

The Church - A Covenant Community

Over the last months we have considered what the Bible says about God's saving relationship with sinful man. The next step for a Christian, after salvation, is to go to church. So now we begin the next stage in our study of theology: the doctrine of the church, or Ecclesiology. We are going to look at the redeemed communities that God forms. Each church represents the body of Christ throughout the world. They were given a commission by Christ just before He went to heaven to start first in Judea and to start churches throughout the world.

Acts 1:8-9 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

9 And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight.

Today we are going to see that churches are not just gatherings of people. Each church is a covenant community, a people grounded in Christ, which will ultimately be united to Him as His Bride, and alive by His Spirit.

1. A New Covenant Community -

For today, the first thing we want to look at is the foundation of the Church in Christ. We are going to look at the *nature* of the church. It's important to recognize that we are not just a bunch of people drawn together by religious interest like a crowd rooting for their team at a football game. Each church is a covenantal community. We are a people brought together through the blood of Christ and *joined* to one another by a *relationship*. We do not pay any fees to be part of Christ's church. We are not admitted to the church based on an

impressive résumé. We are made part of the body of Christ by free grace and God's promise.

Jer 31:31 Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new *covenant* with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

It is important to understand the idea of a covenant. It is not merely a casual agreement or temporary arrangement. It is a binding, enduring relationship established on solemn promises and mutual commitment. In Scripture, covenants form the foundation of God's dealings with humanity, revealing His faithfulness, grace, and purposes. Unlike a simple contract, which is often conditional and transactional, a covenant carries relational depth, personal loyalty, and moral obligation. Understanding covenant helps us grasp the weight of God's promises, the seriousness of our responsibilities, and the profound security we have in our relationship with Him.

When God enters into any covenant, it is different than men enter into a covenant. God's covenant promises are ultimately *unilateral*, or one sided. Even though there are *two* sided commitments, the covenant does not rest on the obligations of both God *and* man. The covenant rests upon God's own character, power, and faithfulness, but does not include human ability or merit. While covenants in human experience often require mutual negotiation and equal contribution, God's covenants, and especially His redemptive covenants, are initiated and *secured* by Him *alone*. Take for example, God's covenant with Abraham.

Gen 15:7-18 And he said unto him, I *am* the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.

8 And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?

9 And he said unto him, Take me

an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.

10 And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.

11 And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

This was one of the ways that a covenant could be formed. In ancient covenant-making rituals (especially in the kind called a blood covenant), the two parties would take sacrificial animals, cut them in pieces, and lay them out opposite each other, creating a path between the divided carcasses. As each party walked through the blood and between the pieces, they were symbolically declaring: "May what has happened to these animals happen to me if I break this covenant." In other words, they were invoking a self-curse of death upon themselves should they violate the terms. This made the covenant incredibly solemn and binding. But what you will notice in the next verses is that Abraham never walks through that path!

12 And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.

...

17 And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.

What makes this passage so remarkable is that God alone passes through the pieces. He is represented by the smoking furnace and burning lamp. While He does this, Abraham is in a deep sleep. God is declaring that the covenant depends *entirely* on *Himself*, and if it were to fail (which *He* cannot), the penalty would fall on Him alone. This is a beautiful foreshadowing of how God

Himself would bear the penalty for man's failure which was ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

18 In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:

Even when covenants include human responsibility, their *ultimate* fulfillment does not hinge on man's performance but on God's unwavering commitment to accomplish His purposes. This unilateral nature of God's covenants gives believers profound assurance, knowing that His promises are certain because they rest upon *His* unchanging nature. In the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31, we are forgiven, indwelt, and spiritually united as one body with one Head, Jesus Christ. It is in this sense that a church is a covenant community.

