

Final Report (part 1)

My last week working in Malawi passed with little change - long drives, different places to sleep, preaching outside and inside, to large and small crowds. The change to motorcycles for a few days was not as pleasant as I had hoped. Loose front forks, poor brakes, and wandering cows combined with sandy soil created more stress than the freedom I usually feel when riding.

The only real change was a late invitation to speak on Sunday at one of the oldest churches in Lilongwe. Some issues have been raised regarding the organization of the church and the elders wanted me to come and address it. They normally have two services on Sunday - one in English and the other in Chichewa. On the last Sunday of the month they combine the services and all worship together. Since I came on the last Sunday of August, there were over 400 in attendance.

They asked me to preach on the authority of elders in a local congregation. This included how they work with the evangelists and deacons, interact with elders from other congregations, and especially, did Jesus give any means for those outside a local congregation to remove the elders, fire their preacher, or overrule their decisions? All of these questions centered on how Jesus organized the church He built, so we began there.

I began by describing how the needs of citizens lead a government to create a system to fulfill them. For example, citizens need their children to be educated. The government responds by creating an organization (a school), to fulfill that need. They appoint headmasters and teachers to accomplish the task. This is a simple organization that exists in every village in Malawi. Another example are the needs of citizens to be treated for sickness and injury. This is a more complicated task and requires a more extensive organization. A hospital is an organization to care for the needs of patients. It is made up of a doctor, nurses, and a variety of support staff (lab, x-ray, pharmacy, registration, surgery, etc.). Thus an organization is a system created by someone to fulfill the specific needs of a group of people.

God saw great needs on the part of sinners who wanted to serve Him. They needed forgiveness, guidance, protection, and direction. He first gave a Savior to bring forgiveness, a gospel, and a church to completely cover all these needs. The church was designed to bring as many people as possible to heaven. Just as the government created schools and hospitals with the personnel needed to fulfill the identified needs, so did Jesus with His church. He knew the challenges of time and distance His church would face. They needed to go into all the nations, and Jesus would continue to work with them until the end of the age (Mt. 28:18-20). The most basic description of the personnel of a local church was given by Paul in his greeting to the church in Philippi. Much like headmasters and teachers in schools, the church is to have bishops (overseers) and deacons (servants).

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: (Phil. 1:1)

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spoke of how Jesus gave gifts to the church. These gifts were the offices He created for the church to fulfill it's mission. These gifts included the apostles and prophets along with the evangelists, pastors (shepherds) and teachers. Each of these offices was designed by Jesus to allow His church to function properly no matter where in the world (*every nation*), or when in time (*until the end of the age*) a local church came into being. When these gifts are used properly, saints will be equipped, the ministry will go forward, and the body of Christ will be edified.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, (Eph. 4:11-13)

Paul had already revealed that Jesus made the apostles and prophets the foundation of His church.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. (Eph. 2:19-22)

While they had twelve apostles (thirteen if Paul is added), and many prophets, only four apostles and four prophets were used to write the NT Scriptures, which are the foundation of the church. Matthew, John, Paul and Peter are the remaining apostles and Mark, Luke, James and Jude are the permanent prophets. Without them there could be no church. Without them we would know nothing of the life of Christ (gospels) or the “*all things Jesus commanded them.*”

*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, **He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.** (Jn. 14:26-27)*

*“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, **He will guide you into all truth;** (Jn. 16:12-13)*

***teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;** and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen. (Mt. 28:20)*

Paul told the Corinthians it was not their physical presence, but their teachings that were important.

“For his letters,” they say, “are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.” 11 Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such we will also be in deed when we are present. (2Cor. 10:10-11)

We do not need their physical presence, just as Israel did not need Moses:

“Do you also want to become His disciples?” 28 Then they reviled him and said, “You are His disciple, but we are Moses’ disciples. 29 We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from.” (Jn. 9:27-29)

When we build on their writings, we have fellowship with God. If we reject that foundation, we don’t have God. Only when we abide in their teachings about Christ do we have the Father and the Son.

*that which we have seen and heard **we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us;** and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1Jn 1:3-4)*

***We are of God. He who knows God hears us;** he who is not of God does not hear us. **By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.** (1Jn. 4:6)*

*Whosoever goes onward and abides not in the teaching of Christ, has not God: **he that abides in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son.** (2Jn. 9)*

We use them today exactly as Paul described to those in Ephesus after he had told them “*you will see my face no more*” (Acts 20:25, 38):

how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, 4 by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), 5 which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: (Eph 3:3-6)

From generation to generation this foundation has not nor ever can change. No matter when or where in the world a new church begins, it must always and only be placed on the same foundation.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8)

The other gifts are the “living gifts” that must be replaced in each generation. These are the “personnel” Jesus gave to the church to lay this foundation, no matter when or where on earth. The evangelists were given to the church by Jesus to take the foundation of the apostles and prophets and lay it down all over the world.