

THE CHURCH AND ITS OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS

I used to play football (or “soccer” in the US) for my school as a teenager and I still love watching football on television. Few things are more thrilling than when you see a pre-determined plan unfolding before your eyes between members of a team as they move the ball down the field, ending in an exhilarating strike to the back of the net. The fans go wild—chest bumping and cheering—and the players dog-pile on top of each other like a multi-layered human sandwich.

It’s what they have practiced over and over again for years. Sometimes, a goal happens as a seemingly unintentional fluke. But those *pre-planned* executions—where everything happens according to what they’ve practiced—seem to captivate the crowd, building up their excitement until the ball blasts past the goalkeeper and the stadium erupts into all-out elation, or at least half of the stadium.

The history of the church is God’s *pre-determined* plan. It’s his “Plan A.” Despite

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the sin, corruption, and twisted events in the church's past, God has preserved a remnant, his people. In fact, you are reading this page according to the eternal plan of God!

Even though this book focuses on the history of the church after the days of Jesus to the present times, its origin certainly did not begin there. Before the creation of the heavens and the earth, God chose a people from every tribe and language and people and nation to be his treasured possession (Eph. 1:4; Rev. 5:9). This is the true church of God and it will persevere *as* the church of God into glory.

The Church Visible and Invisible

At the outset, an important distinction needs to be made between the church *invisible* and the church *visible*. No, I'm not talking about ghosts or people walking around who can't be seen. The church *invisible* doesn't mean that you can't see it; rather, it's made up of all those—in every age—who have been saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. It's the true church, ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Those who represent the *visible* church, on the other hand, may or may not be a member of God's chosen and saved people. They are members of the local visible church—the people you see in the pews

or seats at church, those who make public professions of faith and so on. Jesus said that there exists tares among the wheat (Matt. 13:29-30), goats among the sheep (Matt. 25:32), and unbelievers among believers (cf. 1 John 2:19).

The church invisible exists within and alongside the church visible. At times, as we will see throughout the course of this book, we are astounded by the sheer worldliness and sin of the "church." But we must remember that many who make up the visible church are not true believers. For one reason or another—whether power, prestige, community, emotional support, etc.—they are aligned with the church by profession of faith, but in the end, Jesus will say to them the sobering words, "I never knew you, depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). To be sure, Jesus alone is the Head of the church (Col. 1:18) and he will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).

But the good news is that God, by his good and sovereign grace, has saved a rebellious, spiritually dead people through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, whose atoning work on the cross and righteousness is applied to the elect by the working of the Holy Spirit, which we receive by faith alone. The true

church consists of all those who have experienced this new birth by trusting in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The Old Testament Church

We see the beginning of God's people from the beginning of the Old Testament where God promises a coming Messiah. After Adam and Eve's fall into sin, God said, "I will put enmity between you [the serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). From the very beginning, then, we see two offspring, two people: those *of the world*—following Satan—and those *of God*, trusting in him and his saving promises. This difference becomes more and more apparent as you move through the pages of the Bible between Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), between Noah's family and the families of the world (Gen. 6), and between Israel and its surrounding nations.

But the church really began to take shape when God called Abram (later renamed "Abraham") as the father of a new visible community of faith. God told Abram,

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3).

Abraham fathered Isaac and Isaac fathered Jacob. Throughout Israel's history, God continued to remember his covenant promises by reminding his people that he remains the God of "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Jacob had twelve sons, whose names represented the twelve tribes of Israel. God's Old Testament church, Israel, would eventually make their way to Egypt under the care of one of Jacob's sons, Joseph, who became second in command over all of Egypt.

After 430 years, Israel found herself in slavery under an Egyptian ruler who treated them harshly as slaves. So God called Moses to lead his people out of slavery—called the *Exodus*. This was the defining event of deliverance for the Old Testament church. God's people made their way through the desert to Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses and Israel the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20) and the Levitical laws. If they kept God's commands, they would live long in the land that God was giving to them. If not, they would be cursed and punished.