When people talk about "going to church," they mean something different than what the Bible describes. For them, when they say "go to church," it is more like a consumer experience going to a concert, a play, or a movie. They pay for a ticket and are entertained for awhile. That is a contractual relationship. You pay a transaction and in exchange you get admission. That is not church. We are not a *contractual* community. Contracts are based on *mutual* benefit – "you do your part, and I'll do mine." Another interesting fact about a covenant is that even if one party fails in whatever obligation he commits himself to, the covenant obligation is not canceled out for the other party. It is similar to the way marriage vows are *supposed* to be. Christian marriage is supposed to be a covenant, not a contract that can be annulled. One of the first things that married couples in trouble have to face is not whether they have a mutual benefit in the marriage. They have to be reminded that the covenant is still in effect according to the original terms because they said for better *or* for worse, in sickness *or* in health, for richer *or*

poorer. What's your complaint? The vow says *or*. It's still a commitment when the husband or wife *fails* at being richer, healthier, or better. It is easy to see how attacks on the family are pushed by Satan. Even though the Mosaic Law had a statute regarding divorce, it was only there, as Jesus said, because of the hardness of their hearts. We will see a little bit later that God's intention for marriage was designed to be a reflection of Christ's relation to the church.

Mark 10:5-9 And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept.

6 But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female.

7 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife;

8 And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh.

9 What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

When it comes to our relationship with Christ as a church, we are bound by something far more enduring than terms and conditions. Our relationship is not contingent upon performance or personality. It is rooted in Christ's unbreakable commitment to us even when we fail. Just as God remained faithful to His covenant with Abraham, even when Abraham slept and God walked through the sacrifice alone, so Christ has secured our place in this covenant with His own blood. However, this does not give us license to abuse that relationship.

Just because Christ, in His love, is going to keep His commitment to us we should not think that our commitment and obligation to our church doesn't matter. If anything, this should make our sense of obligation even *stronger* because we are supposed to be like Christ. When others in the church might fail us, this should not be an excuse for us to cancel our commitment. To be like

Christ means that *we* should keep our obligations *in spite* of others' failings. Our love, service, and perseverance with one another are grounded not in *convenience* according to what we can get *from* the church, but in *covenant* according to what we, in Christ, can give *to* the church.

2. Jesus, the foundation of the church -

Everything about the church is based on our relationship with Jesus Christ. This is how Jesus defined the church in Matthew 16.

Matt 16:13-18 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

14 And they said, Some *say that thou art* John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

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.

Whenever we look at this passage, we are careful to point out that the word for Peter is a *small rock*, but Jesus uses a different form of the word *rock* when it comes to the church. The word Christ uses refers to *bedrock*. Bedrock is not a loose stone rolling around as you kick it. It lies deeper in the ground and can be 12 to 25 miles thick. The church is built not on *Peter* the *little* rock, but on the bedrock foundation of the *confession* of Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

the living God. As a church, we are built on that foundation.

Earthly foundations are designed to transfer the weight of a building safely into the ground, and their design depends greatly on the soil and climate conditions of the site.

In wet or soft soil regions, deep piles or poles may be driven down until they reach stable ground, allowing the weight of the structure to be carried securely. In areas with firm, well-drained soils, a floating slab foundation may be sufficient, spreading the building's load across a broad surface. In colder climates, foundations must extend below the frost line to prevent damage from frost heave, where expanding ice can push the structure upward and cause cracking. The shape of the footing is also critical; it must not come to a narrow point, which would concentrate the load and allow it to sink, but rather spread out wide to distribute the building's weight over a larger area of soil.

Ultimately, the strength and size of the foundation limit how large or tall a structure can safely be built, since the foundation must bear all the loads transferred from the building above. For the church, the *New Covenant* in Christ is the footer of the foundation, wide enough to carry the weight of eternity.

The church is not built on a creed, a system, or a strategy. It is built on a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the foundation, the cornerstone, the bedrock of the redeemed community. But this foundation was planned, foreshadowed, and secured by God's covenant. We must be careful how we build on that foundation.

1Cor 3:10-11 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

11 For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

God's Word becomes the blueprint for how we build on that foundation. We build on that foundation using sound doctrine that aligns with God's Word, holy living in daily conduct, reliance on God's promises rather than self, serving others in Christlike compassion, and steadfastness through trials and testing.

3. The Bride of Christ -

The church is a community based on its relationship with Jesus, but that relationship runs even deeper. The church is described in Scripture as the Bride of Christ. This gives us an even more powerful image that reveals the depth of Christ's love and the nature of our relationship with Him in the church. We can see this in Ephesians 5:25-27

Eph 5:25-27 Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word,

27 That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.

This is covenantal language. Christ, the Bridegroom, has committed Himself to the church with sacrificial love, cleansing her and preparing her for eternal union with Himself.

