

Membership: Honoring our Mother; Dwelling in our City

Introduction – When we talk about church membership, we must look in two different directions. First we must let the scriptures teach us what our relationship is to the thing of which we are members. Second, we must then come to understand what it means to be members in such a relationship. This morning, we will consider the first direction.

The idea of membership has fallen on hard times in our day of high-handed individualism in all relationships. Skepticism, rationalism, materialism and egalitarianism have all played a role in blinding us from the beauty of covenant bonds. But the Lord has a story to tell us; an allegory that helps us to rethink and return to living out membership, not as having a name on a cold, impersonal roster somewhere, but rather as a place at your Mother's dining room table and a seat on the council of the unshakeable City of God.

The Story of Two Moms and Two Kids (Gal 4:21-31) – Paul illustrates the difference between believers who rest upon Christ alone and those Judaizers who trust in the law for their salvation, by a comparison to a real but also symbolic story of Isaac and Ishmael. Understanding this passage requires that you know the stories of Genesis 15-17 and 21, and the prophesy of Isaiah 54. Paul's warning is that those who claim they are rightly under the law are in fact not listening to the law (4:21).

Abraham and His Two Sons – “You see,” he says, “there were these two sons born to Abraham.” Ishmael was born of the concubine, Hagar, and Isaac of the freewoman, Sarah (v22). These two children allegorically symbolize two covenants (v24). One which gives birth to bondage is the rebellious Jerusalem of the earth; the city which despised the very law it claimed it was keeping as it crucified the Messiah the law proclaimed. This child is the fruit of self-righteous law-keeping even though his father was Abraham. The other child represented the covenant of promise, “*the Jerusalem above*” which is free and which is “*the mother of us all*,” Jew and Gentile alike. Intertwining the pictures of mother and city, Paul shows that this was just what Isaiah had promised.

Promises to a Barren Woman and an Impotent City (Is 54) – Gal 4:27 is a quotation of Isaiah 54:1, and Paul would expect you to have the whole prophesy in mind as you read this summary verse. This woman was barren, but she is told to break forth with great joy (not unlike Abraham who fell on his face and laughed before God) because of the promises God has for her. Her children will outnumber the children of the married woman (v1). Her home will cover the earth and so her descendants will inherit the nations (vv2-3). This woman has a kinsman-redeemer, a husband, who has forsaken her for a moment, but promises to gather her back to himself. This Husband is the Lord of Hosts and He is called the God of the whole earth (vv4-8). This promise of fruitfulness upon the earth is as solid as the promise of God to Noah (vv9-10). In vv11-15 she suddenly is pictured as a city whose foundations are of sapphires, gates of crystal and walls of precious stones. This is the heavenly Jerusalem pictured in Revelation. Finally, she is to be comforted with the knowledge that even the one now bringing the fiery trials of exile and judgment have come from the hand of God and therefore she can also know that “no weapon....shall prosper” (vv16-17).

Children of Promise – Paul returns to say that we Christians are like Isaac (Gal 4:28). He shows how the same antagonism exists between the two children as seen in the persecution of the Christians by the Judaizers (v29). And we are told to be faithful to our mother and kick the son of the bondwoman out (vv30-31).

Our Personal Relationship With Jesus Christ – True. It is personal. It is a relationship. And there is an individual aspect to it. Individuals will be saved or not one by one. No one gets in on someone else's coat-strings and no one is left behind due to another's sin. But salvation is salvation from one family into another, from one mother to another, from one city to another.

Understanding Church as Mother – That personal relationship with Jesus Christ means that we have a new Father, a heavenly Father. It also means that we have a new mother, the church. To say that we are members of the church is to say that we are this Mother's children. We are as organically connected to the visible church on this earth as we are to our earthly family where we find our home, our place of rest, our source of nurture and celebration. To be in Christ is to be in the Church. And all of a sudden you look around and find out that there are many others who have the same new last name as you do.

Understanding Church as City – Family, city, and national loyalties run deep in the hearts and souls of men and women. And these are real loyalties. But we have ultimate loyalties that run deeper. We are citizens of a heavenly city, a city whose tent-pegs are extending out to cover the whole earth. We are the new humanity under the new Adam and this new city is supplanting the old city, the old humanity, the old ways. This is why John tells us not to love the world, for we are not of the old world which is passing away (1 John 2:15-17). We are the manifestation of the new heavens and earth. The church is the new kingdom, whose King has been given all authority and has sent us to go and disciple the nations, extending the tent pegs, if you will.

Understanding Church in Christ – Descendants of Hagar see their fleshly works and declare themselves law-keepers and righteous. They are the ones who attend church in order to prove they are in the church. Descendants of Sarah are the sons of Abraham who have the faith of Abraham. But we are confused if we think that our connection is only in abstract propositions (we believe the same things) or in heaven but not here, in real churches and fellowships. Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia when he wrote this epistle. These were places with real people meeting at a particular time and in a particular place. And so are we. This is your church.