

Sunday, August 23, 2009

Introduction & Review

We have defined the church in its broadest sense as all those who are in covenant with God through Jesus Christ. And we have said that one may enter this covenant, in the same way that every other covenant is entered into, namely *by means of an oath*.

This is just how it is in marriage. When a man and a woman exchange vows, they enter into a new relationship. They have a different status. They become something they weren't before. The man becomes a husband and the woman becomes a wife.

So also God's covenant is entered into by means of an oath—by the exchange of vows, as it were. The gospel is God's promise (his vow, his oath) to be our God and to take us for his people. In return, we vow—we pledge—our fidelity, our faithfulness, to him. “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex. 24:7).

And, as I mentioned last week, all this comes into focus in the New Testament in the person of Jesus Christ. He is presented by the prophets as “the messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1), and even as the covenant itself (Isa. 42:6; 49:8), since the covenant is inaugurated in his blood (Lk. 22:20; cf. Heb. 13:20).

This is why THE confessional statement of the New Testament is: “Jesus is Lord” (Rom. 10:9). When this is confessed in the way in which Paul intends, it's not simply a person's reflection concerning some abstract notion he has floating around in his head. It functions as a pledge of allegiance, an oath of obedience to one's rightful sovereign.

And upon the taking of this oath—upon the pledging of one's allegiance to Jesus Christ—a person's status *changes*. He becomes something he wasn't before. He becomes, in a word, a *Christian*. He is numbered among God's covenant people. And to signify this, and to signify that God will deal mercifully with him and

cleanse him of all his sins, God gives him the sign of the covenant, which is baptism. More on that in another sermon.

So then, the church can be defined very simply as the covenanted people of God.

The Church in the Old Testament and the New Testament

Now we have a vitally important matter to discuss today, and that is the relationship between God's people in the period of the Old Testament and his people in the period of the New Testament.

People often think these are two separate groups of people. You have Israel on the one hand, and the church on the other. You have Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New. And it's common for people to think that there is a radical *discontinuity* between them, as if God simply started over with a new and different people in the New Testament.

I hope to show, however, that this is not the proper way of looking at things. It's proper to see continuity between the Old and New Testaments, and between God's *people* in the Old and New testaments. There is development, of course; there are modifications; but there is continuity.

Now, this is such an important point that I want to take some time to stress it. The church is *not* unique to the New Testament period. It did not come into existence on the Day of Pentecost. This is what many people think. But God has always, always, *always*, had a people for himself. He had a people in the Garden of Eden. He had Adam and Eve. And after their fall, when he made atonement for them, he had a *redeemed* people. And in the very early days, in the infancy of the race, as the number of people was just beginning to increase, we find that the faithful began to gather together to call upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26). But the point is that God has always had a people, and that people, who belong to him by way of covenant, is his church—in whatever age they are found. In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses the same word for the gathering of Israel at Mount Sinai that is used in the New Testament for the church (cf. Deut. 4:10; 9:10; 10:4; 18:16).

“To Seth also a son was born, and he called his name Enosh. At that time people began to call upon the name of the LORD” (Gen. 4:26)

The church has gone through many different phases throughout its history. It has grown in numbers. It has developed in a variety of ways, notably at the time of Abraham, again at the time of Moses, yet again at the time of David, and still further at the time of Christ; but it is one church and one people throughout its history.

I can't begin to tell you how important it is that we get this. Trust me; it's important, *hugely* important. If we think of the church as a uniquely New Testament phenomenon, we will not only be wrong in our conception of the church, but we will be wrong on a number of other important matters as well. We'll be wrong in terms of the church's mission and calling. We'll be wrong in terms of our heritage and our possession. We'll think, "The Old Testament? Oh, that was for Israel. The New Testament is for the church." And so we'll cut ourselves off from the whole counsel of God found in the whole Bible. If we don't understand the church as having continuity through history, beginning with Adam and including Noah and Abraham and the patriarchs and Moses and David and the prophets, if we don't see ourselves as belonging to this people...well...it's like we have just cut off our right arm.

The New Testament itself teaches us to think about the church as being a continuation of God's faithful, covenanted people in Old Testament times, albeit in a modified form. The church is faithful Israel...with believing Gentiles incorporated in.

Paul makes this plain in the second chapter of Ephesians, when he says,

¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh [you *Christian* Gentiles], called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— ¹² remember that you were at that time [note that he is saying something that was true of them in the past, but is true no longer] separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13).

Notice that they were *once* "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel"; but they are not so now, because they have been grafted in, incorporated into Israel. They are now a part of the true Israel, the new Israel, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles. This is why in Galatians Paul refers to the church as "the Israel of God."

