

Ecclesia beyond the Congregation: Emphasizing the New Testament Believer's Ministry in the Workplace

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Abstract

The argument against the “this-worldliness” of the church in the plan of God has, to a great extent, been settled in scholarship. This is especially significant in view of the current understanding that the kingdom of God, which the church represents in the world, is both already here and yet to come, an understanding which makes it imperative for the church to be useful to the world while she remains in it. This is the spirit of the new covenant. However, the extent of that influence has received divergent opinions, ranging from the conservative to the liberal. This work argues that the preparation of all the saints for ministry in the world is critical to the calling and New Testament definition of the Church. As a descriptive study, it emphasizes that every legitimate work is to be seen as a calling, thereby fostering the understanding that, rather than wait to congregate in the church on Sunday to worship and/or serve God, believers should actually go into the field and win the world for God. Suggestions are made on how this can be achieved, plus recommendations for possible action.

Keywords: Ecclesia, Church, Workplace and Ministry

Introduction

Many biblical scholars agree that, with the advent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the Church was born. Grudem (1994:937) sees this birth from a covenantal perspective. For him, the day of Pentecost is much more than an individual event in the lives of Jesus' disciples and those with them. The day of Pentecost was the point of transition between the old covenant work and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the new covenant work and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The commissioning of the Church, with its implications, has received a lot of attention by both believers and observers of the Christian faith for centuries. One of such is the extent to which believers (who corporately make up the Church) should participate in meaningful work. Of course, Paul warned that any believer who did not work

should not eat, emphasizing the dignity of labour. However, there is scanty information in the scriptures on how Christians should view their daily work, that is, whether there is before God a separation of the sacred from the mundane, or every work should be seen as a means to an end, the end being humanity's co-operation with God in His continuous acts of creation. This would, of course, depend on the Church's understanding of her identity either as a physical building or an organism. Thwaites (1999:5) regrets that "In spite of all the changes we have seen in our society in the past 30 to 40 years we, as saints, still remain focused on the building, the meetings and the programmes we call 'church'".

Resolving this tension is as important a task for the church as defining the essence of her existence, because it affects the way work, a vital aspect of human life, is approached, thereby determining the level of satisfaction – or dissatisfaction – believers derive from it. More than that, it determines the understanding with which ministry is done, which makes it a factor in the overall kingdom expansion. In clearer terms, how should Christians view work today? How should they regard their relationship to work? May they think of work as something more than mere daily toil and sweat? Is work a calling? Can it be thought of as worship? Do they perhaps need to review their positions and views about the place and the value of work in their lives, in the light of the changing environment of work? How must these and many other related questions be accounted for? (Botha, 2001:9). What is the role of the Church in all these? The above questions form the main thrust of this work.

Ecclesia in Biblical Data

The word Ecclesia (Gk.: *Ekklesia*) occurs both in the Old and New Testaments. In the Septuagint it is used 70 times for the Hebrew *qahal*, which means "to call". *Qahal* is used 123 times of Israel called out from the nations (Genesis 12:3); of a council called from each tribe (Genesis 49:6); of local assemblies of Israel called out to worship (Deut. 18:16; Deut. 31:30; Joshua 8:35; Judges 21:8); and of any congregation of worshippers (Psalm 22:22-25) (Ogunsanya, 2005:20). In the New Testament, it (*ecclesia*) appears 115 times and in each case except 5, it refers to the Church of Christ. The word is first found in Matthew 16:18 and was spoken of by the Lord when He said to Peter, "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." It is used for the Church of Christ in two major ways: for the invisible Church of Christ and also for the visible Churches of Christ (Ogunsanya, 2005:18). Originally the term *ecclesia* was a political one, denoting an assembly of free people who were qualified to vote (Acts 19:39) or more generally, a public assembly. According to Onyemara (2012:2,3), the idea of *ecclesia* in the New Testament was principally used by St. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9-10, although there are diverse ideas of Church in the New Testament. He further identifies ten different ways of expressing the idea of the Church in the New Testament as follows: The saints and the sanctified; believers and faithful; slaves and

servants; the people of God; kingdom and temple; household and family and the new Exodus. Others are: vineyard and flock; one body in Christ; and the New Humanity.

