INSIDER CHURCH

Ekklesia and the Insider Paradigm

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Foreword by
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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and interior design: Mike Riester
Copyeditor: Andrew Sloan
Indexer: Rory Clark
Managing editor: Melissa Hicks

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-272-9 (paperback), 978-1-64508-274-3 (mobi), 978-1-64508-275-0 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

24 23 22 21 20 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020947043

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CHAPTER ONE

The Church and the Divine Drama: Narratives and Themes of the Church's Identity

The church is the light of the world. But in Muslim-majority lands, it can also be a stumbling block. My Muslim friends have complicated and varying views of the church. Many see the church as the Christian counterpart to the mosque—a house of prayer deserving of respect. Some see the church as a source of strange, deviant worship, which intrigues the curious while repelling the devout. With the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches being some of the largest and oldest Christian communities in the Middle East, many Muslims associate "church" with icons, incense, and black-robed, bearded priests. For many Muslims—including those living in "unchurched" parts of the Middle East—their views of the church are just as likely to be shaped by stories about the Pope and the Vatican, or the varied portrayals of churches in Hollywood movies.

Some of my friends view the church and Christians fairly positively, as a community of peace in a region too often at war. Yet some still see the church as a potential danger—as an alternative, competing community that can pose a threat to Muslim society if it lures Muslims to abandon their religion, family, and nation.

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How do we multiply churches among people for whom "church" carries such unwieldy baggage? Is it possible to bypass Muslim suspicions of "the Christian church" altogether by reimagining "church" as *Muslim,* insulated completely from the institutional Christian church? What are the possibilities and dangers presented by such a proposal?

Any answer to the above questions requires answers to a completely different set of questions. What is *church*? What is essential to its biblical identity, and what is secondary? How does the church express itself in diverse cultural and religious contexts? The way we define *church,* and its interaction with cultural context, is foundational for how we see the church taking shape in Muslim contexts. It also determines in large measure how we assess the insider vision of the church.

This chapter and the next tackles the fundamental question of the nature and identity of the church, laying the groundwork for later discussion on the church's relation to culture. The goal is to provide a biblical and theological vision of the church that is sound and robust enough to engage the messy realities of mission to Muslims and the complex problem of the insider paradigm. As will be shown in later chapters, this biblical and theological framework sheds light on both insightful strengths and worrisome weaknesses of the insider vision of the church which must be addressed in a clear-eyed, responsible assessment of the insider paradigm.

To define the identity of the church, there is no better starting point than Holy Scripture. The inspired Word of God discloses the mind of God—who designed and created the church. Furthermore, God's Word illumines, corrects, and relativizes all human ideas and experiences of church. But as we look to Scripture, we see that the church is not presented as an abstract philosophical concept, but as a concrete reality—a living, historical community, enmeshed in the story of God and his people. We cannot understand what it means to "be and do church" apart from the overarching narrative of the people of God which defines the church's identity.

In the remainder of this chapter, I trace the way that Scripture unveils and shapes the identity of the church through the unfolding narrative of the people of God, from Abraham to the New Jerusalem.[1] As we trace this story in its key stages, we will get a glimpse of the rich array of themes, images, and teachings that contribute to the

1 This approach is similar to what Klink and Lockett refer to as "History of Redemption" (BT2) in their fivefold taxonomy of approaches to biblical theology in *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 22–23. This is also the approach represented by the New Studies in Biblical Theology series edited by D. A. Carson. The series preface states that one of the key goals of the series is "the delineation of a biblical theme across all or part of the biblical corpora" (Carson 2006, 9). This approach is employed masterfully by Christopher Wright (2006) in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, as he argues that a biblical-theological theme that is traced through the canon also serves as a distinctive lens through which to read the biblical story line from creation to Christ to consummation—providing an interpretive framework or "map" to aid understanding Scripture as a whole. It therefore should be judged for its "heuristic fruitfulness," or its ability to either illumine or distort the biblical text as a whole (ibid., 68–69).

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fabric of the nature of the church in Scripture.[2] As later chapters show, the insider paradigm emphasizes particular images and biblical themes to support its vision of *ekklēsia* for insiders. In order to accurately assess both the strengths and weaknesses of insider biblical theology, it is crucial to grasp the fullness of the biblical narrative and array of images that define the identity of the church in Scripture.

