of life. In Eden stood the *tree* of life – and it was a tree bearing fruit. Jeremiah speaks of the tree planted by the water, that is fruitful, even in times of drought. The river flowing through the new Jerusalem has beside it the tree of life, which yields fruit month by month. The point about life is that it brings forth fruit. And what kind of fruit? Galatians tells us: ‘the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal. 6:22-23). These are the signs of true, Spirit-given life – are they evident in our local churches? Are they evident in you?

A church which has good music and hearty singing and a well-run service, but whose members care nothing for each other, is not a lively church, whatever the appearance. The lively church may be small in number; it may meet in a rather old-fashioned building; its music may not be anything special; but it is a church in which there is real love and care. This may not be terribly evident, at first sight. It is mainly noticeable during the week, as the sick and elderly are visited and their practical needs attended to; in the phone calls and emails and letters to one another; in the financial support of the pastor and his family; and in 1001 other small ways, not obvious to the newcomer.

It will be evident in the meetings of the church – in the joy and the peace which the members evidence, which somehow permeates the services and finds a climax in the preaching – not through jokes and light-heartedness, but through a deep-felt, genuine, God-given sense of peace, because of sins forgiven and a cleansed conscience and a conviction that the future, whatever it may hold, is in God's hands; and of joy in Christ – even though there may be trials and suffering of the worst kind. These things, as well as the other fruit of the Spirit listed in Galatians, may be most evident, as we get to know members of the church individually. Here are men and women and young people and boys and girls, who are somehow different from others – different from what they themselves used to be – here are people who are really *alive*. The local church, then, is a place of true *life*.

2. *Righteousness*

There is a second characteristic of the church in glory which is emphasised in the New Testament as something which should be clearly reflected in the local church. Peter describes the new heavens and the new earth as the place where righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13).

There was no sin in Eden, at first, and at the last, in the new Jerusalem will be found nothing unclean, detestable or false – 'Outside', says John, emphasising that word, 'are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.' (Rev. 22:15). These things will have no place in heaven and they should have no place amongst the people of God now.

I believe this is something to which insufficient attention is being given at the present time. God's people have always been subject to God's law – from Adam in the garden onwards. The righteousness of the followers of Jesus Christ is to exceed that of the law-observing scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). It is those who keep Jesus's commandments who abide in his love and who are his friends (Jn. 15:10, 14). We are not, says Paul, to steal, we are to put away falsehood, beware of anger, bitterness, corrupting talk. These things are to find no place amongst God's children (Eph. 4:25-32). We are to be careful how we walk (Eph. 5:15). We are, says Peter, to be holy in all our conduct, because our God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Let us be quite clear. The passages to which I have alluded are not speaking primarily of the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the believer. They are speaking of how believers are actually to live out their lives. Our justification by faith in Christ alone is foundational to this. We do need to grasp that all our sins truly are forgiven through the blood of Christ and not through our own works and that, by his merit alone and not ours, we stand justified and reconciled and accepted before God. We need to know for sure that, just as Christ Jesus was made sin for us, so we in him have become the righteousness of God. And we need to know that we cannot add anything to this righteousness that is accounted to us. It stands and will stand for ever. The true child of God is as justified today, in the sight of God, as he will ever be, even in heaven. All that, as I say, is foundational. But everywhere the Scripture insists that, having been saved by faith alone in Christ alone, the believer goes on to live a new life. He is born again, and having been born again and with hearts that have been purified through the blood of Christ, Peter tells us, we are to love one another earnestly, putting away all malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, slander (1 Pet. 1:22-2:1).

We need to take this seriously. In how many of our churches are there brethren who have not spoken to one another for years? Where there is strife and faction, where disputes of long ago are allowed to remain unresolved, where brethren remain unreconciled – and yet feel able to come to church week after week, singing heartily of the redeeming love of God in Christ and nodding approvingly as the pastor preaches to them of the forgiveness to be found only in the blood of the Saviour, all the time forgetting Paul's admonition, 'as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive' (Col. 3:13)?

The community of Jesus Christ is to be a righteous community: a community of love, forgiveness, humility; a place of truth and honesty; an environment in which sexual

immorality, unclean talk, wrath, malice, slander, envy are absent. We are really to live godly, pure and holy lives, knowing that none of this will add to the salvation that Christ has accomplished for us, but knowing also that there is no other way for the children of God to live. Of course we fail, we fall into sin – but when we do, we are to come straight back to the Lord Jesus in sincere repentance, seeking the cleansing of his blood and his renewing power, that we may go on, trusting in him.

The church, then, is to be a community of life and of righteousness.

