

ISRAEL VS. THE CHURCH

THE CONTROVERSIAL PROBLEM

- Are the church and Israel distinct entities or has the church assumed the covenant promises made to Israel?
- On one hand:

The process whereby Christ builds the church is just a continuation of the pattern established by God in the Old Testament whereby he called people to himself to be a worshipping assembly before him. There are several indications *in the Old Testament* that God thought of his people as a “church,” a people assembled for the purpose of worshipping God...It is not surprising, then, that the New Testament authors can speak of the Old Testament people of Israel as a “church”...Therefore, even though there are certainly new privileges and new blessings that are given to the people of God in the New Testament, both the usage of the term “church” in Scripture and the fact that throughout Scripture God has always called his people to assemble to worship himself, indicate that it is appropriate to think of the church as constituting all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers.

Wayne Gruden, *Systematic Theology*, 853-4.

- On other hand:

The present [church] age is something of a parenthesis. From Genesis 12 through the Gospels and deep into Acts, God’s primary purpose dealt with Israel. In the Gospels and Acts, the Lord Jesus is offered to Israel as Messiah. The coming of the kingdom was contingent upon their response. Because of Israel’s negative response, God is now working with the church, distinct from Israel...The church, therefore, is a mystery, never prophesied in the Old Testament...It is neither a “new Israel” nor a new form of the kingdom.

Stanley Toussaint, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 249.

- How you answer that question determines which theological system you belong to

Covenant Theology

- “Covenant Theology” is an aspect of reformed theology that emphasizes the unity of God’s dealings with fallen man throughout history (Covenant of Grace)
- “Reformed” is a catch-all term that reflects all the various aspects of theology that arose as part of the Reformation
- The Reformed tradition tends to have a high view of the sovereignty of God and the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures
- The “Reformed tradition” includes Calvinism, covenant theology, and amillennialism, as well as the Presbyterian form of church government
- Covenant Theology has its roots in the Reformation, but was not systematized until 1647 in the Westminster Confession
- Covenant Theology is based on two covenants:
 - 1) The covenant of redemption – the persons of the Trinity entered into a solemn covenant in eternity past wherein each person of the Godhead assumed a part in the plan of salvation

- 2) The covenant of works – an agreement between Adam and God where God promises life for obedience and death for disobedience

Genesis 2:16-17 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die."

- This was broken by the Fall and was replaced by the covenant of grace.

- 3) The covenant of grace – an agreement after the fall between God and the sinner whereby God promises salvation through faith in Christ

Interpretive Foundation

- Covenant theologians generally begin with a literal or historical-grammatical method of interpretation
- This came in conjunction with rejecting the Roman Catholic viewpoint that the church is to interpret Scripture and that church tradition is on a par with Scripture

Prophecy

- Most covenant theologians, however, suggest that prophecy calls for a special, spiritual method of interpretation. Thus, they are usually Amillennial: The church has replaced Israel and there is no literal 1,000-year period of universal peace and righteousness before the end of the world
- The Amillennial holds that there is no sufficient Scriptural ground for the expectation of a millennium, and is firmly convinced that the Bible favors the idea that the present form of the Kingdom of God will be followed immediately by the Kingdom of God in its consummate and eternal form.
- This is the foundation for the distinction between dispensationalism & covenant theology

Evaluation

Positives

- The Scriptures do affirm that God has one unified plan of dealing with fallen man throughout history

Negatives

- Though covenant theology starts with a literal hermeneutic, they contradict this when interpreting prophetic literature concerning the future for Israel
- The Scriptures clearly indicate that, based on His unconditional covenant with Abraham, God still has a plan for ethnic Israel:

Romans 11:28-29 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Jeremiah 31:35-37 Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: 36 "If this fixed order departs From before Me," declares the LORD, "Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease From being a nation before Me forever." 37 Thus says the LORD, "If the heavens above can be measured, And the foundations of the earth searched out below, Then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel For all that they have done," declares the LORD.

Dispensational Theology

- Dispensationalism tends to interpret Scripture with an emphasis on the distinctives of how God relates with mankind during different time periods in history.

1. Man Innocent (Creation to the Fall)

2. Man Under Conscience (Fall to the Flood)
3. Man in Authority Over the Earth (Noah to Abraham)
4. Man Under Promise (Abraham to Moses)
5. Man Under Law (Moses to the death of Christ)
6. Man Under Grace (The death of Christ to the rapture)
7. Man Under the Personal Reign of Christ (The Millennial reign of Christ)

- Note: There are many versions of identifying the dispensations. This one is from C.I. Scofield, a key figure in the development of dispensational theology.
- The distinctions between the various periods cannot be denied. The real question lies in their significance and the amount of emphasis one wishes to give them. Dispensationalism suggests that the distinctions are significant, whereas covenant theology suggests that they are in reality minimal.

