

06 The Church - Its Definitions and Distinctions

Introduction

How many of you by show of hands know your parent's names? How many of you know your grandparent's names? Keep your hands up. How many of you know your great-grandparents names? How many of you know your great great grandparent's names? Isn't it interesting how tied we are to the present? How little we know of our own family.

Have you ever wondered why there are all those genealogies in the Bible? There is more than one answer I'm sure. But at least one answer is that they were much more family oriented than we are. They knew their roots. They knew who their family was. They not only knew what their names were, they remembered their stories, their lives.

This is the sixth message on the church. And we are just now getting around to asking the question, "What is the church?" I have preached a few sermons on the church assuming everyone had a basic understanding of what the church is. Most importantly, we looked at the names of the church and made the case that if a church is going to be anything, it has got to be God-centered. We have no meaningful existence outside of being God centered. We need to be God-centered in our preaching, in our worship, in our prayer, in our structure, in our fellowship. We need to be God centered in all that we do or we may as well not be a church at all.

So with the understanding of whoever we are, we must be God -centered, we now ask the question, "Who are we anyway?" What, exactly is the church? Often times when people are formulating a creed they will have an affirmation and denial section. "We affirm the inerrancy of Scripture." And to clarify they may say, "We deny that everything a Bible character said was true." The Bible has no errors in it, but when Satan said "Surely you will not die" he was not telling the truth. The Bible is without error, but when Jacob said that he was Esau, he was not telling the truth. So along the same line, let me give you a definition of the church, and then I will compare and contrast that with other concepts so as to help make it more clear.

Definition

In simple terms, the church is the whole number of believers through all of time. That is it. But as I said before, this broad definition of the church can take on some definite texture and shades and contours once you begin to take a closer look. Anyone who has repented of their sin and trusts in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins is in the church.

The Church & The Kingdom of God

More than a get-together

So what relationship does the church have to the kingdom of God? Are they the same thing? Not quite. Perhaps the best way to understand the difference is to see the church as the citizens of the

kingdom of God. The church is primarily a people, the kingdom is the rule of the king. You never hear about the gospel of the church.

The kingdom of God is the bigger idea. It could be argued that the kingdom of God is the overarching theme of scripture. Covenants are the means by which God administers his kingdom. And it is through these covenants that we come into relationship to the King. Thus it is through the kingdom of God that the church is brought into existence.

Paul in Colo 1:13-14 states, "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Thus it is through the King that our hearts are conquered and we are brought into his kingdom.

We are not the kingdom, we are brought into the kingdom.

The church is a steward of the kingdom. The keys of the kingdom are given to the church. And the church is to bear witness to the kingdom. We are heralds of the kingdom. Jesus says in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations."

So when we gather here on Sunday mornings, it is more than just a bunch of people getting together to do religious stuff. I want you to see the transcendent aspect of our gathering. We are citizens of a kingdom doing kingdom work. This goes hand in hand with what we learned the other week about the church being the possessions of the Lord.

The reign of the King

Finally, if the kingdom of God is the reign of the King, then that has implications for the church as kingdom citizens. If we are part of the church, then we are part of that over which the Lord reigns. And so Paul says in Romans 14:17 "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Also in Romans 4:6 "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." We once were in the domain of darkness and sin had dominion over us. But that we have been transferred into the kingdom of His Son, Christ is now our master, not sin. It is still a fight. We still sin. But now we have the ability to fight it. We have the ability to triumph over it.

Don't misunderstand this point. Paul is not saying that we will never sin again. Neither is he saying that there is some magical power that you get on entrance to the kingdom that makes you immune, or at least resistant to sin. Rather, it is the grace of God in Christ Jesus that is our power over sin. So how do you get a hold of that grace? Well there are several ways actually. And these are called "means of grace." God has given to the church several means of grace that we must take advantage of in resisting the dominion of sin in our lives.

Some Means of Grace

I am tempted to go into greater detail on these points, but we haven't the time this morning. I must confine myself to two means of grace and a few short comments knowing that we will return to this subject in due course in our series on the church. The first means of grace is the preached word of God. As we hear from the word, it convicts us of sin. It drives us to repentance. It encourages and strengthens us through its promises. It convicts us of wrongdoing

through the law. It comforts and relives us through the gospel story. The word of God is a wonderful means of grace. Prayer is also a means of grace. Through prayer we enter into the throne room of God. We have fellowship with God through prayer. We can pour out our soul before God in prayer. Our burdens are placed at his feet through prayer.

