

Rediscovering Jesus in the Jewish Gospels

The Church before THE Church

Matthew 18 Lesson 35

An evangelical theologian's view of Israel will determine whether he is a Covenant theologian or a Dispensationalist. The question of Israel is central to a proper systematic theology. A systematic theology that leaves Israel out of the majority of the text of scripture and has to explain away the modern state of Israel as not being the fulfillment of the prophesied regathering of Israel toward the end times. At worst there is a danger of theological anti-Semitism. Whether Jewish people are blamed or neglected in evangelism the horrific results are the same. The most common theological basis historically for neglect or hostility toward Israel and Jews among Protestants is from the position that the Church has replaced Israel.

Dispensationalists interpret scripture literally. Theologically we believe that God's plan for the Church does not supersede His plan for the 12 tribes of Israel and all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We believe that God made five covenants with Israel establishing a People, a Land, a Messianic seed, a Throne, and a literal Messianic Kingdom. The Church is a beneficiary of God's new covenant made with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah and as a fulfillment of "*In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*" Dispensationalists do not see the Church as replacing Israel neither do we see the Church as a complete fulfillment of the new covenant.

Covenant Reformed Theology claims that "the elect" and "the people of God" describe all believers throughout all time. They believe the remnant of believing Jews were the church **before** the church of the New Testament. Their NT proof texts of that dogma include Acts 7:38 where Stephen in his final sermon said, "This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and *with* our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us." They also claim that Paul "affirmed the spiritual unity of Israel and of the Church" in Romans 11:17-21 and Ephesians 2:11-16. Dr. Fruchtenbaum in his book *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* said, "Berkoff concludes that in "essence Israel constituted the Church of God in the Old Testament though its external institution differed vastly from that of the church in the New Testament."^a Though there is a broad spectrum of theological positions within this larger context, they generally view the Church replacing the chosen people of Israel absorbing them into "the elect" of all time because the Church is in their view the fulfillment of the New Covenant.

Before dismantling that huge assumption we must establish what is the church and ... When did it begin?

How could the disciples "tell it to the Church" if no church existed yet?

The Greek word used here (18:17) is ἐκκλησία, *ekklēsia*, which means a *calling out*, that is, a *meeting*, assembly.

Greek =συνάγω *sunagō* 3 verses later (18:20) means *convene* "gathered to gather" and is the root word for synagogue.

Were both terms *ekklēsia* and *sunagō* simple a generic term referring to an assembly?

The fact that the synagogues would later expel believers in Jesus, is evidence that Jesus' disciples were still considered within bounds of broader Judaism individually. "because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue." (John 9:22) These Jewish believers were considered as belonging to a Jewish sect known as followers of "the way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; 22:4;14,22), and in Gentile Antioch, they were given the derogatory moniker of "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

Did Jesus's statement "tell it to the Church," imply The Church of Believers was in existence before Acts 2?

Or was He speaking prophetically as to how to handle a matter when The Church would come into existence?

Some argue that the church was already in existence when He said it, comprised of the 12.

Covenant Reformed Theology began to claim that all believers throughout all time are “the elect”, “the people of God,” as opposed to only the “chosen people” being the “people of God.” Therefore, they view The Church as generally replacing the chosen people of Israel because the Church is in their view the fulfillment of the New Covenant since in their view Israel forfeited their fulfillment of the old and new covenants. Admittedly there is a broad spectrum of theological positions between Amillennialists, Postmillennialists, and Premillennialists, within this larger “covenant theological” context all based on a wrong interpretation from an allegorical hermeneutical basis.

Six reasons are given by Arnold Fruchtenbaum from the Bible supporting the notion that the church is a distinct work in God’s household from His people Israel.

- 1) “The first evidence is the fact that **the church was born at Pentecost**, whereas Israel had existed for many centuries”. This is supported by “the use of the future tense in Matthew 16:18 shows that it did not exist in gospel history”. Since the church born at Pentecost is called the “Body of Christ” (Col. 1:18), and entrance into the body is through “Spirit baptism” (1 Cor. 12:13), in which Jew and Gentile are united through the church. It is evident that the church began on the Day of Pentecost since Acts 1:5 views Spirit baptism as future, while Acts 10 links it to the past, specifically to Pentecost.
- 2) “The second evidence is that **certain events in the ministry of the Messiah were essential to the establishment of the church** - the church does not come into being until certain events have taken place”. These events include the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to become head of the church (Eph. 1:20-23). “The church, with believers as the body and Christ as the head, did not exist until after Christ ascended to become its head. And it could not become a functioning entity until after the Holy Spirit provided the necessary spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:7-11)”.
- 3) “The third evidence is **the mystery character of the church.**” A mystery in the Bible is a hidden truth not revealed until the New Testament (Eph. 3:3-5, 9; Col. 1:26-27). Fruchtenbaum lists “four defining characteristics of the church [that] are described as a mystery. (1) The body concept of Jewish and Gentile believers united into one body is designated as a mystery in Ephesians 3:1-12. (2) The doctrine of Christ indwelling every believer, the Christ-in-you concept, is called a mystery in Colossians 1:24-27 (cf. Col. 2:10-19; 3:4). (3) The church as the Bride of Christ is called a mystery in Ephesians 5:22-32. (4) The Rapture is called a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. These four mysteries describe qualities that distinguish the church from Israel”.
- 4) “The fourth evidence that the church is distinct from Israel is the **unique relationship between Jews and the Gentiles**, called one new man in Ephesians 2:15”. During the current church age, God is saving a remnant from the two previous entities (Israel and Gentiles) and combining them into a third new object - - the Church. This unity of Jews and Gentiles into one new man covers only the church age, from Pentecost until the rapture, after which time God will restore Israel and complete her destiny (Acts 15:14-18). 1 Corinthians 10:32 reflects just such a division when it says, “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.”
- 5) “The fifth evidence for the distinction between Israel and the church is **found in Galatians 6:16**”. “It appears logical to view ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16) as believing Jews in contrast to unbelieving Jews called ‘Israel after the flesh’ (1 Cor. 10:18). This passage does not support the false claim of replacement theologians who claim that Israel is supplanted by the Church. Instead, the Bible teaches that a remnant of Israel is combined with elect Gentiles during this age to make up a whole new entity the New Testament calls the Church (Eph. 2).