3. Evangelism

But we need to say, thirdly, that it is to be an outward-looking community. I must be honest here – I think many of us are far too inward-looking, when it comes to church. We are not here simply to wait for heaven. Our churches are not only places for the edification and fellowship of the saints. It is very striking and instructive, to trace the story-line of the Bible from the few individuals in Genesis who followed the Lord – Seth and his line, Noah, Abraham and the patriarchs – through the multiplying of the people of God, the vast numbers that came out of Egypt under Moses, until we are told in Solomon's time that their multitudes were as the sand by the seashore; and then to come to the New Testament and find, supremely in the book of Acts, the gospel spreading beyond the confines of the land of Israel, throughout Asia into Europe, to the very heart of the Roman empire itself. The entire outlook is progressive, developing, growing. One of the refrains in Acts, found at pivotal points in the narrative, is the statement that 'the word of God continued to increase', or 'the word of God increased and multiplied'. These were not people who were constantly looking at themselves, wondering whether they had chosen the right fabric for the new lectern cover or the right shade of blue for the new carpet. These were people who understood, as William Carey did so many centuries later, something of the greatness and grandeur of the commission which the Lord Jesus gave to his apostles and through them to the entire church – to 'go ... and make disciples of all nations'.

Of course, there will be no evangelism in heaven, because by then the task will be completed. But we can learn something of the nature of the task by considering the end-result. John in his vision saw, he tells us, 'a great multitude, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm

branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9-10). And it is fascinating to note that, when we come to the vision of the new Jerusalem at the end of the book, it appears to encompass the entire world – the nations walk by the light of the city and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it, and the only ones who are outside are those we mentioned earlier – the dogs, the sorcerers, and so on.

This age, then, is the age of the increasing of the kingdom of God to encompass the entirety of the globe. I am not here making a point about millennial views, but about the responsibility of the church to look outwards - and to be colour-blind as she does so. I do sometimes wonder why our churches are as mono-cultural as they generally are. In the providence of God, we have in this country practically every nation on our very doorstep. What a glorious opportunity to obey our Lord’s great command, to reach every nation with the gospel! Let’s look outwards, let’s find ways of taking this gospel message to all within our communities, let’s work and work at this, spending and being spent, until truly the whole earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Is. 11:9).

4. Christ at the centre

The final characteristic of the church which I want to examine is that which is most prominent – that the church of Jesus Christ has always at her centre the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Time and again in the book of Revelation we see that the Lord Jesus sits at the centre, on the very throne of God. He is worshipped and he alone. Angels disclaim any worship offered to them and point only to the Lord Jesus as the true object of worship. He stands at the centre of the people of God, their Saviour, their Lord, their Priest, their King. He rules among them and they obey him gladly. He hears their prayers and answers them. He is, supremely, the bridegroom for whom the bride is prepared.

And of course this is reflected all the way through the New Testament teaching on the church. If we are elect, we are elect in Christ; if we are justified, it is through faith in Christ; if we are glorified, it is in him. We are united with Christ – he is our head and we are his body. He is our foundation and cornerstone, he walks amongst the lampstands, he watches over us and leads us on, as the Great Shepherd of the sheep. All we do is for him – for him we live and breathe and in him we die. He is our all in all.

This sense must permeate the meetings of each local church. Our hymns must focus on the person and on the work of our great Saviour. Our prayers are offered to God through him – we come boldly to the throne of grace because our Saviour has lived and died for us. We confess our sins because they are sins against him and we trust we are forgiven because he has shed his blood for us. We give him the praise and adoration of our hearts, because he first loved us and because, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, the ungodly. And we urge our preachers to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ – to know amongst us nothing, save Jesus Christ and him crucified. We do not want to hear from our pulpits of politics and social justice and economic truths and environmental dilemmas, important though these things may be in their place; we don't want to hear sermons that are really no more than pop-psychology or morality tales. We want to hear of our Saviour – of all that he is, of all that he has done, and of all that that means for us. This is no narrow topic, nor is this a recipe for boring, repetitive sermons. The whole of Scripture speaks of Christ – and look at its variety and depth! It speaks of sin and all its terrible consequences and of salvation in all its glorious aspects – election, incarnation, atonement, resurrection, intercession, reconciliation, redemption – the list goes on and on. And it speaks of how we should live as a result of our salvation, of the confidence we may have in our Saviour in this troubled world, and of the hope we have of glory to come. A preacher who focuses on these themes, founded in Jesus Christ and him crucified, will never be a boring preacher.

So I have argued that the local church is to be a reflection of the bride of Christ that she will become in glory. She is to be full of life, righteous, evangelistic, and above all Christ-centred. But in my title I deliberately spoke of the local church as 'a little' heaven on earth, and I deliberately inserted a question mark at the end. Because we are only too well aware how short we fall of the ideals I have tried to set before you. We need to understand this too, or we will descend into a state of confused despair at our own and our churches' failure to be what we know we ought to be.

