

Becoming and Being Church, the People of God

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (Matt 16:17-19)

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them. (Matt 18:19-20)

It is interesting that every time I have asked people how their church came into being, they have referred to their denominational roots or their founding fathers and mothers: the former, to the European or North American missionaries who pioneered the work of those churches; and the latter, to their charismatic founding leaders. Most quickly refer me to the name of their church and the denomination they are associated or affiliated with: Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal Assemblies of God, Miracle, Deliverance, Word of Life, Christ is the Answer, Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian,

Christ Apostolic, Mennonite, Lutheran ... The catalogue of names and denominations is endless.

It is even more instructive to inquire what constitutes their being church. Many will quickly make reference to what happens on Sundays when they gather or during the week days, "at church"; others may point to their leaders or leadership structures and doctrinal emphases and biases. When one inquires deeper into the basis and foundation of these structures and practices, they have little to say. Being church for them is being part of a denomination; and becoming church is primarily about going to a place for some Christian activities.

However, there is increasing disenchantment among many, especially young people, with "church" simply as a denomination or religious institution. I have been involved in work among Christian young people in Uganda for three decades and I have noted that in Kampala, for example, where there is a myriad of churches, young people no longer ask, "What church do you belong to?" or "Which church do you go to?" but rather "Who do you fellowship with?" Church for them is space where they connect with each other. This may also be reflected in the words they use to describe their worship services.

I was intrigued when I first visited St Paul's Church Howell Hill, an Anglican church in one of the suburbs at the south-west edge of London. I discovered that the name of the youth ministry and their worship service on Sunday evening is Reality. I inquired what kind of young people came to Reality. I discovered that over 30 per cent may be characterized as "unchurched" - that is, with no church background. They came because their friends invited them. Although there was a structure to the service, it could not be described as Anglican. There were no visible priests with priestly regalia, no altar or pulpit and no chairs. They began their meeting at 6:30 p.m. with a social time comprising drinks, toast and games. Then they moved from the "clubroom" into the worship area, where they spent time singing, led by a band. They had a leader who ensured some kind of flow to the service. After the songs (they do not call them hymns) of worship, there was a time of sharing personal stories; then one of them stood to give a "talk" (not a "sermon"). This was followed by a time of praying for one another in small circles of six to ten. Such is "church" that gives young people the opportunity to connect together as they connect with God, share their stories and express their youthfulness. I guess that is why it is called Reality.

This ministry Reality is part of what today is called the Emerging Church Movement - new expressions of church in the postmodern era.

But even these Emerging Churches could become the next-generation denominations with new religious bureaucracies. Today's denominations were a church phenomenon born with the modern era in Europe and which were later exported by European and North American missionaries. Every culture and generation emerges with forms and expressions of church. So it is important that we start our journey of exploring how the church came into being with the story of the one to whom the founding of the church is credited: Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus and the Church

The leading question is: Was or is the church Jesus' idea? Did Jesus have in mind the birth of a community that would be identified as church? And was that "church" what would constitute the new people of God, in continuity with ancient Israel? Then come the follow-on questions: What does "church" that is true to Jesus' idea of church look like? And is the church in its diverse forms today what Jesus conceived?

There are only two passages in all the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – in which Jesus made explicit reference to the church. The first is Matthew 16:17–19.

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock *I will build my church*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven [italics mine].

The second, also from Matthew, 18:15–20:

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the *church*; and if they refuse to listen even to the *church*, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them [*italics mine*].

Experts in the languages in which the Gospels were originally written tell us that it is difficult to determine exactly what words Jesus used that are translated “church” in these passages. The English word “church” is the translation of *ekklesia* in the common Greek language that was spoken in first-century Palestine; it meant a citizens’ assembly in a city to decide the matters that affected their welfare – a political gathering or simply a gathering. It was therefore also frequently used instead of the term *sunagoge* – translated “synagogue”, the local gathering of Jews for preserving and nurturing the Jewish faith during the post-exile period. The term *ekklesia*, however, does not have an inherently religious (or later on, cultic) meaning. It is uncertain whether Jesus used a Hebrew or Aramaic word that translates *ekklesia* for temple. He may have used the Hebrew words *edah* or *qaha*, or the Aramaic equivalent, *edta*, which simply means the community of Israel. Yet another possibility is the Aramaic word *kenista*, which could be used of either a local Jewish community or just the Jewish people.¹

