

Discussion: Edmund Clowney's "The Church"

Let us begin with prayer.

We ask about the church and how it should function, Lord. Help us to love You and love Your church. May we not be detractors but edifiers in our own fellowships. Give us a broad view of the body of Christ and a concern for other Christians and different communions, Father. We ask You to improve our own churchmanship, Father—our zeal and effectiveness in Your service. We commit ourselves to You. Teach us, we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us talk about Clowney's book, *The Church*. One student has expressed an appreciation for many good thoughts in this book but also difficulty in following the flow of the argument. There are not many good books on the church and so I am grateful for this one. Clowney's fairness in dealing with others, even those with whom he disagrees, is admirable. Also, he has a balanced treatment of women's roles in the church.

According to Edmund Clowney, missionary concern is a leading factor in the development of the ecumenical movement. That is how things developed. Believers began to get together to share their burden for the lost and the missionary task of the church around the world. And out of that came ecumenism. Ecumenism has some good aspects, and yet today the World Council of Churches, for example, is so dominated by radical theologies that most conservatives are ill at ease even in supporting it. And there has been an unfortunate move away from a missionary zeal now that the focus is on dialoguing with the world's religions.

When Jesus said, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church," Luther and Calvin would say the rock referred to Peter's confession, not Peter himself. But Clowney says that Jesus was actually referring to Peter. I would agree with Dr. Clowney. This was one place where the reformers were overreacting to the Roman Catholic claims. However, this does not lend any weight to the Roman claims about Peter being the Pope. That is not the point. But I do think the reformers engaged in some defensive exegesis at this point. And I would agree with Clowney, although there is disagreement here among Bible believing Christians. But certainly Peter did not claim to be Pope and he is not the Pope. In 1 Peter 5:1 he gives his attitude; he was a fellow elder and a servant of Christ. Some of us have difficulty in understanding Clowney's statements on this issue. Clowney emphasizes the inseparability of Peter's person and his confession. I think that is a good way to do it. If Jesus was talking about Peter as an individual, it was not Peter apart from his fellow apostles and it was not Peter in some office apart from his ministry of the proclamation of the Word. Rather, Jesus was designating Peter as the God-ordained leader of the early church. There is no doubt that Acts focuses around the ministries of two outstanding leaders gifted by God: Peter and then Paul. Peter was used by God in a mighty way. God tamed him and used his zeal, leadership gifts, and boldness in preaching. He also was given power to heal, which supported the preaching ministry. His preaching was blessed by God. Thousands were converted day after day. Clowney does not want to support Roman Catholic claims or agree with the reformers' defensive exegesis of this passage. He is trying to be positive and study the text. The reformers had something when they said it was Peter's confession that Jesus was referring to, but they did not need to separate that from his person. It is Peter the confessor, Peter the preacher, who is in view in Jesus' statement.

Some teach that the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is limited to empowering select individuals for special service. It is true that He empowered select individuals for special purposes and service. But we cannot limit His work to that. Clowney, along with other reformed theologians, would

say that ever since the Fall people were dead in their trespasses and sins; if they were to be saved they needed to be given new life by God. He refuses to accept, and I agree, a different salvation in the Old Testament than in the New Testament. There are differences in terms of the object of faith and the understanding of the people. Then the saints were looking forward to Christ's coming, and now we look back to His coming—we see things much more clearly. If people were spiritually dead then we have to first ask the question, did God save Old Testament believers? Surely we have to say yes on the strength of passages such as Romans 4, Galatians 3 and 4, and Hebrews 6 and 11. And if we say yes, then we have to ask, did He save them in a different way than He saves them now? The answer has to be no. All evangelical Christians, as far as I know, agree on this point: no one is saved apart from the atonement of Jesus Christ. The saints have all either looked forward to Him or looked back to Him in retrospect. Even so the Holy Spirit had to apply that saving work of Christ to come to the Old Testaments saints as well. If they were spiritually dead—I do not see how we can deny that, although it is more plainly taught in the New Testament than in the Old—and if they were saved, which the New Testament certainly teaches that they were, then I do not see how they could have been saved apart from the election of God the Father, the saving work of Christ in the future, and the application of that salvation by the Holy Spirit. We are not claiming that these things are as plainly taught in the Old Testament as they are in the New, but there are hints of them in the Old. The revelation of the Bible is progressive.

I would agree with Clowney that although the Holy Spirit was involved, He was involved empowering individuals to do great works of service. Think of Judges, for example, and men like Sampson. We cannot limit His work to those aspects, but instead we need to also ascribe to Him other aspects of the working of salvation. Otherwise we have to say that the saints of the Old Testament were not saved or, what seems like a theological monstrosity to us, they were saved in some other way—apart from the work of Christ. But if they were saved by the work of Christ, was it without the Holy Spirit? Did they make themselves alive spiritually? Or did they remain dead spiritually and were they saved while they were spiritually dead? Were the works of Joseph and David and other Old Testament heroes deeds of the flesh or were they the fruit of the Holy Spirit? Even as God has always been the holy Trinity—a teaching which is much more plainly revealed in the New Testament than in the Old—even so the one salvation has always been planned, accomplished, and applied by that same Trinity. What about the Spirit's work in creation and providence? There is evidence in the Psalms that the Holy Spirit is involved in God's good work of sustaining His creation, especially, and also directing it toward His ends. Be challenged to look into this yourself. Do not accept anything just because I and Clowney say it. You have to be convinced from the Bible.

