

Biblical Theology, Class 5: The People of God

Who knows what a mixed metaphor is? Can anyone give me an example?

A mixed metaphor is using two different images that don't fit together in a single utterance.

You might remember Jiminy Cricket from Pinocchio exclaiming, "You buttered your bread. Now sleep in it!" or the line from another movie, "It looks like the cows have come home to roost."

To this day I sometimes repeat the words of Biff, the thick-headed bully from the Back to the Future movies: "Let's make like a tree and get out of here."

Yet it's not only the comedy writers who mix their metaphors. Poets do as well, though their mixtures are subtler. T. S. Elliot opens one of his poems with a line about "forgetful snow," and William Butler Yeats writes about "treading on dreams." Strictly speaking, snow cannot be forgetful, and dreams cannot be tread upon. But the unexpected pairing of metaphors in both cases allows us to see true things that we may not ordinarily see with more literal language.

In his book *Church Membership*, Jonathan Leeman observes that when the New Testament authors start talking about the church and its members, they push this mixing of metaphors into hyperdrive, like hitting the turbo button on a racehorse. Paul talks about being "baptized" into a "body," as if one could be immersed into a torso. Peter talks about Christians as "living stones," itself a mixed metaphor, and then he says that these "living stones are being built into a spiritual house to be a royal priesthood."

Can anyone think of other metaphors for the church in the New Testament?

When you open up the Bible and read what God says about the church, you find yourself staring at one big mixed metaphor. We read that the church is like a body, a flock of sheep, branches of a vine, a bride, a temple, God's building, a people, exiles, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, salt of the earth, the Israel of God, the elect lady, and on and on. The images keep coming, one piled on top of the other. It's like flipping through a photo album of images.

The church is unlike anything on earth. It's simultaneously family-like, body-like, flock-like...you get the idea. That's a hard picture to draw, even for the best artists. The question of course is, what do we do with all these metaphors? What is the church?

If you've been here in previous weeks, you know that we've been tracing different themes through the biblical canon. Biblical theology begins with the assumption that the Bible, though authored by many different human authors over thousands of years, by individuals from different cultures speaking different languages, is also the product of one divine author, who is telling one story, albeit with many subplots, about the person and work and glory of Jesus Christ.

I. WHAT IS THE STORY?

Two weeks ago we thought about the storyline of *kingdom through covenant* which holds this book called the Bible together. Again and again, God establishes his kingdom (or rule) through covenants. First, he establishes his kingdom with all humanity through a covenant with Adam, which he then repeats through Noah. But then he specially establishes a special demonstration of his kingdom through a special covenant with Abraham, the first of a special people.

Turn in your Bible's to Genesis 10. *What do we see in chapter 10?*

A genealogy, or what's sometimes called a table of the nations. And notice specifically how the genealogy is laid out: Noah's three sons are listed, and then each of their sons are listed—all the brothers.

- Verse 1: These are the generations of the sons of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth...
- Verse 2: “The sons of Japheth...”
- Verse 6: “The sons of Ham...”
- Verse 21: “To Shem also, the father of all the children...”
- Verse 32: “These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood.”

But then look at chapter 11. What’s there? First, there is the story of the Tower of Babel. Verse 1: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” But of course they raise themselves up against God. So, verse 8, “the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth.”

Then what do we get starting in verse 10? Another genealogy of Shem. That’s interesting. We already had a genealogy of Shem in chapter 10. *What do you think we have a second genealogy of Shem only one chapter later?*

The first thing to notice is the different structures of the genealogy. *How are they differently structured?*

Chapter 10’s lists all the brothers. You might call it a horizontal genealogy: if we were writing it out on a piece of paper, you’d have all these horizontal lines. Chapter 11’s lists only one son, and his one son, and his one son. It’s like it’s tracing out a special line. You might call it a vertical genealogy: father, down to son, down to son, and so forth. And chapter 11’s vertical genealogy culminates in Abraham.