Whichever of these words Jesus may have used, they all communicate the idea of a community identifiable by their gathering as well as by what happens when they gather, as was the case with the Israelites. In the affirmation “I will build my church”, Jesus makes clear whose initiative and responsibility it was to bring the community into being and to whom the community would belong. Like the citizens’ gathering and Israel, they would have a shared consciousness of the group’s identity. However, their identity was grounded not simply in their belonging together, but rather in the one to whom they belonged. The community was to derive its character not from its membership but from the one who called it into being. Jesus was to be the author and reason for gathering. Furthermore, he pledged to be personally present in the gathering. It was Jesus’ gathering in every sense: his people, and by extension, God’s people.

1. Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* (London: SPCK, 1995), 37.

Unfortunately, the contemporary church scene speaks more of the presence of a denominational character than that of Jesus. I fear that in a lot of instances it is not Jesus gathering his own but rather us gathering those who are like us. Is it not true that the churches as we know them today – such as the ones described in the Introduction – are associations rather than assemblies of Jesus? Don't the rivalry, competition and conflict, and our inability to work together reflect the fact that our primary rootedness and calling as communities is in our worldly credentials – ethnic, social, regional, structural, stylistic and formal – and not in Jesus? I have been amazed when visiting congregations in my work as bishop in Kampala to find that some of them have felt more like tribal meetings because, in spite of the cosmopolitan nature of Kampala, the members of these congregations came from one ethnic or regional groups. The history of the churches in Kenya is such that particular denominations are associated with particular ethnic groups: Presbyterian for Kikuyu; Methodist for Meru; African Inland Church for Kalenjin; and so on.

It is unfortunate that the significance of Matthew 16:17–19 in defining the purpose of an authentic Jesus community has been lost in theological and ecclesiastical debates over what Jesus meant by “on this rock” and “the keys of the kingdom”. Too much energy has been devoted to determining whether Peter was that rock and who his successors are! By focussing on this we miss the major subject of Jesus' words, which concerns the nature and purpose of community. Jesus' statement “I will build my church” is a clear expression of his intention to bring into being a visible community. Church was not accidental or incidental to his mission.

But the community was not to exist for its own sake. A closer look at the life, mission, message and ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels shows that it was not the community that was Jesus' preoccupation but rather the kingdom of God. It is noteworthy that while there are only two references to the church in all the Gospels, there are 76 independent sayings on the kingdom of God, or 103 if the parables are included.² It was Jesus' messiahship that would be the foundation of the kingdom; the keys to Peter symbolized the work of “unlocking” through his apostolic leadership and declaration of the finished work of Jesus as Messiah. The kingdom of God was the reason Jesus was revealed. The purpose of the community is the kingdom of God.

The church was not the good news that Jesus preached; that good news was the kingdom of God. It is the kingdom of God that defines the

2. Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, 27.

church, not vice versa. The church does not possess God's reign; it is to be possessed by it. Jesus' presence in the world would continue "where two or three are gathered" in his name. This would especially be the case after his physical departure from them, for he would be present for ever among them by his Spirit, whom the Father would send in his name (John 14:16-21). The community was to be a bearer of the kingdom of God in the world, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. This should act as a corrective to many erroneous notions of the church "building the kingdom of God". As Craig Van Gelder has observed:

It is not uncommon to hear such concepts as "the church is responsible to build the kingdom of God", or "the church is to extend God's kingdom in the world", or "the church must promote the work of the kingdom of God", or "the church is to help establish God's kingdom in the world". These images of build, extend, promote and establish stand in sharp contrast to the biblical language used to define the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God.³

The kingdom of God is a greater and more encompassing reality; its vision much more liberating and inclusive; and its scope, spanning time and eternity. The kingdom of God is the reason for the church.

K. E. Skydsgaard has expressed it thus:

The Kingdom of God is the conception placed above that of the church; the church is not the Kingdom, but the church owes her existence to the Kingdom. She exists for the Kingdom; she represents the Kingdom of God on earth in the present age till through the coming of Christ in power God will grant full and final victory. In the Kingdom of God the Church has her ultimate frontiers; from the kingdom she receives all her substance, her power, and hope.⁴

The missionary vocation of the church is to receive, enter, seek and inherit the kingdom of God. As pointed out by Lesslie Newbigin, the British

3. Craig Van Gelder, *The Essence of the Church: A Community Created by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000), 87.