The New Covenant

Covenant is without doubt one of the most important motifs in biblical theology, attested to not only by the traditional labels applied to the respective parts of the Christian Bible, but also by the fact that the concept looms large at important junctures throughout the Bible. It underpins God's relationship with Noah, Abraham, Israel, the Levitical priesthood and the Davidic dynasty. It is also used with respect to God's relationship with the reconstituted 'Israel' of the future. Williamson (2007:30) therefore argues that, while 'biblical' and 'covenant theology' must certainly not be confused as synonymous, covenant is indisputably one of the Bible's core theological themes. When man was expelled from Eden, when the spiritual communion of man and God was severed, the soul was severed from the spirit: man's heart was broken; sin raised a divide between soul and spirit. Since then, contrary to original design, man is led by his soul, a heart condition that Scripture labels as 'stony,' 'blind,' or broken-hearted.' Like the knowledge of good and evil, this sequel of breach of covenant is passed on through procreation and, unless reversed, leads to eternal separation from God once the body has stopped working. To restore man, God would introduce a new covenant – through Israel. The two parties of the new covenant are the same as those of the Mosaic Covenant: Israel and God. The outwardly written Torah is the content of the Mosaic covenant (sealed with animal blood and an outward manifestation of God). The inwardly written Torah is the essence of the new covenant (sealed with the blood of Jesus Christ and an inward manifestation of God). To sign the new covenant, one must do what the Messiah did – one must die. This happens through regeneration during which the foreskin of the heart is cut and the old nature removed. Once the wall of partition between the human spirit and the soul is pierced, God supplies his signature by sending his spirit. In that moment, the Holy Spirit merges with the human spirit and the person becomes a new creature. He is born of water and spirit, and has entered the new covenant (Wilson, 2022). For Christians the concept of the new covenant is very important and it is used as a legitimization of belief in Jesus and of a lifestyle that differs from several regulations in the Torah (Paul, 2021:14

The New Covenant and the Church

Part of the significance of the covenant theme, as Rabali argues, is that it provides evidence of an inherent link between Israel as the people of God in the Old Testament and the Christians, or as the people of God in the New Testament (2004:61). Under the old covenant, the chosen people of God were the nation of Israel. God chose Abraham and

promised to bless his descendants, and bless the seed line through Isaac (Gen 21:12). The collective name used to describe God's people was "Israel", and it referred to all the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel (Gen 49:1-28). It was first used of Jacob after he wrestled with God at Peniel (Gen 32:22-32). The word "Israel" means to be a "prince with God," a prince who has power with God and with men, and has prevailed (Gen 32:28). Now, even in the old Mosaic covenant there was a spiritual Israel within the natural Israel (Rom 9:6), composed of all those Israelites who were true believers in the Lord. God's will for natural Israel was that they were to be set apart unto Him (Exo 19:5, 6). It is a known fact that God preserved that nation of Israel and used her to bring forth the "Messiah," Jesus, the ultimate and perfect Israelite (Rom 1:2-4), who fully and completely prevailed and overcame (Rev 5:5).

Under the new covenant, God's chosen people and "true Israel" are all who belong to Jesus Christ through faith (Gal 3:29). The new covenant Israel of God is the church, or all those who are saved. The new covenant Jews are composed of all the saved natural Jews and Gentiles (Phil 3:3; Gal 6:16; Rom 2:28, 29). Believers in Christ are the new spiritual nation of God, the new people of God, and the true seed of Abraham (1 Pet 2:9, 10; Gal 3:29). They inherit Abraham's blessings. Now, there is one body, and God has broken down the wall of separation between Jew and Gentile in Christ (Eph 2:14-16). God will work sovereignly in the end to bring many natural Jews to Christ, and a vast number will get saved in the last days (Rom 11:25, 26). They will get saved the same way the Gentiles get saved, through faith in Christ (Gal 3:26), and will be a part of the "New Israel of God" or the "New People of God," who are joined to Christ. They will be part of the Church, and not as a separate people of God. They will be grafted into the one olive tree of God (Rom 11:11-24). This new covenant church, in line with God's provision for the new covenant as prophesied by Jeremiah, is one that is made up of believers who are the carriers of the Spirit within them, for which reason they can extend the influence of the kingdom wherever they find themselves (Kent, 1985:296).

