

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH
 Lesson 2

The Church in the Old Testament

- I. DEFINITION OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH: The universal church or the body of Christ is a spiritual organism with Christ as its Head, and is composed of all regenerated people (including Old Testament saints) from the Day of Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ. NOTE: Sometimes the universal church is called the catholic or the invisible church.
- II. FOUR VIEWS OF THE CHURCH BASED ON A PARTICULAR ESCHATOLOGY
- A. Introduction:
1. While all Christians believe the fact that Christ is coming again literally and bodily to this earth, they do not agree on how He is coming again and the events that surround His Second Coming.
 2. The crux of the matter is how to interpret Old Testament prophecies and how to interpret Revelation 20:1-6. Is the millennium spiritual or earthly? Is it fulfilled in the church or at the Second Advent?
 3. There are four basic eschatological systems found among evangelical Christians and each claims his system is grounded in the Bible: amillennialism (finalism, realized millennialism), postmillennialism and premillennialism (chiliasm, futurism, unrealized millennialism) which can be divided into two distinct groups—historic premillennialism (covenant-premillennialism) and dispensational-premillennialism.
 4. Within these four basic systems there is much room for various interpretations. For instance, all amils do not agree on every detail of interpretation of prophecy, but they are in general agreement.
 5. There are wide differences between amils and premils, but far more similarities between Historic Premils and Dispensational-Premils than there are differences, although Dispensationalism is the most radical of all four interpretations.
 6. What we believe about the secondary issues in eschatology in no way affects our salvation or our personal walk with Jesus Christ, our Lord. We should all be followers of Christ and then students of prophecy. Never let eschatological confusion stand in the way of your personal devotion and commitment to Jesus Christ. It is true that how one views eschatology may influence his thinking about life and world events but it does not affect the fact of salvation and one's constant anticipation of the Lord's return.
- B. Amillennialism
1. Some evangelicals believe that Christ will return, there will be a general resurrection unto life and a general resurrection unto death. These scholars are sometimes called Amillennialists because they do not believe

that there will be an earthly kingdom over which Christ will reign. The word “amillennial” (literally “no millennium”) is a misnomer, for every Amil believes in a real millennium that is fulfilled in a spiritual sense.

2. *“No amillennialist denies that the Bible teaches a millennium. But the word amillennialism means “no millennium.” The issue is not whether Revelation 20 teaches a millennium. All amillennialists believe it does. Every conservative is a millennialist, because he accepts the inerrancy of the Scriptures. The distinction, therefore, must be between differing systems of millennialism. The true difference between amillennialism and the other systems involves two things: (1) The nature of the millennium and (2) the chronological position of the millennium in the economy of God.” (J. Adams, *The Time Is At Hand*).*
 3. Amillennialists would rather be called “finalists” or “realized millennialists.” Realized millennialists contend that the millennium is a present reality, not an earthly utopia but a spiritual reality with Christ reigning in the hearts of true believers. They take the “thousand years” of Rev. 20 as figurative language and refer it to an indefinite period of time between the first and second advents of Jesus Christ. As finalists, they believe that all Old Testament prophecies are finally fulfilled in the first advent of Christ and the succeeding gospel age.
 4. Some Amils do not deny a yet future Anti-Christ, a great apostasy and a time of unprecedented tribulation before the return of Christ, but they would deny a seven year tribulation period. The Amil would not deny that there is a future Golden Age but this will take place after the second advent of Christ in the “new heavens and new earth” (2 Pet. 3:12-14; Isa. 65:15; Rev. 20:11).
 5. Realized millennialists differ most strongly, therefore, from other prophetic schools in that they look for a truly golden (i.e. perfect) age, and a non-utopian millennium. Both post and premillennial views anticipate a quasi-utopian millennium. (Adams)
- C. Postmillennialism
1. Some evangelicals believe that through the preaching of the gospel by the church that the world will get better and better because of mass conversions. God will establish His millennial kingdom on earth through the church and then Christ will return and there will be a general resurrection and judgment.
 2. *“The postmil looks for a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a glorious age of the church upon earth through the preaching of the gospel under the power of the Holy Spirit. He looks forward to all nations becoming Christians and living in peace one with another. He relates all prophecies to history and time. After the triumph of Christianity throughout the earth he looks for the Second Coming of the Lord. There are, of course, differences of opinion concerning details among the posts as among other schools of thought.” (J. Marcellus Kik, *An Eschatology of Victory*).*

