


END-TIMES ISSUES



#8 Our identity in Christ – *not* defined by the word "church."

1

WE HAVE BEEN LOOKING AT ISSUES RELATED TO ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH.

Last week, we were looking at what the word "church" meant at the time the New Testament was written.

—

THE EARLY CHURCH DID NOT USE THE WORD "CHURCH" THE WAY WE NORMALLY DO.

- ✓ **FOR US:** The word has become a "technical term," and can refer to an institution, a denomination, a group of Christians at a specific location or living in a specific time period, etc.
 - ☞ This is illustrated by our use of the term "early church," as seen in the above title.
- ✓ **FOR THEM:** It meant *any* group of people *assembling* together – Jew or gentile, saved or unsaved. It was a common word, and was used of Israel in the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

2

THIS FACT HAS GREAT SIGNIFICANCE IN MANY WAYS.

1. We need to realize that the "modern" definition is so ingrained in people's minds, that it is probably *impossible* to change it.
 - **Modern definitions may be *necessary* in some instances.** We often need to communicate concepts that the early Christians couldn't even think about! Consider our use of the phrase "the early church" or a reference to a "church denomination," etc.
 - ☞ There are some modern-day definitions that would be good for us to *oppose* – such as equating the word "church" with a building.
 - ☞ In other cases, we might be able to *replace* the word "church" with "Christian."
 - **Context is important!** If we *recognize* the different ways the word is used, we can distinguish between the way *we* typically use that word, and the way the *New Testament* typically uses it.

3

{ Since the word "church" did not have a special "technical" significance when it was originally used ... }

2. Inserting a "technical" significance into the New Testament may result in wrong conclusions.
 - **It doesn't *always* do so.** Since we often use the word "church" as synonymous with "Christians," what Scripture says about *Christians* will be true about Christians who have *assembled* together for worship ("church").
 - **Sometimes it does.** We can illustrate this with an argument that some make when talking about end-times issues. →

Interesting trivia: The word "church(s)" is found about 110 times in the New Testament (if you include the few times it is translated as "assembly" or "congregation"). It is found about 100 times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. (This is about 1/3 as often, since the O.T. is much larger than the N.T.)

4

EXAMPLE OF A WRONG CONCLUSION

– reached by giving a significance to the word "church" that does not exist in the New Testament.

- **What some argue:** The absence of the word "church" in Revelation chapters 4-21 means that the "church" isn't present at that time.
- **What it actually means:** The *absence* of the word "church" doesn't prove anything about the presence or absence of Christians in this time period. All it means is that there is no mention of people *meeting together*. There are no statements indicating that Christians are not present.
 - ☞ These chapters do contain terms that are used to describe Christians – such as "holy ones" ("saints"). (Such terms are also used to describe Israel in the Old Testament.)

Disclaimer: We are looking at end-time *issues*, not attempting to prove or disprove specific *interpretations of how things may occur*. If this prophecy viewpoint is correct, it will find its support in other Scripture passages. (In the future, we may observe things that seem to "disagree" with *other* viewpoints.)

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3. Many modern-day uses of the word "church" have unintended negative consequences.

{ Especially with all the rituals and practices that have been added, and are often deemed "necessary"; also when equating the word "church" with a building. }

 - **It's a lot easier for "fakes" to feel at home.** It is easy to be a fake, when "church" is defined as a building or a set of rituals – or something you occasionally "go to."
 - **It often blurs the distinction between "following Jesus" and "religion."** With all the rituals and trappings, the "membership drives" (often with incentives or rewards), the committees and meetings and activities and programs, it is often difficult to see any difference. (Most unsaved people don't see any difference.)
 - ☞ Many "churches" act no different than a "club" or some type of "religious organization" – especially when the characteristics mentioned in the New Testament are *absent*.

6

WHAT IS "RELIGION"? ⇒ ⇨ It focuses on *what people do*.

- ✎ The *unsaved* may do it to *gain* God's favor; but the *saved* do it as a response of love (they have *already* gained God's favor – through salvation by grace).

✓ The practices of the "heathen."

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very **religious**."

Acts 17:22 (NIV)

✓ The practices of the Jews – in Jesus' day, many of these practices were of human origin. (Others were commanded by God.)

[Paul said...] "I conformed to the strictest sect of our **religion**, living as a Pharisee."

Acts 26:5b (NIV)

7

- ✓ The practices of the saved – an expression of love for God and people ... a *response* – the *result* of being saved.

"Christianity" is **NOT** a "religion"; but your response to being saved is. James illustrates this with two examples of a saved person's "religion":

Those who consider themselves **religious** and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their **religion** is worthless.

