

Who is the Church?

In our study of what the church is, we concluded with the definition:

The church is the assembly of Christ's [regenerate] people who regularly and intentionally gather in His name to worship Him and serve one another as they learn the Bible together, sing [psalms and hymns and spiritual songs] together, pray together, and celebrate the Lord's Table together.

Though it might not initially seem important, understanding “who” Christ’s church is actually has eternal consequences. Sadly, there are many people who sincerely believe themselves to be Christians simply because they regularly “go to church”, or because they are “members” of their local church.

There are two tragic errors that people make in relation to the connection between Christ and His church:

1. That a person can belong to Christ and yet not belong to His church
2. That a person can belong to Christ’s church and yet not belong to Him

A major reason for this is simply that in our jettisoning of doctrine, especially the overlapping doctrines of soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology, most people affiliated with the church:

1. Have no idea what it means to be saved
2. What it means for those saved to belong to the church
3. What the church’s role is in God’s redemptive purposes.

If we’re honest, most people outside the church think that the church is simply a bunch of nice, religious people who get together on Sunday to talk about the Bible.

- Unfortunately, the reason why they think this is because this is often the message that most people inside the church convey to them.

Why is this eternally dangerous?

- Because it preaches the false gospel that we can be “okay” with God apart from being born-again and subsequently united to Christ through the supernatural gift of saving faith in the gospel.

We need to realize that by nature, all humans – including our children and well-meaning friends – as sinners are “hard-wired legalists,” and thus we need to be intentional in communicating this message of “regenerate membership,” especially to those who regularly attend our church gatherings.

If we are not careful, those who attend church – especially our children – will inevitably begin to think that they are Christians because they have always been “in church,” even though they might not actually be “in Christ.”

The Church is to be Comprised *ONLY* of Regenerate Members

Unlike the old covenant people of God (Israel), God’s new covenant people (the church) is only made up of regenerated, born-again believers.

- Again, there may be unbelievers present in the midst of our gatherings, but this does not mean they are part of the church, or members of it.
 - This is why it is important to remember that the church is not a building, a religious meeting, or a denomination, but rather the people of God who have been united to Jesus Christ – the true Israel of God – by faith.

In the old covenant, one entered into the covenant people (Israel) through the act of circumcision.¹ This finds its origins in God’s covenant with the patriarch Abraham in Genesis 17:1-14, which is worth quoting in its entirety:

¹ As one of my (five) girls literally asked me yesterday during our family devotions from Exodus 4, “If the covenant sign of belonging to God’s people in the OT was circumcision, were girls then not part of God’s people, since they couldn’t be circumcised?” This is an excellent question. The (short) answer is simply this: the OT taught that males were the covenant heads of their families, and thus a woman was “circumcised” by virtue of her being under the headship of either her father or her husband. This of course has beautiful and glorious implications for believers – both male and female – in the NT: Christ, who is our representative covenant head by virtue of our union to Him by faith, has “become” in His crucifixion our circumcision before God. Literally, Paul says in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2 that Christ was “cut off” (that is, circumcised) for our sins and in our place. And so, we may add to Paul’s argument

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless, that I may make My covenant between Me and you, and may multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, "Behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." And God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall My covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

It is very clear from this text that one cannot belong to the covenant people of God in the OT apart from circumcision. Any male – and thus any female under his headship – whose foreskin (i.e. “unclean flesh”) was not “cut off” was subsequently to be considered “cut off” from the covenant community, and thus God’s covenant promises.

in Ephesians 4 that there is only “one circumcision” for God’s people in the new covenant: the circumcision of Christ, which is applied by the Spirit through faith (cf. Rom. 2:28-29).

Unfortunately, under the old covenant economy, it was entirely possible to belong to Israel's covenant community apart from saving faith in Israel's covenant God, Yahweh.

- This is precisely what Paul teaches in Romans 9, where he reminds us that “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (v.6b), and “not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (v.7a).
 - As Paul Washer [rightly] notes, *the majority of OT Israel were unregenerate unbelievers!!*²

What many Israelites in the OT did not realize was that God's covenantal promises were to be appropriated by faith, not circumcision.

- Again, as Paul teaches in Romans, circumcision was merely “a sign” that pointed forward to the Messiah, whom God has predestined to come into the world in order to be “cut off” for His people (Isa. 53:8; cf. Col. 3:11) – both Jew and Greek (Isa. 54:1).³
 - Rom. 4:9-12 – “Is this blessing [i.e. forgiveness of sins, vv. 7-8] then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. *He received **the sign** of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised.* The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 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 had before he was circumcised.”⁴

² See his excellent book, which provides an exhaustive treatment of Ezekiel 36, *The Gospel Call and True Conversion* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013).

