

The Church is not Israel

By Mal Couch

The church and Israel did not begin at the same time and are, therefore, not the same entity. The nation of Israel essentially began when God called Abraham and promised to make a great nation from him. The rest of the Old Testament records the growth, development and existence of that nation. There is really no significant debate on the matter of the starting point of the nation of Israel. It began with Abraham and was formed over the next seven hundred years into a nation with people, law and land. The Church however, is not found in the Old Testament because it had its beginning on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2. The Church began centuries after Israel began.

If the Church began at Pentecost, then it did not begin or exist in the Old Testament. It is worth noting that in Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus used the future tense: "I will build My Church." He did not say, "I am building My church" or "I have been building My church." The church was something still future in Christ's ministry, which means that it was not in existence during His ministry or in the Old Testament. The apostles would not have understood what He meant by "His church" being built in the future, but the details about the church would be given to them later. In dealing with the matter of the discipline of an individual (18:17), Jesus told them to tell it to the church or assembly. The apostles would have understood that He was speaking of a Jewish assembly. The statement of 18:17 must be understood in the light of the previous statement (16:18) of the future building of "My church."

Certain things had to be true before the church could come into existence. First, according to the Apostle Paul, the Church is the "body of Christ" (e.g. Col. 1:18, 24 and Eph. 2:16; 3:6; 5:23, 30). It is clear that the church (the body) could not exist and function without its Head, the Lord Jesus. Jesus did not assume that role until after He had shed His blood on the cross, had been resurrected, and then ascended back into heaven. It was at that time, after those events, that the Father "put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him and head over all things to the church, which is His body" (1:22).

Furthermore, the church (the body) could not be formed apart from the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit. This is so because a believer can enter the church, the body of Christ, only by means of Holy Spirit baptism (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13). But this vital ministry of the Spirit did not begin until the Day of Pentecost. Without Spirit baptism no one could enter the body of Christ and, thus, the church could not exist. Not even the Apostles were in the body, but they would experience Spirit baptism shortly after Jesus' ascension. On the day He ascended back into heaven, the Lord Jesus informed His apostles that the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit would begin in the near future (Acts 1:5, 8). Ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost, this and other ministries of the Spirit began. As the Apostle Peter reflected on the day of Pentecost as the time when this new work of the Spirit began (11:15), he spoke of it as a time of "beginning." Peter's use of "beginning" (arche) speaks of a specific point in time when something new commences. This new thing, the church of Jesus Christ, began on the Day of Pentecost.

The Apostle Paul also tells us that the Church's foundation is the apostles and the prophets of the New Testament with Christ being the cornerstone (Eph 2:20). This suggests two things: first, that the church must have begun in the time of the apostles if they are the foundation,

and second, the Church is not seen being built upon the key Old Testament personalities of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. The Church did not begin in the Old Testament and, therefore, it and Israel are distinct.

The unique character of the Church supports the distinction

The church, unlike Israel, is declared to be a “mystery” (Eph. 3:1-12; Col. 1:26-27). In the New Testament a “mystery” is a truth that was not revealed previously in the Old Testament. “In the N.T. it denotes, not the mysterious...but that which, being outside the range of unassisted natural apprehension, can be made known only by divine revelation, and is made known in a manner and at a time appointed by God, and to those only who are illumined by His Spirit” (W.E. Vine, Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words)

The apostle Paul is clear that this unknown truth related to the church was something that was hidden from man and was hidden with God until “now” (the time of the apostles and New Testament prophets). The mystery included the facts that believing Jews and believing Gentiles would be united as equals in one body and that Christ Himself would indwell them. While Gentile salvation was seen in the Old Testament, this kind of relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and between God and the believer, was never true in the Old Testament. The church was something new and significantly different from Israel.

The apostle Paul also declared that the church is “one new man” (Eph.2:15). He states that based on the death of Christ, reconciliation has taken place between Jews and Gentiles as well as between God and man. The “one new man” is distinct from Israel and it is distinct from the Gentiles. The “one new man” (the church) is not a continuation of either but is made up of believing Jews and believing Gentiles. It is something entirely new and points to a very real distinction between the Church and Israel.

Specific New Testament scriptures support this distinction

A number of New Testament scriptures have been mentioned and there are a number that legitimately could be discussed. As was noted earlier, “in order for replacement theology to qualify as a biblical option, passages which allow such an interpretation are not enough. “There need to be, positively, passages which clearly teach it and, negatively, no passages which actually exclude it” (Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*).

Replacement Theology does not have any passages that clearly teach that the nation of Israel has been set aside by God and replaced by the Church. But it is faced with Paul’s powerful presentation concerning Israel in Romans 9-11, which does not allow for replacement theology. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal in detail with this key section in Romans 9-11. Others have done a fine job in demonstrating that the nation of Israel does have a wonderful future and that God fully intends to restore them to a place of prominence as He fulfills His covenant commitments to them (Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*).