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

James 1:26-27 (NIV)

- ❖ Moral purity is an expression of *love for God*.
- ❖ Helping the weak (people who can't pay you back, such as destitute widows and orphans) is an expression of *love for people*.

8

Since our "identity" is **NOT** defined by the word "church," we should focus on concepts that **do** define it.

- Many of these concepts also apply to the saved Jews of the Old Testament (or sometimes to the Jewish nation).

- ✎ This should not be too surprising, since we have *much in common* with *all* the saved in *all* ages.
- ✎ The difference:
 - *They* (those who were saved) *trusted* God to take care of the sin issue. *We know* how he did it, and we also trust him.
 - Under the Old Covenant, when the focus was on the nation, some of these terms might apply in a different way.
 - In the end, these things will NOT apply to the unsaved.

- Some terms that identify us (instead of the word "church"). →

★ (If Scripture uses these terms to identify us, shouldn't we?) ★

9

① "Holy ones" (also translated as "holy people" or "God's people).

- ❖ This focuses on the relationship of God's people to God... as well as the type of life they want to live.

- God calls us "holy." We have been set apart from the world for God and for godliness. *This fact should influence all that we do!*
- It is our duty to pursue holiness. In this present life, we are not sinless. When we fail (fall into sin), we should adopt Paul's attitude:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize of God's heavenly calling in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:13b-14 (BSB)

- * NOTE: Many translations use the word "saints." This can be quite misleading, since people often associate the word "saint" with concepts that have no basis in Scripture. The Bible's emphasis is on us – typical Christians – being holy.

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- God called *Israel* "holy." For the most part, these Scripture passages were directed toward the *nation* of Israel. God set them apart from all the other nations for a special purpose.

For you are a people **holy** to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His prized possession out of all peoples on the face of the earth.

Deuteronomy 7:6 (BSB)

- With this privilege came obligation: The people had an obligation to **pursue holiness** (even though many didn't do it). *

The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be **holy** because I, the Lord your God, am **holy**.'"

Leviticus 19:1-2 (NIV); also in Leviticus 11:44-45; 20:7.

- * (Many churches are just like this. There are *fakes* present, who don't pursue holiness.)

11

- Under the New Covenant, God has made us holy.

By his will we have been made **holy** through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hebrews 10:10 (NET)

He has saved us and called us to a **holy** life ...

2 Timothy 1:9a (NIV)

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his **holy** people, ...

1 Corinthians 1:2b (NIV)

- Like Israel, we have an obligation to pursue holiness.

But because the God who called you is **holy** you must be **holy** in every aspect of your life. Scripture says, "Be **holy**, because I am **holy**."

1 Peter 1:15-16 (GW); he quotes the Leviticus passage.

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- **Comparing the two covenants:**

- ✓ **DIFFERENCES:** Under the New Covenant, the motivation to pursue holiness is *internal*. Under the Old Covenant, it was *external*.
- ✓ **SIMILARITIES:** In both cases, there are *fakes* in the visible group. These fakes will be removed at the Day of Judgment (if it doesn't happen sooner).

- **The only other option to living in holiness** is to be "living" in sin. [Actually Scripture describes it as being "*dead*" in sin. We don't become really "alive" until God saves us.]

You were **dead** because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you **alive** with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.

Colossians 2:13 (NLT); see also Ephesians 2:1.

13

② **"Brothers" *** (modern translations may say "brothers and sisters") and **"family."**

- ❖ This focuses on the various "family" relationships that we have to each other and to God. This also implies *obligations to each other*.
- **The only other option** is to be in the devil's family.

You belong to **your father, the devil**, and you want to carry out his desires.

John 8:44 (BSB); see also 1 John 3:10.

- * NOTE: In most languages in the world, the term "brothers" is *generic* in such a context as this. *It is not a reference to gender.* In societies that have abandoned the nature of language, their own connection to history, and even the reasons Scripture defines concepts in such ways, we may have to use *both* terms "brother" and "sister." (*This is yet another term that has been corrupted by modern society.*)

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- **This concept applied to both Israel and Christians... by adoption.**

They are Israelites, God's **adopted** children.

Romans 9:4a (GW)

[God] predestined us to be **adopted** as sons through Jesus Christ for himself ...

Ephesians 1:5a (CSB)

- **Under the Old Covenant, this concept applied to Israel.**

"Then tell Pharaoh, 'This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn **son**.'"

Exodus 4:22 (GW)

You are the **children** of the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy 14:1a (GW)

... the whole **family** that I brought up out of the land of Egypt ...

Amos 3:1b (BSB)

"For I am Israel's **Father**, and Ephraim is My **firstborn**."

