



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 7 Issue 3

January 20, 2008

An Understanding of the Church, Part 1

The Benign Problem at Redlands

In 1999 I was called to a pulpit in Homestead, Florida. Upon arriving I was made aware of a problem that had plagued the church for many years, a problem which had yet to be addressed. When I asked why the problem had not been addressed years before, the answer I got was quite understandable.

You see, the 1990's for this church was a difficult decade. Hurricane Andrew swept through Homestead, Florida in 1992 producing a devastation which took years to overcome. Then there was a church split around 1995. Shortly thereafter one of the elders was caught in adultery. Then in 1998 their preacher resigned, then was re-hired, and then resigned again. And it was against this backdrop that "the problem" which I then faced barely made a bleep on the radar screen.

Now don't misunderstand me, this was not an insignificant problem. But against the backdrop of the trials and tribulations of the '90s, it easily was overlooked.

Family of God I think this is parabolic as to an issue facing the church today. Over the past two decades (and well before), serious theological error has blown through the church and each error necessitated a reasoned response. In my short 17 years in the pulpit, there has been controversy surrounding many things:

- The charismatic movement and its little sister, the laughing movement.
- Worship- and so the worship wars of the '80s.
- The church growth movement.
- Theonomy.
- The Sabbath.
- The House church movement.
- The New School/Old School debate.
- The Openness of God.
- The “Political-a-sizing” of the church.
- The Gospel — and close to it: Historical/Redemptive vs. Exemplary preaching.
- And most recently the New Perspectives on Paul.

Many books, man hours, and ministries have devoted themselves to these issues. And truly I am thankful today that we are part of a denomination that continues to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

And yet in and through it all I have observed a festering wound in the body of Christ, an illness which hardly has been noticed by the theological watch dogs of our day. Yet, that is not to say that we personally haven't been affected by the lack of attention given to this growing problem. You see it in the way:

- We act on Sunday morning.
- We talk to each other.
- We look at the church.
- How we view church attendance.
- Visitors come through the door- the questions they ask and don't ask, the things that they look for, the criterion for staying or leaving.

Truly the problem is as a smoldering branch which in comparison to a forest fire seems rather benign, yet it continues to devour whole churches.

The thesis for our current study is this: While by and large I think the Reformed camp has done a good job of defending the faith such that our “-ologies” have been preserved, I think most of you have a pretty good grasp today on your

- Christology.
- Harmitology.
- Pneumatology.
- Anthropology.
- Soteriology. **and even***
- Eschatology.

Nevertheless there remains a void and so a gross misunderstanding on the part of the body of Christ today when it comes to our Ecclesiology: Our Doctrine of the church, of Church life, our Churchmanship! Today, the church is viewed as a product which is marketed, bought, and sold. We don't look for church families to whom we commit ourselves unto their growth, health, and well-being. Rather we “shop around” looking for the best buy. And the Church has responded:

- We have ad campaigns: “First Presbyterian Church... where everybody is somebody and Jesus is Lord.”
- We have theme songs and t-shirts.
- We market our service and sermons.
- And we pattern our church buildings after the mall with
 - Bookstores.
 - Fun centers.
 - Coffee Shops.
 - Foot Courts.
 - Theatres.

And all of this has affected the way we live as a church body.

Church Split

In Florida a congregation went through a church split in which their leadership was kicked out. The next day the remnant placed a sign on their lawn which read: “Under New Management.”

Church Expansion

Recently I drove by a church building project where a new sanctuary was being erected and the sign read, “We are expanding for you!”

Small and Dying Churches

When it comes to a small and dying church, the issue rarely is this: What can we do to encourage the elders of the church to shepherd the flock of God entrusted to their care? Rather it is this: What program, marketing, or event can we do to grow the church.

Brothers and sisters, I could go on and on referencing abuse after abuse when it comes to the church—some of which sadly I’ve been part of in my early days in the ministry. And I think you could too.

All of this demonstrates that indeed there is a crisis facing the church today. It is a crisis not in our theology as a whole, but specifically in our ecclesiology. Accordingly I want to spend time with you studying about the theology of the Church. I want to answer these questions:

- What is the church?
- What are we addressing when we talk about the local body of Christ?

The Church Identified

There are a variety of names throughout the Bible to designate the people of God. In the Old Testament the primary name used to reference the body of Christ was “Israel.”

*Israel*¹ literally means “to contend with God” and was given to the people of God following Jacob’s wrestling match in Genesis 32.

Genesis 32:28, “And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.”

¹ ישראל Yisra’el

The noun Israel appears over 2300 times in the Old Testament.