This age is a fallen age and, although we are redeemed and justified and sanctified, yet sin remains. The devil and his acolytes are vanquished, but they are nevertheless still permitted some degree of activity and influence for a while. And we know this – we are tempted and we fall; we are weak and ignorant; we fail. As Thomas Watson put it, sin does not come as a lodger to stay for a night – sin is not an overnight guest – it dwells, it has taken up residence

within and there it stays. Of course its controlling power is broken in the believer, we are not what we once were, but still ‘the good that I would I do not’ and ‘the evil which I would not, that I do’ (Rom. 7:19, AV). ‘The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.’ (Gal. 5:17). That is the position in this age. Sin is not yet entirely done away with – that time is still to come. We must recognise this. We do not believe in any kind of perfectionism – that it is somehow possible in this age to reach a state in which one is entirely free from sin. No, this life is a life of struggle and battle and conflict – with spiritual powers, temptations - the world, the flesh and the devil. And sometimes we are wounded in the struggle and fall, as Christian did before Apollyon.

If we do not understand this, severe discouragement will follow. We need to recognise it for ourselves, but also for others. Dear, godly brothers and sisters in the church will sometimes fail you; they will occasionally act in ways that seem inconsistent with the gospel they profess. Even your pastor may occasionally be grumpy, inconsiderate, irritable, or worse. I do not say these things to provide us with an excuse for sin, of course. All I have said above about the need to live righteous, godly lives in this world still applies. But we need to understand also where we are in God’s plan – indwelling sin is not yet eliminated. The reason for pointing this out is not to encourage us to relax our standards but to adjust our expectations of one another. In church life, we will often need to cut each other quite a bit of slack – to ignore the apparent slights, to overlook the sharp comment or the slightly barbed remark; to be patient with our leaders, particularly the young and inexperienced ones – they will make mistakes and the best reaction is not, generally, to come down hard on them and refuse to give them another chance, but gently to help them see how they might do better next time, and to continue to love and trust them and submit to them.

In this age, we have many blemishes – and sometimes they seem like gaping sores. But let us never forget that we have a Saviour who has purchased his church with his own blood, ‘that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish’, and that that day will most assuredly come.

3. *Practical Consequences*

I want to end this lecture by drawing out some practical consequences of all that we have considered, under three headings.

1. The central importance of the local church

If God's people in the Scriptures, OT and NT, are consistently portrayed as a community, as they are, and if in glory they are pictured as the bride of Christ and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, why is it that in our age Christians can appear to rank the local church so low in their Christian experience? We have passed through a very individualistic age, it is true, and no doubt that forms part of the explanation. I believe also that an over-emphasis upon the individual nature of conversion, coupled with a suspicion of organised religion for a variety of historical reasons, has led many Christians to the place where they can, it seems, have no difficulty confining their exposure to a local church to one visit, if that, per week. Let me say then, loud and clear, the New Testament knows nothing of the Christian who is not an organic part of a local church. In New Testament terms, you have no right to call yourself a Christian at all if you are not a functioning part of a living local church. The body has no part-time or occasional members. We are, certainly, saved as individuals, but we are not saved to be just individual Christians – we are saved to be part of the people of God, and to demonstrate that truth in our lives as an active part of God's community where we live. God's plan is not to save just a series of individuals – his plan is to save a people for himself.

Let me say, equally, that the New Testament knows no such phenomenon as a local church which is merely a preaching-station. Preaching is important- indeed, central - in any church, but it is not everything. Those who think that the sole purpose of belonging to a church is to hear preaching are sadly mistaken. Nor is it true, as some have suggested, that any gathering of Christians is a church. No, a local church is a community of Christians who have, one way or another, committed themselves to one another to serve one another in the gospel and together to serve their Lord and Saviour in this world. You know who belongs to your local church – they are the people to whom you have undertaken a particular commitment to serve together in your locality in the gospel. You learn together, you worship together. You encourage one another, you rebuke one another. You share together in one another's joys and sorrows and you uphold one another in them. You pray particularly for one another. Together

you support your pastor, financially and spiritually, you submit to him and his fellow-elders and you work with him to further the cause of the kingdom of Christ in your locality. That is a New Testament church – are you part of one?

And do you give yourself to service within it? Do you seek to live out the things we have examined this evening, in the context of your local church? Do you see in your local congregation, despite all its faults and weaknesses, a real foreshadowing of the glory to come? There, in the Sunday services, in the prayer meeting, in the Bible studies – in the work of outreach of various kinds, in the lives of the individual church members as they go about their daily work – in all these aspects of church life, there is the bride of Christ, being prepared for the marriage-supper of the Lamb, there is the holy people of God being made ready for the new heavens and the new earth, the home of righteousness. Let us learn to look on our local churches in that way – it will transform them.