What you’ll find in Genesis is a story of two seeds. Flip back to Genesis 3:15. In cursing the serpent, God says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring [or seed] and her offspring [or seed].” The horizontal genealogies, in a sense, trace out the seed of the serpent: all fallen humanity. The vertical genealogies trace out the seed of the woman: God’s specially called out people, through him victory over the serpent and over sin will

come. With Shem, we get two genealogies because, of course, he's both: seed of the serpent and the woman...as is Abram...as are we, if we are Christians: simultaneously sinful *and* justified. But now I'm getting ahead of myself.

The big picture so far is this: God created humanity to image him in the Garden of Eden. They didn't. So God calls out a special line of people who are simultaneously *a part of* and *set against* all people to accomplish his purposes in creation of imaging him.

A. Called-Out Special Covenant Members: Nation, Seed, Children

How does the Bible describe these called-out members of God's special covenant members? To start, he calls them a nation. Look at chapter 12, verse 1: "Now the LORD said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation.'"

And of course it's Abram's seed that will comprise this nation. Verse 7: "To your offspring I will give this land."

In chapter 17, we learn that the *Abrahamic people*, the *children of Abraham*, or the *seed of Abraham* were marked off by their circumcision.

Eventually Abraham begets Isaac, who begets Jacob, whom God renamed Israel. Israel then had 12 children who became the heads of the twelve tribes of the *nation of Israel*.

They are a nation, seed, children.

B. Son of God, Son of Man, Image, King, Priest & More

But hold on, let's rewind the tape. Let's make sure we didn't miss anything earlier in the story. (Speaking of metaphors, do people under 30 know what it means to "rewind the tape"?)

Two weeks ago, we also saw that Adam, being created in God's image, was a kind of son of God—someone who was to look and act like his dad. And what did his dad do? His dad was a king, and so Adam was to be a kind of king. And Luke's vertical genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:38 concludes, "the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God."

And we considered two weeks ago how all these titles work together: son of God, son of man, image of God.

Interestingly, God then calls Israel his "son" in Exodus 4:22-23, and then David his son in 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 2.

And of course David is a king. So the image of God is the son of God who is a son of man who is the king.

We also saw two weeks ago that Adam was also a kind of priest because he was to watch over the Garden. Sure enough, Exodus 19 refers to Israel as both priestly and kingly when God says, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests."

To recap, we have the people of God described in the language of sons of God, image, king, and priest. Does it feel like image overload yet?

And these are just some of the metaphors used for the people of God in the Old Testament. We'll see in a moment a number of others.

C. Christ as the New Adam, Abraham, Israel, David, Image, King, Priest, Son of Man, Son of God, Seed of Abraham

Now when we turn to the New Testament, it's important that we don't move straight from Israel to church. Israel's storyline is not fulfilled in the church. It's fulfilled in who?

Christ!

Two weeks ago we considered the opening words of the New Testament: “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Matt. 1:1). And we saw that Matthew was telling us that Jesus is the new Adam in addition to being the new David (or king) and the new Abraham (or seed of Abraham). And in Matthew 2 and 5 we saw he was the new Israel.

Throughout the Gospels we learn he’s the Son of Man, the Son of God. Hebrews tells us he is our true priest.

D. A New People Through Union With Christ

Who then are the New Testament people of God? Look at point “D” in your handout. They are everyone who is covenantally united to Christ, who is the second Adam, seed of Abraham, new Israel, and son of David. Remember the new covenant Christ promised through his blood at the Last Supper?

What does it mean to be covenantally united to Christ? It means that all which is his becomes yours, and all which is yours becomes his, as in a marital covenant. When I married my wife, what’s mine became hers, and hers mine. Union with Christ means his righteousness and standing and glory become mine, and my sin and condemnation become his.