Clowney says two qualities define the Spirit's purposes as He is found in the church. He is the Spirit of truth and the Spirit of life. I think that is good, though perhaps we should add that He is the Spirit of love. There is much about fellowship in Acts. The Spirit gives new life. He worked through the apostles' preaching first of all and then He led them to put into writing the New Testament—certain aspects of that preaching, directed toward individual churches and some of their needs. All of that is in fulfillment of John chapters 14-16. In discussing the work of the Holy Spirit we cannot sharply separate natural gifts from spiritual gifts. This seems wise to me. It is not at all a way to get around denying the supernatural. Rather, it is a way of saying that the most important thing is we must use all our gifts for God. The Lord has given us natural endowments, which He sanctifies in His service; praise the Lord! It all comes from God. Do unbelievers have natural gifts? Yes, of course. They can have great natural gifts. They can be gifted intellectually, artistically, with winsomeness, etc. But we can be sure that every believer has at least one gift. It may augment their personality. It may be useful for teaching or ministry in some particular area. But God does not cancel out our whole personality. There can be great changes in personality, but I would say that is unusual. Usually there is a blossoming of natural gifts and

endowments. And certainly as the Lord's people we still have problems, even big problems. We often do not use our gifts in the best way that we can.

As Clowney points out, the sure sign of Christ's true church is not found in its unbroken line of succession from Peter. Rather, it is found in its fidelity to the Gospel that Peter and the other apostles taught. That is the apostolicity: faithfulness to the apostles' message, not an unbroken line of succession from Peter. While no church is perfect in its teaching, we must distinguish between churches that are defective in doctrine—which I suppose would be all churches to some degree—and those that are apostate, having renounced the apostolic pattern of sound teaching. The New Testament itself warns of great apostasy in the last days. Some years ago in teaching the doctrine of Scripture I was struck by the fact that apostasy in the last days is mentioned in context of the two great passages that teach the inspiration of the Bible (2 Timothy 3 and 2 Peter 1). The Lord is forthrightly saying there will be such apostasy, a great turning away from the truth of the Word of God. And the context of these warnings seems to imply that the Bible is given to us as the antidote to that apostasy. Scripture is God's remedy for the spiritual poison of apostasy.

It is humbling but true to admit that none of our churches are perfect in teaching. Because this is true, we should always be reforming, always trying to evaluate our teaching by the Word of God. But we need to distinguish between orthodox churches that have some defects and churches that have departed from the apostolic pattern of sound teaching. It could be hard in individual cases to label churches as having done such. With some others it may not be hard. One professedly Christian congregation has called for embracing theological pluralism with the religions of the world. Anything less than that they call imperialism. But even in such clear cases as an outright pluralism of accepting every religion and whatever beliefs they have, it is tricky, too, to pronounce denominations apostate. There are often sections within the denomination of congregations that are striving to live and teach according to God's Word.

As Clowney points out, the idea that Christ is not incarnate in the cosmic process is false (page 95). He together with the Father and the Holy Spirit created and sustains the universe, but that is not how He is incarnate. He is incarnate in becoming a human being, living a sinless life, dying for our sins, rising again, and returning to the Father. We must not downplay the uniqueness of His incarnation by talking in these terms. This is actually evolutionary theory applied to Christian theology, and it is false.

Sectarianism and racism deny the catholicity of the church. Clowney is a practical theologian, is he not? He knows historical theology of the church. He works carefully with the Bible, he knows what is happening in our churches and in our world, and he seeks to apply the truth. The marks of the church include true preaching of the Word, proper observance of the sacraments, and faithful exercise of church discipline. Church membership is biblical and necessary. The information we have in the epistles concerning church discipline implies something very much like church membership. How can you exclude people from fellowship if there is no sense of membership in fellowship? Their church membership may have taken a different form than ours. But there is that idea of belonging because if people go far enough they are then disenfranchised and put out—which means they were in to begin with. That is the biblical foundation for what we call church membership.

People who have enough thought and interest in the church to spend years of research and to write a book on the church are likely to cast para-church organizations in a negative light. There are problems, I understand that. There are sometimes serious problems. I have taught students who have worked faithfully in para-church organizations and known the Lord's blessing on their ministries and have not regarded all as wasted. But they came to seminary because of abuses and problems in the organization.

They came to get more training and to work with the church. I rejoice that church staffs are hiring para-church-type workers in the areas of discipleship and evangelism. These are often very effective people. There are definitely problems with para-church organizations, but it would be too strong to label them as illegitimate.