³ Though it is not explicitly shown in Isaiah 54 that Messiah's people include Gentiles (remember, most Jews thought they alone were God's people), Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, applies Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:27 to say that God's elect and predestined people – that is, who are “in Christ” by faith – include not only Jews, but Gentiles as well, as evidenced by the fact that they too have received the eschatological promise of the Holy Spirit (4:6; cf. Acts 11:17-18), marking them out to be God's true “sons” in *the “Son”* (4:7). The whole letter of Paul to the Galatians deals with who the true covenant people of God are, and whether or not circumcision is actually necessary to belong to “the Israel of God” (6:16).

⁴ Ironically, Reformed theologians use these very verses to defend their practice of infant baptism. Though the context is dealing with *Abraham* as the ultimate illustration of whether or not Gentiles need

- “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, *nor is circumcision outward and physical*. 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.” (Rom. 2:25-29)

There are two passages that Paul is likely referring to here: Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37. Let us consider them in turn:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 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, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

to be circumcised to be included into God’s covenant community, they make the passage all about *Isaac*. Paul’s whole argument is that Abraham – who was a “Gentile” before God savingly called him – was counted righteous by God through faith apart from circumcision, and that Gentiles thus were not required to be subsequently circumcised after their faith in the gospel of Christ (cf. Acts 15 and the entire letter of Paul to the Galatians). It is true that circumcision is indeed “a sign.” But Paul makes it clear in this passage that the circumcision for Abraham was not a sign of “future faith” of God’s “promise to save his children if they believed”, but rather a sign of something he already had, namely “righteousness by faith.” Again, Reformed theologians wrongly equate OT circumcision with NT baptism, assuming that just as believing Abraham circumcised all of his [unbelieving] “seed,” so now in the new covenant, believing parents are to baptize their [unbelieving] children with the hope that their baptism will “point forward” to their need for faith in the gospel. However, Paul couldn’t make it any clearer: the sign doesn’t point forward but backward. It is faith alone that is the prerequisite of belonging to the covenant people of God (which he develops further in chs. 9-11), and in the NT, *baptism always is to follow saving faith*. Finally, we need to understand that the Scriptures clearly teach that God’s covenant sign in the new covenant is not baptism in water per se, but baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5), by whom we are “baptized into Christ” (1 Cor. 12:13). It is the Holy Spirit that is our new covenant “seal” (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Gal. 3:1-6, 14; 4:6; 5:16-25; 6:1; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Phil. 3:3). And, as Acts repeatedly teaches, only those who have “received” the Holy Spirit – by faith (Eph. 1:13) – are to be subsequently immersed (“baptized”) publicly in water as the visible new covenant sign of, and confession to (cf. Rom. 10:9-13), one’s allegiance to the risen Lord (e.g. Acts 2:41; 8:12, 36-38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 11:16-17; 16:14-15, 32-33; 18:8; 19:3-5).

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31-34)

Put simply, the covenant that Yahweh made with Israel at Sinai – commonly called the “Mosaic covenant” – was insufficient to accomplish the covenant promises He made with Abraham in Genesis 12, ultimately because it was conditioned on her obedience:⁵

- In the Mosaic covenant, Yahweh promised Israel that He would abundantly bless her – and through her the nations – *if* she would only obey Him:
 - “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Exo. 19:5-6)
 - “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall overtake, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.” (Deut. 28:1-2; cf. vv.3-14)
- However, if Israel failed to obey Yahweh, the opposite would happen:
 - “But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all His commandments and His statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” (Deut. 28:15; cf. vv. 16-68).

Ultimately, Israel refused to heed the commands and warnings of God’s covenant mediator – Moses – and was subsequently and ultimately exiled out of the Promised Land by the Babylonians.

The reason for their failure to keep the covenant is obvious: Israel wouldn’t obey God and keep their end of the covenantal bargain.

⁵ This is exactly Paul’s argument in Romans 7 and 8 (and Galatians 3 and 4). The law was not able to bring about the promises God made to Abraham, and was given to prepare Israel for Messiah. “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (Rom. 8:3-4)

But WHY?

- Israel wouldn't keep the covenant, because Israel couldn't keep the covenant:
 - "And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear." (Deut. 29:2-4)
- And the reason Israel couldn't keep the covenant is because she didn't love the LORD her God with all her heart.
 - And the reason why she couldn't love the LORD her God with all her heart is because she needed a new heart:
 - ➔ "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stubborn." (Deut. 10:16)
- But since Israel could not do this, Yahweh would Himself have to do it:
 - "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." (Deut. 30:6).

