



WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

THEME

3

PART

1

Old Testament Witness

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR

In Book One of *Kerygma: the Bible and Theology* we focused on the central questions Who is god? and Who is Jesus Christ? These are the two major theological issues with which the young church was concerned during the first centuries of its life. The doctrines of the Trinity and Christology were critical for relating the church to its Jewish heritage and to the Gentile world into which it soon moved.

As the church struggled with these issues, however, other related questions began to emerge. In this book we take up two of these questions: What is the Church? and Who is Humanity? A full-blown understanding of these themes developed slowly, in conjunction with doctrinal controversies, persecutions and the continuing interaction of Christians with the sources of their faith.

In theological language, the doctrine of the church is called ecclesiology. We begin our study of this theme by looking at the Old Testament story of Israel. We next move to see how the early Christian church came to perceive who it was in relation to God's gift of Jesus Christ. Our final segment explores the ways the church had to refine its self-understanding in light of troublesome issues during the early Christian centuries.

Who is the Church?

Although we can study the church theologically, a clear emphasis throughout these sessions is that the church is people. An early description of Israel is "the people of the Lord." God has entered into a relationship with a group of people. The story of this relationship from its earliest period to the present is the story of the "church." It is a living, vital story full of "zigs and zags" as God's people display both periods of faithfulness and periods of unfaithfulness. The history of Israel displays both these aspects. The title of our theme could perhaps better be phrased, "Who is the Church?" This would imply that the church is composed of real, living people and is not simply an abstract concept

or notion. The essence of the church is this relationship between God and God's people. As this chapter shows, God's covenants are the means by which this relationship is identified and its benefits and obligations made clear. It will be important for group members to realize that as we speak of "church," we are speaking of ourselves as we participate in the relationship God has established with us.

The Beginnings of the Church

Sometimes we celebrate the events of Pentecost (Acts 2) as the "birthday of the church." This is true, but in a limited sense. The story of the church as the "people of God" really begins with God's call to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 12:1-3). As God entered into a covenant with them and formed the covenants in Israel's later history, God took the initiative to call and communicate with a people. This perspective helps us to see that God has been active in calling, establishing and working with a community of people throughout history.

A study of the Old Testament witness to God's activities helps us realize that the roots of the Christian church reach back to these early times. Ultimately, this is why a thorough acquaintance with the Old Testament is important to the contemporary church. We see in the history of Israel how God has been involved with those who are called into this relationship of love and obedience. Sometimes this story of God's ongoing work is called "the history of salvation." God has been providing a way by which ordinary humans can be united with God and carry out God's purpose for this world. The story of the Christian church begins with God's relationship with Israel.

Blessings and Responsibilities

We see in the story of Israel as the "people of God" and the "people of the covenant" that there are both blessings and responsibilities in this relationship. The law was given to Israel as a way by which the nation could show its gratitude to the God who had called it into existence and delivered its people in the Exodus event. It is very important to emphasize that the laws which regulated all facets of Israel's life were to be regarded as God's good gifts to the people. The laws showed how God wanted the people to live and what God required as their obedience. The people were to obey the laws and express their obedience because they were grateful for the relationship God had established with them.

God freely called the nation into existence and acted to save it from destruction. In the covenant at Sinai, the people promised to be God's people and to obey God's will as expressed through the laws God prescribed. The nation often experienced the blessings which obedience could bring. The ongoing story of Israel, however, especially as dramatized in the writings of the

prophets, shows that the nation was not always faithful to the covenant and to their identity as God's covenant people. When disobedience occurred, the relationship was tested and God's judgment on the nation followed.

An important theological point to be highlighted from Israel's story as God's people is that God's grace was the basis for God's laws. The nation of Israel was given laws to obey as a sign of their covenant relationship with the God who loved them. They obeyed as a response to God's gracious provisions for them. They did not obey in order to gain a relationship with God, for that relationship was already established through God's covenants with Abraham and Sarah and with the nation at Sinai.

A mark of the people of God throughout their history has been faith in God's covenant promises. Obedience follows as an expression of faith and gratitude, not the reverse. God gives the law as a demonstration of the divine will to show the shape that life should take for those who are God's people. The experience of Israel indicates that the church is grounded in God's gracious love and does not gain its relationship with God by anything we as humans do for ourselves. We accept what God has done for us and obey God's will as a way of showing our gratitude for God's love.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Become acquainted with each other.
2. Name at least two terms used to designate God's people in the Old Testament.
3. Define covenant as it is used to describe the relationship of God with Israel.
4. Trace the beginnings of the church in the Old Testament.

