

Biblical Theology - A New Community

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[0 : 0 0] My son was very helpful this morning in ensuring that I got here on time and so I'm very grateful to him. My wife and daughter are in Germany right now enjoying the Christmas run-up. So as I was getting ready and brushing my teeth Jonathan stood in front of the clock and said it's 8.30 and then he said it's 8.31 it's 8.32 it's amazing how that gets you going.

And so we're here and we're ready to go. I had a wonderful time this morning. I just wanted the verses I wanted to share with you before I really got going on our theme. It's this wonderful verse from Isaiah 40. Those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.

Isn't that a wonderful verse? And I kind of was using that this morning as I was praying and I woke up this morning to say my prayers and have my coffee before Jonathan awoke feeling rather weak and tired and not up to anything. And it was just wonderful to recognize that we're people we don't wait on God in absence. We're not waiting in darkness. We wait on him.

We wait on his word. And so we renew our strength. And it was just a wonderful time for me to spend some time with the Lord and wait on his word and wait on him. And I just it was a wonderful prayer time for me this morning. I just want to encourage you in your own prayer life to remember that we wait on the Lord. We wait on his word. That's the glory of Advent. We're waiting for him. Not in a vacuum, not knowing what's going on, but for him to complete what he has said he would do, the work that he began. So biblical theology. I come to our third lecture at four. I'm dragging myself towards the end now. And we have a new community, the people of God on earth. I want to recap what we've been looking at and then look at the nature of the church, the nature of what it means for us to be, the people of God. There's so much that one could say about that. So I'm going to simply make some very bold points. And I'm sure that in the exchange afterwards, you will be very learned. And so this is how I'd like to go. But if you recall over the last few weeks, we've defined biblical theology in this way. Biblical theology approaches the Bible as an organic drama of God's unfolding revelation through history. It is distinctive from doctrinal or systematic theology because biblical theology follows the progressively unfolding revelation of God's words and deeds through history. There is this linear aspect of revelation which unites each revelatory event and proclamation both retrospectively and prospectively. At the center of this organic unity is the person and work of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

[2 : 4 2] God spoke into history. God acted in history. God was incarnate in history. So we have this vertical interface with history, which is regarded by biblical theologians as the eschatological penetration of the history of redemption. Isn't that a great thing to say?

I wish I'd written it myself. Overarching the entire history of redemption is this eschatological arena. Every revelation of God in history is an invitation for the creation to possess the arena of the eschatological, the heavenly, the eternal. This has been accomplished through the saving work of the Son, Jesus Christ. And so, hence Christ was eschatologically... I love that word! And I was told I'm not allowed to ever use it in sermons, so I never have, and now I can try it out on you.

Have you ever used it in a party? Only for hangman. Hence, Christ was eschatologically revealed through the history of redemption as the promised seed of the woman, seed of Abraham, seed of Jesse, heir of David. So even as God and man met in Jesus Christ, so the eschatological and the linear, the heavenly and the historical met at every point of God's special revelation.

So today, that being the case, we look at our third theme, a new community, the people of God on earth. And there's a lot of things, applications for thinking about what it means to be God's people, which I hope it will stimulate in your minds as we go through this this morning, because it's one of the questions we find ourselves asking in our current situation as a church.

What does it mean to be God's people? What does it mean to be the church in our own time and in our own place? Is there a point at which God's people cease to be his people? If so, what place is

that? Where does it happen?

[4 : 46] How far does one tolerate? Where are the lines? I don't have any answers for that, but I want to throw it out to get you thinking. Because one of the conspicuous activities of God is that he does gather for himself a people to be called his own.

Beginning with Abraham and Genesis, God promises a land and a nation and a blessing for all the people. He's promising a nation, numerous as the stars in the sky, which will come from Abraham's seed.

God's plan was to work out his salvation plan through a people of his own. And we see that beginning to take shape in the patriarchal period. As Abraham's family turns into a clan, a somewhat, um, uh, very human clan.

If you read the patriarchal story, you'll find yourself astonished. God didn't wash his hands of the whole thing right there and then. But of course, that wasn't the point. The point of the story isn't the quality of God's people.