History

- Definition of dispensation (*oikonomia*) = to manage house
 - Referred to activity of managing a house; stewardship – 1 Cor 4
 - Later came to refer to an “administration”; Not a time period
 - Theologically – a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose
- Many tenets of dispensationalism have been held throughout church history (premill, imminency, dispensations, distinction between church & Israel, etc.)
- But not systematized until 1830 under John Nelson Darby
- Popularized by Scofield Reference Bible (1909, 1917)
- Trends:
 - Classic Disp – 1900-1950’s
 - Revised – 1950-1980
 - Progressive – 1980-1991

Interpretive Foundation

- Dispensationalism emphasizes a literal, historical, grammatical method of interpretation.
- The key issue relates to authorial intent: What did the prophetic author intend? This allows for the biblical writer to use symbolic language, but insists that any interpretation must be based on the author’s intent.
- While it is acknowledged that many prophetic passages do contain figurative language and that they are often written in poetic style, one must question whether the method for interpreting prophecy should be distinct from the method for interpreting other kinds of biblical literature.
- The question is not between a strictly literal versus a strictly symbolic approach: even the strictest literalist takes some things symbolically. The differences between literalists and symbolists are relative, rather than absolute, involving questions of "how much" and "which parts" of prophecy should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally.
- If one accepts an "absolutely literal" perspective, the text itself becomes the clearcut authority without question. Unfortunately this absolute view is impossible to maintain, not only because of the nature of language (and even more so the language of Scripture), but also because of the size and complexity of Scripture. As one moves away from this end of the spectrum, a greater degree of subjectivity of interpretation enters the picture until one reaches the opposite extreme of absolute subjectivity with each individual and his interpretations being his own authority.

Premillennialism

- When consistently applied, the hermeneutical assumptions of dispensationalism logically lead to Premillennialism: Christ will return to rescue ethnic Israel and set up a literal 1,000 year rule from Jerusalem.

Evaluation

Positives

- Dispensationalism rightly identifies God’s continued plan for ethnic Israel.

Negatives

- Dispensationalism identifies too much of a distinction between how God deals with mankind during different time periods in history.
- No matter what the time period, God always deals with mankind “by grace through faith.”

Habakkuk 2:4 “Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; But the righteous will live by his faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

<i>Viewpoint</i>	Covenant Theology	Dispensational Theology
Description	God works through a covenant of grace to save all	God works in various ways in different periods of history
God’s People	God has one people, the church	God has two people, Israel and the church
God’s Plan	God has one plan for one people	God has two plans for two separate people
Church Started	With Adam	At Pentecost
New Covenant	Fulfilled entirely in the church; Israel participates in NC as a part of the church	Church participates in the NC, but NC will be fulfilled with Israel as a nation in the future
1 st Coming	To die for our sins and establish the New Israel	To establish the messianic kingdom (which was rejected)
2 nd Coming	To bring final judgment and eternal state – amillennial	To usher in a 1,000 reign of Christ, then the eternal state - premillennial

- The bottom line issue is: What is the same and what is different between the Testaments?
- Traditional dispensationalism would emphasize the differences, sometimes even to the point of salvation.
- Traditional covenant theology would emphasize the similarities--even replacing Israel with the church.
- The key is that there are *both* similarities and differences.
 - In salvation, there are clear similarities: all men are saved by grace through faith.
 - In end times, there are clear differences: God still has a plan for ethnic Israel.
- How do we know that there is a distinction between Israel and the church?

THE BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

Use of the Term “Israel”

- Some say that the terms “Israel” and “church” are used interchangeably in Scripture
- However Biblical writers always make a distinction between the two and never equate them
- The term “Israel” is used 73 times in the NT and always refers to ethnic Israel not the church
- Examples: Matt 8:10; John 1:31; Acts 2:36; Phil 3:5

Misunderstanding of Specific Passages

- Covenant theologians use 3 of the 73 uses of the term “Israel” in the NT to “prove” that Israel equals the church (however, there is disagreement on 2 of those 3 passages)
 1. *Romans 9:6 “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel”*
 - Covenant theologians says that Paul is saying that “not all Israel” = the church
 - But Paul is simply referring to the fact that in Israel there are believing AND unbelieving Jews
 2. *Romans 11:26 “...and thus all Israel will be saved...”*
 - Covenant theologians says that all those saved in the church are being equated to Israel
 - But the context is national Israel and Paul is saying that a time is coming when national Israel will be saved
 3. *Galatians 6:16 “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God”*
 - Covenant theologians says that “and” = “even”; therefore says it says “peace and mercy be upon them (believing Gentiles), even upon the Israel of God” thus equating believing Gentiles with Israel
 - But Paul is simply saying that all are saved in the same way, whether Jew or Gentile, because both Jew and Gentile were present in the Galatian church

Recognition of the Primary Differences

1. Different Promises (Earthly vs. Heavenly)

- *Ezekiel 36:24 “For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land”*
- *Ephesians. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ”*

2. Different Seed (Physical vs. Spiritual)

- *Romans. 9:6 “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel”*
- *Galatians 3:29 “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise”*
- Israel's is a physical heritage and this physical heritage has not gone away. The Jews are one of the few ancient cultures that have maintained their ethnic heritage and kept from being totally amalgamated into other cultures.
- But believers have a spiritual heritage

3. Different Births (Sinai vs. Pentecost)

- *Exodus 19-20 - Israel became a nation at Sinai*
- *Acts 2 - The Church began at Pentecost*

4. Different Nationality (Jewish vs. Heavenly)

- *Jeremiah. 31:31* “Behold days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah’”
- *Philippians 3:20* “For our citizenship is in heaven...”
- God chose and developed a relationship with a literal nation...His choosing was not of individual people, but rather of a nation.