WHEN would this divine and supernatural heart circumcision take place?

- Jeremiah tells us: "in the new covenant."

WHO would receive new hearts?

- Again, Jeremiah tells us: "all" of God's covenant people will "know" Him.

This raises the question: "Who then are the new covenant people of God?"

- And the answer is simple: only those who have received the Lord's promise of a new heart that truly loves Him and obeys His commandments.
 - The first command the new heart obeys, as we see in Acts 2:37-38, is to "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

And as Ezekiel prophesied, the “proof” or “seal” of this regeneration was the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit:

“Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate My holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the courtiers and bring you to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new [S]pirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in My statutes and be careful to obey My rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be My people, and I will be your God.” (36:22-28; cf. 11:18-20)

Paul teaches this very thing – that the distinguishing “mark” of God’s people in the NT is the indwelling presence and outworking fruit of the Holy Spirit. Speaking to the believers in Corinth, he writes:

“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us,⁶ written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human⁷ hearts.” (2 Cor. 3:2-3)

And so we see that under the old covenant, anyone could become an “Israelite” simply by the virtue of *physical* [“outward”] circumcision, regardless of whether faith in, and love for, the LORD and His covenantal promises was [inwardly] present or not.

⁶ The “letter of Christ,” of course refers to the gospel. This is what Paul had preached (“delivered”) to them. This “letter” is much different than the “letter” of Moses (i.e. the law), which it seems was being preached/delivered by the false apostles who were infiltrating the church there.

⁷ Literally, the Greek reads “on tablets of fleshly hearts.” The Greek Paul uses here is pretty much identical to that used in Eze. 36:26 in the LXX. This is definitely intentional and meant to be seen that this OT promise has been fulfilled in the new covenant by Christ through the Spirit.

However, under the new covenant era, only those who have the Holy Spirit, that is, have been born again⁸ and have received the gift of a new “heart,” belong to the new covenant people of God – the church.⁹

- “For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law...Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified [i.e. ‘cut off’] to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.¹⁰ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, that is,¹¹ upon the [true] Israel of God.” (Gal. 6:13-16)

Therefore, the “passport” for entry into the end-time expression of the kingdom of God – the church – is to “have the Spirit.”

⁸ This is precisely what Jesus was teaching Nicodemus in John 3. To “be born again/from above” is the same as being “born of the Spirit and of water,” referring, of course to passages like Eze. 36-37. To be born of “water” is not referring to baptism, which is an unfortunate anachronism.

⁹ Many Reformed, Lutheran, and Catholic theologians love to cite Augustine and his erroneous interpretation of “the parable of the weeds” in Matthew 13:24-30. Rather than simply reading Jesus’ own clear interpretation of this parable in verse 36-43, Augustine defined the “field” where unbelievers and believers dwelled side-by-side as “the church,” buttressing the idea that the covenant community in the NT, like that OT Israel, is comprised of both the regenerate and unregenerate. However, in v. 38, Jesus says, “The field is the world,” not the church. This is consistent with the rest of the NT witness.

¹⁰ For Paul, the Spirit is the marker of the “new creation.” According to the OT, the Spirit would usher in the “last days,” where God would fully and finally fulfill His [saving] promises to His people through the Messiah (see esp. Eze. 36-37; Joel 2:28-32; Isa. 11:1-13; 32:15-18; 42:1-9; 44:1-5; 59:21; 61:1-5).

Amazingly, we see that **the church is the end-times’ people of God**, or, as Paul puts it, the church is the one “upon whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor. 10:11). That is, **to have the Spirit is to be in and part of the new creation**. Since Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23), it only makes sense that this title is applied to us (James 1:18; cf. Rom. 8:29) by virtue of our union to Him.

¹¹ This is my own translation of the conjunction *καί* (*kai*), translated simply and woodenly by the ESV as “and.” For Paul to make a distinction between “two peoples of Christ” would totally undo and run contrary to his main argument in the letter, namely, that there are not Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Over and over, Paul teaches that there are only “in Christ” Christians, irrespective of their Jewish or Gentile backgrounds. That believers are the true Israel of God fits entirely with Paul’s argument not only in Galatians, but also in Romans, Ephesians, and Corinthians. Christ is the “true Israel,” and those who are “in Him” are [now] the earthly expression of God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven. The NLT rightly interprets the verse as, “May God’s peace and mercy be upon all who live by this principle; they are the new people of God.” Unbelieving ethnic Jews do not live by *στοιχῆσουσιν*, *stoichēsousin*] this “principle.” They live by the now obsolete Law of Moses [see 4:9, where Paul uses the same root to explain how the now obsolete Law of Moses is no different than pagan rituals that characterize this ‘present age’], and thus are not under God’s blessing, but curse (3:10). Only those who have the Spirit (3:14) are able to “walk” (5:25 *στοιχῶμεν*, *stoichōmen*) as Paul has laid out (cf. 5:1, 13). Since only the church has the Spirit, they are the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel, namely to have His Spirit in full measure in and by the Messiah.

