



BETHEL
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Understanding the Church, Part 3

Over the past couple of weeks our subject matter has been the church. We have defined the church as a distinct people to whom God bound Himself for His glory and their good. As such, not only does this institution transcend Redemptive History, but it is also known by a variety of names:

- The people of God.
- Israel.
- The Church of God.
- Temple of the Holy Spirit.
- Vine.
- The Bride and Body of Christ.

The Church holds a special place in the heart of God such that it is included as part of what constitutes the climax of world history. At the end of this age, following Christ's return, the Lord is going to bring to Himself His Bride, the Church. Together we will participate in a wedding ceremony and feast by which we shall forever be with the Lord. This wedding ceremony along with the Final Judgment is the direction everything in this world is moving towards!

When Did the Church Begin?

This is what we've seen thus far. And yet there remain holes in our understanding; one of which we are going to address today: When did the Church begin?

This question arises because if Israel and the church constitute the one people of God, distinct throughout all the ages, there must also be a distinct beginning to this group. Thus we ask: When did this church begin? And we further ask: Where does one read in Scripture of a "distinct people of God"?

These questions are important to us today, because when one answers them, he also gleans important insight and understanding of what we are in Christ this day as a body.

New Testament

The Dispensationalist answers these questions generally by stating that the Church began on the Day of Pentecost¹, or when Christ spoke to Peter in Matthew 16. However since we believe that there is only one people of God we point to the Old Testament for this answer.

Garden of Eden

Now, some find it tempting to say that the Church began in the Garden. Here Adam and Eve together were a "people of the Lord." In Genesis 1 God created man in His own image that together God and man might enjoy a deep and abiding relationship.² And while we would agree that God at this time bound Himself to Adam and so to mankind via the Covenant of Works, nevertheless they were NOT a distinct people separate from others. For you see, they were the ONLY people; there were no others! So we do not trace the beginning of the church to the garden.

Noah

Others have suggested Noah. Notice Genesis 6.

Genesis 6:13-14, "And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch."

The rest of the chapter describes how God wanted the ark to be made and the fact that Noah built it.³

Genesis 7:1, "And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation."

There you have it! God has set apart a distinct people to whom He bound Himself for His glory and their good. This therefore must mark the beginning of "the people of God" in the Bible, right?

Unfortunately there is a problem with this suggestion. For while God bound Himself to Noah and his family at this time, the relationship was only intended to be temporal, one that lasted only for the duration of the flood. God did not continue to participate in a special relationship with Noah or any

¹ Compare Acts 2

² Compare Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 3:8

³ Compare Genesis 6:22

particular one of his immediate descendants. Instead, Noah's three boys went forth from Mount Ararat and repopulated the earth forming the peoples who eventually would participate in the Tower of Babel.

So in the era of Noah we still do not have a distinct people to whom God permanently bound Himself.

The Call to Follow

In Genesis 11 and 12 we read of the covenant made with Abram. Here Abram was issued a call to go out and follow.

Genesis 11:31-12:1, "And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran. Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee."

Following the Tower of Babel, God allowed mankind to go their separate ways. Soon whole nations developed, and with them various and sundry religions, all of which were an attempt to flee from God and unite with man.⁴ During this time God sent no prophets; His word therefore was non-existent.⁵ Mankind was left to sow and reap the wages of their sin. Yet as we have seen, it was God's plan to send a Redeemer, the Savior of Genesis 3:15. And so the Lord approached one man with and through whom He would work to bring about the blessings of the Redeemer. And to this man, the Lord gave the command to

- Leave his father's house.
- Go to a foreign land.

Having only God as His refuge and strength.

Now it is important to note that God already had prompted the patriarch and his family to leave Ur and travel to Haran (which is due north of Palestine). In this place Abram faced a huge crisis, for there his father, Terah, died.

Now doubt Abram wondered what to do? Ought he to return to his father's house in Ur? Or should he stay right where he was with his nephew in Haran?

It was at this juncture that God came to Abram and commanded him: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1).

What a difficult command! Yet what a calling! In essence God would be Abram's security! The forsaken Abram was to leave everything that was familiar to him and trust a Being he had only just met!

