

The Church as Gospel – Gal 4:21-31

The Strong Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ #9

Introduction – Men and women are saved individually and the necessity of the new-birth is a necessity for each individual person. This is the work of the strong gospel upon people. Nevertheless, when one is baptized by the Spirit into Christ, that individual is baptized into the church, the body of Christ. In our overly individualized cultural and spiritual worldview, we have discarded the importance of honoring the church as “*the mother of us all*” and the spiritual body, “*out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*” (WCF XXV.2). Recovering this is part of recovering the strong gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Born of the Freewoman (Gal 4:21-31) – While embracing the truth that God is our Father and that corporately we are the body and bride of Christ, we are also admonished to see that we have an intimate relationship with the church. The church is your mother. We are children of the freewoman if we have been born of her (vv21-26). This is because the bride of Christ is one flesh with Christ and produces children unto God. This is an amazing and impossible work apart from all law-keeping works and completely dependent upon the promises of God and the work of His Spirit (vv27-31). In fact, there is a deep division between the two children characterized by Ishmael, son of Hagar the bondwoman, and Isaac, son of barren Sarah, child of the promise and of the freewoman.

Like Sarah – The church is barren in herself, but by the Spirit gives birth to children. And so the church is not a place where in some mechanical way, all who are in it are made regenerate. But it is God’s chosen, ordinary means by which He uses Word and Sacrament to fulfill His promises. The church is therefore the place of life-giving and life-nurturing activities; she is a Spirit-filled mother.

The Hallmark is Faith – In this passage, Paul is pressing out the details of 3:26-29. Sons of Abraham have the faith of Abraham, and like Abraham, have been baptized into Christ.

The Ancient Church – This has other implications. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church argue with one another (and to us) about who is the true ancient church. But neither of them goes far enough. Abraham was a member of the ancient church. Seth’s son, Enosh, lived in the days of the ancient church in the days when “*...men began to call upon the name of the Lord*” (Gen 4:26). In fact, Abel was a member of the ancient church (Heb 11:4).

The End of Jew-Gentile Division – In the church, the New Israel, there is no Jew-Gentile division. There is only the division between those who have faith in the Lord Jesus and those who do not. In Christ, the two have become one new man, and the dividing wall has been broken down (Eph 2:11-15).

Images of the Church – We are an independent people, engaging with the church when it suits our particular felt needs, but not seeing it as God’s ordained tool for transforming the world with the message of Jesus Christ. It is my purpose to admonish us to repent of dishonoring our mother, treating her with contempt, ignoring her summonses, and keeping our distance from our siblings. Consider some other images of the church.

Body of Christ – We are all members of one body, the body of Christ (Rom 12:4-5, 1 Cor 12:12). This stresses the unity of the church with Christ and the unity of each Christian with the others. It means we are interdependent and that the whole is much more than the sum of the parts. Ears, fingers, and kidneys don’t accomplish much detached from the rest of the body. But we are often far more comfortable to live in isolation with our own sins and oddities than in community with everyone else’s.

Temple of the Spirit - While scripture speaks of each individual as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19) we are also corporately the temple of the living God (1 Cor 3:16-17, Eph 2:21-22, 1 Pet 2:5), living stones, held together by Jesus, the chief cornerstone. Individualism looks at oneself as a very precious stone to be cared for first rather than to be fitted into something much greater than oneself. Unbiblical autonomy weakens those walls and the effectiveness of the temple.

Branches of the Vine – The church is also these branches and the vine is Christ (John 15:5). It is the olive tree, from which some branches have been broken off and others grafted in (Rom 11:17-24). And so there is no automatic salvation by being attached, but it is the natural and appropriate place to be attached in order to bear much fruit. But if we are attached there it means we are attached with others.

Corporate Ministry of Love – Combining many of these images, Paul speaks of the gifts given to the church for the equipping of the saints (Eph 4:11-16). Paul lists four particular gifts given to the church (v11). These gifts were given to equip the saints for the work of ministry, not for their own show (v12). These gifts are exercised until we reach another unity – a unity of the faith, and a unity of the knowledge of the Son of God which will be displayed in a mature body fitted for its Head (v13). This will protect us from gullibility towards the latest false teachers (v14). Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow up into Christ in all ways of society (v15). Here is the purpose of the church on earth over time: the growth of the church in the power and context of gospel-love (v16).

The Strength of the Gospel of the Church – In the church we find the plan of God for humanity being fulfilled. Irenaeus said that in the church, “God has re-formed the human race.” This new-humanity society is a creative spiritual force that God keeps here for the purpose of re-creating all of humanity. The church not only has the message of the gospel. The church is the gospel on earth.