Our union with Christ extends to both what he possess, as well as to much of the work that he does, such as the offices of priest and king. (Rom. 6:1 ff; Gal. 2:20; Col. 2:20–3:4). Thus, the Christian shares in his life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, rule, and reign, as well as the justifying benefits that come through his atoning death and resurrection. Being “in Christ,” says theologian Sinclair Ferguson, “means that all he has done for me representatively becomes mine actually.”

As such, Christians, too, are called “sons” and “children.” Peter calls us a “royal priesthood.” We are priests and kings. And of course we are being conformed to the image of the Son, says Paul.

E. Church as Israel, or Seeds of Abraham, but *Through the Promise*

Insofar as Christ is the seed of Abraham and the new Israel, and insofar as the church is united to Christ, such that all that is his becomes ours, we, too, become Israel, we become seeds of Abraham, but we become identified with Abraham and Israel through the promise.

Think for a moment: I am a Leeman by blood, because my parents were named Leeman. My wife, Shannon, is also a Leeman. *But she's not a Leeman by blood, she's a Leeman how?*

Through a covenantal promise.

And when Jesus and the apostles show up, we learn that it's not really blood or biological descent that matters, it's the covenantal promise.

Look at Matthew 3:9. Jesus says to the Pharisees and Saducees, “do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”

Flip to Romans 9. Paul explains further. Verse 6 to 8: “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” It is not the children by physical descent who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring.

Finally, turn to Galatians 3:29. Churches of Galatia, Paul says, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”

It’s not physical descent from Abraham that finally matters, but receiving the promise that came through Abraham. Look at Galatians 6:15-16: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything;

what counts is the new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God.”

With the coming of Christ, the structure of the people of God changes. The people of God are no longer constituted by physical descent. The ethnic people of Israel simply served a typological, shadow-like function. Their purpose, among other things, was to demonstrate what the true people of God were to be like. Therefore they received God’s presence and God’s law. But of course they also needed God’s Spirit. “What counts,” Paul says, “is the new creation.”

The movement from the Old Covenant to the New is the movement from genealogy to re-genealogy, or regeneration. (I tweeted that this morning. No, I’ll never be a super popular twitterer.)

F. Church as Regenerate and Baptized

Notice what this means then for the composition of the church. The church, the people of God in the New Testament, are no longer held together by ethnic ties, or biology. The ethnic ties fall away since they were only meant to point to something else: a supernatural, Spirit-created family.

Our infants are not a part of the church community simply because they are our children. Instead we are a regenerate community. What’s the purpose of marriage, according to Paul in Ephesians 5? It’s to point to a covenantal union even greater than itself. And what’s the point of family ties, particularly in the family ties in the life of Israel? To point to a family ties even greater than themselves: the family ties we are to have through regeneration in the church.

Who then should be baptized? Not babies, but repentant believers.

Turn to Acts 2. In verse 36, Peter preaches,

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the

heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Again, we see that Peter is interested in a promise. And who receives the promise? Well, Presbyterians and paedo-baptists generally want to say: “Well, look, it’s for us and for our children. So we should baptize ourselves and our children.” The problem is, the verse keeps going: The promises is for you, your children, and for all who are far off, which is to say, both Jews and Gentiles. It’s for all whom the Lord will call. It’s no longer biological descent. It’s for those whom the Lord calls, whether near or far, Jew or Gentile. And this is true for your children, too. Your children, too, must be called.

The people of God in the New Testament consist of baptized believers.

G. Many of the Metaphors for the Church Root in the Old Testament

In other words, tracing the storyline of the people of God from Old Testament to New requires us to attend carefully both to matters of continuity *and* discontinuity. I’ve just emphasized a point of discontinuity by describing the movement from genealogy to re-generation.

