

Helping to Build His Church

In this article, an introduction is given to the book of Haggai. It has previously appeared in the magazine "Shield and Sword" and has been taken over with permission from the author.[1]

We do not know much about Haggai as a person, other than that he was a prophet. It is not known who his father was, where he came from or where he lived. The name 'Haggai' means: 'he that is born on a festal day'. Just as the prophets Zechariah and Malachi, Haggai prophesied after the tribe of Judah was freed from captivity in Babylon.

The Jewish people had begun to rebuild the temple in the year 537 B.C. under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua. However, after some time the work was halted due to opposition by the inhabitants of the land, the Samaritans. They achieved this through Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who gave a command to stop the building and '*by force of arms made them cease*' (Ezra 4:23).

This situation lasted for about fifteen years. The rebuilding remained at a standstill until the second year of the reign of Darius, the king of Persia (Ezra 4:24). Then Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in the name of the God of Israel (Ezra 5:1). This was in the year 520 B.C. Zerubbabel and Joshua, who were still leaders of the people, listened and began to encourage the people to resume the building again. After four years, the temple was completed.

The book of the prophet Haggai contains four prophesies. Haggai prophesied all four of these in the year 520. The first on the first day of the sixth month (a feast

day, the New Moon), often celebrated on the 29th of August, the second on the twenty-first day of the seventh month (the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles), often set on the 17th of October, the third and fourth on the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, often set on the 18th of December.

First Prophecy

In the first prophecy the prophet calls the leaders and the people in the name of the Lord to resume the building of the temple. Due to pressure of the circumstances this had been halted. There were the continual plots of the hostile Samaritans (Ezra 4 and 5). There were also their own concerns, there was poor harvest (Haggai 1:6, 10 and 11), and there was still so much to do for their own homes that, or so they thought, they did not get around to giving much thought for the house of the Lord.

However, the motives of the people are swept off the table by the prophet. It is striking that Haggai does not name their enemies, but places the guilt with the Jews themselves for neglecting to rebuild the temple. The harvest was so poor, precisely because the temple was not being rebuilt. The people had to be reminded that life can only be blessed from out of the temple, the House of the LORD.

The leaders of the people listened to the warning of the LORD, and again began to build the temple.

Also in our age our lives must stand in the light of building the church. That is more important than building our own luxurious life. What matters is *how* we build. In connection to this I quote the following by Prof. B. Holwerda:

'What is the only thing we can do today? What shall we chase after? The apostate church grasps for honor and power, riches and wealth, influence and prestige; and she denies her Husband and sells herself to everyone. However, the true church and the true members, they are not noticed in the world; they

do not receive power or honor. Quietly and simply they go about their way. Yet they pursue righteousness, doing the will of Christ. And when the splendor of the harlot goes up in flames, the Bride of Christ appears without blemish or wrinkle, in the shining garment of good works.

Therefore, there is only one important thing today. We no longer must dream of a position of power or prestige. This can be attained only by committing adultery. Sometimes you still find that among us: we have to do something! Build an organization for this or that. Attempt to make an influence and win over the world for Christ. Let us not drink a drink of illusions: we will not win over the world; the antichrist conquers the world. The apostate church which is not faithful to Christ and to her own children will have influence; but the true church is always plundered, slaughtered. What only is important? Not that our businessmen make profit, but that they do the will of Christ in their place. Not that our workers attain a higher standard of living, but that they are zealous in good works. If only God's will has dominion in our families and in all other relationships; then the rest does not matter.

Today the important question is, whether we are truly church, and whether each one of us as living member manifests in his good works the pattern of the true church.

For they are the future. Of them it is written: 'Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!' Only this is important: that they cling to the Lord Jesus in times such as these. The important thing is that the church holds fast to the grace of the Liberation and that this grace receives more access in all of our lives. All that is important consists in this: that we in this anti-Christian world, wherein the universal church commits adultery, that we keep ourselves clean and pure for Christ'. (from: De kerk in het eindgericht, 1950).

Second Prophecy

The second prophecy contains an encouragement with an eye to the question that the Jews who still remembered the first temple asked, namely, whether the LORD would be pleased to dwell in this temple with His people. The first temple was indeed much more beautiful. Upon this the Lord answers: *'Be strong and work, for I am with you'*.