The story of the people of God will be traced along four key stages and an excursus, each of which reveals and shapes the identity of the church in crucial ways: (1) the Old Testament people of God, (2) the kingdom community of Jesus, (3) the Pentecostal church of the Spirit, (4) the apostolic teaching about the church, and (5) the triumphant church of the Lamb. Each stage provides an important block in our biblical foundation for defining the church, and each deserves careful attention.

"I Will Be Your God, and You Will Be My People": The Old Testament Backdrop

The word *church* does not appear in the Old Testament. Yet we cannot fully understand the nature of the church without grasping its roots in the Old Testament story of God and his people, which forms the essential backdrop for the emergence of the church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.[3] The significance of the Old Testament to the church can be captured in three identity-defining moments in the story of God and his people: (1) the Covenant with Abraham, (2) the Exodus and Sinai revelation, and (3) the Exile and the Remnant.

The Covenant with Abraham: Origins of the People of God

The story of the people of God has a backstory—the story of God and his creation. God's good purposes for the world were frustrated by the rebellion of Adam and Eve, sparking a downward spiral of violence and evil, from the crime of Cain to the arrogance of Babel. But then a new history begins of God choosing, forming, and redeeming a people for himself. The call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 is a turning point in the biblical story and in the history of the world, "the beginning of God's answer to the evil of human hearts, the strife of nations and the groaning brokenness of his whole creation" (Wright 2006, 199).

2 See, for example, Paul Minear's classic, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, which names ninety-six different images in the New Testament related to the church, organized under four major controlling images: people of God, new creation, fellowship in faith, and body of Christ.

3 My approach in beginning a biblical theology of the church with an Old Testament theology of the "people of God" is an alternative approach to that which would take a systematic theological definition of the church (such as the company of all who are truly saved by Christ) and read this understanding back into the Old Testament, as certain strands of Reformed theology would do in speaking of "the church" in the Old Testament. Instead, I attempt to preserve the distinctive contribution of Old Testament theology to an overall biblical theology of the church by allowing the Old Testament to speak on its own terms before seeing how it is developed and fulfilled in the theology of the New Testament. Edmund Clowney (also Reformed) follows this general approach by examining the nature of the church in the context of redemptive-history as first the people of God, then the disciples of Christ, and then the fellowship of the Spirit (1995, 29). Others who affirm the importance of a biblical theology of the people of God to ecclesiology are Payne 2009, 41; Millar 2000, 685; Tidball 2000, 407; and Wright 2010, 29, 114.

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The promise to Abraham reveals God's plan of creating a people to bless all peoples, and within this covenantal call, Israel would later find the essence of its own identity as the people of God. As Harrington says, "Gen. 12:1-3 contains in brief compass many features characteristic of Israel's sense of peoplehood: the divine initiative, the communal nature of salvation, the central significance of God's fidelity and the gift of the land, and the place of Israel with reference to other peoples" (1980, 5). The Abrahamic promise introduces language that will reverberate throughout Scripture of God's resolute determination to create a people for himself and to identify as "their God" (Gen 17:7-8).

This foundational covenant with Abraham extends to Abraham's children (e.g., Gen 12:7; 15:1–21; 17:1–8), and in the new covenant, this incredible honor is bestowed upon all who are united to Christ, the Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:29). The essence of the church ultimately finds its origin in God's radical decision to choose one man and fashion him into a nation that would bless the world—the first defining moment in the formation of the people of God.

Exodus and Sinai: God Takes Israel to Be His People

The exodus from Egypt inaugurates a new era in the formation of the people of God, a critical juncture which would forever re-define the identity of God's people. The exodus was a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and a new horizon for his people (Ex 2:24; 6:2–5). For the first time, God formally reveals his personal name, *Yahweh* (6:2–3), and refers to Israel as his people, signaling a new level of intimacy and identification between Israel and their God: "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Ex 6:6–7).[4] In language reminiscent of betrothal, God promises to make Israel into a nation that belongs to and his blessed by him, in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham.[5]

The exodus culminated in the "day of assembly" at Mt. Sinai, where Israel's identity is solidified through the ratifying of the covenant and the giving of God's law (Clowney 1995, 30).[6] Nowhere is this identity better captured than in

4 God powerfully asserts ownership of his people to Pharaoh: "Let *my people* go, that they may serve me in the wilderness" (Ex 7:16).

