WHAT IS CHURCH OR CONGREGATION?

ARNO & MARIANNE CLAASSEN

A FRESH NEW CONCEPT ABOUT CONGREGATION! (PART 8)

© COPYRIGHT 2010

ARNO & MARIANNE CLAASSEN
LIFEWISE CONSULTANTS

PUBISHED BY:

LIFEWISE PUBLISHERS
ABSA, Branch Code – 334 645
Account number: 9211 621 868

PO BOX 31288TH
WONDERBOOM, 0033

(012) 335 7571
Arno Claassen 082 460 3024
Marianne Claassen 082 412 7000

arno@lifewise.co.za

www.lifewise.co.za

THE RIGHTS OF THIS DOCUMENT AS IT IS ARE IN THE HANDS OF THE WRITER. ANY READER IS ENCOURAGED TO SEND IT TO AS MANY PEOPLE AS POSSIBLE WITHOUT CHANGING THE CONTENTS THEREOF. THE CONTENT CAN BE FREELY USED IN YOUR OWN WORDS AND THEN USED UNDER YOUR OWN NAME!

PROLOGUE

Little by little we are making progress. We have now seen the scope of the great commission and how we are to think about congregation from this one and only commission to go out and disciple the nations. The writing of these studies is as confronting to me as they are to you. After I have written the previous chapter, I sat back and said to myself, “You definitely believe that this great commission is written in the Word, but you do not really believe what is written there.” I got so used to the Word and the contents thereof, that I do not think of the implications thereof anymore. My church life has kept me so busy that I have become immune to the Word. At least I keep myself busy with the things of the Lord! God will have to understand because He will see how much I am sacrificing for His Kingdom. However, it remains a fact that if my congregation life does not mean I am carrying out the great commission, it does not count any marks in the Lord’s Kingdom!

In this chapter we are reaching the heart of the matter! What is congregation? Throughout all my years in the ministry I am still dumbfounded when I see how congregation leaders can do something for years without knowing the basic definition thereof. There is great confusion in the Evangelical, Protestant churches about simple matters like: what is church, who is God, when are we forgiven, what does it mean to be reborn, and even how does one become saved? Is church so complicated that we all practice it together but we cannot get one uniform, basic definition about it? Did the Father make things so complicated? Are these things not for the simple and uneducated people too? It is indeed so simple that any person can understand it!

WHAT IS CHURCH?

8.1) TWO GROUPS:

To introduce the subject, let us look at a few comments which may help us in the process. Throughout the Bible there have been two groups of people. In the Old Testament we had the Jews and the heathens. The Jews were chosen to bring the glory of the Lord to the heathens, which never happened. In the New Testament the group of heathens was done away with, because salvation was bought for everybody and everybody was brought to the same level before the Father. After the resurrection we now only have believers and unbelievers. On the one hand we have those who believe in Jesus and on the other hand we have the rest who does not believe in Him.

8.2) TWO REQUIREMENTS FOR OUR LIVES:

There are two matters or callings on our lives that come strongly to the forefront from the New Testament. Firstly we all have a CALLING according to 1 Cor 1:9 *to fellowship with Jesus Christ*. There is a general calling on all people and that is to live in relationship with Jesus. This calling from God on our lives is very strong and it forms the basis and foundation of everything in our spiritual lives. There is something like a specific calling as well, but that points to the specific gift and field in which you are functioning. If you do not understand your specific calling, it is usually because you are not in the first place sufficiently established in your general calling! What is important, though, is that everyone has a calling and not only some people!

As we have already seen from Matthew 28:18-20, there is a clear COMMISSION to all believers. The commission is to disciple all nations unto obedience to the Father. The message is very clear, namely that all believers have a commission to disciple. It is not a task that is selectively reserved for the fulltime, fivefold team! Let us thoroughly secure these concepts in our minds, because we will need them when we are going to look at the definition for congregation.

8.3) TWO MISSIONS IN THE TRADITIONAL CONGREGATION

From my experience in church I have learnt that the average congregation experiences dissension between two missions, where the one appeals as much to the people as the other. On the one hand the believers have to go out, win souls and bring them back into the congregation. As soon as the new believers are in the congregation, they have to be educated so that they can then go out. However, statistics show that if a believer has spent 2 years in a congregation, he will not go back to the world where he came from or even go out to reach any other people for the Lord! They have been “churched” too much and it is far too uncomfortable to go to the unbelievers. The average church makes things very comfortable for you, especially when they have auditoriums with comfortable chairs!

