

People Shaped by Covenant

By Bob Young

Introduction

Last Sunday night, we studied orientation, disorientation, re-orientation in the Psalms and in contemporary songs. Today's sermon may be disorienting and may not re-orient you as well as you would like. You may feel dizzy; it's OK to be dizzy. We have been turned in one direction so long that to get us unwound is going to take a lot of turning in the reverse direction.

At the heart of church is the question of who we are, and what we are to be about.

→If we are not who we are supposed to be, we cannot be the church

→If we are not about what we are supposed to be about, we cannot be the church of Christ.

I began preparing this sermon by thinking about biblical descriptions of people of God, especially from 1 Peter. The more I studied, the more I realized that such is incomplete.

It is one side of the river—one pier for the bridge, but does not touch the other side. There is too much unsaid.

Who are we? Above all else, we are covenant people, blessed and blessing people.

This suggests several things.

First, we must think about the nature of the covenant/agreement.

The goal is RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH CHRIST.

I am concerned about our tendency to define ourselves negatively, noting what we are against, but I feel compelled to take the risk: we are not about a statement of faith.

This encompasses any formal statements and also informal statements. We say we do not have a statement of faith, but you and I know that we do.

There are certain things that we always include in our description of faith: certainly baptism is there, and the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper, and the non-use of instrumental music in worship. Some would include other items. If you want to know what is in the faith statement of a person, just start trying to change things.

My point is not that we should not believe certain things, but that any effort to encapsulate our faith in a list of beliefs is not an adequate description nor the entirety of our Christian faith. Jesus said there are two great commands: #1 and #2. I keep coming back to these and preaching them again and again.

Christianity is about how we live and what we do.

We are all theologians (thinkers about God), but we must be practical theologians, integrating belief and practice. Sometimes we make a choice. Not everything is black or white.

The first steps toward Restoration reflected the need to choose: is the primary focus unity or scripture? Can we have both? If we have to give up one, which one will it be? We have entirely missed the point that both of those options in their raw, unedited form are ditches. That is why we have so much trouble seeing ourselves in the Pharisees of the New Testament. Phariseeism is a ditch. On the opposite side of the road, caring not at all what the Bible says is a ditch.

What does it mean to live in the context of covenant? What does it mean to live in relationship with God through Christ?

Second, in the context of being a covenant person: WHAT IS THE BASIS OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Where is Jesus' "statement of faith?" He called people into faithful relation to God. As with the prophets of the Old Testament, he was not concerned primarily with whether individuals gave cognitive assent to abstract propositions. His purpose was to call people into trustworthy community through embodied and concrete acts of faithfulness. The writers of the New Testament were not obsessed with finding a final set of propositions so that true believers could be identified by their assent. Paul, Luke and John talked much more about the mission to which we should commit ourselves than they did about the propositions to which we should assent. The very idea of a "statement of faith" is mired in modernist assumptions and driven by modernist anxieties. To see in Jude 3 a "statement of faith" is probably to miss the real point of what Jude is saying.

In a brief review of church history, we can understand how various people have defined the church through the centuries and how others have sought to correct misunderstandings and to return to more biblical patterns.

- Following the rise of Catholicism and the beginning of the decline, a new, more biblical view of the church began to take shape. Catholicism had largely defined the church by the sacraments. Catholicism saw the church as the mediator of Scripture, standing over and controlling Scripture (rather than vice versa). Tradition had an equal role with Scripture in defining human obligation.
- Wycliffe opposed the church as an organization, especially its accumulation of wealth and the sale of indulgences.
- Huss defined the church by Christ-like living rather than by the sacraments. Erasmus attacked inconsistency and hypocrisy in the church.
- Luther helped define the priestly nature of the church, a priesthood of believers. Luther also said that the church is the place where the gospel is preached.
- The groups that came to be associated with the Radical Reformation (Anabaptists, Hutterites, Schwenkfelders, Mennonites, and Amish) repudiated church-state connections (often resulting in pacifism) and considered the church a voluntary association of committed believers with strict church discipline. Some of these latter groups practiced the community of goods.

All of this is not to suggest that what the Bible says about the church does not matter, or that what Jesus said is not important. This is simply to affirm that first and foremost the basis of our relationship with God is Jesus Christ. There are commandments and we are a covenant people bound by the conditions of the covenant. But the ultimate goal is that this church become like Jesus. This will be seen first in lifestyle, commitments, priorities, and sacrificial love.

How should we live life? What is THE RESULT OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

What are we here to do? What is the goal? One might answer, "We are here to save people." In the context of covenant, an alternative is that we are here to bless people.

Churches that are growing are those that are doing some part of what God calls his people to do, often imperfectly. This shows up in an external focus, a shift away from an internal focus.

Another shift is that the focus is on people not programs.

A third shift is to ask what God thinks and what others think, rather than the church patting itself on the back with its church-based self-perception. The result of this shift is a change in how the church understands leadership. Leaders of a community (rather than an institution) see leadership differently, they see different priorities and do different things, the church as a community functions differently, service is paramount, and the result is engagement with the larger surrounding community.

In A.D. 30, no one had a church job. The servants, ministers, deacons of Acts 6 got a task—probably unpaid. The Apostles recognized their responsibility. What does it mean for everyone to be a minister—what does it mean for everyone to be a missionary? Are not all charged with making sure that everyone in our sphere of influence comes in contact with the good news?

In the current model, most elders meetings are spent managing and a primary job of an elder is organizing and deciding. To recognize the church as covenant community, to seek relationship with God through Jesus, and to live out the result of that relationship is a first step toward recovering what it means to be apostolic and prophetic and evangelistic. It begins by understanding the nature of the church.

The DNA of a follower of Jesus is this: do you love God? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Or in Old Testament terms, are you in covenant-relationship with God? God established a covenant relationship, he wants you in that relationship, but covenants are mutual. Since God establishes the covenant relationship, he is one who defines love.

Notice the questions that we usually ask that are not the right questions.

The question is not do you know the Bible, do you believe this or that or the other, can I have your prayer requests and share those, or can we just love on one another.

A person can be in the covenant without knowing the Bible, and just loving on one another does not make us covenant people.

What makes us covenant people is that we want to be and try to be.

The life of a follower of Jesus is “let’s serve together.” Let’s bless one another and our world.

I have only one take-away: let us adopt a blessing strategy in this church.

We are so attractational, so much desiring to invite people to church so they can get fixed. We must become kingdom agents (ambassadors) right where work, live, play and eat. People are not desperate for church, but they are desperate for God. We must understand kingdom apart from the baggage of the contemporary church, because Jesus did not say we should pray, “thy church come,” or “I come to give you church...”

Forget a form evangelism program; most of those are not working anyway. When we evangelize, we are inviting a bunch of people to get converted into a church culture, to become like us, and some days that doesn’t look all that pretty or inviting.

Have a blessing strategy. Let a blessing strategy permeate your benevolence. Let me tell you why this church is here and what church and kingdom is all about: covenant with God and one another, blessing and being blessed, changed lives.

We are covenant people, we live in the covenant on the basis of our God-relationship through Jesus Christ, and we are committed to faithfully live out the realities of that relationship in our daily lives.