It is the faithfulness of God to his promise and his plan. The Exodus story tells the, of God's faithfulness to his plan and his people, now a nation whom he rescues and takes to himself.

[5 : 49] He sends them down to Egypt where they become a great nation. And then in his mighty, great, mighty act of the Exodus, he redeems them from slavery and takes them out of Egypt. The nation matures and centralizes under a king in his capital city, Jerusalem.

And we see the marks of the relationship between God and his people being, his people Israel being a covenantal one, marked by rights and responsibilities on both sides. They are to worship and obey God and he would protect and prosper them.

You will be my people and I will be your God. This is the constitution, if you like, the covenant. Under David, God promised a royal line that would be eternal. But the God and Israel project appears to have been doomed from the beginning.

If you read the Old Testament, you wonder how on earth the whole thing worked out. Moses, I mean Abraham, for example, was a man of immensely clay feet who just did not trust God to keep his promises.

Moses starts out his career as a murderer and has to flee. You think, how is God going to work this out with these people, let alone the sons of Jacob? It appears to have been doomed right from the beginning.

[6 : 59] In the desert, the people grumbled against God and demanded to be taken back to Egypt, back to the land of slavery. They worshipped, remember, at the golden calf, because they didn't think Moses was going to come back with anything.

Back in the ancestral land, the relationship between God and his people was marked variously by rebellion, by apostasy. And in the prophetic writings, we see God's feelings towards what was happening amongst his people.

God holding them to the covenantal promises to which they were bound. Promising exile and punishment, but also looking further towards restoration, renewal, and a Messiah.

In the New Testament, a seemingly new body is brought together, the church, and that's us. God's people in the New Testament look different from before.

Not a nation, but many nations. Not Israel, but a new Israel. Not a physical, political country, but a people nonetheless, set apart for God and belonging to him. And so, biblical theology would have us ponder the relationships between Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New.

[8 : 02] To see how the people of God fit in to the salvation plan of God. What is the connection between them? How do they relate? Because there is, after all, one continuous salvation plan.

God has revealed himself once and for all. And his salvation in history. Then there has to be some kind of continuity between God's people in the Old Testament and God's people in the New.

And that's what I want to look at today. Some of the biblical images for God's people from the New Testament. What does it mean for us to be church? How do we relate to what went before? The New Testament word for church is ecclesia.

Which means the called out ones. In classical Greek, the term was used almost exclusively for political gatherings. In particular, in Athens, the word signified the assembling of the citizens for the purpose of conducting the affairs of the polis, the city-state.

Moreover, ecclesia referred only to the actual meeting, not the citizens themselves. When the people were not assembled, they were not considered to be the ecclesia.

[9 : 10] And the New Testament records three instances of the secular use of the term. They are in Acts chapter 19. The most important background of the term ecclesia is the septuagint, which uses the word in a religious sense about 100 times.

Almost always as a translation of the Hebrew word kahal, which is of the same meaning. While this term does not indicate a secular gathering, it does denote Israel's sacred meetings.

And when we come to the New Testament, we discover that ecclesia is used of the community of God's people some 109 times out of 114 occurrences of the term.

The term only occurs in two gospel passages, in Matthew 16, 18, and 18, 17. But it is of special importance in Acts, occurring 23 times, and in the Pauline writings, 46 times.

It is found 20 times in Revelation, and only in isolated instances in James and Hebrews. So we may broach the subject of the biblical teaching on the church by drawing three general conclusions from the data so far.

[10 : 23] First, predominantly ecclesia, both in the singular and the plural, applies to a local assembly of those who profess faith in an allegiance to Christ.

Second, ecclesia designates the universal church. For example, Acts 9. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up, and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it was multiplied.

Especially we find this in the later Pauline letters. Colossians 1, 18. Christ is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

Third, ecclesia is God's congregation. 2 Corinthians 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God, which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia.

So, two things there. First, ecclesia, both in the singular and the plural, applies to a local assembly of those who profess faith in and allegiance to Christ. Second, ecclesia designates the universal church.

[11 : 39] And third, the ecclesia is God's congregation. The nature of the church. The nature of the church is too broad to be exhausted by the meaning of one word, ecclesia.

