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Understanding the Church, Part 2

It is an interesting study and one worthy of your time... When it came to his highest priority concerning this world, what was Paul's?

You say, "God! God was Paul's highest priority." And that is right.

- Philippians 1:21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."
- Colossians 3:23: "Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men."
- 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Indeed Paul's highest priority was the honor and glory of God, but that is not what I asked. Let me refine my question. As it pertained to his life in this state of sin and misery what was Paul's focus? As one committed to the honor and glory of God, how did this effect Paul's living? What was his priority when it came to the things of this life?

As you endeavor to answer these questions, no doubt you will be surprised by what you discover. Paul's greatest passion in life was NOT

- His own happiness.
- Retirement.
- Pursuing his career as a tent maker.

- Advancing beyond his countrymen when it came to the things of the Lord.

Paul didn't care about

- Worldly honors or glory.
- Recognition.
- Status.
- The praise of man.
- Positions of authority.
- Climbing the corporate ladder.

Indeed! THE passion, goal, and end of all the work and labor of Paul on this earth revolved around the body of Christ, the CHURCH! It was unto the planting of churches that Paul spent the entirety of his redeemed life.¹ The horrible persecutions that Paul frequently faced were on account of his labor for the church.² Paul's earthly conduct was determined by the church.³ It was for the church that Paul contemplated staying on in the flesh.⁴ Every letter Paul wrote in the Bible was on account of the church.

You say, "What about the letters of Timothy, Titus, and Philemon? These were written to people and not churches?"

Indeed they were! However read the letters and you will discover that they all concern themselves with the individual calling and responsibility that Timothy, Titus and Philemon had in and to the church. In fact, Paul boldly proclaimed that everything he did in life was for the furtherance of the gospel unto the gathering of the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23, "For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you."

You say, "Thank God that I don't have Paul's calling!"

Oh but you do!

What is the only meaningful difference between you and Paul? The oversees Missionary? The evangelist who labors tirelessly to plant a church in a foreign or distant land?

The only meaningful difference between you and Paul is location. Truly the gifts you have received in Christ have been entrusted to you for the church.⁵ The freedoms and privileges that you have in Christ

¹ Compare Acts 14:23-27

² Compare Colossians 1:24

³ Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:5

⁴ Compare Philippians 1:24

⁵ Compare 1 Corinthians 12:7 and 1 Peter 4:10

are to be subject to the good of the body of Christ.⁶ A mark of maturation in Christ is NOT the depth of your quiet times, but your building up of the body of Christ.⁷

Not surprisingly then, a wasted life is one lived for itself and not the beloved.⁸ To not give yourself to the “stimulating of the body unto love and good deeds” is to forsake Christ.⁹ I could go on and on referencing exhortations and teachings which positively demonstrate the primacy that the church ought to have in a Christian’s life. As Paul spent His life establishing and growing it, so ought we!

And yet this only follows when you come to see the place of the Church in the outworking of God’s eternal plan. The church is a distinct people to whom God has bound Himself for His glory and their good! And therefore there are not TWO peoples of God, but ONE.

- The Bride of Christ.
- The congregation of the living God.
- Israel.
- The church.

That’s what we are this day!

Now, let us continue in our study looking at the place of the Church in the outworking of God’s eternal plan. We pick it up with Revelation 19.

Revelation 19:6-9, “And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.”

This passage takes place following the Second Coming of Christ. Christ is indeed conquering and what follows is a unique and glorious celebration; a wedding!

Truly at the end of this age, Christ is going to take to Himself His fiancé, the church, and participate in a ceremony in which Christ and His Bride will be wed for all time! **IT IS THIS EVENT TOWARD WHICH ALL OF CREATED HISTORY IS MOVING!** And it is my intention to show you this from Scripture.

Let me begin by asking a very important question: In the Bible what is it that governs God’s relationship with man?

Now that you might understand what is behind this question, let me ask you another: When it comes to the parent/child relationship what is it that governs it? Why is there such a relationship? Everyone is someone’s child. Why do you have the relationship that you have with your parent? Why don’t

⁶ Compare Romans 15:1-2

⁷ Compare Ephesians 4:16

⁸ Compare 1 Timothy 5:6

⁹ Compare Hebrews 10:24-25

you have that relationship with someone else?

You might be tempted to say that it is because of our blood relationship. It is true that most of us have a relationship with our parents or children because we are related via birth. Yet that is not the answer when it comes to the adopted child. So again, why the relationship?

The basis for the parent/child relationship is a commitment that begins on the part of the parent and eventually develops on the part of the child. The minor can say, "I don't love you; leave me alone!" But the relationship remains solely because the parent wills it to be so. This is ultimately the basis of the parent/child relationship: a commitment, a bond freely made.