4. K. E. Skydsgaard, "Kingdom of God and the Church", in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4 (1951), 386.

missionary to India who later became bishop in the Church of South India, in his essay "On Being the Church in the World", there are at least three ways in which the church is to reflect the kingdom: as a sign pointing to a reality beyond what is visible now; as an instrument through which God's will for justice, peace and freedom is carried out in the world; and as a foretaste of the presence of the kingdom.⁵

Jesus' instructions on the ordering of the community's internal relationships in Matthew 18:15–20 give us a glimpse of his idea of what the community of the kingdom of God looks like. Firstly, there is a tacit assumption in his words that as part of its community life, they *should* gather together. The visibility of the community is in its gathering. But it is important to keep reminding ourselves that the distinguishing feature of the community is not just in its gathering, but rather in the cause for its gathering – Jesus' name. Jesus' name is the grounds on which members of the community gather. We get the full power of the significance of what Jesus said to his disciples when we remember that the people he was addressing regularly gathered in the synagogues and on occasions in the temple at Jerusalem. The community Jesus was bringing into being was not an add-on to the synagogue Jewish communities, but a radically new community whose life and health depended wholly on him.

Secondly, restoration and reconciliation are to characterize the common life of the community. The purpose for bringing the unrepentant brother or sister to the congregation (Matt 18) is so that they may be led to repentance, leading to reconciliation with those they have offended. For, "where two or three are gathered in my [Jesus'] name", Jesus – the one who loves, forgives and reconciles – is present. It is important to note that the one who sins is part of the community. But the one sinned against is also part of the community. In other words, the community that Jesus brings into being is not perfect. Members of the community sin and that creates conflict. But it is not permissible to live in conflict and division. Those Jesus gathers he also reconciles. Those who refuse to acknowledge their sin and folly are to be treated as foreigners to the community – pagans. Jesus counselled his disciples that should the sinner not repent of their wrongdoing and "refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector", meaning that they will have revealed where they belong: not to the kingdom

5. J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, "On Being the Church in the World", in *The Parish Church? Exploration in the Relationship of the Church and the World* (ed. G. Ecclestone; Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 25–42.

community where Jesus rules, but rather to the community of the rebellious. The church that Jesus is building is the community of love, of forgiven and forgiving sinners; the place where the good news of the kingdom – love, forgiveness and reconciliation – is experienced. The church is a people shaped by the redemptive reign of God.

The act of forgiveness and reconciliation points to a third dimension of the life of the community: hope. The community has not yet reached perfection but rather is on a path towards complete victory, because the gates of hell will not overcome it. The redemptive reign of God is yet to be fully consummated. While on the journey there is a struggle with sin on the one hand and “the gates of hell” on the other, but neither will overcome the community. The community brought into being by Jesus is to keep its sights on his triumph as it lives out its missionary calling as the agency of the kingdom of God.

This is the community Jesus had in mind as constituting his church – the new people of God – when he said, “... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it”: imperfect but on a path to victory. During the three and a half years of his ministry Jesus was forming the nucleus of that community through which he would continue his mission. Jesus’ prayer was that the new community would be a sign of the kingdom in the world; a community that lives beneath the kingly rule of God, acknowledges it and proclaims it; daily praying to the Father, “May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” and looking forward to its final manifestation. He came to the world that we may have “life ... to the full” (John 10:10), life in its fullness in time and eternity. So, Jesus’ people, while in the world, must be a sign of that life that he gives.

Thus, although Jesus did not make many direct references to the church, the creation of a new community was central to his life, teaching and ministry. Clearly, he envisaged a community that would continue after his death, resurrection and ascension, embodying and continuing to declare the kingdom of God.

Every church I know – indeed every one of the churches referred to in the Introduction – would argue that their claim to “being church” is their connection to Jesus. They invoke the name of Jesus as the reason for their gatherings. They would argue that their sense of community, group identity or self-consciousness has something to do with Jesus. What we must ask is whether their community life in their contexts and cultures is consistent and in continuity with Jesus’ life and mission. We must ask whether they are in

Kampala, for example, as a sign, instrument and foretaste of the kingdom of God. If they are not, they may be invoking the name of Jesus in vain.