Resources You May Need

Newsprint or a chalkboard

Markers or crayons of four colors

Worksheets with Bible references and questions

Copies of the assignments for the three groups working on descriptions of God's people in the Old Testament
Definitions of "grace" and "law" on newsprint or chalkboard
Hymnals

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

1. Begin the session with a prayer inviting God to be present with the group. If you prefer formal prayers, an invocation or prayer for illumination from a Sunday worship service would be appropriate.
2. Invite participants to share their names and one or two of the following items of information:
 - an early memory of the church
 - a memory of a church member of significance to him or her
 - the name of a favorite Old Testament person and a brief statement of why that person is significant.

If the group is large or time is short, you may want to do this activity in groups of five or six people, rather than in the whole group.

3. This session will be most effective if members of the group received their books in time to prepare for their study together. However, if participants are not familiar with the *Resource Book*, guide them through its structure, pointing out:
 - the two themes, each with three chapters or parts
 - a summary of the content, basic Bible references, and a word list for each chapter
 - in the Foreword, guidance for preparing for the group meetings
4. Divide the group into several smaller groups. Give each small group four markers or crayons of different colors and a sheet of newsprint in the center of which you

have written the word “church.” Use an arbitrary method of choosing a writer in each group, such as “the person whose first name begins with a letter closest to the end of the alphabet.”

Ask the groups to list words and phrases that come to mind when they think of the word “church.” Tell them they have three minutes in which to work.

At the end of three minutes (or before, if you see they are ready), give these directions: Using a different color for each, circle words and phrases that describe the church as:

- a building, a physical structure
- programs, organizations (for example, church school)
- activities, what the church does (for example, serves)
- people

Assure them that it is all right if they have some words or phrases that do not fit any of these categories.

Assemble the total group, display their newsprint sheets and compare them, noting similarities and differences. (Save these sheets for an activity in Setting the Stage in the next session.)

OR

Write the word “church” on a sheet of newsprint and display it where the whole group can see it. Ask for a volunteer to help you write. Invite the participants to call out words and phrases that come to mind as they think of the word “church.” (If you and your assistant take alternate words as they are suggested, this will move quickly.) Stop at the end of three minutes or when suggestions run out.

Ask the group to help sort and classify what is on the newsprint, using these four groupings (or ones of your own choosing): building; program and organization; activities, what the church does; people. Use a different color of marker or crayon to circle the items in each category. You may have some words or phrases that do not fit any of these categories. (Save this newsprint for an activity in the next session.)

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Make the transition from the former activities by recalling the theme for this study. For example: We have a page full of ideas about the church, some out of our own experiences, some from the experiences of others. Through the study of this theme we will seek to deepen, affirm and expand our understanding of what the church is.

and

If your group has a large number of members who did not begin their study with Book One of this program, present a mini-lecture on why Christians turn to the Bible as a major resource for what we believe. Three sections in the Introduction of the first *Resource Book* will be helpful: "The Bible as a Book of Faith," "The Bible is language and literature," and "The Bible and Christian Theology."

2. In this session we begin our study with the Old Testament. The word covenant appears frequently in the *Resource Book* to describe our relationship to God. On newsprint write a brief definition of the term which you have gleaned from research in a Bible dictionary. Or, ask members of the group to suggest definitions of covenant and work to establish a common understanding of the term. Write this on newsprint or a chalkboard and leave it in front of the group for the remainder of the session.

Divide the group into clusters of two or three people. Give each cluster a worksheet on which are written one of the following Scripture references and the list of questions to guide its work:

Genesis 12:1-3; 15:18

Exodus 5:1; 6:6-7

Exodus 19:4-6

Leviticus 26:9-13

Deuteronomy 30:19-20

2 Samuel 7:12-17

Isaiah 55:3

Jeremiah 31:31-34

In this passage:

- a. Who were the parties to the covenant?
- b. By whom was the covenant initiated?
- c. What were the terms of the covenant, i.e., what was each party to do?
- d. At what point in Israel's history did this occur? (Use the *Resource Book* for help.)

Allow about ten minutes for clusters to work.

Call the group together. Introduce the reporting time with this quote from pages 1-2 of the *Resource Book*: “The history of the people of Israel is the story of their relationship with Yahweh, the God who called them into existence and established an enduring covenant with the nation.” Let us trace that history in broad strokes.