- That is, those who belong to the King – Jesus – are marked out by the King’s “stamp of approval” – the Spirit.
 - “You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him.” (Rom. 8:9-10; cf. vv. 10-17, 26)

This is further seen in passages like 1 Corinthians 1, where Paul addresses the letter to “the church of God that is in Corinth.” (1:2a)

- And WHO are those who belong to this local church? Paul tells us in the very next clause:
 - “To those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” (1:2b)
- Moreover, for Paul to have “fellowship” with others in Christ’s church must be preceded first of all by fellowship with the resurrected Lord Christ:
 - “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (1:9)

Evidence of the Indwelling Spirit

Despite what many may think, the indwelling presence of Christ’s Spirit is not “invisible,” nor are we left to “guess” who in the church has it or doesn’t.

- When Paul wants to explain what it looks like visibly for a person to have been marked invisibly by the Spirit, he lists some of the evidences, or fruits, of this:
 - “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, which is expressed in¹² joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” (Gal. 5:22-23)

¹² This is my own paraphrase. Elsewhere, Paul teaches that *the* visible evidence of the new creation, that is, evidence of having the Holy Spirit is simply “love, which operates by faith” (5:6, 14; cf. 3:14). Since the Spirit is received by faith and love operates by faith, there seems to be a “transitive property” that shows us that “love” is the visible expression of the Spirit’s presence. This is definitely buttressed by the apostle John in his first epistle, where he shows us that those who belong to Christ not only believe true gospel doctrine, but also love God, love God’s people, and love God’s commands.

- The entire letter of 1 John reminds us that those who belong to Christ – that is who have received the Holy Spirit – are not merely those who show up at church meetings or use religious language, but actually believe the apostles’ teaching about Jesus Christ, and show their love for the true God by loving His commandments and [tangibly] loving His people.

And so, when someone professes to be a Christian or a member of the church, we actually have a metric by which to gauge their profession.

This is why it is important for the elders of a church to be cautious about rashly and undiscerningly bringing “unproven” persons into membership.¹³

Applications:

1. As we will study later, this concept of “regenerate membership” only makes sense if immersion (“baptism”) is reserved only for those who show credible evidence (“fruit”) of the indwelling Spirit in the totality of their lives.
 - Baptism of unbelievers, whether of unknowing infants by paedobaptists, or the practice of emotional manipulation of most western Arminian evangelical churches, unfortunately has produced much harm and unnecessary confusion in the church. Worse, since unbelievers are often ‘declared’ to be believers, the world is confused when such false professors live no differently than them (cf. Rom. 2:24).
2. Along this theme, and as we will study later, this is why the Lord’s Table ought to be “fenced.”
 - Again, to administer a covenant “sign” – baptism – to an unbeliever causes unnecessary confusion. Worse, it may produce the assumption that by participating in the Table one is actually saved, irrespective of the state of their heart or necessary presence of the Spirit in one’s life.

¹³ Of course, the Lord Jesus has given His church the gift of church membership, whereby a local church has Christ’s heavenly authority to put professing members “outside” the church and declaring that until they meaningfully and publicly repent of their grievous sins, they are not to be considered members of the covenant/kingdom/church. We will spend much time later on in our studies to look at this vital aspect of ecclesiology (cf. Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-3; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; 2 Thes. 3:6-15, etc.).

- Again, as we will see, fencing the Table ought to encourage evangelistic conversations with those who want to know why they are not allowed to partake of the Table, or with those who are desirous to.
3. “Regenerate membership” safeguards church votes.
 - Do we really want unbelievers voting on spiritual matters they are truly not concerned about? As Paul repeatedly reminds the Corinthians, those who have the Spirit “see” things much differently than unbelievers, who are still “fleshly” in their affections and goals in life.
 4. “Regenerate membership” ensures biblical church discipline.
 - Again, we will deal with this in more detail later in our study on ecclesiology.
 5. “Regenerate membership” ensures that only believers are serving as representatives of Christ’s body in the church.