3. *“The Millennium to which the postmillennialist looks forward is thus a golden age of spiritual prosperity during this present dispensation, that is, during the church age, and is to be brought about through forces now active in the world. It is an indefinitely long period of time, perhaps much longer than a literal one thousand years. The changed character of individuals will be reflected in an uplifted social, economic, political and cultural life of mankind. The world at large will then enjoy a state of righteousness such as at the present time has been seen only in relatively small and isolated groups, as for example in some family circles, some local church groups and kindred organizations.*

*This does not mean that there ever will be a time on this earth when every person will be a Christian, or that all sin will be abolished. But it does mean that evil in all its many forms eventually will be reduced to negligible proportions, that Christian principles will be the rule, not the exception, and that Christ will return to a truly Christianized world.” (L. Boettner, *The Millennium*).*

D. Historic Premillennialism (Covenant-Premillennialism)

1. Some evangelical scholars believe that Christ will return and establish His kingdom over this earth. The earthly kingdom will be brought in by the cataclysmic event of the Second Advent. There will be a future tribulation and anti-Christ before the return of Christ. The church will go through the Tribulation anticipating the return of the Lord. The Tribulation may or may not be seven years in length and the millennium may or may not be exactly one thousand years, but there will be an earthly kingdom that Christ will rule over after His Second Advent.
2. At Christ’s Second Advent, all true believers (of all time) will be resurrected and enjoy the blessings of the earth kingdom. At the end of the earthly reign of Christ, there will be the resurrection of all unbelievers and they shall be cast into the Lake of Fire. All true believers will then enter into the eternal kingdom, which is the “new heaven and new earth.”

E. Dispensational-Premillennialism

1. The proponents of this view believe that the true church will be taken out of this earth before the Tribulation period, that there will be seven years of Tribulation which is more terrifying than anything this world has ever known; then Christ will return with His church to establish His kingdom for one thousand years, where He will reign from Jerusalem and fulfill all the promises and prophecies he made to Israel in the Old Testament. There is a sharp distinction made between Israel and the church and the Tribulation and millennium are given a Jewish flavor.

III. THE CHURCH IS NOT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. The church is a mystery (Col. 1:24-29; Eph. 1:1-12; Rom. 16:25-27). A mystery is a truth hidden but made known only by direct revelation of God. The concept of the church is not introduced until the New Testament

- B. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). The church was still future from the time He made this statement.
- C. The concept that Jew and Gentile could be on an equal basis was unknown in the Old Testament (Eph. 2:15; 3:6). The Old Testament teaches that the Gentiles would be blessed but the Jew was always the one through whom the blessings would come to Gentiles. Equal spiritual blessing in Christ is a totally new revelation.
- D. The only place that it is hinted that the church might be in the Old Testament is Acts 7:38 – “He (Moses) was in the assembly (church) in the desert.” The word “church” (ekklesia) is used in a non-technical sense of an assembly or congregation. There is no mention of the church, the body of Christ, in the Old Testament.
- E. The weight of evidence seems to be that the church is not in the Old Testament, and the church, the body of Christ, is a New Testament revelation. The church is a distinct group from physical, national Israel, and this distinction must always be kept in interpreting scripture if a proper meaning is to be attained.

IV. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

- A. The Bible distinguishes national, physical, ethnic Israel from the church. “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32).
- B. The Bible distinguishes unbelieving Gentiles from the church. “Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks (Gentiles) or the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32).
- C. The Bible makes a distinction between believing Israelites and non-believing Israelites. “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel” (Rom. 9:6).

V. OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS (JEWS) BECOME PART OF THE CHURCH

- A. **Hebrews 11:39-40.** “These were all commended for their faith (Old Testament saints), yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us (the church) so that only together with us would they be made perfect.”

The things New Testament believers experience as members of the church is “something better” but it is through these better things that Old Testament saints are made perfect. Old Testament saints could not be made “complete” or “whole” or “perfect” without the New Testament saints. Both Old Testament and New Testament saints are now in the body of Christ, the church, and await Christ’s Second Coming. There is a oneness of Old and New Testament saints in the church.

