

# Route Sixty-Six

*Part Thirty-Seven*

*Haggai*

*Don't Quit Building the Temple*

*(John 5:39; Haggai 2:21, 22a)*

*With Study Questions*

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**Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. <sup>22</sup>I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots And those who ride in them (Haggai 2:21, 22a).**

## **Introduction**

There is a great deal of discussion these days as to what constitutes that which is essential to the welfare of a society. One politician recently posited that in a four-phase program, opening churches would be in phase three. For perspective, phase two includes opening schools, childcare facilities, summer programs, retail stores, parks, trails and toy-making. Churches are in phase three alongside hair salons, sporting events and movie theatres.

This has produced no small amount of chafing on the part of many Christians. In a purely pragmatic sense, placing church so low on the totem-pole of societal essentials appears short-sighted. Churches (at least if done well) provide fellowship, warmth, encouragement, direction and a very deep sense of purpose. Politically leaders would do well to also recognize that it is in church where people are admonished to respect political authority. Heaven and hell aside (taking a deep breath in writing that because these things are uniquely addressed in church), church is highly essential for the well-being of society.

Of course, now we must discuss what church actually is. Defining the word *church* is like defining the word *mother*. A mother has children, but that is certainly an insufficient definition. A mother is a woman. A mother is a nurturer. A mother may generate income. A mother is (generally speaking) a wife. A mother is a teacher. I daresay books can be written defining the word. Similar with the word *church*.

Due to the livestreaming church services we are seeing a great deal of very limited definitions of church. One popular meme indicates that God doesn't want you to go to church, He wants you to be His church. We can give that half an amen. Does God not want you to be His church and go to church? Are we not called not to forsake **"the assembling of ourselves"** (Hebrews 10:25)?

The word *church* can mean a great many things. If I said, "Let's meet at church" you would know where I meant for us to meet. At the same time, meeting *at* church is different than *going to* church. When we talk about going to church, we generally are talking about an event with a liturgy (call to worship, singing, a sermon, the sacraments). So, we, as the followers of Christ are *the church*, going to a building we call *the church* to do an event call *church*. But that is not the end of it.

The Bible also speaks of, what is generally called, an *invisible church* (Hebrews 12:23). This includes the participation of angels and those who have left this life. These are true believers, past, present and future. The true members of this invisible church are known by God alone.

We also speak of a *universal visible church* (universal in that it is not confined to one nation, as under the law). This visible church consists of all who profess the true religion and their children. This visible church is made up of *particular churches*. This is what we see laden throughout the New Testament with the epistles addressed to **"the church of God which is at Corinth"** (1 Corinthians 1:2) or **"to the churches of Galatia"** (Galatians 1:2) or **"to the church of the Thessalonians"** (1 Thessalonians 1:1), etc.

The difficulty of defining church continues when Jesus, in the midst of teaching on church discipline offers the phrase, **"tell it to the church"** (Matthew 18:17). How does this take place? Does some random member show up with a bullhorn in the church parking lot? A deeper study of church discipline seems to indicate that this is done by designated leaders in the church. So, the church can also be referring to the elders.

But one phrase in the Westminster Confession grabs our attention. This phrase does not resonate with the modern Christian who might view the church as a good idea, but not critical. The confession asserts that outside of the visible church (again, made up of particular churches) **"there is no ordinary possibility of salvation"** (WCF. 25. 2).

We live in an era with an abundance of books, broadcasts, social media and informal religious gatherings that can make the church seem expendable. You will notice it is with great thoughtfulness that they use the

word “ordinary” recognizing the power of God to use other means. At the same time, let us not allow the exception to become the rule.

If the church is neglected and crumbles, all of the books, broadcasts, social media, informal religious gatherings and parachurch efforts, will follow suit. Jesus is building His church and it is through His church that the Great Commission will be fulfilled. I open with this because the central theme in Haggai revolves around the negligence of God’s people when it came to the building of God’s temple, which in the Old Covenant was square one when it came to the heart of God’s church.

## **Survey of Haggai**

A brief survey of Haggai requires we understand that the people of God had been in captivity but a first wave of them were released to return home and given the green light to rebuild the temple. Haggai records the story of how those who had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, began to rebuild the temple but soon gave up.

In our study of Ezra we noted why they gave up. One, was the deception of the detractors of Israel offering to work with them-wolves among the sheep as it were. The church must be very careful when the arms of the world reach out to help.

Another reason they gave up was due to the detractors speaking discouraging words. The church will not always be accompanied by cheerleaders. There must be a primary (and sometimes singular) trust in God’s promise that your labor in Christ is not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Finally, the adversaries hired counselors to frustrate and accuse the workers. In time, they succeeded in halting the building of the temple! Ezra notably records the restoration of worship before the temple is built. Similar to the sacraments, the temple was significant, but it was not magic. It was only valuable (similar to baptism and the Lord’s Supper-really any religious undertaking) to the extent that it taught of the person and work of Jesus.

But not of this should lead us to undervalue the critical nature of building the temple. True faith would lead to the building of the temple in the Old Covenant similar to true faith leads to the building of Christ’s church in the New Covenant.

One other impediment to the building of the temple surfaces early in Haggai. It was a misreading and misapplying of prophecy.

**Thus speaks the Lord of hosts, saying: ‘This people says, “The time has not come, the time that the Lord’s house should be built”’ (Haggai 1:2).**

Not to get into the details here, but it had been prophesied that there would be a seventy-year period of desolation due to their rebellion. Their lack of understanding of that prophecy caused them to declare that **“the time has not come”** for the temple to be built. It’s been said that the prophecy of future deliverance, which was designed to be tonic, had become a narcotic.