The glory of the second temple would even be greater than the first one. Christ was physically present in this temple during His walk on earth. However, the perspective reaches beyond the second temple, which was also a building of stone. The Lord now wants to see the temple of living stones being built in this world according to His purpose, in accordance with His Word. And He will make this spiritual temple grow into God's priestly kingdom in heavenly glory. That is the coming salvation of the Lord.

We are encouraged through this as well. Perhaps we may sometimes ask ourselves what is to become of the true church in the Netherlands now that the church has become so small. Let us then think of the words of the Lord Jesus: *'For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them'* (Matt. 18:20).

Rev. Joh. Francke wrote a devotional about this text from which I quote:

'to lawfully meet as church, as long as those two or three gather on a lawful basis.

Thus Christ does not say: there must be at least two or three, otherwise I will not be there in their midst, but He said: 'if only two or three gather in My name...'. In other words: that gathering does not depend on numbers. For example, there can be a thousand people gathered in a church building but without a lawful basis; at the same time a small number (two or three) in a

living room though on a lawful church basis. And then it is not an unanswered question where Christ is present with His salvation. (...)

Yes, in the eyes of man, the church can become an obsolete thing: two or three. But these two or three are encouraged by the Head of the Church: if only they remain in the pure Word, Christ is in their midst. And that is everything!

No, Christ does not seek small numbers. He seeks the great multitude that no one can number! But He does not despise the small number which remains and gathers them in in a certain time here and there, locally and nationwide. Therefore, we may not shudder when we, who remain faithful to Christ's Word, remain at two or three! Christ will fully comfort those two or three who gather in His name. Is that not enough and wonderful?' (from: Leven tot in eeuwigheid, 1973).

Third Prophecy

In the third prophecy, the people are told that they are impure due to the negligence in building the temple, and that therefore everything was defiled. However, now that they have again begun to work they are blessed again, but not on the basis of their faithfulness but only on the basis of God's favor.

This also has something to say to us: Church sin is contagious and it works through all of life. Let us be watchful that we are not negligent in the upbuilding of the church. In this connection I once again quote from Rev. Joh. Francke's devotional on Matt. 18:20:

'The church may and can be ensured of Christ's central presence when in all things she only binds herself to God's Word. She must be completely lawful in her foundation and the church must continually examine herself in this.

This Word of Christ is therefore not meant for personal conversations, conventicles and conferences, but it is meant for His church. And when one does not bind himself to the preaching, church discipline, prayer and to the communion of saints to God's Word, it is self-deception to say: 'Jesus is in our midst!'

Whoever does not unite together and remain united on lawful grounds, does not have Christ in their midst. And to lack this central presence in the church or any other place is the greatest disaster that can be imagined. Whoever loses Christ, loses everything! One can very well shout: 'See, here is the Christ! Look, there is the Christ' but He does not let Himself be pushed or forced to go anywhere. He only comes with His holy presence there where His people, His children gather in accordance to His Word and His rule of law.

Today a terrible game is being played with the Word of the Savior. It is often intended very well and it is seriously meant, yet it is not about good intentions, well-meant or not, but about Scriptural unity with Christ. Whoever calls themselves, let them examine their own gathering!

In the church, the central presence of Jesus Christ makes her faithful as well as strong, strong to withstand Satan, to expel the world from the church and to crucify his own flesh.

*No, the number does not determine the strength of the church, neither of having a lot of money nor having an agreement among members about their spiritual unity. It is only Christ with His Word and Spirit that determines what is church. And it has been the Father's good pleasure to give the Kingdom to that 'little flock' (from: *Leven tot in eeuwigheid*, 1973).*

Fourth Prophecy

Just as had happened in the second prophecy (Haggai 2:7-10), in the fourth prophecy an eschatological perspective is sketched (Hebrews 12:26 f.). Through God's divine judgments in the Old and New Testaments the temple of the LORD is built, until the day of the second coming of Christ, for God uses judgment and catastrophes to build the church in this world. Then God's temple will be completed. In this way world history must serve church history. And God requires us to help build His Church. And so the glory of God's completed temple will come. God Himself will dwell among His people.

'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will no longer be any death...' (Rev. 21:4a).

The author is a member of De Gereformeerde Kerk of Lansingerland (the Netherlands). This article has functioned as an introduction on Haggai for the men's society of this church.

[1] J. Bos, 'Helping to Build His Church', *Shield & Sword*, vol. 2, no. 6, June 2017: pp. 4-7.