Now, don't miss a very important point! Abram's background was that of polytheism; his father's house

⁴ Compare Romans 1:21

⁵ God's word was known as we see in the Job. While there is uncertainty to the time of Job, most historians believe that he lived approximately before or during the life of Abraham

was steeped in idolatry.⁶ Now, Abram was to forsake his father's house (including his gods) and follow Yahweh to a strange land. Such is the call of faith! And yet, God's call to Abram was not without a promise.

The Promise of the Covenant

Genesis 12:2-5, “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.”

Genesis 12:7, “And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.”

Again, Abram was alone and no doubt frightened! And so to encourage the patriarch, the Lord gave him five promises.

- Promise #1: God would be with him and his descendants! “I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2). While the connotation of “blessing” is large, it included the idea of God binding Himself to Abram and his household. We see it in Genesis 15 and the flaming torch which passed between the halved animals.⁷ We see it in the words God spoke to Abraham.

Genesis 17:17, “And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.”

Truly through the Covenant of Grace, Abraham and his descendants became “the people of God!”

- Promise #2: Abram’s name would be great! “I will make your name great” (Genesis 12:2). For the rest of eternity, we will remember Abraham and God’s workings in His life. That is a status of “super-stardom” which puts to shame any and every mega-star of this world. Who in glory will know the names of those famous in our day:
 - Paris Hilton?
 - Brittany Spears?
 - Brad Pitt?
 - Bill Gates?
 - George Bush?

And unless they’re children of God, who will even care?

- Promise #3: God would give Abram and his descendants a land flowing with milk and honey!

⁶ Compare Joshua 24:2

⁷ Compare Genesis 15:17

“To your descendants I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7). We know that “the land” here ultimately is the New Heavens and Earth.⁸ This still remains the promise and hope of the child of God!

- Promise #4: God would bless the world through him! “I will bless those who bless you” (Genesis 12:3). As Paul later would explain, this would only be as the individual comes to know the faith of Abraham.⁹ As we trust in Christ, just like Abraham did so long ago, we indeed come to know blessing!
- PROMISE #5: ABRAHAM WOULD NOT REMAIN ALONE; GOD WOULD MAKE HIM A GREAT NATION! “I will make you a great nation” (Genesis 12:2).

This is a key element to the covenant which is so easily passed over, for here we have the makings of a distinct people! By God promising to make the seed of Abraham a “great nation” God revealed His plan and will when it came to redemption; God deigned to work through a family to bring about His salvation!

Now the question is what family? Is it the family of the ethnic Jews?

No! It is the family of the faith of Abraham!¹⁰ And thus when the gospel was preached at the time of Christ, the call was rooted and grounded in the Abrahamic Covenant. When the gospel was proclaimed on the Day of Pentecost it was rooted and grounded in the Abrahamic Covenant.

Acts 2:39, “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.”

In theology much has been made of the first four elements of the covenant, yet with our study it is the last promise that is of particular importance. For when we look in Scripture for a “distinct people to whom God bound Himself for His glory and their good” it clearly is seen that through the Covenant with Abraham God created this distinct people.

Clearly here we see these elements:

- A commitment on God’s part to a particular people.
- Great blessings promised to this people.
- The formation of a people of God- a family, a qohol, a synagogue, THE church.

So it is here, during the time of Abraham that we trace the beginnings of the Church of God.

The Covenant Culture

Now, this is significant on account of the culture which consequently emerged amongst the people of God, a culture forged and shaped by the covenant.

⁸ Compare Hebrews 11:15-16

⁹ Compare Galatians 3:7-9

¹⁰ Compare Romans 9:8

Because the birth of the church was linked to advancement in the Covenant of Grace; specifically that time when God committed Himself to a people/family, the family of Abraham, a fundamental characteristic both of the covenant and the church is the call for the care of the lowly, weak, outcast, and helpless in our midst!

Thus Scripture is saturated with the call for compassion, mutual care and devotion when it came to the body of Christ. Notice the commitment of God:

Psalm 146:8-9, “The LORD openeth the eyes of the blind: the LORD raiseth them that are bowed down: the LORD loveth the righteous: The LORD preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down. “

As this is God’s will toward the weak, helpless, and infirmed, we are not surprised to see that compassion and mercy when it came to the Covenant Community became THE cultural standard. Accordingly, God commanded His people:

Deuteronomy 27:18-19, “Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way. And all the people shall say, Amen. Cursed be he that perverteth the judgment of the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say, Amen.”