The Bible and the Church

All churches, in addition to invoking the name of Jesus, claim authenticity on the grounds that their common life is governed by the Bible; that their use of the Bible qualifies them to be church. If we were to go by this rule, all groups and communities that use the Bible in one form or another would rightly claim to be true to the vision of Jesus for the church. But we know that that is not the case, for even witchdoctors and diviners use the Bible. A friend of mine told me of a diviner in a village in a part of Uganda where the Church of Uganda (Anglican) has been strong. Among the tools of her trade are the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, both in the language of the people she serves. There is a rebel group in Uganda called the Lord's Resistance Army that has waged a senseless and vicious war in Northern Uganda since 1986. They loot, rape and kill. One of the ways for recruiting in their ranks is abducting children – both boys and girls. They maim and kill those who resist them. They claim that their inspiration is the Ten Commandments. Clearly, the use of the Bible cannot be grounds enough for a community or group to claim to be an authentic church.

Some may object to the examples I have given above, arguing that they demonstrate misuse rather than use of the Bible. But that is the point. We have been drawn into the debate on use and misuse of the Bible and labelling churches according to which side of “use” and “misuse” they are – fundamentalist, evangelical, liberal; and neo-fundamentalist, neo-evangelical and neo-liberal. Is it not true that rather than the Bible being a uniting factor, it is a battleground for much of the infighting and rivalry among churches? It is often the reason for the proliferation of churches. Churches split because of disagreements over use and misuse. The Bible has become a problem for churches today!

I suggest that one of the reasons why the Bible is often misread and misused is that it is considered and handled primarily as a book. Granted, it is in “book form” that we encounter it: so, like any other book, it is for us to read or not read; to use and misuse; and dispense with if we do not like it. It is a tool in our hands. This is precisely what was rejected by Jomo Kenyatta, the freedom fighter and leader of the Kenya African Union (later renamed the Kenya African National Union) agitating for Kenya's independence

from Britain in the 1950s. In his book *Facing Mount Kenya*, a study of the culture and customs as well as of the economy of the Gikuyu people prior to independence, Kenyatta argued that, since the Bible had been used as one of the tools to colonize Africans, in order for the Kenyan people to be freed from the shackles of their British colonial masters they needed to reject Christianity as "the white man's religion" and the Bible as their tool of suppression. He lamented that when the missionaries came from Europe to Africa they had the Bible and the Africans had the land. He said that the missionaries had used the Bible and taken advantage of the hospitality and generosity of the Africans to dispossess them of their land and sovereignty.⁶

Unfortunately, Kenyatta had a point. The same thing happened during the apartheid era of South Africa. The Dutch Reformed Church justified the doctrine of racial segregation on the basis of the Bible. No wonder the communist ideology had a very strong appeal to the anti-apartheid movement. I contend that it was not a rejection of God as such, but rather the God of the Bible that had been used as a tool of oppression.

But the Bible is not primarily a book. In fact, it is not a book, but an anthology of books, with one story. The organizing principle of the biblical text – how different texts and sources were put together into the books, when and how they were collected and arranged into the Bible as a whole – is the story of Jesus the Christ and of the community whose life was fashioned along that story.⁷ Jesus is the link between the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament story points to and is completed in him. God, who in the beginning created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1), is the one whom John identifies in his Gospel as revealed in Jesus, the Word, who "was with God, and ... was God" (John 1:1). The first five books (from Genesis to Deuteronomy), commonly called the Books of Moses, recount the story of how the Creator God formed for himself a people through whom all creation would be blessed. Their promise, and indeed the promise for all peoples of the world, was the Messiah, whom God would send and who would come from among them. The prophets' work was to keep this hope alive, reminding the people that God would be true to his promise.

All the Gospel records link the story of Jesus to the account in the Old Testament. Matthew made it clear that the Jesus story did not begin with his birth in Bethlehem of Judah, because Jesus was "the son of David, the

6. Jomo Kenyatta, *Facing Mount Kenya* (Tel Aviv: Am Hasefer, 1963), 305.

7. Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible* (New York: Harper, 1988).

son of Abraham” (Matt 1:1). He therefore began the account of Jesus’ life with the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then follows the ancestral line of David, including Tamar, Rahab and Ruth, who were of Gentile descent; and then the ancestral line of Joseph, during the monarchy, exile and the restoration. Luke records an incident after the crucifixion when two of Jesus’ disciples were mourning his death, not realizing that he had risen from the dead “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:4). Then, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Jesus is the key to understanding the story of Israel.

