

## **The Church: the Covenant People of God** **by Bob Young**

### **Introduction**

We must try to understand biblically what the church is about. 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.

One simple description: the church is the people of God. It is a good exercise to think about biblical descriptions of people of God. Such abound in Peter.

But such a study is incomplete. It stays on only one side of the river, it is only one pier for the bridge; it is not firmly anchored to both shores. We must seek a more complete view. One approach is to begin with Old Testament concepts of people of God, and ask how these concepts find continuity in New Testament descriptions.

Beginning in Old Testament, God's people are covenant people, blessed and blessing people.

### **What is meant by the phrase, "people of the covenant"? What is the nature of the covenant?**

We must understand agreements, different kinds of covenants or agreements, and the process of establishing covenants. Generally they include mutual commitments.

OUTLINE: the GOAL of the covenant, the BASIS of the covenant relationship, and the RESULT of the covenant in the life of the Christian.

### **What does it mean to be a covenant person in the New Testament church, in Christ?**

#### **The goal of the covenant is RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD THROUGH CHRIST.**

I am concerned about a tendency to define the church negatively, that is, by what we are against. The goal is not to codify a limited number of items that are our belief system. The goal is relationship with God through Christ. We are not about a statement of faith.

In saying this, I refer not only to a formal statement of faith, but also to any informal statement.

We have said we do not have a statement of faith, but you and I know that we often do.

There are certain things we include in a statement of faith: for example, baptism; weekly observance of the Lord's Supper; no instrumental worship. Some would include other items.

If you want to know what items are sacred, try to change things.

My point is not that we should not know certain things, but that a few limited items cannot define the Christian faith. Jesus said, pay attention to #1 and #2: love God, love neighbor. I preach these regularly; I keep coming back to them. Christianity is about how we live, what we do. We who teach and preach must be theologians, practical theologians and theological practitioners, integrating thinking and life in the context of relationship with God through Christ.

Life in the context of the covenant involves choices. The Restoration movement struggles with two goals often at odds with one another: the unity of the church and the teachings of Scripture. Can we have both? We too often miss the point that both of these taken to an extreme are ditches alongside the road. Neither by itself can enable a faithful walk down the middle of the road. Perhaps that is why we have so much trouble seeing ourselves in the Pharisees of the New Testament. Phariseeism is a ditch, applying Scripture without concern for humanity. On the other hand, sacrificing the teaching of Scripture for the sake of unity is also a ditch. The goal is not unity, the goal is not the Bible. The goal is relationship with God through Christ.

**If the goal is relationship with God, then in context of being a covenant person,  
What is THE BASIS OF THIS RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?**

Jesus did not have a “statement of faith.” He called people into faithful relation to God through life in the Spirit. As with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus was not concerned primarily with whether individuals gave cognitive assent to abstract propositions but with calling persons 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 assent to the propositions could mark true believers. 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 think that Jude 3 is referring to a codification of “the faith” into a series of beliefs or statements misses the point of what Jude 3 is about. The basis of the relationship with God is not in mental understandings. The basis of relationship with God is Christ as we become like him.

Consider a brief review of church history. Think with me about how various understandings or definitions of the church through the Christian centuries.

The development of Catholicism included a close alliance between the church and the state. The church was both a political institution and a religious institution. This alliance was one factor in the development of various unbiblical practices and abuses. Catholicism held that the church was the mediator of Scripture, standing over and controlling Scripture (rather than the Bible informing and instructing the church). As a result, Catholicism exalted tradition so that tradition came to have an equal role with Scripture in defining human obligation. Catholicism primarily defined the church by the sacraments.

Against this religious backdrop, a renewed focus on the authority of Scripture and the nature of the church developed. A new, more biblical view of the church began to take shape. Wycliffe opposed understandings of the church as an organization, especially its accumulation of wealth and sale of indulgences. Huss defined the church by Christ-like living rather than by the sacraments. Erasmus attacked the inconsistency and hypocrisy in the church.

Luther helped define the priestly nature of the church as a priesthood of believers. He was primarily referring to the church as the priesthood rather than to individual Christians as priests. Luther also affirmed 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 practiced the community of goods.

It is helpful to see how others have understood the biblical teaching about the nature of the church. The biblical descriptions of God's people are important; they informed the efforts of those mentioned to return to Scripture and biblical understandings of the church. The commandments of Scripture must be obeyed. But the larger context of the New Testament teaching about the church is that Christians are a covenant people, bound by the conditions of the covenant. The ultimate goal is that this church become like Jesus. This will be manifested in lifestyle, commitment, priorities, and sacrificial love.

**Third, in the context of being a covenant person living a covenant life,**

**What is THE RESULT OF RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?**

What are we here to do? What is the goal? Save people? I have an alternative suggestion. We are here to bless people.

What is happening in our world is that most of the churches that are growing are doing only a certain part of what God calls his people to do.

What happens when the church lives out its relationship with God?

→The church develops a healthy balance between an external focus that seeks to take the gospel to the world, and an internal focus that binds together the people of God.

→The focus comes to be on people not programs.

→The church moves away from patting itself on the back with a church-based self-perception, toward asking what God thinks and what others think.

→The church develops a new understanding of spiritual leadership. The result is meaningful community engagement. (The challenge is that we develop leaders of a living body and not of an institution.)

In A.D. 30, in the life of the Jerusalem church immediately after Pentecost, no one had a church job. All devoted themselves to teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer. The apostles devoted themselves to the word and prayer. The deacons got a church job—probably unpaid. What does it mean for everyone to be a minister? What does it mean for everyone to be a missionary? Are we committed to making sure that everyone in our sphere of influence comes in contact with the good news?

Without a continual focus on the goal and the desired results, elders' meetings are spent managing, organizing and deciding, even though the primary job of an elder is shepherding and teaching. We must recover what it means to be apostolic and prophetic and evangelistic, all of which begin with a biblical 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.

Illustration: what do husbands get wives for Christmas or Valentine's Day?

Notice the questions that we usually ask that are not the right questions. It is not do you know the Bible, do you believe this or that, can I have your prayer requests and share those, can we just love on one another.

A person can be in the covenant without knowing the Bible, even while mistaken. Just loving on one another does not make us covenant people.

What makes us covenant people is that which we want to be; intend to be, and try to be. (Illustration: former Michigan law, you are married because one party intended to be married and thought they were being married—even if other laws were broken.)

The life of a follower of Jesus is defined by the attitude: “Let’s serve together, let’s bless one another and our world.”

Here is my one take-away, let us adopt a blessing strategy in this church.

We are too attractional. We 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 our typical evangelism strategies. They are not working anyway. Typically, when we evangelize, we are inviting a bunch of people to get converted to a church culture, to become like us, and some days that doesn’t look all that pretty or inviting to me.

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.