The Ecclesia in Relation to the World

It has been argued that the word "Ecclesia" nowhere refers to a building or a denomination (Ogunsanya, 2005:18). According to Anthony (2008:30, 31), the biblical background of the term "ecclesia" implies that the church is essentially the living community of those who have responded to the call of God, and therefore not the formal ecclesiastical structure immediately brought to mind today by the word "Church". Unfortunately, translating *ecclesia* directly as "church" results in the term losing much of its significance. It is for this reason that Caudle (2020:1) argues that this watered-down translation de-emphasizes the responsibilities of the *ecclesia* and the call of the body of believers to contribute to the

common good and be active in all areas of their world. Jesus said He would build His Church. He could not have meant a building, for that would not have been any different from the magnificent temple already existing in Jerusalem. In John's account, He said the disciples were not of the world, just as Himself was not of the world (John 17:16). This passage clearly shows that the ecclesia is called out of the world. But the *calling out* in context was earlier defined in verse 15: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one" (RSV), portraying that Jesus was not referring to the geographical world, but the world in the context of the prevalent evil, not unconnected with the devil, the perpetrator of evil.

Even though Jesus constantly used the Greek word *kosmos*: (world), He made clear His perspective by emphasizing that, though they were *in* the world, they were *not* of the world. While the former referred to the geographical world, the latter could only have referred to the world in terms of evil. Actually, the notion of cosmos (order, harmony) occurs in ancient Greek thought, where the Demiurge gives shape to amorphous matter, pre-existing matter, which before being ordered is under total chaos (Bugiulescu, 2017:26). The Greek *kosmos* has more than one meaning. The first is a decoration, ornament; the second is (used figuratively and symbolically) a world of something, as an aggregate; the third connotes the created world, material universe, especially the earth; the fourth is humanity, the people of the earth, often a synecdoche for any part of the world, the great majority of people in a particular place, the world generally, every man without distinction, not necessarily every man without exception; the fifth is human society, that ordered complex of human institutions, cultures, and practices, with all its influences and experiences, operating at both the individual and corporate levels of life; the sixth is – ethically, morally, or spiritually – the present world-order or system of life in its condition of self-reliance and independence from God along with its apostate beliefs, values, ethics, attitudes, and practices (Yau, 1978:17-20).

The *kosmos* as such is concerned with the present, transitory dimension of life, ignoring or denying eternity (Baker, 1996:1642). There is every reason to believe that the sense in which Jesus was using the word in question was not far from this last meaning. The important thing to consider here is the fact that, since Jesus was not praying for God to take the disciples (by extension, the church) out of the world immediately, then there was a purpose for which He allowed them to remain in the world. He was leaving the earth bodily, but they were to remain. However, they were not just to sit and fold their arms, awaiting His return (as reflected in the "Occupy till I come" parable of Luke 19:13). They were to let their lights shine before men who would see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). It was in this sense that Martin Luther said that "...God does not

call people from the world, but into the world” (Botha, 2001:15). Adelaja (2008:11) explains this further when he says:

It is on the same note that Wagner emphasizes that the kingdom of God is not confined to the four walls of the local church. He notes that many traditional church leaders, even today, would strongly affirm the following two presuppositions:

1. The work of ministry is done in the local church – in church-sponsored activities – or possibly in a parachurch organization.
2. The Body of Christ is the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God. Consequently, church leadership has been trained to carry out their responsibilities in the kingdom of God here on earth primarily through the local church (2004:59).