The irony is that being “weak” and “helpless” in the surrounding nations was a sign that God was against you; you had done something wrong. Thus if you were healthy and well-off, it was in your place to curse these ones by

- Making fun of them.
- Throwing rocks at them.
- Spitting upon them.
- Misleading them.

Yet this was not to be the ethic amongst the people of God.

Exodus 22:21-24, “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.”

If you don’t care for the needy in the body of Christ, God won’t care for you! In fact, this is THE first implication that arises from an understanding of the greatness of God!

Deuteronomy 10:17-19, “For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward: He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

You say, “How does God’s greatness necessitate caring for the weak and helpless?”

Part of our understanding of the greatness of God revolves around His will to bind Himself to a distinct people, calling them friend. As this is true, how ought this to effect the way we live?

Deuteronomy 24:19-21, “When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands. When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow. When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean it afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow.”

Whether you were a farmer or business man, the body of Christ was ever to be on your mind. You were to be concerned about the body’s needs.

Do you see the covenant will of our covenant God? o you see the culture that emerged on account of their being a distinct people of God?

Unlike the nations, Israel was to become a nation of compassion and genuine love toward one another- such that, through the Abrahamic Covenant and its stress on the Covenant Community, Christianity became a religion of

- The community.
- The family of God.
- The people of God.

Christianity in Crisis

In light of this, would you notice what in Scripture constitutes a “crises of religion:” Apostasy. One of the marks of apostasy when it came to the church in the Old Testament was NOT first a compromise in Israel’s Christology or Pneumatology, BUT a disregard for any in the body of Christ. The Psalmist lived at a time of gross hypocrisy. Faith had fallen on hard times. Notice his plea:

Psalm 94:1-6, “O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, shew thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth: render a reward to the proud. LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves? They break in pieces thy people, O LORD, and afflict thine heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless.”

Where does arrogance and the seed of ungodliness first manifest itself?

It manifests itself in how we individually view and/or treat the weak, wounded, and hurting in the body. Listen to the call of God when it came to His compromised people:

Isaiah 1:16-17, “Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

By the sound of this exhortation, obviously God’s people had completely abandoned the Lord and were running headlong into paganism! But it was manifested by their failure to “seek justice, reprove the

ruthless; defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.”

I remember years ago coming across verses like this in a quiet time and my first thought was that it was the evil that bothered God. After all that was why God’s people went into exile. Any way with all the theological battles of the twentieth century, the plea seemed laughable; if your greatest problem as a people is that you are not caring for the weak or hurting among you, you don’t have problems!

But when I reflected upon and came to understand the Covenant will of our Covenant God, I had a new appreciation for mutual love and care in the Covenant Community.

- When love fades between the people of God
- When church members only care about themselves
- When a member of a body can look at someone hurting and not be moved

the church is in crises; apostasy already has set in! Notice the basis for God blessing His people.

Jeremiah 7:5-7, “For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbour; If ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt: Then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever.”

Wait a minute! At the writing of Jeremiah, Judah had forty years remaining on the time clock before they would be snuffed out as a nation, and that which would have postponed the judgment was the body of Christ caring for their own! Listen to God’s exhortation to the leaders of Judah during this time:

Jeremiah 22:1-5, “Thus saith the LORD; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, And say, Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates: Thus saith the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation.”

Ezekiel was written a couple of decades after Jeremiah at a time when judgment had befallen the people of God. What at this time remained God’s problem with His people?

Ezekiel 22:7-8, “In thee have they set light by father and mother: in the midst of thee have they dealt by oppression with the stranger: in thee have they vexed the fatherless and the widow. Thou hast despised mine holy things, and hast profaned my sabbaths.”

Yes Israel was guilty of profaning many holy things including the Sabbath. But most significant is the fact that lumped in the list of the church’s apostasy was their neglect for the poor and needy amongst them. There is no way around it; our treatment of the weak and helpless in the body of Christ is of great importance to God! We see it after the return of God’s people following the exile in 520 BC.

Zechariah 7:8-10, “And the word of the LORD came unto Zechariah, saying, Thus speaketh the

LORD of hosts, saying, Execute true judgment, and shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother: And oppress not the widow, nor the fatherless, the stranger, nor the poor; and let none of you imagine evil against his brother in your heart.”

Still a century later, listen to God’s beef with His people- yes it included the ‘weighty’ sins of sorcery and witchcraft, but it also included the awful sin of neglect and disregard when it came to the body.

