

## 2. The New Humanity and the Structure of God's Covenant Household

The Scripture reveals a foundational continuity in the people of God moving into the age of fulfillment in Christ. Like the covenant nation of Israel, the New Covenant community is determined by possession of the covenant sign of circumcision and personal participation in and ownership of the covenant itself. But what was temporal and external for Israel – being prophetic and pedagogical – is now entirely spiritual by virtue of its transformation in Christ. Indeed, every aspect of the covenant community's identity has found its terminus, fulfillment and life in the Seed of the Woman. The sole criterion for participation in God's covenant household is participation in Christ.

The preceding consideration of the identity of the "people of God" focused more on its individual constituent members. It sought to answer the question of who is a part of that people. But the individualism associated with God's household is secondary to its corporate nature and function; the covenant community is just that – a *community*.

### a. The Church as Corporate Sanctuary

In the context of the present study of sacred space, the realization of God's dwelling place has found its preeminent expression in Jesus Christ Himself; in Him the fullness of deity dwells *bodily* (Colossians 2:9; cf. John 1:14). The import of Paul's words is that divine fullness resides in the *man*, Jesus of Nazareth, the seed of Eve: The fulfillment of sacred space has an anthropological focal point in the man, Christ Jesus, but He is not merely man, but a new Adam. Thus the anthropological focus of sacred space extends through Jesus to the human race as it finds its spiritual origin, descent, and destiny in Him.

This understanding is consistent with the individualism of the people of God: Everyone – Jew or Gentile – who is joined to Christ is a covenant descendent of Abraham and heir of the promises made to him. Participation in the covenant isn't a matter of family or community relation, but *personal* faith and individual renewal by the Spirit (cf. Romans 4:1-24; Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29). But, though the Scripture emphasizes the foundational individualism of covenant membership, it equally insists that the individual believer enters into and finds his existence and life within a community. God's goal in the realization of sacred space isn't the salvation of multitudes of individuals, but the formation of a corporate sanctuary.

Thus Peter spoke of individual people becoming "living stones" through faith in the Living Stone that is Jesus Christ. But He is the "chief cornerstone," meaning that He is the foundation and orienting point for a structure built upon Him. Men become "living stones," not in order to remain individual entities lying on the ground alone, but to be built together into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:4-6).

*The personal "christification" of God's fulfilled covenant people – the true sons of Abraham – serves the goal of His formation of a christified community.*

The Scriptures know nothing of an individual Christianity; to be a Christian is to be part of the household of faith. Paul's theology of the Church exactly paralleled Peter's: God's regeneration and bestowal of His Spirit to individual persons (Ephesians 1:13-14) serves His goal of building a holy temple for Himself – a corporate eschatological and everlasting dwelling (Ephesians 2:19-22). While individuals are God's temple by virtue of His indwelling Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:15-20; cf. Romans 8:9-10), that reality has its meaning in an *ecclesial* sanctuary.

In this respect, too, the covenant household manifests promise/fulfillment continuity. Yahweh's presence in Israel was manifested in His glory-cloud in the Holy of Holies, but He also spoke of His Spirit dwelling in the midst of the community (Isaiah 63:7-14; Haggai 2:5). God's presence was localized in a physical structure, but the point of that tangible symbolism was that Israel itself was, in a spiritual sense, Yahweh's sanctuary (cf. Exodus 25:1-8, 29:38-46); the living Father was present with His beloved son. *In the age of promise and preparation, the issue for the covenant household wasn't personal indwelling, but corporate presence.* Israel was a corporate entity: It was collectively the "son of God" and Yahweh dealt with His covenant son in corporate fashion.

- When individuals sinned and broke the covenant, the whole nation suffered: The unbelief of a portion caused the whole covenant household to wander in judgment for forty years (Numbers 14:1-35); Achan's sin at Ai brought the defeat of the nation and the death of individuals who had no part in his disobedience (Joshua 7:1-5); so the faithful remnant of Israel and Judah suffered desolation and exile with the rest of their countrymen.
- Conversely, the whole nation enjoyed God's favor though multitudes of individuals in every generation disregarded and even opposed Him (cf. Psalm 78; Hosea 2:1-8; Jeremiah 31:31-32). Not individual Israelites, but the covenant household constituted Yahweh's chosen and beloved son.

Now, in the "fullness of the times," fulfillment has brought the discontinuity of individual indwelling. Yahweh isn't simply among His people; He indwells them personally and permanently. But the fundamental continuity of the covenant community remains: As it was with Israel, so also in the New Covenant Church the "people of God" is a communal idea. *Personal indwelling finds its meaning and relevance in corporate indwelling.* Living stones realize their purpose in God's spiritual sanctuary built upon the chief cornerstone (ref. Zechariah 4:1-10).