- First as the name of honor for the patriarch Jacob. In this context it didn't reference his nationality, but the fact that he had a personal relationship with God such that he grappled with Him.
- Then as a name for the corporate people of God that descended from his twelve sons, Exodus 3:18, the ethnic Jews.
- Then after 930 BC it was used to designate the ten northern tribes as opposed to the southern kingdom of Judah.
- After the northern kingdom went into exile, it was used of the southern kingdom of Judah.
- And when the southern kingdom went into exile, once again it was used primary of the ethnic Jew.
- Yet by the New Testament it is clear that Israel also could reference the genuine child of God as it did when it first was used.² (cf. Rom. 9:6-8 below).

The Old Testament commonly refers to the people of God as the assembly³ or the congregation.⁴ The Septuagint often translates this root as *ekkaleō* from which we get the term *ecclesia*.

These are the primary names used for the people of God in the Old Testament. However there were other names used to reference this distinct people.

- Jew: *yēhûdî* (יהודי); translated as “Jew” and so referenced a person from Judah.
- Congregation: *ēdâ* (עדה); another word used for the “congregation” of God’s people. This is the primary word used to reference the synagogue.
- Hebrew: *ibrî* (עברי); this term, derived from Eber the name of one of Shem’s sons, was used in the Old Testament to refer to a specific ethnic group of people- the descendents of Abraham. The title is close to the word for “wanderer,” “stranger,” or “immigrant.” As such, many usages of this term are negative.
- There’s those Jews... they’re *ibrî*. That’s those wanderers! You’re a migrant! In time however, “Hebrew” became the name by which the covenant people were designated in contrast to the Egyptians and Philistines.⁵ And this continued to be the case throughout the Old Testament and inter-testamental period.
- Circumcision: this was used to distinguish the Jew from all others.

In the New Testament the primary name used to reference the people of God is church.⁶ The term church *ekklēsia* (*ejkkłhsiva*) the word for church is derived from the Greek *kaleo* which means to call. Thus the *ekklesia* are the “called out ones.” This is the primary word used in the New Testament to reference the church.

Yet just as in the Old Testament, there were other titles used to reference the New Testament people of God:

² Compare Romans 9:6-8

³ קהל *qahal*

⁴ Not surprisingly the word for “preacher” in the OT is *qōhelet* (קֹהֵלֵת).

⁵ Compare Genesis 39, Exodus 10, and 1 Samuel 4-29

⁶ ἐκκλησία *ekklesia*

- temple
- vine/branches
- body
- bride
- synagogue
- house of God
- company of believers
- congregation of the faithful
- flock
- God's Inheritance

Now regardless of the names used to reference the body of Christ in the Bible, the concept remains the same throughout the testaments. In its most essential form the church is the people of God. In fact, as we reflect upon the various and sundry words used to identify it both in the Old Testament and the New Testament we note that each lays stress on the whole, not the parts.

The people of God represent NOT a group of separate people who have decided to gather and so form a club or a communion RATHER it is a communion created by God. This fact has great implications when it comes to understanding what we are this day; implications that we'll address throughout this study!

In light of this a more formal definition of the church would be this: The church is a distinct people to whom God has bound Himself for His glory and their good. As such theology proper says it this way:

“The visible Church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”⁷

So when we talk about the “church” we are talking about the body of Christ! It is a distinct group of people to whom God has bound Himself for His glory and their good; the people of God.

Now the questions are these:

- Does this definition transcend the testaments?
- Are there two peoples of God or are there one?
- Are the Old Testament Jews a people distinct from the New Testament church?
- Or was the New Testament church simply a continuation of what was before?

Distinguished

Romans 9:6-8, “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”

⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV, ii

Roman 8 is the climax of Paul's epistle. Here he clearly affirms that "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Romans 8:1).

Romans is an epistle that Paul wrote to introduce himself to the Roman believers in the hopes that they would help him on his way to Spain.⁸ However there was a problem. While the apostle had never been to the church in Rome; his reputation no doubt had! And Paul had the reputation of being a teacher of lawlessness. When Paul came to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey, the brethren related what people were saying about him:

Acts 21:21, "And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs."

If this is what the Romans knew about Paul, the apostle was in trouble. So he penned this epistle to introduce himself to the brethren. It was an introduction which involved a detailed explanation of what he both believed and taught.