In light of this I hope you understand what we are after when we ask, "What is it that governs God's relationship with man?"

Is Dispensational Theology Correct?

Now in theological realms there have been two answers to this question. The first group we will look at takes the word "administration" found in passages like Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; 1 Timothy 1:4, etc. and use the Latin word from the Vulgate *dispensation* to describe their position: Dispensationalism.

A Dispensationalist would say that that which governs God's relationship with man is a series of tests—sort of like if you saw Anne of Green Gables how Anne's relationship with the Cuthbers was at first on a probationary basis. Accordingly it is believed that God's relationship with man is predicated upon man passing a test of obedience. If man were to pass the test, God would usher him into an inviolable relationship with Himself. But that is the issue, "IF!"

The Scofield Reference Bible, produced by one of the supporters of this group of theologians, put it this way:

"A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture."¹⁰

In this thinking therefore, the Garden represented NOT the foundation upon which man relates to God today, but just one of many tests by which God sought to have a relationship with man. Now man failed the original test when he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And so, God wiped out the confines of the first test and started over with another test... and then another.

In the Dispensationalist's theological view redemptive history contains a series of tests which¹¹ do not

¹⁰ C. I. Scofield, The Scofield Reference Bible, © 1945, page 5

¹¹ The Dispensationalist view varies from theologian to theologian, so some hold to this while others do not. Here are some of Dispensationalism's main arguments against Covenantal theology: (1) Dispensationalism uses a literal hermeneutic especially concerning future prophetic events and Covenantalism allows for allegorical, figurative, and literal interpretations, (2) Dispensationalism teaches that Israel and the Church are two separate and distinct entities with Israel receiving an earthly inheritance and the Church receiving a heavenly inheritance, Covenantalism teaches that there is only one people of God who will receive a heavenly inheritance (3) Dispensationalism teaches that God's main purpose is in the literal Israel while Covenantalism teaches that Christ is the center of God's purpose. (4) Some Dispensationalist's teach that Old Testament saints were saved by works, other Dispensationalist's teach that Old Testament saints were saved by faith in the revelation they received in their dispensation; Covenantalist's teach that the only way of salvation is by grace through faith in the

build upon another and are independent from each other. Accordingly, one of the foundational pillars of this perspective is the isolation of redemptive eras from one another.¹²

- Genesis 1-3 is separate and distinct from Genesis 4-8.
- Genesis 4-8 is separate and distinct from Genesis 9-11.
- Genesis 9-11 is separate and distinct from Genesis 12 to Exodus 18.
- Then there's the era of Moses- separate and distinct (Exodus 18-Acts 1).
- Following this is the era of the New Testament, the so called, "Church Age" and this too is separate and distinct from everything before it.
- The key in understanding this approach is that each of these divisions represent an independent, isolated test by which God endeavored to have a relationship with man. There is very little carry over from one dispensation to the next.
- So when it comes to Israel and the Church, they are two separate and distinct entities.¹³

Each dispensation represents a different group distinct from those of a different dispensation and they have very little in common. Accordingly the church was unforeseen by God, and was an after-thought, something that God imagined after Israel rejected Christ, their Messiah. So from this perspective, the church is not special; Israel is. The church simply was created to jealousy them.¹⁴

Is Covenantal Theology Correct?

Now there is another way answer the question: "What governs God's relationship with man?" The answer is NOT a dispensation, BUT A PROMISE and so A COVENANT!

Theologians who espouse this view, are known as Covenantalists. A Covenantalist understands that

- In Genesis 2:15-17 God established a relationship with man predicated upon man's ability to obey God perfectly. We call this the Covenant of Works or Covenant of Life.
- Now we know that man did not uphold his side of the relationship (cf. Gen.esis3:1-7) the result should have been God wiping out man and starting over. But the Lord didn't do that. Instead God deigned Himself to become a man, to be born under the Covenant of Works and so its requirements. As a man He therefore fulfilled perfectly the requirements of the relationship, He did that which Adam could not do. He died in the place of His children who formerly stood condemned before God on account of Adam's sin. And then rose again from the dead.
- From this perspective the Covenantalist understands that Scripture does not contain isolated eras,

finishes work of Christ. Dispensationalist teach that the Law has been abolished; Covenantalist's teach that there are three uses of the Law, to restrain sin, lead men to Christ, and instruct men in righteousness and that Christ fulfilled the Ceremonial Law and therefore it is no longer necessary to uphold the Ceremonial Law, but God's Moral Law continues.

¹² The following breakdown comes from Charles C. Ryrie's book, *Dispensationalism Today*, Moody Press (April 1999),

ISBN-10: 080242256X , pages 57-63

¹³ The standard dispensational teaching states that baptism and circumcision do not a relationship. Circumcision was instituted in a previous dispensation, a dispensation which was separate and distinct from all others and so has no bearing on the New Testament.

