

What Do Presbyterians Believe About the Church?

Pastor Jeff Wood

October 30, 2016

In 1947, in Palestine, a shepherd tossed a rock into a hillside cave and heard something that sounded like a pottery jar breaking. The oldest copy of the Hebrew Bible was one written in 1000 AD. What the boy heard was actually a pottery jar breaking, and it contained editions of the Bible from 250 BC. So, in one instant we leap frogged 12.5 centuries in terms of manuscripts. In his hand was one from 1000 AD, and in this other hand was one from 250 BC. The big, super relevant question was, “How has the Bible changed over the course of time?” How reliable was the 1000 AD version compared to the 250 BC version? What the scholars discovered was that for all practical purposes they were *the same*.

In 1517 the son of a miner, now a man, throws himself into the Bible, particularly the book of Romans, and made a huge theological discovery. It was about the nature of the church and her beliefs. He leap-frogged over 14 centuries and the question was, like with the DSS, how have things changed. But in this case there had been a huge change. Today is Reformation Sunday in which we remember that man, and ones like him, who worked so hard to bring the church back to its biblical roots. They worked to reshape and reform the church back to its biblical roots.

In advance of this Sunday, we have been looking at what Presbyterians believe about certain subjects. Presbyterians are part of this Reformation movement.

This is one part of the church tree. It is not the only one or even, if there is such a thing, the best one. But, it is a good one.

Last week we looked at what Presbyterians believe about the Bible. We said that we are a people of the book, and so today we will look at that book to see what it says, and what Presbyterians believe about the church.

Aren't you curious about this? Here's why you should be. All of us are born physically into biological families. All who are born spiritually are born into spiritual families. This family is the church and as vital as our physical families are for our development, so our spiritual ones are. It's critical that we understand the nature and function of this family for it means so much to us.

Pray.

I've mentioned 12 centuries, 14 centuries, but the Bible's time line is 40 centuries. And at the beginning, middle, and end of this book and its timeline is one unchanging purpose God has for the people of God, the church.

So we go to the beginning, to Genesis. In Genesis 1-11 we have the Bible's prologue learning of creation and that there have been four "falls": Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's generation, and the people who erected the Tower of Babel.

Then the storyline of the Bible becomes redemption. God turns to one man and enlists him to enjoy a friendship and to help begin repairing the broken planet. He enlists him with these words:

"I will make you into a great nation

*and I will bless you; I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless
you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*¹

So here's the opening of biblical history, the gateway we pass through into the whole rest of the Bible; and it says in short, "I will bless you in order to bless all the peoples of the earth." Friends, the church, you and I...are for blessing and blessing, to receive and to give... we are a means to an end – blessed *to be* a blessing.

Here is the essence of that blessing – God. God, who is truth and love, to be utterly consistent with who He is, must put us in touch with the truest truth and the loveliest love for that is what truth and love do for others – put them in touch with the truest truth and loveliest love. Who is that? Himself! To have all, not just a few people, but all the people of the earth, not simply acknowledging his truth and love from afar, but to have them experiencing it *and enjoying* it, is the thrust of God's plan. To have the loveliest love loved, the truest truth trusted. And to have this not be a few, but a multitude in on it is the point!

¹ Enjoy this played out in those who bless Abraham are blessed and those who curse him are cursed. See it put into historical-literary pictures as with Exodus 15:27, "Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water." Twelve tribes to water the seventy nations of the earth (Gen 10).

So if you are with me, God is saying to Abraham, “I’m going to start with you. Know me and my blessing. Share me and my blessing.”

The hand movement is receive with this one and give with this one. Receive, give. Receive, give.

It is not receive, receive, receive. If there is no give, then why should the receive continue? It is never that we are all blessed up with no place to go.

Receive, give is like catch, release. Catch, release. But it is also a catch, catch in a way. God thinks up things like this. We get in getting and we get in giving. Two gets for us!

I have here something I probably have shown you before. It is a stole. It’s beautiful. The golden images on it are hand sewn. This was given to me by Father Alejandro, a priest in a little town called Nueva Rosita, Mexico. The stole had been created for him by the townspeople to celebrate the 25th year of his ordination. It was a gift of love. They gave him one for himself *and twenty five to give away so that he would be doubly blessed knowing the joy of not only receiving, but the joy of receiving and giving.* I appreciate Father Alejandro and I *really* appreciate the people in his parish. This is what God is up to with Abraham. If I gave you a stole, you in this stole and you feeling loved is nice. You’ll appreciate me as the giver. But twenty-six people in this stole feeling loved with you, knowing the joy of receiving and giving, is even better. I’ll be more appreciated. That’s God. “Abraham, let’s get started.”

And what Abraham is enlisted to do continues. For example, soon thereafter, Joseph is blessed and blesses Egypt. When Moses brings the people out of

Egypt he brings them to the Promised Land. Think geographically -- It is a “land bridge” among the continents, an intersection between Asia, Africa, and Europe. It is not just the Promised Land, but it is a Promise Land because that Abrahamic promise can travel the trade routes crossing it.²

The promise that is born there and is spread to the world is Jesus Christ. Remember when he is born, a devout old man named Simeon is in the temple and holds the baby Jesus, saying, “My eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared for *all* people, a light for the Gentiles, for the glory of your people Israel.”

That Jesus distilled all the Law and Prophets to two commands. What are they? Love God and love neighbor.³ Blessed by God’s love, now bless by neighbor loving. Loved, love. Blessed, bless. Aren’t they the same?

Right after this someone asks Jesus, “Who’s my neighbor?” The answer is the Good Samaritan and the major point of the story is that the neighbor is different. He blesses someone different.

That Jesus, when he returned from the dead, we looked at this last week, walked to Emmaus and did a

² Think of Nebuchadnezzar through Daniel coming to bless God. Or Nineveh through Jonah coming to bless God. There was faltering to be sure. Isaiah moans over Israel’s lack of doing more blessing of nations. “As a woman with child, we writhed in pain, but we gave birth to wind. We have not brought salvation to the earth; we have not given birth to people of the world.” (26:17-18) But the prophecies of great success in blessing in terms of one who will be a “light to the nations.”

³ Luke 10:25-28

Bible study with two disciples. Here is how they explained that Bible study to the other disciples.

This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. Luke 24:46-7

The beginning of Acts has the same message, “You’ve received the Holy Spirit so now go and share from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.” The rest of the Acts and the New Testament is about just that.

It is the same in Matthew 28. I’m going to read it a little differently. “Remember, I am with you always.” Paraphrase it as, “I’m with you, for you, loving you.” Next bit: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” There’s that vertical dimension – “I’m with you,” God and person. There’s that horizontal dimension – “Go and bless the nations.”

Abraham ... Israel – blessed to bless; Jesus ... Church – loved to love. Both to end up with God being God being known and enjoyed. There’s 4000 years between them but it is the same message, it is the same plan of God for the people of God.

All the way to the end ... at the end of the Bible and biblical history, in Revelation, the last book of the Bible:

You were slain and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.

So what do Presbyterians believe about church? That we are a people blessed to bless or as it says in our mission statement guiding us here for 30 years – To Know Christ and Make Him Known.

Thanks be to God for this His church.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

revjeffwood@gmail.com

www.welovefirst.org

www.facebook.com/welovefirstsebastian