## **b. The Church as the Body of Christ**

Individual participation in Christ looks to corporate membership in Him, and this concept is most pronounced and most developed in Paul's imagery of the Church as Christ's **body**. The metaphor of an organism is eminently suited to describe the Church in relation to Christ, for it accurately expresses the relationship between the Church's individual and corporate aspects.

- Like a living organism (a “body”), the Church is comprised of individual members. The human body isn’t an amorphous mass or homogeneous substance, but an amalgamation of discrete and differing parts. So it is with the Church: It is composed of many members, each of whom is entirely unique yet individually vital to the make-up of the body.
- At the same time, the members together form a unified, synergistic whole. While an organism’s individual parts are identifiable, they are always identified and understood in relation to the whole. A person’s eye is a discrete organ that can be isolated for examination and analysis, but no one considers that organ in an individualistic sense. In form as well as function, the “meaning” of a particular part is relative to the whole.

This is how it is with the Church. It is composed of numerous members that can be individually identified and considered. And yet their individual significance and role as Christians are bound up in the organism of the Church. The implication ought to be obvious: It is impossible for believers to fully grasp their individual identity and function except as they are considered in relation to the corporate body.

***Considered and treated in isolation as individuals, Christians are ultimately unintelligible – to themselves as much as to others.***

This can be illustrated by a person who stumbles upon an individual tiny bone in a field and attempts to identify and understand it apart from any reference to the organism of which it was a part. Even if the examiner were able to determine that he was holding a bone, he could go no further in his understanding without identifying the creature it had come from.

So Paul addressed himself to the Church at Corinth: As it is with the human body, so it is with Christ. Though His “body” is composed of many individual members – each of which is unique in its identity and role, the many are together constituted one spiritual organism having Him as its Head (ref. 1 Corinthians 12:12-14; cf. Ephesians 4:14-16; Colossians 2:18-19). *Most importantly, Paul understood the dynamic of individuality/community in the Church in terms of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.*

- It is the indwelling presence of the Spirit that makes a person part of Christ’s body. Moreover, the first work of Christ’s Spirit is to join the individual human being to Christ Himself (Romans 8:9-10); there is no such thing as a body part that isn’t vitally connected to the Head.
- But by joining a person to Christ, the Spirit also joins him to every other person who is “in Christ.” The Spirit creates the organism of the Church in *Himself* (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:1-14; Ephesians 4:1-6), but, in that He has become the *Spirit of Christ*, that organism is Christ’s “body.”

The centrality of the Spirit in the constitution of Christ's body highlights a few crucial features of the Church and its order and function:

- 1) The first is that, as the Church is constituted by the renewing power and indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, *it has no ground or aspect of unity that isn't purely spiritual and christological*. This is a radical notion that is lost on perhaps the majority of professing Christians.

The reason is that no human organization, order, or institution follows this paradigm. **Regardless of culture or historical context, every instance and expression of human social order has its organizing and unifying features in earthly considerations.** This is as true of religious institutions as secular ones. The need for human beings to organize around tangible, temporal realities is innate, and explains why all religion in the history of the world has been sacral. (Sacralism is a social system in which a society's religious and civil/cultural identities are co-extensive; it is when a given people are defined by a common religion as well as a shared social structure). The power and intractability of mankind's sacral mindset is evident in the fact that, a mere four centuries into its existence, the Christian faith had already been brought under its sway and transformed by it. *Corpus Christi* – the body of Christ – had been rendered *Corpus Christianum* – the body of christened society, or “Christendom.” This sacral conception of the Church would endure through and beyond the Reformation, being manifest in certain societies to this day.

But the Church revealed in the New Testament is overtly anti-sacral: It consists, not of all the members of the community (albeit conjoined by sacrament), but all those – and only those – joined to Christ by His Spirit. *There is only one point of commonality in the fulfilled people of God, and that is participation in the new creation effected and perfected by Christ's Spirit*. Unlike every other religious community in the history of the world (including Old Testament Israel), membership in Christ's body involves no temporal or ritual/sacramental markers or demands. His body isn't delineated by common culture, language, geography, or any other social, religious, physical, or personal considerations; it is solely determined by one Spirit, one faith, one spiritual baptism into Christ, one God and Father.

Given the powerful human inclination toward sacral religion, it's not at all surprising that this mindset continues to dominate the Christian landscape. It operates even among those who reject the Reformed notion of a composite Church identified by the sign of water baptism. Baptists, too, innately tend to define the members of Christ's body in terms of temporal, tangible commonalities. They can include “spiritual” things like “walking the aisle” and common doctrine and religious practice, but extend even to such matters as shared dress and lifestyle patterns. One need only consider the homogeneous composition of most churches to prove the point.