Jeremiah 31:9b (BSB)

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- **Under the New Covenant, this concept applies to us.**

"This is how you should pray: Our **Father** in heaven, ..."

Matthew 6:9a (GW)

Dear friends, now we are God's **children**.

1 John 3:2a (GW)

The Lord Almighty says, "I will be your **Father**, and you will be my **sons** and **daughters**."

2 Corinthians 6:18 (GW)

- **Jesus calls us his "brothers."**

So Jesus is not ashamed to call them **brothers**.

Hebrews 2:11b (BSB)

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- **This family relationship places serious obligations on us.** We are *not* to treat these obligations as "optional"!

This is **the way** God's children are distinguished from the devil's children. Everyone who doesn't **do what is right** or **love other believers** isn't God's child.

1 John 3:10 (GW)

{ Doing what is right is an expression of love for God. }

Love one another deeply as **brothers and sisters**.

Romans 12:10a (CSB)

Whenever we have the opportunity, we have to **do what is good** for everyone, especially for the **family** of believers.

Galatians 6:10 (GW)

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③ **Other terms** that "define" us.

- ❖ There are many, some more common than others. (Some may also apply to Israel, but we will not be looking at this issue.)
- ❖ *Each of these terms implies obligations on our part.*

- **Disciple (follower of Jesus, people willing to learn from him).** This is quite common in the gospels and Acts.

In the same way, none of you can be my **disciples** unless you give up everything.

Luke 14:33 (GW)

And the **disciples** were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 13:52 (BSB)

Then Jesus told His **disciples**, "If anyone wants to come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and **follow** Me.

Matthew 16:24 (BSB); see also vs. 25-26.

18

- **Servant/slave of God.** This is quite common, especially in Paul's writings, where he normally introduces *himself* as Jesus' slave.
 - ↳ **The only other option** is to be a slave to sin! (Slavery to righteousness means *freedom* from sin's control.)

Paul, a **servant** of Christ Jesus ...
Romans 1:1a (BSB)

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a **slave** to sin."
John 8:34 (NIV)

Do you not know that when you offer yourselves as obedient **slaves**, you are **slaves** to the one you obey, whether you are **slaves** to sin leading to death, or to obedience leading to righteousness?
Romans 6:16 (BSB)

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- **Christian.** Surprisingly, this term is found only three times in the New Testament. These three passages equate this term with:
 - ✓ Being a follower (disciple) of Jesus [like those at Antioch].
 - ✓ Having a changed way of thinking and living; willing to accept what the Bible says. [Agrippa was unwilling to do so.]
 - ✓ Willing to suffer for Christ (and to avoid sinful conduct that *earns* suffering).

The disciples were called **Christians** for the first time in the city of Antioch.
Acts 11:26b (GW)

Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think you can quickly persuade me to become a **Christian**?"
Acts 26:28 (GW)

If you suffer for being a **Christian**, don't feel ashamed, but praise God for being called that name.
1 Peter 4:16 (GW); see also v. 15.

(Today, most people don't define the word "Christian" this way.)

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④ **Some terms used to "define" Christianity.** It's not the word "religion"!

- **The Way** and **the Truth.** These terms are found randomly throughout the New Testament. They point to the *exclusive* nature of Christianity – as opposed to all the religions that people have invented. **Jesus also claims these terms for himself.**

[Paul claimed] ... I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of **the Way** ...
Acts 24:14b (NIV)

Jesus answered, "I am the **way** and the **truth** and the life."
John 14:6a (BSB)

It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to **the truth**, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in **the truth**.
3 John 1:3-4 (NIV)

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⑤ **What about the Bible?** It's not "inspirational thoughts" or "religious opinions"!

- **It is the very words of God... and is to be accepted as such.** Though God used people to write down these words, they are **NOT** of human origin.

No prophecy ever originated from humans. Instead, **it was given by the Holy Spirit** as humans spoke under God's direction.
2 Peter 1:21 (GW)

When you received God's word from us, you realized **it wasn't the word of humans.** Instead, you accepted it for **what it really is—the word of God.**
1 Thessalonians 2:13b (GW)

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for instruction, for conviction, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work.
2 Timothy 3:16-17 (BSB)

... the very words of God.
Romans 3:2b (NIV)

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This week's MISSION!

CLAIM YOUR IDENTITY!!
Be what God made you to be!!

- ⇒ **Anyone** can "assemble" (the meaning of the word "church").
- ⇒ **But only God's people** can be holy...
and:
 - ✓ **A member of God's family.**
 - ✓ **A follower of Jesus.**
 - ✓ **A servant of the Most High God!**

God has given his very own words to show us how!

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Credits

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