The Acts of the Apostles is an account of what Jesus continued to do through his apostles by his Spirit – bringing his own together into gatherings in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and beyond, throughout the Roman Empire. Thus Peter, in explaining the outpouring of the Spirit to the Jewish Pentecost gathering in Acts 2, referred to Joel’s prophecy of many centuries before, predicting that God would pour out his Spirit. He pointed to Jesus as the one through whom that promise had been fulfilled. The rest of the New Testament is the continuing account of Jesus’ work among his followers, looking towards its consummation in eternity, the vision laid out in the book of Revelation. Jesus is thus the centre of the entire biblical narrative. It is the story of Jesus Christ that is the one thread that joins the whole biblical account together.

The purpose of the record of the story of Jesus is for his community to live by that story. The immediate audience of the four Gospels was the second- and third-generation followers of Jesus. John the evangelist summed up the purpose of the Gospel accounts: “Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30–31).

The epistles were written to the various emerging communities who had come to faith in Jesus as a result of the witness of the first apostles and disciples of Jesus. Paul encouraged the early followers of Jesus to devote themselves to the Scriptures of the Old Testament because it was through them that their faith would be nourished. The New Testament communities understood themselves to be in continuity with the Old Testament community. Hence Paul, writing to first-century believers in Corinth, appealed to the record of the pilgrimage of the Hebrew people from Egypt to the land of Canaan as a warning to the believers in Christ:

Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry." We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.

These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. (1 Cor 10:6–11)

The faith experience of those who had gone before the Corinthian believers was to serve as a challenge and an encouragement for their faith in Christ.

As succeeding generations of believing communities and people ploughed through the different texts there was a resonance between their story and faith, and the story and faith they encountered in those texts and narratives. So in the process the canon of Scripture was established, based on a faith-consensus: a consensual decision as to what "is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16), thus according these Scriptures universal value. They judged them not only to be pointing to God's words and acts from the beginning of creation, but also to be an unfolding of God's continuing action in them and through them, centred on Jesus Christ.

We therefore need to look at the Bible not primarily as a book, but as a story. Firstly, we need to see it as God's story: his words and works; an account of his unfolding will and purpose in bringing "all things in heaven and on earth together under ... Christ" (Eph 1:10). Secondly, as Lesslie Newbigin has put it, we need to see it as universal history,⁸ because God's words and works span all time and space. Thus, although the Bible focuses attention on particular people in particular epochs in history, it spans all time: the past, the present and the future, beginning "in the beginning" (Gen 1:1) and reaching to the coming of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1). The subject of its message is not bound by chronological time. It is also not bound

8. "The Bible as Universal History" is the title of a chapter in Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), 89–102.

by culture, because its message is for all peoples, "all the world ... all creation" (Mark 16:15) and "all peoples on earth" (Gen 12:3).

The most significant achievement in the pioneering work of missionaries is the translation of the Bible into the native languages of the people among whom they are called to serve. Lamin Saneh, in his book *Translating the Message*, has made the point that "missionary adoption of the vernacular ... was tantamount to adopting indigenous cultural criteria for the message, a piece of radical indigenization far greater than the standard portrayal of mission as Western cultural imperialism".⁹ It should not surprise us that the completion of the translation of portions of Scripture always propelled growth in the numbers of those accepting the message of the gospel as well as depth in commitment to their new-found faith. Unfortunately, the story of the process of translating the Bible into native languages is often credited to European or North American missionaries alone, yet part of the significance of the translation process is that it was one of the ways in which the recipients of the new message felt that the message was their own. In reading the Bible in the vernacular, they not only read about the history of Israel, but they also discovered in it the clue to their own history.

The story is told of a village community in central Africa in the late nineteenth century. A European missionary and his African colleague had been working painstakingly for many months translating the book of Genesis. On completion of their work they decided they would give to the chief the first printed version of Genesis in the mother tongue of the community. During the presentation the African colleague read Genesis to the chief. Slowly, he worked through the creation story, with its refrain "And God said, 'Let there be ...'" (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, etc.). At the end of the reading the chief exclaimed, "God speaks my language!" To the amazement of the chief, each time God spoke, he spoke in his own language.