5. Different Temple (Physical vs. Spiritual)

- *1 Kings 8:11* “the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord”
- *1 Corinthians 3:16-17* “Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”
- There was a physical temple in Jerusalem and there will be a future temple rebuilt for the millennium (Ezekiel 40-41) – a literal temple
- But the church is a spiritual temple for Christ (Eph. 2:21)

6. Different Relationship w/ Christ

- *1 Peter 2:7-8* “The Stone which the builders rejected... a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense...”
- *Ephesians 2:20* “[God's household] having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone”

THE CRUCIAL ISSUE

- An understanding of the biblical covenants is essential
- God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3) was an unconditional promise to give him land, seed, and a blessing
- Was it conditional or unconditional? Why is this an important question?
 - If conditional, then can be nullified by Israel’s disobedience and promises can be passed on to church
 - If unconditional, then all promises must be fulfilled literally with Israel
- Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional because:
 1. Only God passed between halves of animals (Gen 15)
 2. AC was still in effect after patriarchs sinned several times
 3. AC was still in effect after nation of Israel had sinned for centuries
 4. AC was still in effect at the beginning of the NT (Luke 1:67-75)
 5. Despite Jews’ rejection of Messiah, still regarded as children of AC
 6. NT emphasizes unconditional nature of AC (Gal 3:17-18)
- So were all promises in the Abrahamic Covenant fulfilled to Israel?
 - Some were: Abraham received a blessing, Israel became a nation
 - Not all were though: Israel is still not in the land
- How would the Abrahamic Covenant be fulfilled? → Through the New Covenant
- The New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34; 32:39-40; Ezek 16:60-63; 18:31; 34:25; 36:26; 37:26) was a covenant made **with Israel** to administer the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant
- How do we know that the New Covenant was made with Israel?
 - Jer 31:31 “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”
 - Ezek 36:22 ““Therefore, say to the house of Israel, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went”

- Its provisions included:
 1. Transformed heart (Jer 24:4-7; 31:31-34; 32:37-41; Ezek 36:22-32)
 2. Permanent forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34; 33:8; Ezek 36:25-27)
 3. Permanent indwelling of Holy Spirit in all believers (Ezek 36:27)
 4. Law inside a believer (Jer 31:33)
 5. Consummation of Israel's relationship with God (Jer 31:33)
 6. Physical blessings on Israel (Jer 31:8-14, 38-40; 33:12-13)
- The New Covenant provides for the salvation of Israel in that one day Israel can and will obey the Lord
- What is the foundation of the New Covenant? → The death of Christ on the cross!
- Thus, had Israel accepted their Messiah, they would have been received the blessings of the New Covenant
- But since they rejected Christ, the fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel is still future
- **Yet, the Church does participate in some of the blessings promised to Israel in the Abrahamic Covenant as administered through the New Covenant**
 - *Acts 2:16 "but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel..."*
 - *1 Corinthians 11:25 "In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'"*
 - *Galatians 3:9, 14 "So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer...that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith"*
 - *Hebrews 8:6 "But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises"*
- So the church participates in the blessings of the NC, but does not replace Israel
- Important issues to remember on the church's relationship to the New Covenant:
 1. The Church does not fulfill the New Covenant made with Israel – God made it with Israel and will fulfill it with Israel
 2. The lack of mention of the church partaking of the New Covenant in the OT does not rule out the church from participating in the New Covenant – it was a mystery in OT (Eph 3:3-6)
 3. Provision for blessing of Gentiles was made in the Abrahamic Covenant
 4. The church does partake in the blessings of the New Covenant but not all of them – national, physical blessings for Israel yet in the future
- The New Covenant will be fulfilled with the nation of Israel at the 2nd coming of Christ
- Romans 11 addresses this time when Israel is restored:
 - Vs. 1, 2 – God has not rejected His people
 - Vs. 7 – what Israel was looking for "they had not obtained" – covenants not fulfilled with Israel
 - Vs. 11 – they have not fallen out of God's future plan
 - Vs. 26 – all Israel will be saved as a nation in the future millennial kingdom of Christ

THE FINAL CONCLUSION

- It really is a character issue—God promised and He will fulfill.
- The bottom line:
 - The church and Israel are distinct
 - Although the church participates in some of the blessings promised to Israel, it does not replace Israel
 - God still has a plan for Israel and it will be fulfilled beginning with Christ's 2nd coming