Invite each cluster to report its answers to the questions above, beginning with those who had the passages in Genesis. As the clusters report, make a time line on newsprint or a chalkboard, using a word or phrase to designate each of the texts in historical sequence. (Save this timeline for an activity in Setting the Stage in the next session.)

For example:

God's promise to Abraham and Sarah
Moses and the Exodus
Mt. Sinai and the Law
Benefits of obedience
Settling in the Promised Land
David and David's line
The time of Exile
Hope for a remnant

Engage the group in discussion as a summary of their work, using these or similar questions:

- a. As you read these passages in your preparation and again in your clusters, what emotions and feelings came through to you?
- b. For what purpose did God set this people apart and enter into covenant with them?
- c. Of the names used to designate the people whom God called out – people of Israel, people of God, children of Israel, people of the covenant – which most appeals to you? Why?
- d. Why and how is this Old Testament history of importance to our understanding of the contemporary church? Of ourselves as part of that church?

or

Divide the group into clusters of two or three persons. Give each cluster a copy of a, b or c below. Note that each section uses a different phrase to designate the people of the Old Testament.

a. People of the nation of Israel.

1. Review the section "The God of Israel" in the *Resource Book* and the Scripture references in that section.
2. What were the blessings and responsibilities of the nation to be established through Abraham?
3. Prepare to summarize for the whole group the history of the nation in Old Testament times in relation to those blessings and responsibilities.
4. What questions does this raise for you concerning the people of Israel today?

b. People of God

1. Review the section "The People of God" in the *Resource Book* and the Scripture references in that section.
2. What were the blessings and responsibilities in this relationship with God?
3. Prepare to summarize for the whole group what this title conveys about the Old Testament people.
4. What does the title mean to us in the contemporary church? What questions, if any, do you have about Israel as the precursor of the church today?

c. People of the Covenant

1. Review the section "People of the Covenant" in the *Resource Book* and the Bible references in that section.
2. What were the blessings and responsibilities in this relationship of God with Israel?

3. Prepare to summarize for the whole group the meaning of a covenant relationship between God and people.
4. What questions, if any, do you have about the terms of the covenant as it was made and renewed throughout Israel's history?

As you give these assignments, encourage the clusters to think about why and how this Old Testament history is of significance to our understanding of who we are as the church today.

Reconvene the group for a time of sharing the summaries and discussions. After each group reports, allow time for questions and comments.

and

As a conclusion to this activity, read together Jeremiah 31:31-34. Invite the participants to imagine they are Israelites in exile hearing these words. How would they feel? What hopes might be raised? In what ways has this promise been fulfilled? What hope does it offer the church today?

3. Dr. McKim writes, "Israel became God's people purely by the Lord's free favor. Obedience to the law emerged as a response to this grace." Display a newsprint sheet on which you have written brief definitions of "grace" and "law."

Engage the group in discussing several or all of the following issues:

- a. As you think back over the biblical passages studied in the previous activity, how accurate is Dr. McKim's statement?
- b. According to Dr. McKim, what is the purpose of the law?
- c. How are grace, law and obedience to God related?
- d. How might this understanding of grace and law affect our lives as persons? As a congregation?

or

In a paragraph on law in *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says laws can't make us human but they can help keep us honest.

Invite the group to reflect on this statement by considering the purpose of laws in situations such as these:

- As rules in family life
- As regulations at work or in public safety codes
- As guidelines for justice

What are the benefits and limits of law in these contexts?

Buechner also says grace is “something you can never get but only be given.”

Ask the group to describe examples of grace they have experienced. Then lead the group in considering how law and grace were related in Israel’s life. What does this understanding imply about the relationship of law and grace in a congregation?

CLOSING

Conclude with a prayer of thanksgiving for God’s grace and guidance through the law.

and/or

Sing or read together the hymn, “The God of Abraham Praise.”

Supplementary Reading

Theological Turning Points, by Donald K. McKim (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1988), Introduction and Chapter 3, “Ecclesiological Controversy: What is the Church?” Pages 44-47.

Articles on covenant, law and grace in a Bible dictionary such as Harpers’.

Looking Ahead

1. Invite a participant to lead the opening prayer in the next session.
2. In activity #1 under Exploring the Scripture, it is suggested a participant report on “ecclesia/church” as it is used in the New Testament, using a Bible dictionary and a theological word book as resources. See the activity for details.