- B. **Revelation 21:9-14.** The city, New Jerusalem, is clearly identified as “the bride, the wife of the Lamb,” which refers to the inhabitants of this city. The inhabitants include Old Testament saints as represented by the Twelve Tribes

of Israel on the gates, and the New Testament saints as represented by the names of the Twelve Apostles on the foundation. It becomes obvious that both Old Testament and New Testament saints make up the bride, the Lamb's wife. In the New Testament the church is pictured as the "bride of Christ" (Eph. 5:27). In Revelation 19:7, the church is also depicted as the wife of Christ. In the Old Testament, Israel is called the bride of God (Isa. 62:5). It seems logical to assume that Old Testament and New Testament saints make up the bride of Christ, the church.

- C. It is logical to assume that if living Jewish believers were made part of the body of Christ, the church, at Pentecost, so were the dead saints (Jews and Gentiles). Together they form the bride of Christ.

VI. NEW TESTAMENT SAINTS BECOME SPIRITUAL ISRAEL. The New Testament actually does not so much speak of Old Testament saints being admitted to the church, but the Gentile believers of the New Testament age being admitted to Israel.

A. Eph. 2:11-22

1. Gentiles before conversion to Christ are separate from (without) Christ, aliens (excluded) from the commonwealth of Israel, foreigners (non-residents, not a citizen) to the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, Davidic, New Covenants). Christ through His death abolished the Law which separated Jews from Gentiles into one body. Therefore, Gentiles who believe are no longer foreigners and aliens to the commonwealth of Israel and the covenants, but are fellow citizens with the saints and are members of the household of God.
2. God's people (saints) must refer to the Jewish saints (believers in the Old Testament). The total household of God (Old and New Testament saints) are built upon the New Testament Apostles and the Old Testament prophets, and Christ is the chief cornerstone which unites them to one building in the Lord. Therefore, believing Gentiles, members of the church, have been admitted as citizens to the commonwealth of Israel, from which they had previously been aliens, and thus share in the covenants made by God with Israel in the Old Testament (Rom. 9:1-5).
3. Believing Gentiles, therefore, become spiritual Israelites, forming the New Israel. Obviously the Apostles (all Jews) saw themselves as the inheritors of the promises to Israel because they were true Israel. Also they saw believing Gentiles, spiritual Israel, as inheritors of the promises as well.

B. Romans 11:1-6, 16-24

1. The whole context of Romans 11 is about Israel. The Apostle Paul states that just because the majority of Israelites were in unbelief is in no way indicated that God had cast off Israel and nullified His promises to the nation and His covenants with them. The promises of God to Israel were intended only for believing Israelites, not for the physical Jews as a whole. "For not all who are descendants from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they Abraham's children (spiritual children): (Rom. 9:6-7). Therefore, believing Jews in Paul's day constituted the

remnant (Rom. 11:1-6) and these were in the church. Jewish believers (including Paul) constituted a part of God's continuing program for Israel and the Jewish believers are part of the Christian church, the body of Christ.

2. Paul then uses the illustration of the olive tree. The olive tree is Israel (Jer. 11:16; Hosea 14:6). The "root" of the tree represents Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant. The trunk (not mentioned in context) would be the covenanted people (believing Israel). The natural branches represent physical Israel which was under the covenant in the Old Testament. Some of these natural branches were true believers and some were not. Some (not all) of the natural branches were broken off from the covenant because of their unbelief. Others of the natural physical Jews stayed in the covenant because they believed—they were never taken out of Israel's covenants, the place of spiritual blessing. The wild branches represent Gentiles who believe in Christ and become part of the covenant and blessings to Israel. Gentile Christians, therefore, have been admitted to the ancient commonwealth of Israel as replacements for unbelieving Jews, and they now share with the remaining believing Jews the benefits of the promises to Israel.
3. It should be carefully noted that the believing Jews, represented by the good natural branches, did not move. They were not transferred to a new tree. It was the Gentile Christians (believing Gentiles) who became part of the already present natural branches (Jews). No believing Israelite is cut off from any promise. Rather it is the unbelieving Israelite who is cut off. The logical conclusion is that believing Gentiles become spiritual Jews by faith and partake of the Abrahamic Covenant equally.
4. However, Romans 11 does not teach that there is no future for natural, physical, unbelieving Israel. At the second advent of Christ the natural Jews who are then living will turn to Christ in mass. The great majority of physical Jews today are hardened to the gospel of Christ, but one day "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26); that is, a yet-future generation of Jews will turn to Christ in mass and these believing Jews will go into the millennium or eternal state, depending on your eschatology (Jer. 32:37-40; 33:14-16; Zech. 12:10; 13:9).