At the same time, we have to notice then that many of the metaphors for the church root in the Old Testament. Like Israel, Greg Beale observes, the church is called the “beloved of God” (Deut. 32:15; 33:12; Ps. 60:5; Isa. 44:2; Jer. 11:15; Hos. 2:23; Rom. 9:25; Thes. 1:4); “church” (see LXX of Deut. 23:2-3; 31:30; 1 Sam. 17:47; 1 Chron. 28:8; Neh. 13:1); “son(s) of God” (Exod. 4:22-23; Deut. 14:1; Isa. 1:2, 4; 63:8; Hos. 1:10; 11:1; Matt. 5:9; Rom. 8:14, 19; 9:26; Gal. 3:36; 4:6); “Abraham’s seed” (Gal. 3:26, 28); children of the

“Jerusalem above” (Gal. 4:26, 31); “fellow citizens” with the Jewish “saints” (Eph. 2:12, 19); a “Jew...inwardly” and “the true circumcision” (Rom. 2:26-29; Phil. 3:2-3); the “temple” (1 Cor. 3:10-17; 6:19; Eph. 2:20-22); “the bride of Christ/God” (Isa. 54:5-6; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 1:2; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27); a “vineyard” or “cultivated field” (Is. 5:1-7; Jer. 12:10; Ezek. 19:10; Joh 15:1-11; 1 Cor. 3:5-9); an “olive tree” (Isa. 17:6; Jer. 11:16; Hos. 14:6; Rom. 11:17, 24); “sheep” (Jer. 23:1; 50:6; Ezek. 34:6f; Mic. 2:12; Matt. 10:6; 25:22-23; John 10:1f; 21:16-17; Heb. 13:20); a (special) “people” (Exod. 19:15; 23:22; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Tit. 2:14; 1 Peter 2:9-10); a “royal priesthood and holy nation” (Ex. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9); a “chosen race” and “the Israel of God” (1 Peter 2:9; Gal. 6:16); the “image of God.”

Speaking of Christ’s covenantal union with the church should condition how one interprets the New Testament metaphors, whether they appear in the Old Testament or not. For instance, the metaphor “body of Christ,” in the history of the church, has sometimes been interpreted mystically or even ontologically as “the whole Christ” or a “continuation of the incarnation.” Yet a biblical-theological reading would recommend that the language “body of Christ” is covenantal language, not mystical language. It means, he represents us, and we him. The fact that Christ is the “head of the body” means that he is the covenant mediator and the federal head of the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19).

F. The People of God and the New Jerusalem

All of this leads to the great consummation when God’s people will be with Him face to face.

As John saw in Revelation:

“I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9)

At the end of Revelation, John writes,

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” (Rev. 21:3).

God is creating a New Nation, a Bride, who will live with Him for all eternity.

II. BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL TOOLS

Let’s consider a few of the biblical theological tools we used.

A. Covenants

Clearly the people of God exist as the people of God by virtue of covenantal inclusion. This is true of both Israel and the church.

B. Continuity/Discontinuity

But it’s critical here to recognize which covenant they belong to, which brings us to continuity and discontinuity. These are points of continuity between members of the Old Covenant and New: we just saw how all those metaphors for the church root in the Old Testament.

But there are also many points of discontinuity. There’s a movement from biology or ethnicity to promise and regeneration.

C. Typology

I briefly referred to typology a moment ago. Adam is a type of the son of man, and a type of the Son of God. Abraham, too, is a type of Adam. Israel is a type of Son, as is David. David is also a type of

king. And the antitype to all these things is Christ: the true Son, the true man, the true king, and so forth.

I barely had time to mention all the other ways the church's identity is understood through typology. For instance, you have the Old Testament temple, which is where God made his special presence known to the nation and nations. Who fulfilled the temple? Christ. Christ is the one in whom God specially dwells. But what does that mean for us who are covenantally united to Christ? We become the temple, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians. God dwells in us!

D. Promise/Fulfillment

The theme of promise/fulfillment is also a wonderful one to consider. All the promises and purposes given to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David are now ours, because of Christ. The promises of blessing and a great name given to Abraham? Ours through Christ. The promises of an everlasting dominion given to David and repeated through Daniel? Ours through Christ.