Wagner (2001:64) observes, however, that growing number of leaders, most of whom began their ministry with the above traditional presuppositions, are beginning to enter a paradigm shift. They now regard what is done in conjunction with the local church as bona fide kingdom activity but as only part of the whole picture. He further identifies with Ed Silvoso’s position on four lethal misbeliefs that minimize the impact of believers in the workplace, thus:

1. There is a God-ordained division between clergy and laity.
2. The Church is called to operate primarily inside a building often referred to as the temple.
3. People involved in business cannot be as spiritual as those serving in traditional Church ministry.
4. The primary role of the marketplace Christians is to make money to support the vision of those “in the ministry”.

The recognition of the above as “misbeliefs” is not novel. Thwaites (1999) insists that what he calls the Greek paradigm has confused the Church’s understanding of the way in which God comes to, and exists in, our world. According to him:

The Greek worldview divided the spiritual realm from the created realm; the Hebrew world unites them. The Greek version of reality has made the church something separate from much of the saints’ life and work; the Hebrew worldview brings this back together under one divine strategy and eternal purpose (1999:5)

Until the time of Luther, calling actually ranked as an increasingly important issue, but it was usually regarded as a spiritual calling, the calling to become a believer. In time it became institutionalized, and calling became a technical expression to signify a departure from secular life into the official spiritual life within the institute or institution of one of the spiritual orders, such as monastic life, for example. To receive a call or obey a call therefore literally came to be regarded as relinquishing ordinary, normal life for a secluded and

dedicated life as a member of the clergy. People accepted that these divisions were natural, had to be such and were willed by God (Botha, 2001:15).

Luther, however, opposes the above position. God does not call some people only, but all. Not only some are priests, but all. This motif in Luther can only be understood when viewed in relation to his emphasis on the common priesthood of all believers (Botha, 2001:14-15). The priesthood of all believers is believed to be supported by 1 Peter 2:9 says: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." The first part of that verse makes the statement, while the second part declares the essence. In the first part, the titles given to Israel as can be seen in Ex. 19:5-6 and Isaiah 43:20-21 are woven together and are transferred to the church. In the second part, it can be seen that the essence or purpose of this position of the church is the declaration of God's praises. The Greek word translated praises here, *arêtas*, means goodness, excellence, and virtue. Dubis (2010:57) feels that in line with the underlying Hebrew *hillah* (praise), *aretas* is better interpreted to as 'praiseworthy deeds' referring to the salvific activity in Christ, but Davids (1990:127) adds the activity of God in creation to the contents of this 'praises'. "Show forth" (*angelos*) means to message out, publish abroad or proclaim. To show forth (according to some versions) His praises, then, in the view of these researchers means to live and work in a way that portrays His goodness, excellence, and virtue as reflected in the activity of God in creation and in the redemptive work of Christ. The God to show forth his praises has 'called' them out of darkness into his marvellous light. This according to Davids, implies their conversion. The believer's 'normal' life between Sundays, therefore, is critical to the achievement of this. Again, scripture admonishes believers to do all that they do to the glory of God (1Cor 10:31) (Botha, 2001:17).

With the above understanding, it can be inferred that God's heartbeat is that believers should project His goodness virtues and goodness anywhere they find themselves including the workplace. First Corinthians 7:17 – "Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him" – can also be understood in this light. This would mean that whatever a person legitimately finds to do in keeping with his/her God-wired abilities should be seen as a calling. When it is seen as such, then the ecclesia will go beyond the Church and believers will be seen bringing God's rule to bear upon the spheres of life within their jurisdiction. According to Schumacher (1987:93), this even reflects the mystical church. In his own words: "...work is 'whole' when the action of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is fully manifest in it, and when men collaborate within a structure and spirit which reflects Christ's mystical body, the Church".

The argument above is not in any way to de-emphasize the Church as a body of believers that meet regularly for worship and edification under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Also.

It does not de-emphasize the place of priests trained to serve in the local church. The priesthood of believers implies that every believer has an assignment/service from God to carry out. According to their God given abilities for the expansion of the kingdom of God anywhere they find themselves including their workplaces.