Thirdly, the Bible is the story of a community of faith that finds its ultimate significance in Jesus. Although the Bible gives specific accounts of diverse communities and their encounters with God in different times and places, and could therefore be characterized as many stories, it is also one story and one community, the story of the community of faith both in ancient times and in succeeding generations, who are all united in Christ. The Bible is therefore our story as it continues to unfold towards the final triumph of the

9. Lamin Saneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 3.

kingdom of God. We do not read the Bible simply as a description of the faith of those in its pages – a people living in a different time, culture and world; we read it as descriptive of our faith, as new generations of those who “believe [and are] saved” (Rom 10:9). Our connection with them is the relationship we share with Jesus that coheres with the biblical narrative – the story of *their* faith, which is also the story of *our* faith. Thus the Bible is not just the book we read; it is the place and story in which we live. We do not read it just to understand it, but rather to find our place within it, as we allow it to critique our story, reshaping it and realigning it.

Many studies on the church begin and end with the New Testament account, arguing that the Old Testament has nothing to teach about being and becoming church. Therein lies part of our error in the contemporary church. I believe that this has impoverished the church, because it truncates the story. This approach separates the story of Israel from the story of the church. One would have hoped that beginning with the New Testament would have forced the church to read the whole story, which begins with the Old Testament account. The value of having the Scriptures in one volume is that it communicates the fact that from Genesis to Revelation it is one unfolding story. The story of the Lord of the church does not begin with the New Testament but with the Old, because he is the Lord of the kingdom, by whom, for whom and in whom everything was created (John 1:1-3; Col 1:15-17). One of my hopes is that this book will help every reader appreciate the Bible as one story: our story, the story of all humanity, past present and to come; the universal story.

The People of God: The Continuing Story, Hebrews 11 – 12

Hebrews 11 – 12 is one of the few passages in the Bible that draw together the entire biblical narrative into one coherent account, taking the people of God as an interpretative thread through the entire story. It weaves together the themes of faith, community (both Old Testament and New Testament) and kingdom. It shows how God’s unfolding purposes for humanity and all creation are realized fully in Christ and that these purposes are being worked out through his people throughout all the generations. What the author of Hebrews does in these chapters is retell the story of the people of God from ancient times to the first-century followers of Jesus, identifying characteristic features common to all the people of God, whatever their generation, wherever they are. The point here is that the story of any people of God in any

generation is part of the story of the people of God in previous generations as well as the coming generations. Hebrews 11 – 12 provides a methodological approach for discourse on the nature and character of the “authentic church” of Jesus.

There are at least three features that Hebrews 11 – 12 identifies as characterizing the continuing story of the people of God. The first mark is faith. Commentators on the epistle to the Hebrews are agreed that the immediate audience to whom the message was addressed were suffering for their faith in Jesus. The purpose of the letter was to encourage the persecuted minority, the majority of them Jewish followers of Jesus in the diaspora, to persevere in their faith in Christ, because in Christ they were the true heirs of God’s promise to Abraham. In Christ they were now the true descendants of the patriarchs and it was no wonder that, like them, they lived as wanderers. Citing the roll of honour, from Abel to Noah, Abraham to David and including all the prophets, who were “commended for their faith” (Heb 11:39), the writer encouraged them that they too would be commended for their faith and perseverance.

Thus Hebrews 11 summarizes the account of all the Old Testament heroes, from Abel in Genesis to King David and the prophets, in the phrase “by faith”. Faith distinguished them from other people, both in life and in death, as the people of God, for “without faith it is impossible to please God” (11:6). The writer’s argument was that Israel and its patriarchs were a people called out and called together, that through them God was fulfilling his purpose for all creation. The persecuted followers of Jesus were included in God’s promises to the patriarchs. The patriarchs and the persecuted minority of followers of Jesus in first-century Palestine shared the same faith and destiny. In other words, the connection between Noah, Abraham, King David, Peter, Paul, John and those to whom their writings were immediately addressed in first-century Palestine and Asia was faith – a living relationship with God.

The author also wanted his readers to be encouraged by the fact that “none of them [patriarchs and ancestors] received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us [them], so that only together with us [them] would they be made perfect” (11:39–40). The first-century believers were thus included in the promise and, by extension, those who share in the same faith in Jesus today, in the twenty-first century, are also included in God’s promises and share the same destiny as the patriarchs. In a profound way, Hebrews 11 – 12 is saying that the “church”, as the people of God, did not begin with the New Testament.