¹⁴ This is the common dispensational interpretation of Romans 10:19, "But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you." And Romans 11:11, "I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy." Covenantalists would argue that these passages teach that election has always been by grace through faith even in the Old Testament time of Elijah when there appeared to be no one but Elijah, that even today God is calling a remnant by grace through faith.

but one glorious outworking, and so one theme of redemption. In Genesis 3 God introduces the news that He would redeem man from the curse of the law, Genesis 3:15.

- Everything after this is a growing, building revelation of that truth. And so Genesis 4-9 is not a separate and distinct era of revelation, but rather an explanation and clarification of Genesis 3:15. Likewise, Genesis 10-11 builds upon the revelation given in Genesis 4-9.
- It goes on and on as God raises up His children from that of an infant in Genesis to that of an adult in the New Covenant (cf. Galatians 4 for the metaphor). Thus we read in Romans 5 this incredible statement:

Romans 5:18-19, “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

From this verse we see that man’s relationship with God still is governed by the Covenant of Works, we never have left this “dispensation.” When a person goes to hell it is ultimately because they are guilty of partaking of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. When a person goes to heaven it is ultimately because in Christ they have fulfilled the Covenant of Works and so stand innocent before God!

- From this the Covenantalist understands that there is an organic relationship between all of Scripture. We do not read of divisions, separate and distinct from one another, rather we read of a growing, building, and so expanding revelation of the glorious news of man’s redemption through the person and work of Christ!

Thus when it comes to Israel and the Church, the Covenantalist understands them to be one,¹⁵

because they are one people with one priority and so one purpose. From this perspective the Church was no after-thought, but the people with whom God deigned to fellowship for all eternity.

Now, it should be obvious to most of you, that our church holds to the Covenantalist positions when it comes to the question: What governs God’s relationship with man? It is the promise of redemption and the Covenant of Grace proclaimed and explained throughout Scripture whereby God deigned to save a people to Himself by becoming a man and upholding the requirements of the covenant of works on our behalf! Accordingly we do not read of distinct and separate eras in Redemptive History, but a beautiful unity of purpose.

What follows is a demonstration and so a defense of the unity of God’s purpose. You must see that Scripture contains ONE plan of God from all of eternity, not separate and isolated tests. Accordingly notice this unity:

Beginning and Ending

In Genesis 1-2 we read of

¹⁵ And so when it comes to something like **Circumcision** and **Baptism** the Covenantalist understands that they are intimately related. Baptism was/is the replacement of an outward sign marking out the disciple of Christ. To the Baptist who demands Scripture proof for the practice of baptizing infants, the Covenantalist says, “Show me where God has said, ‘Stop placing the sign and seal of the covenant upon His children!’”

- A Tree of Life.
- A river running through Eden.
- A people enjoying communion with God

In Revelation 22 we read of

- A Tree of Life.
- A river running through the New Heavens and Earth.
- A people enjoying communion with God.

This gives us a glimpse at what was lost at the fall and it shows us how God restores in all in the end. This restoration is what is behind the Covenant of Grace which is understood to be a covenant overlay to the Covenant of Works. In Genesis 3 we read what theologians call the “First Gospel” where the cross of Christ is prophesied by which Satan dealt Christ a flesh wound and Christ dealt Satan a head wound and so a mortal wound.

Genesis 3:15, “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

This remains the theme of Scripture. The Hebrew writer says this of Christ:

Hebrews 2:14, “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”

In fact so much is Christ the focus and theme of Scripture that we read in many passages such as these:

Luke 24:27, “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he [Christ] expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”

John 5:39, “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.”

Scripture is not a series of short stories unrelated to each other. The word of God contains ONE MESSAGE, the redeeming of a people unto God via a Mediator! Thus when God entered into a formal relationship with a man, Abraham, this relationship became foundational to each succeeding era of Redemptive History.

- In Genesis 12, 15, 17, 22 we learn important elements of and refinements to the promise that God initially gave to Adam in Genesis 3:15.
- The mere weight of revelation associated with Abraham suggests that these chapters would be determinative upon the outworking of God's promise. And sure enough they were:

Psalm 105:8-9, “He hath remembered his covenant for ever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac.”

After this passage the Psalmist details God’s work among the Israelites in the wilderness.¹⁶ The

¹⁶ Compare Psalm 105:26-45

confines of the relationship which God established with Abraham continued without abeyance during the time of Moses!

Isaiah 51:3, “For the LORD shall comfort Zion: he will comfort all her waste places; and he will make her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving, and the voice of melody.”

