

# The Church : A brief theology

*Bath Leadership Academy on the Church*

---

God chooses to express the Kingdom through the church. This is not the exclusive demonstration of the kingdom, but the church is God's primary tool in communicating and establishing the kingdom on earth. Believers need to be part of this spiritual body

## God's Plan & Idea

God's heart and plan from the start is to have a people that are called to be his own. God intended that humanity lived with him and had a relationship with him.

**Deuteronomy 14:2** for you are a people holy to the LORD your God. Out of all the peoples on the face of the earth, the LORD has chosen you to be his treasured possession. (NIV)

Church is not a human invention or just another organisation, it is a spiritual entity and must operate in a spiritual way. But the people of God are treasured by Him, the people of God are close to His heart.

**Matthew 16:18** (New International Version)

<sup>18</sup>And I tell you that you are Peter,<sup>[a]</sup> and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades<sup>[b]</sup> will not overcome it.<sup>[c]</sup>

Jesus makes it clear to Peter that although Peter is part of the foundations, Jesus is doing the building. In book of Acts, Jesus, through the power of the HS, is calling together and empowering thousands of legalistic spiritually dead Jews and pagan gentiles. Acts is an exciting roller coaster journey of a church being born and spreading Kingdom reality. The church was making such an impact that it "turned the world upside down" [Acts 17:6]

## A God of Family

**Trinity** : The NT concept of the trinity (Father, Son & Holy Spirit) represents the idea that God exists in relationship with himself. Although you can not point to the word trinity in the bible, the early church came to understand the Hebrew idea of "the Lord God is one God" (Deut 6:4) as three in one. The trinity as a theological construct is alluded to in the OT (Gen 1:26 God creates man in 'our' image) it is only a partial revelation. The NT expands this concept (see attachment from RT Kendall), but in essence God in his nature is in community.

**Adam & Eve** : The Genesis 1-3 account of the creation of mankind is a declaration of the desire of God to be in relationship. He creates mankind in his own image (Gen 1:27), to be like him in nature, to rule over the earth. The first family are an expression of God in community, the family unit is embedded in the natural order, it expresses the very nature of God.

**Abraham, Isaac, Jacob** : Later in Genesis we are introduced to Abraham (Gen 12) who as Abram 'exalted father', becomes Abraham 'father of many nations' (Gen 17). He is a man who lives with the promise of God who will become a blessing and a great nation.

This is the start of the special people of God, who are known as Hebrew, Israel & Judah or Jewish. God's plan was always to have a special people, a nation, he wanted to express community in a blood line.

**Tribe, Clan, Family** : This blood line gets expressed in a family, which becomes eventually a series of clans. Jacob's 12 sons (Gen 35-50) express the growth of the family of God, eventually they are known as the 12 tribes.

**Joseph to Moses** : Genesis ends with Joseph, the saviour of the Hebrew people to deliver them from starvation and then significant time passes until the arrival of Moses as saviour to deliver people from captivity to the Egyptian tyranny. What happens in this time is a nation is formed in the oppressive conditions of Egypt. Moses leads the people out and Joshua takes the people into the promised land (Joshua 1-3), where after a series of battles they confound and conquer the indigenous people and settle the land that God had promised them (Joshua 13-24).

**Kingdom** : After a time of relative peace (Judges) the Hebrew nation want a king, they get Saul! (1 Sam 10) The issue here is not that they wanted a king, but rather it was the need to be accepted by the nations around them. The Kingdom foreshadows the coming Kingdom of Heaven that we see in the NT and David (2 Sam 2) becomes another prototype Messiah, foreshadowing the coming of Jesus. The rest of the OT is a fairly disastrous tale of the earthly kingdom falling into ruin and eventually captivity by the Babylonian empire (2 Kings 25), only to be resurrected by a returning remnant to the physical land of Israel (two major returns, Ezra 1-2, then Nehemiah 2).

**Jesus and the 12** : the scene is now set for the true nature of the heavenly family to return. Like a Moses or David, Jesus comes to earth as the Son of God and gathers 12 men (12 tribes) to demonstrate again the need for a people of God, His family.

## NT Family

**Acts 2:42-47** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the **believers were together** and had **everything in common**. <sup>45</sup> **Selling their possessions** and goods, they **gave to anyone as he had need**. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (NIV)

This picture of the early church meeting in a radical lifestyle, committed together, sharing together, eating together. Here we see a picture of the newly birthed church, there is a link between the love they expressed to each other and the supernatural expectation of being the family of heaven. Paul describes this as being "citizens" (Eph 2:19), a people belonging to God (1 Pet 2:9). There is something so wonderful about the flow of love, compassion and miracles... people getting saved daily, the family of God reproducing which is the inevitable consequence.

## Extending Rule

It is worth just reflecting on the link between the church and kingdom for a moment. The story of the growing family of God is also a story which is linked to rule and territory. The first family were given the task of ruling the earth (Gen 1:28), Abraham was promised territory, Moses took the people to the land and Joshua entered and conquered the land. The time of the Kings matured the idea of kingdom, but their self consumption lost them the land, and then finally an exiled people returned to occupy the land again. Jesus arrives and announces the Kingdom of Heaven at hand (Mt 4:17), an announcement that the rule of God was coming to earth. It is this history that underpins the role of the church, and it is the new way of Jesus that we are supposed to operate in.

## Sent

Greek word “ecclesia” means “called out ones”, called out from the darkness of the corrupted world, called to be citizens of heaven (Phil 2:20).

We are also “sent”. Jesus was sent by the Father to bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth. He in turn sent the disciples (12 and 72) on a mission trip (Luke 9 1-6; Luke 10:1-20) announcing the arrival of the Kingdom. He later renames the disciples apostles, which literally means “sent ones”. On his ascension he sends the disciples (and us) with the great commission (Mt 28:16-20) orders to take the kingdom message where ever we go.