The Nature of the Ecclesia in the Workplace

Whether they know it or not, every Christian is in ministry – at home, at school, at recreation, and at work. Since work is constant in the life of believers and, as a matter of fact, claims more of their time compared to church fellowship times, it is important to categorise how the ecclesia could be extended to the workplace. The following suggestions could serve as means of extending the arms of the Body of Christ to the workplace:

1. The ecclesia in the workplace is made up of believers who understand that they have been saved to serve in the world. Its constituents are aware that, before God, ministry goes beyond the Sunday-to-Sunday experience.
2. The ecclesia in the workplace is realized when the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit are brought to bear upon and to regulate work ethics, thereby offering the world quality services and goods. It is made up of people who understand that both what is done and how it is done are of equal importance to God. Members of this movement do not cut corners; they are honest in their dealings, frugal in spending, wise with words, match words with actions, and confirm promises with fulfilment. Since the members of this movement are patient enough to wait for their time, they do not bribe their way through the rung of the organization's ladder. Rather, they develop themselves and trust God to give them their due rewards. As noted by Dean (2019:37), leadership of members of the ecclesia in the workplace is characterised by love, which practical application involves rather simple yet overlooked concepts such as talking to employees every day, caring genuinely for them by knowing them by name and the names of their family members, asking about their lives outside of work, celebrating their anniversaries, birthdays, and other occasions.
3. The ecclesia in the workplace also entails identifying fellow believers in the workplace and finding unofficial ways of strengthening one another irrespective of denominational differences. According to Lim (2019:8), sharing a common religion might contribute to the building of trust, and hence facilitate the cultivation of socially and commercially beneficial relationships, with one's colleagues and business acquaintances.
4. The ecclesia in the workplace is made up of people who, as much as possible, make decisions that are in accordance with Bible teachings (Lim, 2019:7).

5. Members of the ecclesia beyond the congregation also look out for opportunities to share the love of Christ with those who are yet to be Christians. In fact, they look forward to drawing people to Christ through their positively different dispositions towards work and actions, but they are also sensitive enough to know when there is an opening to share the love of Christ with others.

The Role of the Church in Promoting the Ecclesia in the Workplace

The role of the church in promoting ecclesia in the workplace is important. The Church has an assignment to make disciples of all nations (Matt 28; 19) and by virtue of this assignment; her ministry is to the whole world (Olusakin, 2020:4) including the workplace. So, strengthening the believers and educating them on effective ecclesia in the workplace are pivotal. In the first place, the church needs to emphasize that the ecclesia of the New Testament goes beyond the church building to involve the presence and conscious impact of believers at their duty posts. Thwaites (1999:5) calls it a "...re-evaluation of our present congregation-focused approach to church life" which, in his own words, is long overdue. It will not be out of place to say that the long-standing clergy-laity wall, whenever unnecessarily emphasized, limits the workplace ministry of believers, as it makes them leave the church building with the mentality that that is where the ministry ends. The idea that the people are engaged in whatever work they are doing just to get money and support ministers who are supposedly the only ones in ministry needs to be deemphasized both in word and practice.

Following after the above is the need for the church to teach her members that whatever they choose to do should be seen as a calling. This idea will further be enhanced by the understanding that everyone has been designed to fit in somewhere. This understanding of life's purpose is critical to a correct work ethics and the intrinsic satisfaction that one is supposed to derive from work. Next, the fact that not all career choices are legitimate needs to be emphasized. For this to be actualized, the overemphasis on material prosperity at the expense of prudence and hard work must be handled, as it engenders the love of money and quest for materialism at all cost, which in turn baptizes even occupations known to be illegitimate. Those who are caught up in that snare sometimes even call it favour. The problem with it is fundamental. Hardly can occupations built on faulty foundations promote Christian witness in the workplace, or anywhere at all.

Conclusion

Emphasizing the ministry of all believers in the workplace has several implications for both the church as an institution and her individual members. The impetus for this can be drawn from Ephesians 4:11, 12 which says that Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors and

Teachers have been given “For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” When the Church does her bit and releases members into the world to win their environments for Christ, the Church’s mission will be fulfilled easily, the society will be better, and the future will have been secured.

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