

"ALWAYS BEING PREPARED..."¹

To explain our beliefs about the church, *Matthew 16:13-18*

Certain beliefs and practices define us as a religious group in our thinking and other religious groups' thinking. Because we have a responsibility to be "prepared to make a defense" for the things we believe (*1 Peter 3:15*), we need to have a conversational understanding of our beliefs and practices that we can share with others. This lesson continues a series looking at some of the more apparent beliefs and practices that tend to define us, things like baptism, communion, and music in worship, and will offer a biblical explanation for them. In particular, this lesson explores some of our beliefs about the church:

We believe the church exists as God's new Israel and has the responsibility of mediating between God and the world through its dedication to thinking and acting like Jesus

A new Israel

- The Bible begins with a portrait of God's absolute sovereignty displayed through His organization of the creation into a good, life-supporting environment (*Genesis 1:1-31*).
- That portrait also reveals that God gave humanity the authority to rule over His creation and the ability to continue His creative activity (*Genesis 1:26-28; 2:5, 15*).
- Humanity, however, responded to its privileged position by rebelling against God (*Genesis 3:1-6*).
- God's response to humanity's rebellion involved selecting Abraham and his family as representatives through whom He promised to bless the whole world (*Genesis 12:1-3*).
- Part of God's response involved forming Abraham's family into the nation of Israel, a people He commissioned to mediate between Himself and the world through obedience to their covenant with Him (*Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:1-8*).
- Israel, however, responded to its privileged position by rebelling against God (*cf. Ezekiel 3:4-7; Matthew 23:37-39; Romans 2:17-24*).
- Despite Israel's disobedience, God remained faithful to His covenant with Israel because of His promise to Abraham. God fulfilled His promise in Jesus (*Galatians 3:15-29*) through whom He established a new and better covenant (*Jeremiah 31:31-34; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:14-20; 8:6-13*).
- God's new Jesus-enacted covenant involved forming a new covenant community presented in the New Testament as a new Israel (*Matthew 16:13-19; Galatians 3:27-29; Romans 9:6-8*).

¹ *1 Peter 3:15*. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

- The New Testament outlines the identity of Jesus' new covenant community, which is defined by its:
 - Submission to Jesus' rule as the one to whom God has given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (*Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 1:18-23; 4:11-16; Colossians 3:15-17*).
 - Shared commitment to think and act like Jesus (*Romans 8:29; Galatians 3:27-28; Ephesians 4:1-16*).
 - Unity of beliefs and practices through love-motivated obedience to Jesus (*John 17:20-21; 1 Corinthians 1:10; John 14:15*).
 - Unity among members that defies the world's values (*Galatians 3:27-28; 1 Corinthians 12:12-16; Ephesians 2:11-3:10*).
 - Character more than name or even practices (*cf. Romans 2:28-29; 9:6-8; Ephesians 5:1-6:9*).
 - Mission to mediate between the world and God through its Christlike behavior (*1 Peter 2:4-5, 9; 3:14-16*).

Applications

- Jesus' church continues the story of Israel, the story of God working in the world through a select people.
- The church identifies itself as God's people in the world today through its connection to Jesus.
- If we claim to be Jesus' church, then:
 - We claim citizenship in his kingdom and must submit every part of our lives to his rule; church is a life encompassing allegiance rather than merely a weekend activity.
 - We should define ourselves by how we are like him in our thinking and practice.
 - Church autonomy does not mean independence; we are not free to do what we want because all of Jesus' churches exist under his rule.
 - We should be defined by our unity through Christlikeness; divisions challenge our claim to be his church and our claim to be Christians.
- Humanity and Israel's rebellious response to their privileged places reminds us that rebellion presents a real and present danger for us (*cf. Revelation 2:1-3:22*). Consider, for example, the ways rebellion manifests itself in Jesus' letters to the seven churches of Asia – it can express itself through:
 - Loveless Christianity (*Revelation 2:1-7*).
 - Cultural compromise (*Revelation 2:12-17*).
 - Tolerance of false teachings (*Revelation 2:18-29*).
 - Spiritual indifference (*Revelation 3:1-6*).
 - Arrogance (*Revelation 3:14-22*).

We believe Jesus' church exists as God's new Israel and has the responsibility of mediating between God and the world through its dedication to thinking and acting like Jesus. We therefore seek to support our claim to be part of Jesus' church by committing to Christlikeness.