Through the years I have come to realize that the average congregation does not succeed in carrying out both callings. The one is always suffering under the other. It remains the most convenient option to work with the already existing believers and we conveniently forget about the unbelievers in our pastoral programs. The only congregations where you will find a constant flow of converts, is where the leader himself has a fivefold

evangelistic gift. Then it is the gift of the leader that leads the people to conversion and not the believers. It is then the pastors who gather the sheep and not the sheep who gather sheep. Currently the congregation of the Lord is a movement of fulltime, fivefold leaders who lead and who are supported by believers, whereas it should be a movement of believers who do the work and are facilitated by fivefold ministry!

The congregation cannot focus on two things at the same time. The congregation can only have one focus. That means that you have to either take away one of the existing missions or try to combine them in a way. To put the one before the other will lead to competition and then the most convenient one will always win! The Biblical solution in light of the great commission is to cancel everything that occupies the believers' time so much that they cannot reach the unbelievers, and then to rebuild the whole congregation plan with the discipleship of the unbelievers as the only focus. All the other things only have a place while we are carrying out one vision of the congregation. It may sound radical, but no other solution will be effective.

The whole manner, in which we have built the congregation, has undermined the one single mission of the Father and it has kept us so busy that we don't get to the original great commission. It is easy to excuse ourselves, because everyone is struggling with it and few people get it right! It is time to read the Word again and to work from the Word as the only source. If we all have it wrong, then we all have to change and get to that for which we were destined. All the statistics indicate that the average congregation is failing miserably. Let us be honest and start changing what needs to be changed. The worst is that if you are using something for a purpose it was not intended for, it will kill you anyway. People, there is no

escape or turning back for us. We will simply have to beg the Father for mercy to be able to turn this bus around. We simply cannot go and stand in front of Him one day in the state that we are in today!

8.4) THERE IS ONLY ONE MISSION!

To understand the definition of congregation correctly, it is necessary to correctly understand the Father's mission of His Son to this earth. It is of utmost importance to realize that there is only one, already existing mission of which all believers must become part. God the Father is the source of this mission, because it originated in His heart. The substance of His mission is to reveal to the unbelievers His heart of love, so that they can all come home. To complete this mission, He sent His only Son. Jesus came to save the world and to proclaim the love of the Father to us. Jesus not only came to fulfill the mission, His whole life and existence became the mission. The mission was not a department of his life, but His whole life.

The mission of Jesus was to pay for the unbelieving world and to reveal the glory of the Father to them. When we are converted and we return to the Father, we join the mission of His Son. We are not paying for the world, but we are paying to get the Gospel to them and by showing them with our lives the glory and love of the Father! When unbelievers are converted they become part of a mission in the first place and not part of a congregation first. The mission was there before the congregation and the mission constitutes the congregation. The mission indicates the congregation's right of existence, because the mission is the only right of existence. When the mission gets lost, the congregation loses its right of existence, its direction and its essence. When you take the mission away, the congregation loses all its motivation and purpose to exist.

That is why believers, who are not involved with the mission, become passive and are losing motivation for true congregation life! It is not revelation that keeps the love of God on fire in our hearts, but the mission. Love only remains fresh when it is given out and not when it is hoarded! The heart of missionary work is to love God and our neighbour with all our heart! The only way to get love into your heart is by the immanence of the Holy Spirit at conversion – Rom 5:5. The only way to keep on to love and to let it grow is by giving it out to others.

Nowhere in the Word is there any indication of an invitation to membership or to "come and join the believers" and definitely no invitation to attend services! If you have accepted Jesus, you are automatically part of the body of Christ. All you have to do is to find the local believers or congregation who are already "going out" and to go out with them or even on your own if you do not find anyone who is moving. There is no "come here and sit and listen". The local congregation did not receive a mission and they do not have a missionary department, because the whole congregation is the mission! Everybody has to move on into the sphere of the next unbeliever's life in order to share the love of Jesus with them. Every believer who has lost the "go (and make disciples)" in his life, has lost the essence of true congregational life and the right to existence as believer in a congregation.