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At once, they rebelled and refused to go into the Promised Land, Canaan. As a result, a whole generation died in the wilderness (the book of Numbers). Even Moses, because of his sin, would not enter the Promised Land. When they did finally enter Canaan, under the leadership of Joshua, it wasn't long before they rebelled and worshiped the gods of the Canaanites and fell into a cycle of sin and judgment (the book of Judges). Looking to the surrounding nations instead of to their God, they sought to have a human king and found their first king in Saul (1 Sam. 8-9). Saul eventually rejected the Lord through his sin and so God chose a "man after his own heart," David (1 Sam. 13:14).

Despite King David's many infamous sins of murder, adultery, and greed—think of the story of Bathsheba!—his life and monarchy would become a standard for the future kings of Israel. Ultimately, his kingship would point to the truer and greater King, Jesus Christ. Worship in the newly-constructed temple became part and parcel of Israel's worship after David, under the leadership of his son, Solomon. The sacrificial, ceremonial, and moral laws given to Moses at Mount Sinai would remain in place, giving the Old Testament church the basic structure for religious life and worship. These sacrifices and ceremonies, too, would point to the

sacrificial Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who died once and for all his people (Heb. 7:27). Through sin and strife, Israel divided into two kingdoms, "Israel" in the north and "Judah" in the south (1 Kings 12).

Over and over, God sent prophets to his people to warn them of judgment and exile if they did not obey his laws and commandments (2 Chron. 36:15-16). But they continued to rebel against the Lord. Finally, by his sovereign displeasure, he punished his people. The Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom, Israel, in 722 B.C. and the Babylonians conquered the southern kingdom, Judah, in 586 B.C.

But God was gracious and remained faithful to his remnant and—through the Persian King Cyrus—God caused his people to return to their land and rebuild around 538 B.C. (Ezra 1). How did God's people respond? At first, they responded with great thankfulness and praise. But once again, despite the overflowing mercy of God's grace, they gave him half-hearted worship and continued to do what was right in their *own* eyes. They did not worship God as he had instructed them nor did they keep the laws he had commanded.

Hope in the Coming Messiah

But God continued to point his people to the coming Messiah. This Messiah-King would be

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born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) from the little town of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) as a "light for the nations" (Isa. 42:6). He would come "humble and mounted on a donkey" (Zech. 9:9) and would be "wounded for our transgressions" and "crushed for our iniquities" (Isa. 53:5). This Messiah would be the "righteous branch" (Jer. 23:5) and, through him, God would make a "new covenant" with his people, one built upon his own promise and design (Jer. 31:31) rather than the conditional, obedience-based covenant with his people *as a nation* (Exod. 19ff.).

But God also remained faithful to his promise that he gave to Abraham that, through him, all the nations and families of the earth would be blessed. In fact, those who came after Christ, called "Christians," would be referred to as "the sons of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). God spoke to his people through the prophet Joel and said, "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh ... everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved" (Joel 2:28, 32). God's plan of salvation would go beyond the Jews to include the Gentiles.

For about four hundred years, the Lord remained silent—what we call the inter-testamental period between our Old and New Testaments (600 B.C. to 0). And then, the prophecies and promises began to unfold,

as the Ancient of Days became the Infant of Days; God took on flesh as the long-expected Messiah.

This was all God's "Plan A." As the apostle Paul wrote to young Timothy, "[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, *which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began*" (2 Tim. 1:9, emphasis mine). In God's eternal perspective, Jesus is the Lamb slain from "before the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). God had called a people, Israel, and established laws and commandments, all of which pointed to the One who would fulfill them in his life, death, and resurrection. A child was born, but a Son was given (Isa. 9:6). Salvation would come from the Jews (John 4:22) in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The New Testament church had begun.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If you had to define the "church," what would you say?
- How is the church different and how is it the same between the Old and New Testaments?
- What's the difference between the church visible and the church invisible?
- How can you be in the world, but not of the world?