To capture its significance, the New Testament authors utilize a rich array of metaphorical descriptions. Nevertheless, there are those metaphors that seem to dominate the biblical picture of the church, five of which call for comment this morning.

And these are as follows. The people of God, the kingdom of God, the temple of God, the bride of Christ, and the body of Christ.

And it is these I wish to look at very briefly this morning, in the hope of stimulating much learning exchange. First, the people of God. Essentially, the concept of the people of God can be summed up in that covenantal phrase, I will be their God, and they will be my people.

That is a wonderful phrase which occurs numerous times throughout the Bible, from Exodus 6 all the way to Revelation 21. Exodus 6, Or Jeremiah 7, Acts 15, Brethren, listen to me.

[13 : 35] Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name. Revelation 21, Behold, the dwelling of God is with men.

He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

See, God calls to himself a people of his own, who he will rule, and whom he will redeem. The people of God are those, both in the Old and New Testament eras, who responded to God by faith, and whose spiritual origin rests exclusively on God's grace.

To speak of the one people of God transcending the eras of both the Old Testament and the New, therefore necessarily raises the issue of the relationship between the Church and Israel.

Modern theologians prefer not to polarize the matter, sort of polarize, not polaroid, that's not it, polarize the matter into an either-or issue.

[14 : 43] Rather, they talk about the Church and Israel in terms of there being a continuity and a discontinuity between them. There is a continuity between the Church and Israel. Two ideas establish the fact that the Church and Israel are portrayed in the Bible as being in a continuous relationship.

First, the Church was present in some sense in Israel in the Old Testament. Stephen, in his speech, makes this connection in Acts 7.38.

He makes this connection explicit. I thought that was the rapture happening. I could stop. When, alluding to Deuteronomy 9.10, it speaks of the Church, the Ecclesia, in the wilderness. Stephen's speech, this is he who is in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai and with our Father, and he received living oracles to give to us. The same idea is probably to be inferred from the intimate association noted earlier, existing between the words Ecclesia and the Hebrew word Kahel, especially when the latter is qualified by the phrase of God.

[15:51] This is the Ecclesia or the assembly of God, the people of God. Furthermore, if the Church is viewed in some, the Church is viewed as, in some New Testament passages, as pre-existence in the Old Testament, then one finds therein the prototype for the creation of Israel.

For example, Galatians 4.26, but the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. Hebrew 12.22, but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.

Second, Israel in some sense is present in the Church in the New Testament. The many names for Israel applied to the Church establish that fact. There are a number of Old Testament names applied to the Church.

Some of those are Israel, a chosen people, the true circumcision, Abraham's seed, the remnant, the elect, the flock, and priesthood.

Galatians 6.5-16, For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule, upon the Israel of God.

[17:08] So, there is a sense of continuity between Israel and the Church, the Church being in some sense preexistent in Israel, and Israel in some sense present in the Church in the New Testament.

After all, we are one people, the people of God. But there is also a discontinuity. The Church, however, is not coterminous with Israel. Discontinuity also characterizes the relationship.

The Church, according to the New Testament, is the eschatological Israel, incorporated in Jesus the Messiah, and as such, is a progression beyond historical Israel.

What was promised to Israel has now been fulfilled in the Church, in Christ, especially the Spirit and the New Covenant. One thinks of Joel, wonderful passage from Joel, which is quoted by Peter in Acts chapter 2, in his sermon.

However, a caveat must be issued at this point. Although the Church is a progression beyond Israel, it is not the permanent replacement of Israel.

[18:15] And that point is made by Paul in Romans chapters 9 through 11, but especially in 11, 25 to 27. It says this, So the people of God, in a sense associated with Israel, and yet a progression beyond Israel.

Second, the Kingdom of God. Many scholars in the 20th century have maintained that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God, producing and overlapping of the two ages.

The Kingdom has already dawned, but it is not yet complete. We're going to look at that issue in a little more detail next week with our final talk, A New Age.

This has led many a theological student to try out this phrase, now and not yet, in their sermons. Gera is smiling. I've never tried it out in a sermon, the now and not yet phrase.

But there's that sense that the Kingdom is now and it is not yet. Don't try it out in your sermons. It has no meaning to anyone whatsoever. But it does sound very good. The first aspect pertains to Jesus, first coming, and the second aspect relates to His second coming.