- Romans 1-3: All- Gentiles and Jews- have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Yet God by grace became a man and died on the cross as a wrath removing sacrifice- a propitiation!
- Romans 4: this is proven by the Old Testament and the example of Abraham/David.
- Romans 5: Therefore in Christ we have peace with God. A peace that never will be disrupted or destroyed, no matter how bad we sin.
- Romans 6-7: Accordingly, let us strive to be wholly devoted to the Lord in our life, lip, and conduct!
- Romans 8: and lest you grow weary in doing well, behold the benefits that flow from Christ!
 - The first one is "no condemnation!"
 - The final one is just as glorious...

Romans 8:38-39, "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

All of this is the background for Romans 9 and a very difficult question: If there is no condemnation for the child of God... if nothing can separate us from the love of God, what about the people of God in the Old Testament? What about Israel... the Jews... the visible people of God?

As a whole, the people of God in the Old Testament rejected their Messiah and so remained at the time of the writing of Romans OUTSIDE of salvation. How is it that the glorious promises of Romans 8 can be trusted?

Romans 9 contains Paul's response.

Romans 9:6-8, "Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel,

⁸ Compare Romans 15:24

which are of Israel: Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”

Do you see Paul’s answer?

Redemptive history demonstrates an election on the part of God regarding the household of Abraham from all the peoples and families of the world. No theological camp refutes this! Everyone recognizes that the Jews, God’s people, Israel, the qohol of God represent a distinct people to whom God has bound Himself for His glory and their good. So also within the family of Abraham there have been other elections! God chose Isaac over Ishmael⁹ and from Isaac’s line, the Lord chose Jacob over Esau.¹⁰

Now whether you realize it or not, this demonstrates that God’s promises have not, nor have they ever been blindly given to the descendents of Abraham, i.e., the ethnic Jews! Rather, they rest ONLY upon those whom God has chosen to regenerate and so save by grace through faith; i.e., the remnant, the elect, His people, the children of God be they ethnically Jew or Gentile!

Thus, redemptive history positively demonstrates NOT two peoples of God, BUT one! Israel... the church... the Jews... the Christian... ALL REPRESENT A DISTINCT PEOPLE OF GOD TO WHOM THE LORD HAS BOUND HIMSELF UNTO HIS GLORY AND THEIR GOOD!

Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

Romans 11:5, “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace.”

Thus brothers and sisters when we come to the New Testament we discover a “confusion” on the part of the writers regarding “Israel” and “the church” a confusion which indicates that Israel and the church were understood to be one entity. Thus Stephen could speak of the Old Testament people of God during the time of Moses as a “church.”

Acts 7:38, “This is he, that was in the church¹¹ in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.”

Stephen had no problem identifying the Old Testament people of God as the church.

James, one of the pillars of the Apostolic church, clearly understood that there is only one people of God when he wrote this:

James 2:2, “For if there come unto your assembly¹² a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and

⁹ Compare Romans 9:6-8

¹⁰ Compare Romans 9:13

¹¹ εκκλησια ekklesia

¹² συναγωγη sunagoge

there come in also a poor man in vile raiment.”

In James’s mind the church and the synagogue were one and the same. That is why he uses the term synagogue for the church.

Peter had no problem ascribing to the church the names used in the Old Testament for Israel and its status.

1 Peter 2:9-10, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.”

This nomenclature comes right out of the Old Testament for the Jews.

Perhaps Paul too made the same “error” when he described the Gentile congregation of the Philippians as the circumcision.

Philippians 3:3, “For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.”

If anyone ever doubted that the New Testament people of God and the Old Testament people were not one and the same, this verse alone ought to clinch it!

Consider the work that Christ came to do.

Matthew 16:18, “And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

The concept of “building the church” did not originate here. Rather, this activity constituted one of the main promises of God regarding Israel in the Old Testament! In multiple Old Testament prophecies, God committed Himself to rebuilding His people.

Amos 9:11, “In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old.”

Jeremiah 31:1-4, “At the same time, saith the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.”

The word for “rebuild” is the same word as in Matthew 16:18. In fact this prophecy is quoted in Acts 15:16-18 in reference to the Jewish/Gentile church!

Acts 15:16-18, “After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might

seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.”

In other words, the church is not an after-thought in the plan of God. It is the fulfillment and so the realization of the Old Testament working of God on behalf of His people! Christ came to fulfill the promise that God made to Israel- the rebuilding of that body!

Yet this is only one of many verses which speak of God’s promised “rebuilding” which Christ here applies to the New Testament church.¹³ Truly from Christ’s perspective, Israel and the Church were one and the same! This is why Paul could so boldly say “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

Summary

So what is the church?

Who is “the Israel of God”?

The church is a distinct people to whom God has committed Himself for His glory and their good.