2. The Pastor

Secondly, I want to say a word about pastors. We tend to go to one extreme or the other in our thinking about pastors – either to exalt them as a kind of mini-Pope, or to insist that they are no different from any other church member in any respect. Both extremes are wrong, of course, and completely unbiblical. The pastor is, in one sense, simply a Christian like the rest – a sinner, saved by grace. But he is also a man who is called to an office of leadership and authority in the church. We don't particularly like this idea in our society – of authority and submission to it - but it is quite clearly there in Scripture. The pastor is the under-shepherd in the local church and every church is to have her under-shepherd(s), appointed by Christ to teach and guide her, to watch over her, to keep out false doctrine and to uphold godly living.

To a large degree, the ability of a local church to live out the things I have been describing this evening depends on the pastoral ministry it receives. Not entirely, I grant, but the pastor is a significant factor. He has the responsibility to minister the Word of God – to teach and inculcate the principles of doctrine and life by which the church is to live. He and his fellow-elders have the responsibility to lead the church in its major decisions, in its discipline and in its good order. If a church has real life, godliness, an outward-looking ministry, and above all is centred on the Lord Jesus Christ, it is likely to be because of, rather than in spite of, the faithful ministry of its pastor.

So the pastorate is an onerous responsibility. We seek to recognise that in this Seminary by giving our students a rigorous and intensive course of training. They need to be well grounded in Scripture – Old and New Testaments – with some understanding of the original languages in which they were written; they need to understand the big story-line of the Scriptures but also able to engage in detailed exegesis of individual passages. They need to learn something of how to unravel difficult questions of morals and ethics, to counsel others how to live a godly life in this complex society of ours. They need a real grasp of theology and church history, they need help in developing their preaching gifts and in knowing how to lead a church in a biblical manner. This all takes time and effort and application. It is not something that can be learned in one's spare time or by dabbling here and there. Pray for us as we are engaged in this vital task. Pray for the men who study here, as they prepare for this vital ministry. And pray for your pastor, who bears more burdens than you probably know and who needs your love and support, rather than your criticism and dissent, if he is to fulfil his ministry with joy and not with sorrow (Heb. 13:17).

3. Meetings

Finally, let me close with a word about our meetings, in our local churches – whether Sunday, mid-week or whenever. It has been suggested by some that the primary purpose of our meetings is to teach and to edify. That is certainly a vital part of our meeting together. We need to hear from God's Word, I suggest, whenever we meet together as his people. It would be odd for Christ's people to come together and not want to hear what he has to say to them. However, if we view our meetings as primarily teaching occasions, then our churches become no more than educational institutions, and that is not what they are.

First and foremost, the church of Jesus Christ is a worshipping community. In heaven, in the new Jerusalem, we see God's people worshipping him constantly. The theme of heaven is, not so much teaching, but praise and adoration. At the centre of the throne-room of heaven stands, not a pulpit, but the very presence of God himself, manifested through the person of his Son Jesus Christ. Now let me quickly say, lest I be misunderstood, that I firmly believe that the pulpit should be at the centre of our churches and that preaching should be at the centre of church life. But the question is this – these things, vital and foundational though they are, are not an end in themselves. We do not come to church simply to have our minds filled with

truth. Our teaching and preaching has an end, a purpose, a goal, and that goal is to bring us to Jesus Christ himself. It is not without reason that preaching has historically been known as a 'means' of grace amongst evangelicals. It is a means – to an end – and that end is the worship and adoration and glory of Jesus Christ.

If our local churches are to be what, according to Scripture, they should be – if we are to have churches full of life, abounding in righteousness and godliness, active in evangelism and truly centred upon Jesus Christ, then we must all of us determine that when we come together in our churches, we come to meet with and to worship Jesus Christ. It is true that the whole of life is worship, but there is a particular and special sense in which the gathered community of God's people in the local church worships, together, in a way which is unique because it is a foreshadowing of the glorious, eternal worship of the redeemed people of God in the new Jerusalem. We come to sing praise to our God, to seek him in prayer, to hear his word read and expounded. We come to be stirred up through the Word and by the Spirit to faith in Jesus Christ, repentance towards God, love for one another. We come to learn about our Saviour and how we are to live for him in this world. We come to meditate on all he has done for us and to rejoice in his salvation. We come to remind ourselves that the sufferings of this world are not forever and, indeed, that compared with the glory that is to come they are but light and momentary afflictions. Above all, we come to him, who is the source of life, goodness, truth, salvation and blessing. What a day of rejoicing it should be, when Sunday comes round again – when the week comes round again and it is again time to go up to join with the people of God, to whom we are committed in the local church, to meet together with our Saviour to worship and to adore him. What a day it should be, when we look forward in the week to that special evening spent with the saints before the throne of grace, presenting our worship and praise, our petitions and supplications to the King of Kings, in the knowledge that he hears us and will answer us.

The local church: a little heaven on earth? Yes: most assuredly, it is.