Malachi 3:5, “And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.”

From all of this we conclude that a mark of Spiritual vitality when it comes to the child of God, and so a church is NOT first

- The depth of their quiet times.
- The emotions they feel when they worship.
- The ability to quote scripture.
- How they observe the Sabbath.
- What they do with Scripture.
- How well they know theology.
- How often and deep is their prayer.

BUT their regard for the people of God! Accordingly the Word contains exhortation after exhortation linking our piety to our love of the brethren.

James 2:14-16, “What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?”

Clearly James is making a link between a living, thriving, growing faith AND its results being concerned for the weak and hurting in the body. From this we conclude that a mark of a thriving faith is a passion for caring for one another. In fact you couldn’t get a statement clearer than this one:

James 1:27, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit [show pastoral concern] the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

The purity of our religion and so the gauge of a beating heart toward the Lord is what we do with one another! Living to refresh and build up the body of Christ is a mark of spiritual vitality!

1 John 4:20-21, “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”

Fidelity in our walks with God is intimately linked to our love of the brethren. You can articulate the most glorious doctrinal statements, you can say that you love grace, but if you do not love this body and

so as to bless it, you are

- Self-deceived... a liar.
- Or as Paul put it, “a noising gong and a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians. 13:1).

Christ put it best when he said, “by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

When is Christianity at its best?

When love permeates the covenant community! When Paul set out to send a minister to Philippi to serve on his behalf, he chose a man, Timothy, who cared for the body.

Philippians 2:20-21, “For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s.”

A mature minister of Christ is one who is concerned for the welfare of others, not their own. This always has been a mark of a healthy walk. Finally Paul exhorted this way:

Romans 15:1-2, “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbour for his good to edification.”

It may sound like I’m really harping here because there must be a lack of love at Bethel; that’s not it at all! When I started this series a couple of weeks back I made the statement that there is a crises that exists in Christianity that has fallen just below the radar of the theological watch-dogs of our day. Refined and in decent shape is many of our “ologies.” But when it comes to our Ecclesiology, there is a void! We are in crises!

- So long as “church” is viewed as something you simply attend, our religion is in crises!
- So long as we view what we do here through the eyes of a consumer, our hearts are defecting!
- So long as we read the prayer chain and not pray for the body of Christ, but are simply moved to curiosity, we are “dead even while we live” (1 Timothy 5:6)!
- So long as we do not get involved in the body of Christ to refresh it, our hearts are in a state of decline!
- So long as we view the leaders or the worship of a church as the main attraction, we are in trouble.
- So long as we labor only to see our own walks deepening and not that of others, we are running headlong into apostasy.
- So long as we view each other as dispensable, we are spiritually immature.
- So long as we think we can go it alone, we are babes in Christ.

Oh Christian, consider with me the dynamics of family life and then compare that to what passes as church life today in America. In most families, even dysfunctional ones, there is an unconditional commitment that exists among some if not all the family members. Yes you may fight like cats and dogs, but there remains a capacity for forgiveness that goes beyond comprehension. Have anyone else treat you the way your parents or a sibling have, and you’d be done with them. But the grown man or woman shrugs it off and goes right back on caring for the family member.

In family gatherings, rarely is there the anticipation that if it isn't personally fun, we leave and find a family that's more edifying. Instead we cheer each other on- often times to the chagrin of our spouses.

Why is that? Why is there such a bond in a family?

It is because we view the relationships as lasting for a life-time, and so we aren't willing to allow quirks or even sins to get in the way. Unless I'm mistaken, but what we've learned in our current study is that as the church of God we constitute a family. So

- Where's the unconditional love?
- Where's the commitment that transcends time?
- Where's the deep well of forgiveness?
- Where's the willingness to lock arms together to accomplish our God given calling?
- Where's the longing to be poured out and used up for the good of others- the way a parent does for his child?

Can I tell you where it's gone?

When the church ceased being a family and became a product for the consuming church member, which is what the church has become today. Our church culture became like that of the floor of the stock market, everyone getting the most for their money regardless of who gets hurt.

Galatians 5:15, "But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed one of another."

As we close, I want to call us back to the Bridegroom and His most excellent love for His bride, the church. To gaze upon this love is to begin to cultivate a theology of the church.

1 John 3:16-18, "Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth."

This is what love looks like in a family... that is, the family of God!

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on February 3, 2007. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church