The New Testament does not give us an order of service or detailed directions for conducting worship. I have been with different groups who have thought it does. But I think it is a mistake to say that our particular order of service is commanded by the Lord, because the implication is then that the rest of the people are not worshipping according to the Bible. That seems to me, not deliberately, but in the end, to be prideful. We are simply not given an order of service. There have been some studies of early Christian worship as related to first century synagogue worship, and I would say it is helpful to study those things. But we are not bound to those forms. There are certain essential elements of worship, as Clowney points out. In terms of Christ's mission around the world, those elements can be applied in particular cultures in different ways, under godly leadership and sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. I do not see that every service has to be the same. Perhaps the Lord in His wisdom did not give us a divinely commanded order of worship for that very purpose. In the United States in the last 25 years the church has had less of a problem with indoctrination and more of a problem with a loss of order and instruction in the Word of God. There are many different reasons why this is a problem. One reason is competition with mass media that has become flashier and thus more powerful. People find it dull to sit through a monologue-style Sunday school class. There are serious problems here. We need to devote ourselves to doing a better job of teaching. On the other hand, some movements like Bible Study Fellowship have moved in to fill the void. They are not without problems, but I suppose the existence of those types of ministries demonstrates that there is a real need.

The identity of the church is necessary for the mission of the church. I agree with Clowney very strongly on this point. That is why we began this discussion by talking about what the church is—the nature of the church, attributes of the church, marks of the church—and then moved to talking about the ministries of the church, church government, etc. This is a fundamental order: being is prior to doing. Modern philosophy has not followed that order. And modern theology, which chases after modern philosophy, has erred in the same way; evangelicalism has been affected by that. We tend to downplay being and identity. This is a mistake. We need to know what the church is before we decide what the church ought to do. We need to spend more time preaching and teaching on the doctrine of the church. This is so very rarely the topic of our sermons or classes. And we wonder why people do not understand the church, why they move around from one to the other, and why there is such a lack of commitment to the church. There are many factors there, but a part of the problem at least is a lack of teaching concerning what the church is and what it ought to do.

For the church to turn from evangelism to multi-culturalism and radical feminism is to turn to another gospel. I am glad that in the midst of being fair and compassionate Clowney does not hesitate to take a strong stand against false doctrine where necessary. And here is a case where we surely should not compromise. Also, the Bible condemns many cultural practices. The Lord has some very harsh things to say about idolatry, for example. And if incest or other sins are a part of a culture's framework they begin to be expelled when the Gospel comes in.

The position that believers in every country should form exclusively Christian political parties that seek to exercise power in the name of Christ is a misunderstanding of the mission of the church. I agree with him on that. Others believe that because of the authority Christ gave them, church leaders are free to invent doctrines and practices without scriptural authority. This is surely not true!

Turning to the government of the church, Clowney (who is part of the Presbyterian Church in America) says women are not to function as elders in a church, but he is in favor of women serving as deacons, or rather, deaconesses. I do not know how strong his stance on this is. I think maybe I am not quite as strongly in favor of women deacons as he is, but I would not oppose it. And I certainly agree with him that we ought to not have a negative theology of women. If all we say about any group of people is what they cannot do, that is wrong. The Bible does not do that, though it does give some prohibitions in this area. We ought to respect those prohibitions and not see ourselves as free to change them, but we need also to say what the Lord says in a positive way about women.

Clowney grounds this idea that women can serve as deaconesses not in personal opinion but in his understanding of the Scriptures, as he regards Phoebe as a deaconess. He is not in favor of women as either teaching or ruling elders, but he is in favor of women teaching and serving the Lord. They can exercise authority in different spheres in the church, but not as the official leaders or official preachers of the congregation—this is his own conclusion. You have the right to disagree with us. We are not trying to be contentious but we are bound to what we understand the Bible teaches. Clowney understands Phoebe as a deaconess where some would see her as a servant and not holding that office, though she is described using the same word for deacon.

Clowney believes the apostolic signs, the miraculous gifts, have ceased. But he notes that the cessation of the apostolic signs does not mean the cessation of the gifts of the Spirit. The saints still possess the graces that were supernaturally heightened in the miraculous gifts. I think the key here is the word “apostolic.” That is, he would not agree that there are anymore apostles who have the authority to write Scripture or to preach direct revelation from God. He does show some openness to the possibility of God continuing to do the supernatural. But he sees the apostolic signs as having been limited to the founding of the Christian church. I agree with him that apostleship is something really to jealously guard as a first century phenomenon. I understand that the Bible itself uses apostle in a secondary sense, and perhaps we could use it in that sense, but I would think, because of confusion, it is unwise to do so. On the other hand, God is God and He does still work supernaturally. I know of a student whose brother-in-law had done some preaching in an African country. He preached in English and the people heard him in their own language. I am not sure what we call that, but if he was preaching the true Gospel and they were hearing the true Gospel, then I would call it an occasion for praising the Lord.