The covenant of marriage is not supposed to be like a contract founded on a dowry, where terms are negotiated, conditions are set, and obligations are exchanged. Remember that, in a contract, the focus is often on what each party will gain or provide, and the agreement can be altered or dissolved if those conditions are not met. A dowry may serve as a form of payment or security, but it reflects a transactional mindset. In contrast, marriage as a covenant is a mutual, unconditional commitment of love and loyalty. It is not based on what one receives, but on what one vows to

give "for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, till death do we part." Just as Christ's covenant with the church was sealed not with goods, but with His own blood, so too the covenant of marriage is founded on self-giving faithfulness, not bargaining or benefit. Revelation 19:7 presents a climactic vision of God's church in the end. In the end, there will ultimately be *one* church with Christ as the visible head. This will be the Bride of Christ.

Rev 19:7 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.

Churches are made up of people sometimes losing and sometimes winning in the struggle with temptation and sin. The world might use our losses as an excuse for *their* rebellion, but the time will come when the church, purified and glorified, will enter into the final fulfillment of the covenant and be joined forever with her Redeemer. The marriage of the Lamb is not the beginning of the relationship, but the celebration of a covenant long sealed by His blood.

4. Alive in Christ -

Our covenant relationship is not only legal: it is living. Christ not only claims His Bride, He gives life to His Bride. The church is not just a betrothed people. The church is not just a spiritual building, it is a living body. It is a living body, animated by His Spirit. We are more than a structure; we are an organism, joined to our Head, Jesus Christ, and nourished by Him.

Col 2:19 And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.

We are animated by Christ, sustained by Christ, and grown through Christ. We

don't merely organize *around* Him. We are organically united to Him. The Spirit of the risen Christ dwells in His people, empowering our worship, our service, and our unity as a church. We are His body, and He is our life.

Luke 22:19-20 And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake *it*, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me.

20 Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup *is* the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

Every time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are not performing a ritual. Every time we partake, we renew our identity as covenant people. Just as a wedding ring reminds a spouse of their covenant, so this table reminds us of the blood that sealed God's covenant promise forever. Instead, we are remembering a relationship as we examine ourselves. We are proclaiming the death that brought the covenant into effect, and we are renewing our identity as a local church as His covenant people.

It is not *just* a symbol. It is more like a seal of belonging, like a wedding ring. It reminds us that our unity with Christ and with one another is built on a sacrifice, not a transaction. We sit at the table not because we are worthy, but because He is faithful. In the next weeks, I will be describing our commitment in the church of Christ. Today, I just want to really emphasize the profound nature of our covenant in Christ in spite of our failures.

You may have attended church, you may have heard about God, but you have never truly entered into this relationship with Christ. The good news is that the invitation remains open. You do not come by earning your way in or proving your worth. You come because Christ has already walked through the sacrifice for you. His blood was shed to seal the covenant for all who will trust in Him. If

you will repent of your sin and place your faith in Jesus Christ, you can enter into this eternal relationship today. His arms are open. His promise is sure. Today can be the day that you are born into His covenant family. This is what church is really about.

No one is forced into this covenant. God does not coerce anyone into this relationship. Just as no groom drags a bride to the altar against her will, so Christ calls, invites, and draws, but each person must respond willingly. The offer of covenant is extended to all, but it is entered by faith by those who hear His call and freely yield their hearts to Him. The beauty of the New Covenant is not only in its security, but in its voluntary nature. God seeks worshipers who come to Him freely, not by compulsion but by love. That is why today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart. Respond to His invitation while the door stands open.

If you have already joined in this covenant relationship, let this message renew your confidence and deepen your gratitude. You are not held in this covenant by your strength, but by His. You are not kept by your perfect obedience, but by His perfect sacrifice. As His Bride, you are being purified, prepared for that great wedding day to come. Let us live faithfully, love one another deeply, and serve together joyfully, knowing that our place in this covenant is secure because He is faithful.

Acts 1:8-9

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2. Jesus, the foundation of the church - Matt 16:13-18, 1Cor 3:10-11
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