How would God comfort His people during this time? By quoting the relationship He established with Abraham 1,400 years before; notice verse. 2.

Isaiah 51:2, “Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him.”

Again, the confines of the relationship that God established with Abraham did not end during the days of David and the Kingdom! Truly the Abrahamic era was not a separate and distinct dispensation. It was the continuation of the covenant which someday would be realized in Jesus Christ.¹⁷

Our comfort and consolation as Christians today is that by faith we are heirs of Abraham. Not only was the gospel preached to Abraham¹⁸ but listen to the glorious word of comfort:

Galatians 3:29, “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

Mosaic Era

And yet it was not just God’s relationship with Abraham that continues to be applicable to us today, we understand that there is an organic relationship which exists throughout Scripture where what is written rests on everything before it and after (that’s what we mean by “an organic relationship”). Consider the Mosaic Era.

Galatians 3:17, “And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.”

It is important to emphasize that the promise made with Abraham always has been in effect from the day of its inauguration until the present. The coming of law under Moses did not suspend the Abrahamic covenant, it complimented it! And yet the Mosaic revelation did not just rest upon that which was before it, it also impacted that which came after. Notice that the Hebrew writer contrasts the revelation given at Sinai with that which accompanied Christ.

Hebrews 8:7-9, “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to

¹⁷ Compare also Isaiah 63; Micah 7:20; Matthew 3:9; 8:22; Acts 3; Romans 4; 2 Corinthians 11; Galatians 3; Hebrews 2:16; 7; 9:15-20; James 2, and 1 Peter 3

¹⁸ Compare Galatians 3:8, “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.”

the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord.”

From this we note that the New Covenant was NOT separate and distinct from that under Moses. In fact it simply was more of the same. In the Greek there are two different words for our word *new*. The Greek term *neos* means new of a different sort (like when someone purchases a brand new car). And there is the Greek word *kainos* which means new of the same sort (like when someone fixes up his old car and says, “Look at my new car!”). The word for *new* in this text is *kainos*! As such we conclude that what occurs in the New Testament/Covenant is the elaboration of the covenant made with Abraham¹⁹ and further developed during the era of Moses.²⁰

Davidic Era

The same principles hold true for God’s working at the time of David.

1 Kings 2:1-4, “Now the days of David drew nigh that he should die; and he charged Solomon his son, saying, I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man; And keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself: That the LORD may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel.”

From this we see that the Law of Moses is seen to have an integral role in the Davidic covenant. Truly the eras of redemptive history are not two separate attempts on the part of God to fellowship with man, but one and same! Paul speaking of the salvation we have in Christ said this:

Romans 4:6-8, “Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.”

Truly the Davidic era was NOT separate and distinct from what was before or after! In light of this it should be obvious where the Church fits in the outworking of God’s plan redemption; it was not an after-thought, created because Israel failed, for the last and final time, a test which God prescribed for His people; rather on account of the Covenant, the body of Christ, the church, Israel, the people of God, have been integral to the working of God throughout Redemptive History.

It was God’s plan from the very beginning to redeem a people to Himself for His glory. Paul said that “[God] chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). Accordingly, God’s work of redemption from the start was in reference not to individuals, but to a distinct body.

Genesis 17:7-8, “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. And {this is the promise} I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a

¹⁹ Compare Galatians 3:17-29

²⁰ Compare Hebrews 8

stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.”

According to Hebrews 11:14-16 this ultimately would be fulfilled with the New Heavens and New Earth.²¹

Thus the coming of Christ in His first advent was for “This people.”

Matthew 1:21, “And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.”

Accordingly when Christ died on the cross, Scripture says that He died for “His church.”

Acts 20:28, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

And thus when He returns a second time, get this: It will be NOT for the individual, BUT for His people—the Church... His bride! And this brings us back to our text:

Revelation 19:6-9, “And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God.”

So do you see the place of the Church in the outworking of God’s plan?

We are at the center and so the climax of it such that we say there is nothing more important in creation than the church, Christ’s Bride it IS the pillar and support of the truth²² for it is that for which the truth was given!

If God so values His bride such that

- The climax of history revolves around the church.
- He has claimed the church as His own.
- He died for it.
- He zealously protects it

1 Corinthians 3:17, “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.”

Then ought we not to value the church above all else as well?

Yet we live in an age of flagrant disregard for the church. We don’t weep for the church, long for its

²¹ Compare also Acts 2:29,

²² Compare 1 Timothy 3:15

health, or labor for it. We view the church as a product to be cast off when it no longer pleases us. Paul said this of Timothy:

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.”

Is this what God would say about us?

In the coming weeks we are going to address the “therefore” of this current study. Yet for now may God implant and grow in us a healthy vision for the church.

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

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

VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

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About the Preacher

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