Thus, the question is not which congregation to join, but which mission to live out! The motivation and life of a believer lies in the mission he has and not in the revelation that he receives every Sunday! The unbeliever needs discipling, but the believer needs a mission! Without a mission he will become passive and die spiritually. True growth in the life of every believer only starts when he takes up his mission in his heart and goes to carry it out! Growth

only takes place once believers take up their responsibility toward the mission on their lives and then carry it out. Do not offer anything to any believer until he has taken up his mission and actively started carrying it out. Shepherd newly converted people back to their Father until they clearly hear the mission in the heart of the Father and then take it up.

8.5) CHURCH AS OPPOSED TO CONGREGATION!

The word ‘church’ and the word ‘congregation’ are being used in the spoken language as if it is the same thing. In the original Greek it is two definite, separate words with two definite, separate meanings. The Greek word for ‘church’ is ‘kyriakon’, and it means, ‘the Lord’s or what belongs to the Lord’. The word ‘congregation’ in Greek is ‘ekklesia’, and it means ‘a gathering or congregation of free people who were called out by a herald in connection with the handling of public affairs’. The congregation is the people called out to be a witness for Christ in the world – 1 Pet 2:9.

The Greek word for ‘church’ existed in Jesus’s time, but it was never used by Him. I do not think it was accidental or that He did not know about the word. The word ‘church’ was used by the unbelievers to describe the believers just as the word ‘Christian’ had its origin in the mouths of the unbelievers – Acts 11:26. When people are making use of the word ‘church’ in the present-day language, it refers mainly to external things like buildings, gatherings and all kinds of infrastructure that is used to try and operate a congregation. The Greek word for ‘congregation’ was never used, inside or outside the Biblical context, for the purpose of referring to a building where public worship is taking place. The word ‘congregation’ refers exclusively to

people! People were never asked to 'come to a congregation'. The congregation was to be found everywhere because they went everywhere. The congregation was the body of Christ, His fullness which fulfilled everything in everyone – Eph 1:23. They were everywhere and they infiltrated everything!

The most effective way to let the congregation lose its mission and for its creative purpose to die, is to localize the congregation to a specific building! The way in which we are using the local congregation buildings, is responsible for the statistics which say that we have 600 congregations or 60 000 believers available to reach every unreached group on earth, but it is simply not happening! Believers believe that it is the task of only a few to go and make disciples. It will remain unchanged until the leader sets the pace, starts going and quits to disciple everyone that 'came in'. People also believe that it is only the leaders' task to go, but when the leaders go, they want other leaders to stay behind and look after them and keep them busy! We will have to break away from this sick way of thinking before anyone will take missionary work seriously!

It is not my intention to cause a dispute between the two words 'church' and 'congregation'. Grammatical redefinitions alone are not going to solve the problem. We have to rediscover the heart behind the Father's plan for congregation! To rediscover this heart, it is important to reread the Word and discard the rest. There is a Scripture in 1 Cor.4:6 which says: "Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may *learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written*.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another." We must not think or reason above and beyond what is written, because it will cause us to be arrogant against one another. I find that

there is nothing in church life that makes people more arrogant, proud or haughty than the amount of people they managed to gather and the size of their buildings. The presence of services or gatherings or even buildings is not in principle wrong or the problem, but if this forms the basis of everything, then we are building a church and not a congregation. The problem does not lie in the people, services or buildings, but in the hearts of leaders in how they see and define congregation.

It is the leaders who created wrong definitions and values, not the believers. If we cannot get to the right definition of congregation, I doubt whether we will be able to cleanse the hearts of especially the leaders from pride and dominance based on numbers. We are building incorrectly because we are thinking wrong and we are reading the Word incorrectly. All this leads to pride in the heart of one leader towards another! We have to understand that every theologian strongly believes that his case is in the Word. First we define the case in our own words and then we search for a scripture on which to hang it. We have to start thinking from the Word and we must stop creating and using unnecessary terms that are nowhere to be found in the Word. Develop a Biblical language which keeps everything very simple.