Do you see? We are rich in Christ: "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (1 Cor. 3:21b-23). For all the promises of God are "yes" and "amen" in Christ.

III. SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL

In order to systematize it all, we simply want to consider, What is the church? And what implications might this have for our lives?

A. The Church is a Justified and Holy People

By virtue of our union with Christ, we have possessed his righteousness. We have been justified.

B. The Church Is a United People

By virtue of our union with Christ, we are united to one another. Sure enough, Ephesians 2:1 to 10 explain forgiveness and our vertical reconciliation with God: “By grace you have been saved.” Verses 11 to 20 then present the horizontal: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (v. 14).

To be converted is to be made a member of Christ’s body. When mom and dad adopt you, you get new parents, but you also get a new set of brothers and sisters. Sonship comes first. But brotherhood follows. That is to say, conversion signs you up for a family photo.

C. Each one of the metaphors for the church has a job to do for describing something about our union in a church.

Each metaphor teaches us something different about what a church and its members are like. To describe the church as a “family” is to speak about its *relational intimacy* and *shared identity*. To call it a “body” is to say that its members are *mutually dependent* but have *different roles*. To refer to it as the “temple of the Spirit” is to say that God *specially identifies himself and dwells with these people*. The language of “vine and branch” communicates the church’s *dependence on Jesus and his Word* for its life. Do you see?

There’s nothing on earth like the local church.

D. Each of these metaphors gets put into practice *locally*.

Every biblical metaphor for the church becomes embodied—puts on a body—in the local church. The “family,” the “body,” the “temple,” the “people”—all of these descriptions become concrete in particular places. They get put into practice locally.

But don’t all Christians everywhere belong to the “family of God”? Indeed, they do, but God gives you the opportunity to act like a family

with your local church; you treat them first and foremost as your sisters and brothers.

Right there at First Baptist or Second Presbyterian or St. Mark's Lutheran or Grace Community or The Journey you have the people of God. You have the temple of the Spirit. And you have the body of Christ. You don't have just an arm or an ankle of Christ's body.

The universal church is present in the local church. To state this the other way around, your membership in a local body now presents a picture of your membership in his end-time body. You need *a* body of Christ to be *the* body of Christ. You need *a* family of God to be *the* family of God.

How do you fulfill Jesus' command to "love one another" (John 13:34)?

How do you fulfill Paul's command to "carry each other's burdens" (Gal. 6:2)?

How do you obey Peter's words, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others" (1 Peter 4:10).

You obey all these commands through your (membership in the) local church.

E. The metaphors aren't really metaphors but shadows.

In the New heavens and new earth, the metaphor of marriage will give way to the real substance: union with Christ. Marriage the shadowy outline which points to the *real* reality—Christ and the church.

The same is true, I believe, for all the biblical metaphors for the church. They are the shadows of something even greater. Think also of Paul's reference to the heavenly Father "from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Eph. 3:15). God placed earthly fathers on earth so that all the world would have a shadowy outline of what our relationship with the heavenly Father is to be like.

Why do you think God has created brothers and sisters? Again, so that everyone gets a dim sense of the true reality which begins now in the local church and awaits us completely in glory.

What about branches on the vine? It gives us a dim picture of our dependence on the Word of Christ.

CONCLUSION: THERE'S NOTHING LIKE IT

There's nothing in the world like the local church and its members. The relationships which we share in the local church will ultimately prove more interconnected than a physical body, more safe than a father's embrace, more collegial than brotherly love, more resilient than a stone house, more holy than a priesthood, and on and on we could go.

This is what Jesus has prepared for us in glory, and this is what we begin to practice right now at First Baptist or Second Presbyterian or The Journey. We practice it with all those still-sinful and still-strange people who step on our toes, just like we step on theirs.