And why he could write to the church in Corinth, a mostly Gentile church (1 Cor. 12:2), and say, “I want you to know, brothers, that *our fathers* were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...” (1 Cor. 10:1ff.). How could he say that to Gentiles? How could he speak of the Israelites in the wilderness as “our fathers” to Gentile Christians? He could do this because he understands that God reckons believing Gentiles as adopted into the family of Abraham.

And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16)

We see this very clearly in his letter to the Galatians,

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

There is neither Jew nor Greek... if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:7, 28-29)

This is very different from how most Christians think of it. Most Christians think that in the Old Testament God had Israel for his people, and then in the New Testament he started all over from scratch with a new and different people. But this isn't really how things are presented to us at all. Believing Gentiles are reckoned as descendants of Abraham and incorporated into Israel.

Consider the imagery that Paul uses in the eleventh chapter of Romans, which is very striking (Rom. 11:13-24).

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry ¹⁴ in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? ¹⁶ If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

²³ And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree (Rom. 11:13-24)

Now, what do we see here? I'll tell what we *don't* see. We don't see one olive tree representing Israel, and a second olive tree representing the church. We don't see God planting the tree of Israel, and then saying something like, "Well, that's an unproductive tree; I think I'll start over and plant a new one."

No. We find *one tree*, representing Israel. And we find unfaithful, unbelieving Jews, pruned from the tree like so many unfruitful branches. And we find believing Gentiles, like shoots from a wild olive tree, grafted on.

You see here how there is continuity over time—continuity of the people of God between the testaments. There is one tree, one people—all of whom are regarded as descendants of Abraham and partakers of the promises and covenants that were given to him and to his descendants on the basis, not of physical descent, but of faith.

And this is what God had always intended from the very beginning, when he gave Abraham the original promise, saying, "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). "In you." In Abraham. "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring" (Gen. 17:7).

It was always God's intention, that in the fullness of time, he would send his son to confirm and fulfill the promises he made to Abraham and his descendants, and to call all the nations of the world to receive the saving benefits of Christ. And that this was God's original intention comes into clearer and clearer focus through history, with each succeeding covenantal development.

From Adam to Abraham, the church lacked formal identity and organization. Beginning with Abraham, however, the church begins to take on a more clearly defined character. And we see it develop over time. At first, the church consisted of a family, then of a tribe, then of a nation, and now of many nations. We might think of the church in the Old Testament period as a *national* church, whereas in the New Testament period it is a *transnational* church. But the point is, it is one

people over time. There is expansion and development, to be sure, but it is one people.

When we think of the church in this way, it gives us a much larger vision of the church's calling and purpose, and a much larger vision of the Christian life. It shows us that there is much more to the Christian life than the very narrow concerns of our own personal redemption. As important as that is, it's not the whole of our relationship to God. It's not the only thing we are instructed in in the Bible. There is more...*a lot more*. But too often we get fixated at that point and we can't see beyond it. But when we see the whole Bible as our inheritance and see that it applies to all of life, our vision is expanded and we see that God is not only interested in saved individuals, but a saved community as well. We see that he is not just interested in persons, but in a people.

This larger view of things also shows us how we should look upon our children—as members of God's covenant with us. It helps us to understand that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are a part of our inheritance—that the promises and commands of the Old Testament belong to us. It gives us an identity as a people. It anchors us in history. And it gives us a future and a hope.

There really is a lot more that could be said about this; but we must push ahead and take a look at the organization of the church.

The Local the Church

We have defined the church as the covenanted people of God—those in all parts the world who are joined to God by way of covenant through Jesus Christ. This is the church in the broad sense, the *universal* church. But we need to consider the church as it expresses itself locally, because this universal church finds expression in countless local congregations around the world. How are we to think of the local church? How is it to be organized? How is it to relate to other congregations? What is its purpose, its mission, etc.?

The Duty of Church Attendance

First of all let me say that it is the *duty* of every Christian to be actively involved in the life of the local church. We are to gather weekly for the public worship of God

with other believers (Heb. 12:24; Lev. 23:3). We are to receive instruction by hearing the word of God read and expounded. We are to receive the sacraments. We are to join in public prayer. We are to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16). We are to exercise our gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. We are to *honor God by our attendance and participation*.