The second mark of the authentic people of God is community – a social entity distinguishable in its shared life, values and purpose. Hebrews 11 asserts that authentic faith is expressed in community – in relationship with others. It is faith that formed them into a community, and community formed their faith: belonging to God and to each other. They were all related to each other by faith – a communion or sharing in the faith. It was the common denominator of their lives: *they were all* commended by their faith, and so can rightly be called a “community of faith”. They belonged together by faith. Since faith is a gift – it begins with God’s initiative – we should also acknowledge that becoming a community of faith is a gift. It is God who creates the community of faith. However, God’s initiative invites a response. The faith the people share is demonstrated in their response of obedience. Thus even for Israel, it was not enough that they were the biological heirs to Abraham; it was by the obedience of faith that they would inherit the promises of Yahweh’s covenant with Abraham. Hence Abraham is referred to as the father of all those who come to God through faith in Jesus, for “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal 3:29). The basis of belonging together was their belonging to God, and that by faith. Abraham was therefore father of a community beyond his clan.

This communion of faith – the oneness of the people of God – has two axes to it: one relating to the passage of time, and the other relating to space or geography. The community spans all time; past, present and future. The “great cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1) is constituted by those from the past who have completed their earthly journey. They are witnesses cheering on those who are running now, persevering in order to receive, with all the others, the reward that awaits them in the future, “for only together with us would they be made perfect” (11:40). We who read Hebrews in the twenty-first century can also say of those to whom the epistle was addressed “that only together with us, would they be made perfect”. Their story is our story and our story is in their story. Moreover, it is only “together with all the saints” that we shall “know this love [of Christ] that surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19).

My parents were first-generation believers. They were among the first people in our clan to accept the gospel of Christ. They both died in 2005. They made their home in a village in the south-west of Uganda, an eight-hour, 500-kilometre journey from Kampala, a route that is notorious for its accidents and which my family and I would regularly take to go to visit them. Each time my father prayed for us when sending us off on the return journey

to Kampala, he would invoke the protection of God, beginning his prayers with "Oh God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, our God". Then he would recite the same prayer Moses prayed each time he and the Israelites set out from a place of rest on their arduous journey to the promised land:

Rise up, O LORD!

May your enemies be scattered;

may your foes flee before you. (Num 10:35)

My father made the connection: that they who lived in Kiburara, their little village, were in communion with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses, who lived hundreds of years ago in the Middle East. He believed that just as God travelled with the patriarchs, so he would travel with us, protecting us from our enemies – the hazards of road travel in Uganda. He shared the same faith that the patriarchs were commended for.

But the community of faith also spans geography: it spreads all over the face of the earth, in all its diversities of race, tribe religion, class and so on. All are united in their faith in God, in Jesus Christ. In 1980 I travelled for the first time to Europe, to a conference of international students in Austria. I had never before been to such an international gathering of followers of Christ. I was enthralled by being in the company of followers of Christ from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, the then communist lands of Eastern Europe and various parts of Africa. "Wow!" I thought to myself, "all these are my brothers and sisters in Christ!" Yes, his people are spread all over the face of the earth, "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev 7:9) and generation!

The third mark of the authentic people of God that we learn from Hebrews 11 – 12 is pilgrimage. Pilgrimage gives character to the people of God, for faith and community are lived out in pilgrimage with God – that is, on a journey. We read:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not

ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16)

Pilgrimage emphasizes that the people of God live in hope, recognizing that theirs is an in-between life: one between the already and the not-yet. They are pilgrims because they are yet to reach home. The author of Hebrews says that the community of faith lived their lives "wandering". Their wandering was not, however, aimless; it is to be contrasted with settling or having arrived. Wherever they were, they were strangers and foreigners (11:13). The author of Hebrews explains that the reason the people of God did not settle was because they were looking for a country of their own. Each time they settled in a place it was temporary - "living in tents" (11:9). The goal of their journey - "looking for a country of their own ... a better country - a heavenly one" - would not allow them to settle. Even Abraham, after arriving in the country of promise, "made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country" (11:9), because the promised land was not ultimately home. This sounds contradictory; however, once we recognize that Abraham's call was not simply for the nation of Israel but for the blessing of all the nations, we understand why not even the promised land was home. Thus he looked towards the "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (11:10). This is reminiscent of the garden of Eden, where God's dwelling was among his creation. They lived in hope: hope for the "better country", a recreated garden, their heavenly dwelling. This is what gave them courage to endure all the hardships on the way. "Wandering" was given meaning and purpose in their hope of their true homeland.