The Church & Israel

Explanation

The church is the whole number of believers throughout time? What about Israel? Romans 11:24 Israel will be grafted back into the same tree. There are not two trees, but one tree, one organism. God did not start growing a gentile tree, he grafted the gentiles into the Jewish root. And when they return to God in mass, Israel will be grafted back into the same tree.

Thinking of the church as a plant is a good analogy for the point I want to make this morning. You may think of the relationship between the church and the Israel in the same way you think about the relationship between a tree and a seed. They are not different organisms. They are different phases of the same organism. It is also important to note that the church does not replace Israel. It is not as though God was fed up and is through with them; he is not. Rather, the New Testament church grows out of Israel. One organism. The tree does not replace the sapling, it grows out of the sapling. So it is with Israel and the church.

Ephesians says that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. Paul specifically parallels the way husbands should relate to their wives with the way Christ relates to the church. Jesus does not have two brides, the church and Israel. That would promote polygamy. Rather he died for one people. There is only one bride of Christ.

Scripture uses the term church to refer to Israel, and it uses the terms "Israel," and "Jew" and "children of Abraham" to refer to the church. I am going to give you a lot of verses, and you will not be able to remember them. So write them down in order to return for closer study at another time.

Scripture

Romans 2:28-29 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

Romans 4:12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

Romans 4:16 That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all,

Romans 4:18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, “So shall your offspring be.”

Romans 9:6-8 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, 7 and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” 8 This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.

Romans 9:25 As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’”

Galatians 3:29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

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

Philippians 3:3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Paul labors this point in Ephesians 2 saying:

Ephesians 2:12-20 remember that you were at that time 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. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,

Ephesians 3:6 This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Hebrews 8:8-10 For he finds fault with them when he says:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, 9 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. 10 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9-10 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . .9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Our Part

This is part of our heritage. This is part of who we are. This is our history. There is so much depth and richness in our family tree. Let us read about our family. Let us read the Old Testament knowing that the stories told in those ancient pages are stories of our family. The lives of the apostles are the lives of our family. Become a student of church history and study your family history. What we do here on Sunday morning is so much more than a mere gathering of people. We gather as citizens of a kingdom. We gather as the descendants of a holy nation, a royal priesthood. Let us lift our eyes from this one space and time and see the wonder of God's drama of redemption.

This group is not an accident. This church is not an accidental gathering of people who happen to believe in Jesus. This church is part of God's plan just as Israel was part of God's plan. There is significance in what is happening here. Do we not listen to the stories of old, the stories of Israel and how God worked through her? Do we not praise God because of his faithfulness to Israel even during times of disobedience. Do we not rejoice in the victory of the enemies of God that we see in David and in Joshua. Do we not want to tell the next generation of the mighty deeds that God has done?

I believe that one day, when we are all in glory, we will also be praising God for the work that he did in his church through the ages. We praise God for seemingly small things like God giving Hanna a son, so do not think that our smallness will not be a cause of rejoicing up in heaven. People will praise God for how he worked in this church in spite of her unfaithfulness, and there will be times that people will praise God for how this church rightly reflected the image of God to a watching world.

I want to encourage you in the work ahead. I want you to know it isn't for naught. I want you to know that there is purpose and reason for your existence and that it will not go unnoticed. If God will recognize a glass of water given to the least of these he will remember us. God will give you grace for the journey. He will give you strength for the battle. Rest, dear Christian, in the finished work of Christ. Stop striving in your own strength and rest in the grace purchased for you on the cross. Jesus came and lived the perfect life you could not live. So do not strive to earn your way through doing good deeds. He died the death that we should have died. So stop racking yourself over forgiven sins. He rose again as the first fruits, and if you believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins that resurrection life is yours too. Let us now take our place in God plan of redemption and serve, not out of compulsion, not out of fear, not out of duty, not in your own strength, but willingly, out of joy, out of delight, in his strength, and for his glory.