C. **Matthew 21:33-45**

1. In this parable, the vineyard is Israel (Isa. 5:1-2); its land-owner is God; the vine growers or tenant farmers are the religious leaders of Israel, the servants sent to gather the fruit are the prophets; and the son of the owner is Jesus the Messiah.
2. The explanation of the words "then he rented the vineyard to some farmers" is a reference to Christ taking away the Kingdom of God from the Jewish leaders then in control of the nation and giving of this Kingdom to another people. "Therefore I tell you that the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you (physical, unbelieving Jews) and given to a people who will produce its fruit" (Matt. 21:43).

3. The “people” (nation) referred to here is the church (Rom. 10:19; 1 Pet. 2:9). Therefore, the Kingdom of God in the Old Testament, as it was incorporated in Israel, was removed and given to the church. In place of the old arrangement, God would take the vineyard (still representing the Israelites who accepted Jesus as Messiah) and put it under new management with the Twelve Apostles as the new farmers. This new community was to be known as the Christian church (Luke 12:32; Matt. 19:28). The Christian church incorporating the believing Israelites as its nucleus is to replace the nation of Israel as the people of God.

D. Philippians 3:3

1. The Epistle to the Philippians was written primarily to Gentiles who had believed in Christ. They were called “the (true) circumcision,” identifying them as spiritual Jews.
2. In the Old Testament, circumcision of a Jewish male was a “sign” of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:7-14), and was the distinguishing mark of a Jew (Exod. 12:44). Israelites became popularly known as “the circumcision” (Acts 10:45; 11:2-3; Rom. 3:30; Eph. 2:11; Col. 4:10-11).
3. It is beyond question that the term “the circumcision” was a technical designation for the Jews. Yet, in a spiritual sense, Jews and Gentiles make up the spiritual circumcision or spiritual Israel because they have believed in Messiah (Phil. 3:1-3).
4. The term “the circumcision” is applied to the church; therefore, the church must be the new people of God, carrying on the life of the old people under the New Covenant.

E. James 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1

1. The term “the dispersion” (scattered) is another technical term in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) used to denote the Jews who were dispersed by God among the Gentile nations (Deut. 28:25; 30:4; Jer. 41:17). The term is also found in the New Testament and refers to Jews (John 7:35).
2. In both James 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:1 this term is obviously identified with the church. Again technical Jewish terminology is applied to the church. Obviously in the New Covenant, the Jewish commonwealth has taken on a new and expanded form. The church is spiritual Israel dispersed all over the world and far from their heavenly home. In both James and Peter, the readers may be mainly Jewish but some Gentile believers were certainly included, and these epistles were written to the whole church (both Gentiles and Jews).

F. 1 Peter 2:9-10

1. The Apostle Peter is definitely referring to the church. The terms “chosen people” (Isa. 43:20ff; Deut. 10:15), “a royal priesthood” (Isa. 61:6; 66:21), “a holy nation” (Es. 19:6; Deut. 7:6) and “a people belonging to God” (Isa. 42:16), all refer to Israel in the Old Testament.
2. The church, especially Gentiles who believe, were not a people of God, but now the church (both Jew and Gentile) is in its very essence the people of God (1 Pet. 2:10).

3. The people of God in the Old Testament were the Jews but in the New Testament the people of God are the church (Hos. 1:10; 2:23). The most cherished and particular titles of Israel in the Old Testament are given to the church. Therefore the church is spiritual Israel.

G. Galatians 6:15-16

1. It is grammatically possible to take the “and” (*kai*) and translate it “even.” This would be the explicative use of *kai*. “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” Therefore, “those who walk by this rule” are “the Israel of God” (both Jews and Gentiles).
2. It would be permissible to equate “the Israel of God” with the church in light of other passages in the New Testament which do so (Rom. 2:28-29).
3. Gentiles do not become physical Jews, but Gentiles who trust in Christ become spiritual Jews and have continuity with God’s people in the Old Testament.

H. Romans 4:13

1. By faith Abraham believed God for the Abrahamic Covenant which included a land (Gen. 12:7) and it was to be forever (Gen. 13:15).
2. However, in Romans 4:13, the Apostle Paul says that Abraham “would be heir of the world.” Therefore, the Abrahamic Covenant includes the whole world not just the land of Palestine. Scholars disagree as to whether this is the millennium or the eternal state.
3. Since the Christian (Jew and Gentile) are co-heirs with Christ, it is reasonable to assume that we will inherit the world with Christ (Rom. 8:17).