[19:50] In other words, the age to come is broken into this age, and now the two exist simultaneously. This background is crucial in ascertaining the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God, because the Church also exists in the tension that results from the overlapping of the two ages.

Accordingly, one may define the Church... Oh, this is my best phrase so far. Don't ask me what it means. We've been arguing about it all week in this staff. Accordingly, one may define the Church as the proleptic appearance of the Kingdom.

I think I should get a round of applause for thinking that up. Two ideas flow from this definition. First, the Church is related to the Kingdom of God. And second, but the Church is not equal to the Kingdom of God.

The Church and the Kingdom are related. The historical Jesus did not found or organize the Church. It is not until after His resurrection that the New Testament speak with regularity about the Church.

However, there are hints of the Church in the teaching and ministry of Jesus. He points to it both in general and specific ways. In general, Jesus anticipated the latter official formation of the Church in that He gathered to Himself twelve disciples who constituted the beginnings of the eschatological Israel, in effect, the remnant.

[21 : 12] more specifically, Jesus explicitly referred to the Church in two passages, Matthew 16, 18 to 19 and Matthew 18, 17.

And you remember, of course, that is the famous statement Jesus makes to Peter, upon this rock, I will build my Church. Ecclesia. Ecclesia. In the first passage, Jesus promised that He would build His Church despite satanic opposition, thus assuring the ultimate success of His mission.

The notion of the Church overcoming the forces of evil coincides with the idea that the Kingdom of God will prevail over its enemies and bespeaks of the intimate association between Church and Kingdom.

The second passage relates to the future organization of the Church, particularly its method of discipline, which was not unlike Jewish synagogue practices of Jesus' day.

That's the passage in Matthew 18. That's where people, you know, if someone hurts you, you gather people together, bring them, gather brothers and sisters, and you gather the Church and then throw them out if you need to. So that's something of the discipline of the organized Church.

[22 : 17] So there is a sense in which the Church and the Kingdom are related. But the Church and the Kingdom are not identified. As intimately related as the Church and the Kingdom of God are, the New Testament does not equate the two, as is evident in the fact that the early Christians preached the Kingdom, not the Church.

The New Testament identifies the Church as the people of the Kingdom, not as of the Kingdom itself. Moreover, the Church is the instrument of the Kingdom.

This is especially clear from Matthew 16, 18 to 19, where the preaching of Peter and the Church become the keys to opening up the Kingdom of God to all who it entered.

So it's the Church and the Kingdom. We've been doing a series of sermons on the Kingdom based on Matthew's Gospel in the evening service. And it does raise very interesting issues for us in regard to the kind of nature of the Kingdom, what that assembly is going to look like for us as a Church.

Because Jesus talks quite a lot about satanic activity, satanic opposition and strategies to try to disrupt the Church. We looked at the parable of the wheat and the weeds and how, you know, there's going to be, you know, the farmer sows wheat and then his enemy comes and sows weeds among the wheat.

[23 : 39] What are you going to do? Do you pull the weeds out? And the answer is no. You grow them together until the end when there's going to be a separation. Likewise, this next week we'll be looking at the end of that series of images and how the Kingdom is like a net, a catch of fish which is hauled onto the shore and there is a separation.

The good fish and the bad fish are separated. In both cases, by the way, angels are the reapers who do the separating and the throwing into the fire. So if you have any angel cards for Christmas, I'd think twice about it.

But that association of the Kingdom and the Church asks us, what kind of body are we? Are we a body of the perfected? Well, we're not on this side of heaven. We're not. But, you know, what kind of body are we?

What are the limits? Where is the tolerance? What do we do? I just throw that out and I hope that someone will come back and ask questions about it. But don't expect me to give you the answer. So the Church and the Kingdom, they're related and not related.

Third, the next image is the eschatological temple of God. Both the Old Testament and Judaism anticipated the rebuilding of the temple in the future kingdom of God.

[24 : 49] For example, Ezekiel and Haggai. And Jesus hinted that he was going to build such a congregation like in Matthew 16 or in Mark or in John. Pentecost witnessed the beginning of the fulfillment of that vision in that when the Spirit inhabited the church, the eschatological temple was formed.