Thus the motif of pilgrim is a clue to "being authentic church". "Church" is not an end in itself; it is in the pilgrimage that God works out his purposes among and through his people. There is here a close connection between promise and hope. The pilgrim's life is anchored in the promise of "the better country". The promise keeps hope alive, a hope that keeps the pilgrim on the way. The promise is inclusive, not exclusive. It is missional. The promise to Abraham, to bless him and make him a "great nation", was given in order that he would be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:2-3). As God revealed to Moses while on Mount Sinai, the nation of Israel was called "out of all nations" to be "a treasured possession" and was chosen and formed through the exodus to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19. 3-6). Thus "none of them [patriarchs and ancestors] received what had been promised" because the promised included succeeding generations. God

has an eternal and universal promise – for all people, for all time and for all creation. And the promise is sure, because “He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23).

The temptation of the pilgrim community is to domesticate the promise – to enjoy the blessing for its sake and their sakes, and to ignore or abandon its universal character. The temptation arises from at least two sources. Firstly, the pilgrim nature of life engenders a survival mentality that focuses energies on self-preservation. Secondly, the experience of blessings makes the people of God forget or abandon their pilgrim mode of life. They forget that the experience of the blessing is only a foretaste and a shadow of the promise. The author of Hebrews therefore points to the anchor of faith, indeed the eternal grounds for perseverance on the journey: Jesus, with whom they share the pilgrim life. Jesus was the pilgrim par excellence, who, for the “joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame” and is now seated “at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). It is fixing their eyes on Jesus that will enable the pilgrims to overcome the temptation to domesticate the promise or even to give up in the face of discouragements and suffering. Our sufferings, like his sufferings, are part of the exercise of our faith, for even he, “Although he was a son, ... learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5: 8–9). He is the pilgrim Saviour.

In Jesus, faith, community and pilgrimage meet. He is “the author and perfecter of our faith”, and the one whom God “appointed heir of all things, ... through whom also he made the universe. ... the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:2–3). He is God’s gift of eternal life; by his Spirit we are able to walk in obedience; and in him we are counted with the cloud of witnesses. In Jesus, God displays his purposes, as Paul affirmed: “... he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment – *to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ*” (Eph 1:9–10; italics mine).

It is important to note that the scope of God’s purpose is “all things in heaven and on earth”, the entire created order. Thus, according to his promise, although his church is imperfect and buffeted by the gates of hell, he will accomplish his purpose through it. Jesus’ promise that the gates of hell will not prevail over his church still stands. We have that promise – for his church and now ours!

As we ponder these truths, may we constantly pray:

*Build your church, Lord,
 Make us strong, Lord,
 Join our hearts, Lord,
 Through your Son.
 Make us one, Lord,
 In your body,
 In the kingdom,
 Of your Son.*¹⁰

Outline of This Book

As already indicated, Hebrews 11 – 12 provides us with a methodology for coming to grips with the mystery of God in the life of his people throughout the ages, down to our own times and generation. Our purpose is to try to tell the story – because it is one story, the story of the people of God. Our method, just like that in Hebrews 11 – 12, is to retell the story.

A word about narrative as a methodology is necessary at this point. The way we as humans experience the world and live our faith-life through events that happen, in particular places and times, is filtered through a learned framework of attaching meaning to those events. The way we apprehend the world, therefore, is primarily through description. The way we communicate the exercise of faith in those events is also by description. Bolaji Idowu, the pioneer African theologian, has asserted, “The cogent fact [here] is that no one has ever seen or touched ‘faith’. Faith only becomes known as it realizes or actualizes itself in expressions. And expressions of faith by persons must reduce themselves into forms, which can be described in categories.”¹¹

Narrative is a way of describing the people, events, places and the network of relations and issues around them. The merit of narrative as a descriptive tool is its capacity to combine events and interpretation together. Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory Jones have made the case for narrative as a method: “Narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal to the importance of telling stories; rather it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and

10. Dave Richards, “For I’m Building a People of Power”.

11. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 27.