“...do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some...” (Heb. 12:24)

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation (Lev. 23:3)

Someone will say, perhaps, “Well, I just don’t feel like I get anything out of church.” But church isn’t about your subjective experience. It isn’t about going if you feel like it or not going if you don’t. It’s about doing what God says to do, and about honoring him by your presence, because when you neglect the public worship of God you are implying—you are *asserting*—that there are other things more important than answering God’s summons for his people to appear before him. He has appointed the day and he has appointed the means and he gives us the command to appear before him, and we think we’re free to say, “Oh, I just don’t feel like it today”? What, is it all about our feelings?! Do we think so little of God that we think worship is all about us and our subjective experience? Or are we free to say, “There are other things that are more important, more urgent for me to do today”? More important than obeying God?! Are you kidding me? Our whole week should be organized around the Lord’s Day and the holy convocation of his people. The Lord loves the gathering of the church, the assembling of his people. “The Lord loves the gates of Zion [his holy city, the place where the tribes go up] more than all the dwelling places of Jacob” (Ps. 87:2). There is a unique blessing, a special grace, which God is pleased to grant when his people are gathered together for worship.

Now, although I speak of the *duty* of church attendance, I want to make it clear that it ought to be regarded as a *delightful* duty. A man has a duty to make love to his wife, but I would venture to say that there’s not one of us here who doesn’t think of this as a *delightful* duty. So it ought to be with the public worship of God, the assembling of the saints together each Lord’s Day. We ought to come with the eager expectation of meeting with God and receiving his grace.

How are we to know that God has met with us? Because we get goose bumps? Because we have a tingling sensation down our spine? Because we experience a rush of emotion? How are we to know? *We know it by faith*. God has called us

together to meet with him each Lord's Day and promised blessing and grace to those who do. Take him at his word. Believe him. Trust that there is grace poured out, nourishment and strength and power conferred by the Holy Spirit, just as he promised, whether you feel like it or not.

The Organization and Government of the Church

Now, since the reason we are dealing with the subject of the church in this sermon series has to do with our proposed bylaw changes regarding changing the name of the office of Trustee to Deacon, let's consider what the Bible teaches concerning the organization and government of the church.

We have time only to introduce the subject today. Lord willing we will deal more fully with this next week.

Ordinary versus Extraordinary Offices

The first thing I wish to say concerning the organization and government of the church is that we must distinguish between the ordinary and *extraordinary* offices of the church. Clearly, that first generation after Christ was in a unique position because the church had living apostles in its midst. The office of apostle was unique to that first generation after Christ. Two things were necessary to have been an apostle. First, one must have seen the Lord Jesus Christ after his resurrection (Acts 1:21-22; 22:14; 1 Cor. 9:1). And second, one must have been specifically appointed by Christ to fill the office, because not everyone who saw the Lord after his resurrection was called to be an apostle. Paul himself says that Jesus appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time after his resurrection. But they were not all called to the apostolate. We should also note that an apostle's calling was confirmed by miracles (2 Cor. 12:12).

“So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22)

“The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth” (Acts 22:14)

“Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus or Lord?” (1 Cor. 9:1)

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Cor. 12:12)

There are people today who claim to be apostles (in the Mormon Church, in some Pentecostal churches) or successors of the apostles (in the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches), and my question to them is, “Have you seen

the Lord Jesus Christ? Did he appear to you, like he appeared to Paul? And if you claim that he did, where's the proof? Where are the miracles to back up the claim?" And I don't mean things that are unverifiable, like you healed someone with a headache or a sore back—things that you can't see, things that you can't verify. I mean real bona fide miracles. Things that are visible, obvious. It doesn't have to be big. Heal somebody of acne or something. Let us watch the pimples disappear. Put up or shut up. If you make the claim, the burden of proof is on you. In the book of Revelation Jesus commended the church at Ephesus for putting to the test "those who call themselves apostles" (Rev. 2:2).

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false" (Rev. 2:2)

The office of apostle was an extraordinary office in the first generation after Christ. So also was the office of prophet. The ministry of the apostles and prophets, Paul tells us, was designed to lay the foundation of the church by making known the mystery of Christ (Eph. 2:20; 3:4-5). That mystery has been made known. The foundation has been laid. The structure is being built and has progressed now for two thousand years.

The Scriptures lead us to the conclusion that these were *extraordinary* offices for that first generation. But what offices remain? What are the *ordinary* offices? When we examine the Scriptures we discover that there are two classes of officers in each congregation: elders and deacons.

We gather this from a number of passages, but principally from Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13. In Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses the letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." (Note: "overseer" is another name for *elder*). And in his first letter to Timothy, Paul instructs him concerning the qualifications for overseers/elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7) and deacons (vv. 8-13). These are the ordinary, ongoing offices that remain in the church. Lord willing, we will examine them in greater detail next week.