At the risk of stepping on some eschatological toes, we see (IMO) a similar paralysis taking place with a misreading and misapplying of prophecy today. It is a more modern and popular conviction of the western church that God has determined that Christianity (at least in a certain sense) be an utter failure.

The failure of Christianity is perhaps a shocking concept but it is the title of a chart on page 77 ½ of Clarence Larkin’s very popular book on dispensationalism. The book was written in 1918 and continues to be published. In it, Larkin writes,

**It is evident that there are more than a 100 times as many persons born into the world each year, as there are persons ‘New Born’, and that thus far Christianity, as a world converting power, is a failure, all of which proves that, if after 1900 years of gospel preaching the world is not converted, it is not God’s purpose to convert the world by the preaching of the gospel in this age, but simply to gather out an ‘elect body’ – the church. The ‘Millennial Age’ will be the ‘Dispensation of the Spirit,’ then righteousness shall cover the earth as the waters cover the deep.”<sup>1</sup>**

I do not wish to sound uncharitable. But if you were to ask me to find a popular example of today’s church uttering “The time has not come” to the point of paralysis, this would be it. We must always be on the

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<sup>1</sup> Clarence Larkin *The Greatest Book on dispensational Truth in the World* (Rev. Clarence Larkin Est. 2802 N. Park Ave., Philadelphia 32, Pa. U. S. A., 1918), p. 77 1/2

lookout for misreading and misapplying what we believe the Scriptures teach.

But to convince almost five generations of Christians that it is God's plan for the Christian faith to fail has benumbed us. We are tottering on being inert as we pine away for a secret rapture, handing our sword and trowel in at the door in our commitment to insignificance (Nehemiah 4:15-17).

Perhaps all of this contributes to why a watching world would view the church as nonessential. God, conversely, viewed the advancement of His church through the rebuilding of the temple as a necessary prerequisite to everything that makes a nation thrive. Food, drink, clothing, wages, productivity in general were contingent upon God's house being delivered from the ruins in which it found itself. It's been said that the rebuilding of the temple symbolized God's restored presence among His people.

Moving into chapter two we read that the rebuilt temple fell short of the glory of Solomon's temple. As critical as a temple can be, the beauty of it can become a distraction. This was a central teaching from Jesus in His Olivet Discourse where His disciples became so impressed by the temple of His day. That temple had become a religious attractive nuisance and would soon be removed.

The people of Haggai's day were not to fix their hopes on the opulence of the temple, but the temple should bring their hearts to God's promise of deliverance and the presence of His Spirit.

**'Who is left among you who saw this temple in its former glory? And how do you see it now? In comparison with it, is *this* not in your eyes as nothing? <sup>4</sup>Yet now be strong, Zerubbabel,' says the Lord; 'and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land,' says the Lord, 'and work; for I *am* with you,' says the Lord of hosts. <sup>5</sup>'According to the word that I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remains among you; do not fear' (Haggai 2:3-5)!**

Today's Christians needs to hear similar words. As Paul wrote to Timothy, his young protégé in the faith:

**For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind (2 Timothy 1:7).**

## **Christ in Haggai**

How clearly do we see Christ in Haggai? The book concludes with powerful words aimed at Zerubbabel.

**Speak to Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, saying: 'I will shake heaven and earth. <sup>22</sup>I will overthrow the throne of kingdoms; I will destroy the strength of the Gentile kingdoms. I will overthrow the chariots And those who ride in them; The horses and their riders shall come down, Every one by the sword of his brother (Haggai 2:21, 22).**

Zerubbabel is then told by God that he will be like a signet ring, which was a sign of authority. The language of this shaking and this authority is used by the New Testament writers to point to Christ. The author of Hebrews writes,

**At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." <sup>27</sup>This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken – that is, things that have been made – in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. <sup>28</sup>Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, <sup>29</sup>for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:26-29).**

When we feel shaken, let us be reminded that it is God's way of bringing our hearts to that which cannot be shaken. I will conclude with a quote, for I found that I could not say it more beautifully or powerfully than Calvin when it came to Christ being preached in Haggai:

**When the Jews found themselves exposed to the wrongs of all men, when so small a number returned, and there was no kingdom and no power, they thought themselves to have**

been as it were deceived. Hence the Prophet affirms here, that there would be a wonderful work of God, which would shake the heaven and the earth. It is therefore necessary that this should be applied to Christ; for it was, as it were, a new creation of the world, when Christ gathered together the things scattered, as the Apostle says, in the heaven and in the earth. (Col. 1:20.) When he reconciled men to God and to angels, when he conquered the devil and restored life to the dead, when he shone forth with his own righteousness, then indeed God shook the heaven and the earth; and he still shakes them at this day, when the gospel is preached; for he forms anew the children of Adam after his own image. <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Calvin, J., & Owen, J. (2010). [\*Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets\*](#) (Vol. 4, pp. 385–386). Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software.



## Questions for Study

1. Is the church essential? Explain and justify your answer (pages 2, 3).
2. What are the various ways we understand the word *church* (pages 2, 3)?
3. Explain why you agree or disagree with the teaching that there is “no ordinary possibility of salvation” outside the church (pages 3, 4).
4. What is the historical context of Haggai (page 4)?
5. What were those returning to Jerusalem called to do and why weren’t they doing it (pages 4, 5)?
6. How can the misreading and misapplying of prophecy be a stumbling block to the church? How have you seen this happen in modern Christianity (pages 5, 6)?
7. How did the older people respond to the new temple? What lesson is taught (pages 6, 7)?
8. In what ways do we see Christ in Haggai (pages 7, 8)?