- 6) “In the book of Acts, both Israel and the Church exist simultaneously. **The term *Israelis* used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct**”. Thus, the replacement theologian has no actual biblical basis upon which he bases his theological claim that Israel and the church have become one.

“As to the Church in the Old Testament assertion:

- The Church is called the Temple of God. Israel as a nation is never called the Temple of God. (1 Cor. 3:16)
- The Temple of God in the Old Testament refers to a building on Mt. Zion (Psalm 53:6)
- It is highly questionable that the term “Jerusalem” refers to the Church *per se* in light of Hebrews 12:22
- Galatians 4:25,26 implies two Jerusalems, one heavenly and one earthly.
- The earthly one is certainly the Jewish capital as distinguished from the heavenly one.
- The Church by faith is related to the heavenly one, not the earthly one.
- The term *ekklesia* does not mean “an assembly of the people of God.” It is a word that merely means “assembly,” and in the New Testament and classical Greek is used for an assembly of pagans. (Acts:19:32,39).
- In the Greek Septuagint *ekklesia* is the word that best translates the *qahal*/temple emphasizing the congregation or assembly of Israel. Fruchtenbaum argues effectively that Berkoff's assertion is further weakened because this assembly of Israel referred to by Stephen comprised a majority of unbelievers (Acts 7:39-42).”

Since Matthew 16:18 is speaking prophetically of a Church not yet built by Jesus, then neither is the Church present in Matthew 18:17 but rather a future one yet to be built, one of whose functions are being described.

In reference to Stephen’s “church in the wilderness” phrase, is the generic Greek word for assembly; *ekklesia*.

Arnold Fruchtenbaum contends that in Romans 11:17-21 “the Olive Tree represents the place of blessing as contained in the Jewish covenants. He clarifies that the natural branches represent Israel.”

In the Ephesians 2:11-16 passage, the Church is never identified with Israel. Paul is saying that from two distinct entities “the commonwealth of Israel” and “ye Gentiles,” come Jewish and Gentile believers that are united into one body distinct from Israel. Paul doubles down that Christ is creating in himself “of twain, one new man.” “Create” means something that was never in existence before. “New” is in contrast and different from the old. Since it is being built upon the foundation of the Apostles and prophets then it did not exist before Christ and the Apostles.”

Therefore, Dispensationalist differ from Reformed Covenant Theology on the points that the church is not a continuation of the “Old Testament” assembly and therefore the church is not the Olive Tree of Romans 11. Dispensationalists limit the invisible (universal or worldwide church) to the elect of the period between Pentecost and the Rapture.

Fruchtenbaum succinctly says that “the Gentiles are partakers with the Jews of these Jewish spiritual blessings, but not takeovers of these blessings.”^b

Appendix

Supersessionism Rising. Dispensationalism...?

By Kevin Zuber

“But I'm afraid that premillennial dispensationalism is on the wane, and not because there are better arguments for other millennial views, or for supersessionism. I think this is because the scholars have decided there have been enough arguments over eschatology and that one's view of the millennium is, well, inconsequential and that to advocate a particular view is in poor scholarly taste. And students are looking for cultural acceptance more than theological

precision because they think this is a better way to reach the world with the gospel. The effect of such trends, I fear, is simply to cede ground to views that are by default supersessionist.

Why does this matter? For one consequential matter is Jewish evangelism. It is much more likely for those who believe Scripture teaches a future for national Israel will be involved in ministries devoted to Jewish evangelism. It should be a concern for all of us who understand the Scriptural priority of Jewish evangelism to see that the theological tradition that has nurtured much of the impetus for Jewish evangelism is healthy. One author made the telling observation that there are few staunchly Reformed organizations devoted to reaching the Jewish people.

But even more widely, we should be concerned because the truth we affirm from the Scriptures is in danger of being lost not in the rigors of theological debate and a progressively clearer understanding of the program and plan of God revealed in His Word.

Perhaps the optimists are right and supersessionism will not overtake the more Scriptural view that **God indeed has a future for ethnic, national Israel.** But even if they are right, it is appropriate for us to consider the challenges I have mentioned carefully and to address them boldly and confidently.

How then must we respond? **I'm confident that a serious study of eschatology, looking at both sides and reading both covenant theologians and dispensational authors (such as those books mentioned above) will lead you to a firm conviction of dispensational eschatology.**

^a Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Israelology, P 167

^b Ibid, p 168, 169

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