The sending doesn't end there, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to empower the believers of Jesus (Acts 2) just as he promised he was going to do (John 14:15-31; Acts 1:4-5) and still does. The church grows and then gets sent all over the region, initially scattered after Stephen was martyred (Acts 7-8) and then on a more organised and intentional way with mission trips.

The key is that the church is not a static entity, it is missional, it is on the move, it grows, it is sent to spread the kingdom message.

## Peter's Pictures

The stone on which Jesus said he would build his church is Peter, who gives us two wonderful pictures of the Church.

### Living Stones

**1 Peter 2:5** (New International Version)

<sup>5</sup>you also, like **living stones**, are being built into a **spiritual house** to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The Hebrew people understood the idea of God residing in a temple. In Jerusalem there has been for thousands of years a place where God resided. The temple occupied a massively important place in the psyche of the Jewish nation. The temple was the centre of worship, of government (they were a theocracy not a democracy), of social welfare. So when Peter recast the idea of church as “living stones” making up the temple it was fused with meaning and significance.

People often talk of “going to church” as if it were a building, but Peter makes it clear that the building is the people of God, we are “living stones” – we are the very building where God by his Holy Spirit comes to live. When God sends his Holy Spirit in us, he fills us with

himself, that is why the stones are living, full of the life of heaven. The church is about people, alive with the God's life!

### **People : Royal, Holy, Belonging**

**1 Peter 2:9-10** (New International Version) <sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. <sup>10</sup>Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

This is a brilliant description of the nature of the church. Peter uses four descriptors that link the church to the historic people of God, the Jewish nation. He uses Ex 19:5-6 and applies these words to the newly instituted church.

Through Jesus we have the opportunity to be part of a “special race” (amp) or “chosen race” (ESV), a special group of people that are selected, even elected (see Eph 1). The idea of the choosing of God is not in some individualistic sense but rather in the sense of a people being chosen and selected. The church, regardless of colour or gender, are a new race of people, spiritual heavenly people.

Not only chosen but “royal” and “priestly”. Only the priests (Levites) were able to approach God now all who are part of this new people can approach God, not just as a priesthood but part of the royal family, we are after all “co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17).

We take on the very designation of a “holy nation”, the set aside ones, declared holy by God. Not holy because of effort but holy because of the declaration of God.

We “belong” to God his treasured possession, like our children belong to us so we belong to God. We get to find our identity in him because we take on his identity, the very way we were created to be!

## **Paul's Pictures**

### **Body**

**Ephesians 1:22-23** (New International Version)

<sup>22</sup>And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, <sup>23</sup>which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Jesus is the head of the church, the head meaning the “source” rather than some sort of control centre. The church is the body of Christ, more than a metaphorical body but a spiritual body! We are joined together in a marvellous spiritual way to be the very body of Jesus on earth. This body is filled with the Holy Spirit and made to be Jesus on the earth. We can't be the body separately, we can only be the body together, here is power in being together. Paul expands this analogy in 1 Cor 12. He takes the illustration to get us to be happy in how we are made, it is absurd to be another part of the body, be the part of the body that God intends you to be! He also draws out the idea that when parts of the body hurt, we all hurt, this is an interconnected concept - you CAN NOT be a lone ranger Christian it is as absurd as the hand separating itself off from your arm!

### **Bride**

**Ephesians 5:25-27** Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the

word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (NIV)

Marriage is a prophetic sign of the church in unity and intimacy with Christ. This theme is all through the Song of Songs in the OT, a lover wooing his bride to himself, and the resulting x rated language that comes from such a union! This passage shows Christ's love for his church (v25) and Christ's purpose for his church (v27), to present the church to himself in 'splendor' (ESV). Our response to this bridal theme holiness, worship & witness of the love of God.

Here we see the themes of Adam & Eve as a prototype church, the joinedness, the love, the connectedness, with a purpose of rule.

## Temple

**Ephesians 2:20-22** (New International Version)

<sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>And in him you too are being built together to become a **dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.**

Paul takes on the same theme as Peter and uses the temple idea. We become the place where God dwells by his Holy Spirit. When we gather to meet, it is the very gathering of the stones, brick by brick that make the dwelling place of God. The meeting is not just a spectator thing, we literally become the dwelling place of God. Sunday meetings are our key expression for Temple worship, reflecting the gathered nature of church.

We need the apostles and prophets to take their place, be positioned foundationally, otherwise the church is built badly. It leaves me to wonder if some of the problem with the western church is that the foundations may have Christ as cornerstone but have not had the "master builder" of the apostle in the design!

## Vision of something bigger

Just to conclude this rapid theology of church it is worth reflecting on visions of something far greater.

Ezekiel 40-48 is an incredible picture of a temple built with such precision. The square nature of the temple represents something of the perfection of God's design, with gates that open and let all in to the courtyards. Rooms off the courtyard show that this is a place where you can dwell. The presence of God is open to all, however, the way to get deeper and higher into the things of God require sacrifice and obedience. The angel giving us a tour of the temple stops and the fire that had been sitting off in the distance comes on the temple, it is ablaze with the glory of God. The church must be a place suitable for the dwelling of God, it is in order ready to receive the fire of God's glory, set ablaze with his presence.

But the habitation of God doesn't stop there, the fire in the centre produces a river of delight. The consequence of fire within is a river without. What a river! A river teeming with life and energy, healing springing up. A river that refreshes and brings life wherever it goes. Here is a picture of a church alive with the things of God, a carrier of the glory of God and streaming life into our land!