5 The image of Israel as the bride of God, betrothed at the exodus, is used throughout Scripture, often to mourn Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant (Hos 1:2–3; 2:1–13; Jer 2:1–3; 3:1–20), sometimes to look forward to a new exodus and restored covenant relationship (Hos 2:14–23; 3:1–5), and eventually as background for the image of the church as the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25–32; 2 Cor 11:1; Rev 19:7–8; 21:1–4; cf. Matt 9:15; Mark 2:19–20). Cf. Minear, who discusses the bride of Christ as one of his "minor" New Testament images of the church (as opposed to his four "major" New Testament images of the church as "people of God," "new creation," "fellowship in faith," and "body of Christ"); however, Minear does not discuss the Old Testament backdrop for the image (2004, 54–56).

6 The word for "assembly" is the noun *qahal*, which has two different usages, according to Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB): either (1) an assembly called for a particular purpose, or (2) "congregation, as organized body" (BDB 874). The verb form of *qahal* occurs in the Niphal ("to assemble") and in the Hiphil ("to summon/call an assembly") (BDB 874–75). Both the

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Exodus 19:4-6, which is "a seminal definition of the community of God" (Millar 2000, 684). Christopher Wright calls this passage "a key programmatic statement by God … like a hinge in the book of Exodus, in between the exodus narrative (Ex 1–18) and the giving of the law and covenant (Ex 20–24). It defines the identity of Israel and the role God has for them" (Wright 2006, 330). This statement—which shapes not only the identity of Israel, but also the New Testament church (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6)—deserves careful unpacking.

The people of Israel are defined first and foremost by *God's prior act of redemption*: "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself." As in the new covenant, it is God's "past grace" which provides the context for understanding the identity of the people of God (Wright 2006, 116–17). The deliverance from Egypt is the definitive sign that God has graciously elected Israel—the basis of Israel's privileged status and mission (Harrington 1980, 9–10; cf. Deut 7:6–9).

The people of Israel are also defined by virtue of *a covenant relationship with the God who redeemed them:* "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant …" (19:5). Israel is given both promises and obligations, and in order to become all that God intends them to be as his people, they must remain faithful to the stipulations of the covenant as revealed in God's law.

What follows is a threefold statement that defines who the people of God are in relation to God and to the surrounding nations. (1) *God's special possession* (19:5, cf. Deut 7:6). The Hebrew word used here (*segulah*) indicates the personal royal property of a king, the idea being that King *Yahweh,* who owns the whole earth, has claimed Israel for his personal, kingly possession (Wright 2006, 256). Israel's cherished status would also be highlighted through being God's "firstborn son" (Ex 4:22) and the "apple of [his] eye" (Deut 32:10; Clowney 1995, 33).

(2) *A kingdom of priests* (19:6a). Chris Wright explains this difficult Hebrew phrase as:

> a term implying a representative mediatorial role. Israel would bring knowledge of YHWH to the nations (just as the priests taught the law of YHWH to the people) and would ultimately bring the nations into covenant fellowship with YHWH (just as the priests enabled sinners to find atonement and restored fellowship through the sacrifices). Israel's very existence in the earth was for the sake of the nations, and it had been since God's promise to Abraham. (2006, 260)

noun and verb refer to a variety of purposes for the gathering/assembly, including for war, an evil council, a group of returning exiles, for judgment, for political decisions, or for religious purposes (to hear God's words at Sinai, to celebrate a feast/festival, etc.) (ibid.). A related word is *edahee*, which refers to "a company assembled together by appointment, or acting concertedly," referring variously to a group of angels, people, the righteous, evildoers, animals, (e.g., a swarm of bees), or Israelites (BDB 417). There is a clear overlap in meaning/usage between the two terms, though a slight difference in nuance, in that *qahal* highlights the actual gathering/assembling more than *edahee*. The LXX normally translates *qahal* as *ekklēsia* (73x), and sometimes as *sunagoge* (35x). The word *edahee*, on the other hand, is always translated as *sunagoge* (147x), and never as *ekklesia* (Giles 1995, 231, 233).

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