We simply need to note that the eleven times that Paul uses “Israel” in this section, each time it refers to ethnic Israel, not to Gentiles or the Church. He is talking about his “kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3). Paul knew that most people in Israel had turned from the Lord, rebelled, and become hardened in self-righteous unbelief. Of course, a believing remnant in Israel had always existed, but the nation as a whole had turned away (Romans 9 and 10). But Romans 11 is clear on this point, that the same people who refused to believe and were temporarily disciplined by God would believe and be received back in the future when the Messiah would return. Using an illustration of an olive tree, Paul states that some of the

natural branches of the tree (Israel) were broken off and wild branches (the Gentiles) were grafted in and received life from the “rich root of the olive tree” (the Abrahamic covenant). He then declares that the day is coming when God will graft the natural branches back into the olive tree, which looks ahead to the day of salvation for national Israel - the fulfillment of the New Covenant. On that day “all Israel will be saved” (11:26).

“It means in usage Israel as a whole, not necessarily every individual Israelite (cf. 1 Sam. 7:2-5, 25:1; 1 Kings 12:1; 2 Chron. 12:1-5; Dan. 9:11). The clues to its force are not only the sense of people (Rom. 11.1), but also the nature of the rejection of the Messiah by the nation, a rejection by nation as a whole (the leaders and the great mass of the people, but not every Israelite). This usage, as is well known, is found in rabbinic literature... Thus, Paul affirms that ethnic Israel as a whole will be saved” (S.Lewis Johnson, Paul and the Israel of God). The Apostle does not believe that Israel’s self-righteousness, unbelief and sin have removed them from God’s blessings, but rather that the day is coming when Israel, as a nation, will be brought into the New Covenant, thus fulfilling the Old Testament prophets. Some have said that the phrase “all Israel” is looking at the remnant of Jewish believers that have been saved as a part of the Church over the centuries. But if that were true, then there never was a “breaking off” of the natural branches as the text declares. And there would be no need to graft them back in again, since they have always been part of the olive tree. No, Paul is referring to ethnic Israel and anticipating the day when God will “take away their sins” in light of His “covenant with them” (11:27). Can anything be clearer that this in declaring that national Israel does have a future and has not been replaced or set aside by the Church.

The internal differences support the distinction

There are also significant differences between the two entities. First, and of great significance, is the fact that the body of Christ is made up of believers only. There has not, nor will there ever be, an unbeliever in the Church (the body of Christ) since one can only enter through Spirit baptism. This is in stark contrast to Israel where unbelievers were dominant over much of Old Testament history. So Dr. Berkhof’s statement is a bit puzzling when he says, “As far as their essential nature is concerned, they both consist of true believers, and of true believers only” (Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology). It could never be said of Israel, as it can be of the Church, that no unbelievers were in it.

Second, the two entities function under two different covenants. Israel functioned under the Old Covenant and the Church has been privileged to be “partakers” of some of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant. (Note: The New Covenant was made with Israel and Judah and must be fulfilled with them). There is a stark contrast between these two covenants as taught in 2 Corinthians 3 and Hebrews 7-10 and the New Covenant is clearly superior to the Old. The new covenant ministry is uniquely a broadened and expanded ministry of the Holy Spirit. The operating principles of the Church are significantly different from that of Israel. Third, the work of God in Israel was especially carried out by the Levitical priesthood while in the Church it is the anointed, spiritually gifted believer priest that carries out the work of God. The New Testament believer has been given “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18-20). A believer in the Old Testament, from the tribe of Asher or Gad, could make no such claim. Other internal differences exist. But these surely show us that internally the Church and Israel are quite different. The internal differences point to a legitimate distinction to be made between Israel and the Church.

Some concluding thoughts

The evidence of the Scriptures is strong and compelling that the Church of Jesus Christ and the nation of Israel are distinct entities in the plan and program of God. The Church is not Israel and Israel has not been set aside or replaced. When the biblical covenants made with the nation of Israel are seen as unconditional and unfulfilled, it is essential that the Lord God fulfills them with Israel, the ones who are the original party in the covenant. When the Scriptures are interpreted literally, one comes to the conclusion that Israel means Israel. And the literal (normal) approach of interpretation also leads one to see that the Church began at a different time than did Israel; that it was a “mystery” and something “new” built on the New Testament Apostles and prophets; and that it is externally and internally different from Israel. Such evidence, along with Romans 9-11, points to the fact that Israel was not abandoned or replaced by God. The Church is important in God’s program, but it is not Israel.

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(Source: *The Gathering Storm*, 21st Century Press, Springfield, MO 65807)