Other New Testament writers also perceived that the presence of the Spirit in the Christian community constituted the new temple of God. For example, Paul in Corinthians. However, that the eschatological temple is not yet complete is evident in the New Testament passages, especially with their emphasis on the need for the church to grow towards maturity in Christ, which will only be fully accomplished at the end, at the parousia. Another great word, isn't it? Don't ask me what they mean. In the meantime, Christians, as priests of God, are to perform their sacrificial service to the glory of God. For example, Hebrews. So you see, there is that sense in which we are the temple of God. When the Holy Spirit was given to the church, the temple of God was created in the church, but it is not yet complete.

[26 : 07] It is not, we are not yet perfected. The church needs to grow towards maturity in Christ, and that is only going to be accomplished at the parousia. So we are currently, in the meantime, as Christians, priests of God who are performing their sacrificial service to the glory of God, and that we continue to do.

The eschatological temple. The bride of Christ. The image of marriage is applied to God and Israel in the Old Testament. In Isaiah, in Hosea, similar imagery is applied to Christ and the church in the New Testament.

Christ, the bridegroom, has sacrificially and lovingly chosen the church to be his bride. Ephesians chapter 5. It's wonderful if you look at that teaching on Ephesians, which combines in its thinking Christ's love of the church and also the love of a husband and wife.

And you can't quite separate the two. People talk about Paul as being sexist, but, you know, actually if you look at that beautiful teaching in Ephesians, you can't take apart the sense of how much Christ loves the bride, which is the church.

And then that is related to the relationship between a husband and wife. Her responsibility during the betrothal period is to be faithful to him. At the end times, at the parousia, the official wedding ceremony will take place.

[27 : 31] And with it, the eternal union of Christ and his wife will be actualized. That's Revelation, of course, isn't it? That passage from Ephesians 5. The bride of Christ.

The body of Christ. The body of Christ, as a metaphor for the church, is unique to the Pauline literature and constitutes one of the most significant concepts therein.

Romans 12, 4-5. So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members of one another. Or Colossians 1, 18.

He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn of the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. That is Christ. The primary purpose of this metaphor is to demonstrate the interrelatedness of diversity and unity within the church, especially for Paul with reference to spiritual gifts.

The body of Christ is the last Adam, the new humanity of the end time that has appeared in history. However, Paul's usages of the image, like the metaphor of the new temple, indicates that the church, as the body of Christ, still has a long way to go spiritually.

[29 : 12] It is not yet complete. It is now and not yet. In Paul's now and not yet schema, believers are now metaphorically with Christ, enjoying fellowship with him in the heavenly realm.

What we do is significant when we worship. And we pray together and come to Learner's Exchange. We're doing something heavenly here. I don't know if you realize that. We are enriched by this present fellowship.

And yet, Christians look forward to its eschatological consummation. As Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2, And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

In Ephesians 3.10, Paul refers to the wisdom of God as manifest in the existence of local churches which are visible to the world. Paul uses *ecclesia* to denote a local body of believers in which the present tensions of reconciliation are exhibited.

but *ecclesia* also represents a divine conception for which Christ died and which is presently gathered around Christ in the heavenly realm.

[30 : 34] And finally, Paul uses *ecclesia* for the final assembly of the redeemed, the new man, fully composed, the body perfectly expressed, the fullness of believers constituted as a continuously worshipping assembly.

in Paul's view, Christians belong both to the heavenly church which perpetually worships as well as to the local church which meets intermittently.

not merely part of the heavenly church, local gatherings manifest the principles and essentials of the heavenly one while emphasizing the completed action of Christ and its heavenly action, its heavenly implications.

So I hope that this has stimulated some thought in you about the nature of the church. There are a number of images which unite us to that which was in the Old Testament and the Old Testament to us.

Above all, I believe it is a challenge for us as God's people. What does it mean for us to be his people in the here and now, in this world in which we live, in this time in which we are?

[31 : 38] I think that is an important issue for us as St. John's, important for us to think through and work through. Seems to me it is part of the essence of what it is that we are fighting for. But above all, I believe it means that we are God's, we belong to him, he is in charge, we are those who have responded to him in faith and received the mercies of his grace.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much.