- 2) But if the Church is an entirely spiritual organism that has its identity and life in the vital union of its members with Christ by His Spirit, *it follows that the function of Christ's body is equally spiritual*. This truth, too, has far too often been lost upon the Church, as many influences, both historical and cultural, have served through the centuries to mislead and distract it from its ordained function.

The sacralizing of the Church led it to confuse its role with that of the State. This transformation saw the emergence of the “Holy Roman Empire” and the Church increasingly taking to itself ruling authority. The medieval doctrine of the *two swords* was the Church’s purported biblical vindication of its insistence that the civil ruler’s role in society was to enforce its ultimate authority. The king might be the earthly sovereign, but even kings have souls, and the Church possesses the “power of the keys.”

The Reformation brought certain changes in the Church’s conception of its role, but the Reformers’ determination to retain the sacral ecclesiology of medieval Christendom insured continuing confusion and error. Not surprisingly, European Protestants continued to view the Church as playing a vital role in the State’s affairs, and vice versa. Calvin’s Geneva, Zwingli’s Zurich, and Puritan England all prove the point.

Ascribing to itself authority over the social order, it was inevitable that the Church would also interject itself into academic and scientific inquiry and understanding. The medieval Church had ruled by the tools of ignorance, superstition and intimidation, and it set itself against everything that would liberate men’s minds and souls from its totalitarian control. Under the guise of honoring God, the Church became the enemy of science, creating an uncomfortable relationship between them that endures to this day.

Later, the Enlightenment saw the rise of theological liberalism and the “social gospel” which regards the Church’s primary role as that of social reformer. In this view, the Church is called to remedy suffering and injustice and improve the lot of men and societies. In the modern era that notion has manifested itself in “liberation theology” which enjoys various expressions related to Marxism, Afro-centrism, and even feminism (as liberation from patriarchy). All of these things are further examples of the failure of the Church to rightly recognize the crucial distinction between the spiritual kingdom of God and the natural city of Man.

The same confusion continues in American Evangelicalism. One evidence of this is the fact that certain segments of it have effectively reduced Christ’s Church to a political action committee. Having lost sight of their spiritual mandate to proclaim the gospel and call men to renewal and reconciliation in Christ, many Evangelicals give their energies to fighting social and cultural battles with natural devices and resources.

- 3) At the same time, the very fact that the Church's function and role are spiritual indicates that *it is not to live its life in isolation from the temporal world*. Misconception of the Church's role has led it to intrude into and even usurp the divinely established jurisdiction of the State (ref. Matthew 22:15-21), but it has equally led to the Church's isolation from the world. Monasticism, cultism, and sectarianism are all expressions of a perverse understanding of Christian separation and consecration.

The most obvious proof that Christ hasn't called His Church to retract from the world is the fact that it exists **in** the world. The Father doesn't snatch His children into heaven at the moment of their regeneration, and Jesus was unequivocal that, though His disciples are no longer *of* the world, they are present in it (cf. John 15:18-19, 17:11-14). Indeed, they *must* be present and active in the world because of their spiritual mission: Jesus didn't merely leave His disciples in the world; He sent them into the world to bear witness of Him (cf. John 17:15-20 with 15:26-27).

The Church is the fulfilled "people of God" – the consummate Abrahamic community that shares in Abraham's covenant inheritance. *And at the heart of Abrahamic identity and calling is the singular privilege of mediating Yahweh's blessing to all the earth's families.*

- As the corporate covenant seed of Abraham, Israel was called to fulfill this mission in the world but it failed. Its failure brought the Abrahamic promise – and therefore God's Edenic oath – into jeopardy, but the Lord promised another "Israel" who would fulfill this crucial calling.
- This Seed of Abraham – the faithful Servant of Yahweh – would secure the promise of global (and creational) blessing by His own self-offering (Isaiah 49-53; esp. 52:13-15, 53:10-12). In view of the Servant's work, Zion (as Yahweh's sanctuary) was to expand her dwelling to accommodate all her new children (Isaiah 54:1ff), and these children – themselves *servants of Yahweh* (54:17) and *sons of Abraham* – were to carry out, by their own proclamation and personal devotion, the Abrahamic promise of worldwide restoration to God (Isaiah 55; cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:6-8).

Thus, as much as the confusion of Church and State is a grievous error that undermines the Church's accurate self-disclosure to men and the fulfillment of its ordained role, isolationism is just as bad, if not worse. The fulfilled people of God are the heirs of Abraham's gospel and calling (Galatians 3:7-9), and Yahweh's design to bring the knowledge of Himself to all the nations demands that His people carry *Him* – by His gospel in the power of His indwelling Spirit – into all the world. Salt is a substance distinct from the meat it interacts with, but it fulfills its "savoring" purpose only by intimately permeating it (ref. Matthew 5:13-16).