8.6) THE BABILONIANS AS OPPOSED TO THE ROMANS

In Biblical times there were two ways in which you could expand your empire. The Babylonians, for example, went and conquered the neighboring nation and *brought them back* to Babylon together with their possessions so that they could work for them as slaves. Thus they changed the conquered Babylonians into good Babylonians by bringing

them under their authority and reigning over them. The Romans did something totally different! They went out, conquered the nation in its own country and then placed their own Roman leaders in that country so that it became a new Roman colony. They went and proclaimed the new land by sending their leaders out into the new country and by changing the whole country and its people to be like themselves.

The commission to the believers is to go out and conquer the worlds that do not know Christ and to proclaim these worlds for the Kingdom. We were never called to gather and collect everyone and everything. The success of the businessman is not measured by the amount of stock he has in store, but by the amount of stock that moves out of his stores. The store is neither the endpoint nor the collection point! Likewise the congregation is neither the endpoint nor the storing place for believers. Why do we do it then and why are we so precise about the numbers we have gathered? Our mission is to go and infiltrate every place and person with love and the authority of the Kingdom. We will never succeed if we spend our time with weekly discussions on strategy, but only if each and every believer goes to disciple the nations!

8.7) WHAT IS CONGREGATION?

The traditional definition for congregation is a group of believers who gathers regularly in a building together with qualified elders for the practicing of the sacraments, ministering of the Word and the right theology or confession. The problem with this definition is that Jesus is totally left out and forgotten! Congregation is in essence to live like Jesus lived and to procreate that life! Jesus is the centre and the key to congregation life. If you try to define congregation without Jesus, you will also try and live it

without Jesus, and that is impossible. Congregation life is about an inner life that manifests on the outside and that is why we find it so difficult to define congregation. We keep falling back on all kinds of definitions of external things that are necessary, but not the essence of the matter.

Neil Cole, who writes a lot about 'organic church' and 'simple church', defines congregation as follows: Congregation is the *presence of* Jesus amongst *His people* which are called a *spiritual family* and who pursues *His mission* on earth!

David Watson defines congregation as follows: A group of believers baptized in the Lord Jesus Christ, who gathers regularly for the purpose of worship, discipleship and caring and then they go away from these gatherings with the intention of obeying the instructions and commandments of Christ in order that families, communities and cities may be transformed!

8.8) MINIMUM BIBLICAL REQUIREMENTS FOR CONGREGATIONS!

We see that it is not wrong for congregations to gather, but what we do see is that the gathering should not be the principal matter that takes 80% of the energy. Being a congregation is a life that has a whole process in itself and which can make use of many things along the way to eventually arrive at the purpose of getting more people to live like Jesus! We must not water down the process or lose sight of the purpose. Not all gatherings will necessarily be defined as true congregations, but a few essential ingredients are needed before it can be defined as a true congregation. You may have three people gathering under a tree or you may have a 1000 people in a huge building,

but the following are essential before it can be defined as a true congregation.

- The presence of Jesus Christ
- A gathering of two or more believers
- The ministering of Christ to one another
- Definite steps to obey Christ
- Having an impact on the community

Buildings, cars, sound systems, leaders, letters of confession, names, administration, legal registrations, departments, computers and bank accounts may all help to reach the end result, but all these are secondary resources which may help to reach the goal. If any of these resources become so prominent or so important that the congregation cannot function without them anymore, then we have built incorrectly! Every leader has to be very honest about this. Is the congregation that you have started of such a nature that it will continue spontaneously if you take away all the resources, or will it fall to pieces?

My experience in the planting of congregations the way I have previously done it, is that most congregations will not continue to exist if you take away the leaders, sermons, buildings and Sunday services! We neglected to unite the believers to Jesus. Instead, we made them dependant on the leaders and the programs. How often have I not seen how at least half of the members left when a leader left or when leadership changed. I have built wrongly and I have no intention to keep on building in ways that rely on resources! I invite you to rush with me into the Kingdom until the Father helps us to build in the right way. If you have built the way you should have, your congregation will flourish more if you leave them than when you stay!

8.9) THE THREE FORMS OF CONGREGATION

- The congregation in your house / two or three in My Name
- The congregation in the town or local area
- The congregation in the world / the body of Christ.