Was this church newly created in the New Testament?

NO! This distinct group of people has been around throughout most of Redemptive History.

Characteristics of the Church

In light of this, notice some of the distinguishing traits of the Church; the body of Christ. First the church is Christ’s body,¹⁴ His bride,¹⁵ and so His possession.¹⁶ The imagery is that of an inviolable bond and so a status which the greatest man in the world could never attain on account of his wealth, power, or privilege.

1 Peter 2:9, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”

Who are we?

A chosen race... a royal priesthood... a holy nation... a people that God owns!

What is our purpose?

Nothing less than the proclamation of the excellencies of Christ! Every providence be it bitter or sweet has been ordained in your life that you might better serve this end! As such, one of our goals and

¹³ Compare also Zechariah 6:12-14; Psalm 102:16, 18

¹⁴ Compare Colossians 1:24-25

¹⁵ Compare Ephesians 5:25-29

¹⁶ Compare 1 Timothy 3:5

passions as a distinct people is that we be subject to Christ in everything.¹⁷ This is Christ's gig, not ours!

Toward this end Christ has appointed shepherds and so servants whose responsibility is to protect, preserve, feed, and so nurture the body of Christ.¹⁸ Thus church leadership was not designed to give the church superstars to worship, prize, or cherish. Rather it is ministerial in nature which means in the house of God, elders and deacons are, at best, butlers!

Because the church is the bride of Christ and so the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God,¹⁹ the local body constitutes "the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). In other words, if you want the truth to go out from our midst, if you want the gospel to reign supreme in a land, labor for healthy, thriving, functional churches. You can have the greatest doctrine and the most able teachers, but if the church is sick the truth will be an impertinence! As the pillar and support of the truth, the church therefore rests upon a specific foundation, the corporate confession and conviction that Jesus is both the Messiah/Savior and God.²⁰ Deny either creed and you have ceased being a church of God!

In light of this it should be obvious that no man or group of men is the head of the church; Christ alone is its head.²¹ This means minimally that Christ alone is the only one qualified to direct how we ought to function, worship, serve, and live as a body. To interpret His word (How can Christ interpret His word if He no longer sends prophets or gives revelation?) we are left to interpret God's word with His word, the less clear passages in light of the more clear!

Church membership is determined NOT by the whim or will of man, but by God.²² You don't decide to join the body of Christ. Membership is according to the prerogative of God! As such I hope you see that the church is NOT a club or merely an organization. It is an institution created by God of which we are privileged members!

And just as the Greek teachers of old had their disciples wear a certain dress, scar, or tattoo as a mark of identification, so the Lord has prescribed a mark of identification for His people.²³ Without this mark the person is excluded from the body of Christ and so deemed to be a foreigner²⁴ which was a serious thing.²⁵

Individually the child of God is a member of the church, but corporately, when the church assembles, the gathering is a holy convocation at which Christ Himself presides.²⁶

Summary and Close

Brothers and sisters, there are many more things that we can and will say about the Church. Yet for now I hope you understand what we are. We are among the thousands of brothers and sisters throughout the

¹⁷ Compare Ephesians 4:24 and Titus 2:14

¹⁸ Acts 20:17-28; Ephesians 4:11-12; and 1 Peter 5:1-4

¹⁹ Compare Matthew 16:18

²⁰ Compare Matthew 16:16-18

²¹ Compare Ephesians 1:22; 5:24; Colossians 1:18

²² Compare Hebrews 12:23

²³ Compare Romans 4:11; Matthew 28:18-20; Colossians 2:11-12

²⁴ Compare Genesis 17:14

²⁵ Compare Exodus 12:43

²⁶ Compare 1 Corinthians 11:18; 14:19, 23; 1 Timothy 3:15)

ages whom God has made to be a distinct people for His glory and our good. As such, individually we are not as important as the whole but as a whole we have upon us the obligation of the individual:

- To encourage them in the faith.
- To watch out for them.
- To help them when they are weary.
- To correct them when they are wrong.
- To pray, live, grow, struggle, and die with them.

All to the glory of God!

As a covenant community we are near the heart of God- we are His Church!

Accordingly listen in closing to the promise and so the plan of God for us as it is delineated in Hosea. This is God's promise to His people when they were straying like lost sheep:

Hosea 2:14-23, "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, that thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali. For I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by their name. And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD. And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, saith the LORD, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel. And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."

Individually and as a church, may God give us the grace to live in light of this glorious promise!

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

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

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon and these notes can be found at [One or Two?](#) The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on January 20, 2007. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church