Each of these three is full congregations and one is not opposed to the other. Neither is one more important than the other. Each one has its place and they are all inter-dependant on one another. Leaders always want to be national or international, but the most powerful growing point of congregation is the house where two people gather! Do not try to go big. Be small, but powerful and the Father will see to it that it grows. Our Western congregations are too bothered about huge manifestations, in such a way that we have lost the powerful small format. In our world it is seen as powerful when you are a leader of many and when you are able to preach many revelations! How distorted have we made the believers and this while they are the power points of growth in the congregation!

In my opinion all ministries have been restored except one, namely the office of the believer. Because the role of the believer has not been restored, we also do not see the final restoration in effectiveness of congregations. *Congregations are currently a movement of leaders and not a movement of believers!* As soon as congregation becomes a movement of believers, the congregation will be fully restored in itself!

It is of utmost importance to realize that the basic format of a congregation is where two or more people gather. When a believer gets married, he takes up the responsibility of a congregation by implication, because when both he and his wife are believers, they have just started a new

congregation by getting married! Every married couple is a congregation and has the responsibility to expand their congregation by having children and by bringing other people into the sphere of their home. In essence this is the most powerful growth point in congregations. My question to married couples in my congregation is not whether they want a congregation, but rather how they are going to show accountability to me on what they are doing with the congregation in their house. Your family is your base congregation or your ministering team with whom you are going to disciple others. If we can mobilize every believing family into a full-grown congregation, we will need less pasturing and we will definitely have a lower divorce rate!

The Word speaks about the congregation in your home and then the congregation in your town. We have created something in-between which is not found in the Word. It is denominational phenomena which do not fit into the home, but which are also too small to claim that it represents the town. Somewhere we have to go back to building the small group and stop worrying about the next size. In countries where you find congregations of a million or more in a town or city, you will not find the in-between phenomenon which takes up all the attention and energy.

8.10) START AT THE FOUNDATION

To summarize this chapter, we can say that the only commission the believers received was to go and make disciples of all the nations! That is why we have to start with discipleship and everything else in congregation life must flow from discipleship. We do not start with meetings where we gather believers in order to disciple them so that they can go out to the world at a later stage. We start with the discipleship of the unbelievers and when they get to know the Father, we help them to become part of the one

and only program. As new congregations are created, we invest a lot into the new leaders by means of mentoring. These relationships amongst leaders become the only links that keep the congregation together as a whole.

At times we may make use of bigger occasions to draw from the five-fold ministering that passes by, because they are also on the move. This in-building of the five-fold ministry helps to direct the movement of believers, it helps to ensure that values are still pursued and it awakens certain spiritual genes in the body. No spiritual activity or congregation program may ever take our focus away from the clearly communicated great commission and it may never make us occupied with secondary congregation matters which do not duplicate the life of Jesus!

SUMMARY

1) You only start believing the Word when you do it!

2) The right definition of congregation will lead to the right living thereof.

3) We have a *calling* to fellowship with Jesus Christ and we have a *commission* to go and disciple the nations!

4) In congregation life we do not have many goals or tasks, only one, and that is the great commission. Everything that does not flow from this or does not lead thereto must be done away with.

5) The Father's mission in His Son is everything and has led to the existence of congregations.

6) Conversion is to join a mission and not a congregation. Conversion automatically makes you part of the body, but you are not automatically on a mission!

7) The congregation does not have a mission, the congregation is the mission! The mission requires everything in your life and not only a part of your life!

8) The congregation is the family of the Father on the earth, but if you take mission away the congregation loses its right to existence on earth!

9) Church is a Biblical word which refers to things. Congregation is a Biblical word which refers to people!

10) Learn not to think above what is written, because that will create pride in your life!

11) Expand the Kingdom by going to new worlds instead of inviting those people into your church world!

12) The congregation is in essence a family where Jesus is present, and where the Father is ministered to one another until there is life change so that the community can thereby be reached!

13) The powerpoint of the congregation is not found in the leadership, but in the Holy Spirit that is present in each and every believer.

14) Congregation life is a movement of believers together with their Father that is only facilitated by earthly leaders in order to keep the goal and values!