

Lesson 4

WHEN DID THE CHURCH BEGIN?

The issue among Christian scholars is over whether the church was in the Old Testament and not something entirely new beginning on the Day of Pentecost. It is important, therefore, to locate the beginning of the church.

The implications of the beginning of the church are many. Does the Christian church of this dispensation constitute a unique group of believers, separate and distinct from believers of past and future dispensations? Does the church, instead of inheriting the promises of ancient Israel, have an entirely new and distinct set of promises of its own? Is the church a parenthesis in God's dealing with Israel?

DEFINITION OF CHURCH

The Greek word for "church" is *ekklesia*, which means "the called out ones." Does the word church refer to the elect (called out ones) of all ages, or a body of elect (called out ones) from the Day of Pentecost to the rapture of the church or to the second advent?

AMILLENNIAL CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

The amil believes the church began with Adam or Abraham, and that the New Testament phase of the church had its foundation at the Cross. The Day of Pentecost is merely a continuation and enlargement of spiritual Israel. The church was in seed form in the Old Testament and found its ultimate completion after the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ. They therefore often refer to the Old Testament and New Testament phases of the church.

Definition of Church: An amil takes a broad theological definition of "church" and refers it to salvation of all of God's elect in every age or dispensation. The invisible church is the community of the whole number of the elect that have been, are being and shall be gathered into one body. The church is the effectually called of all ages. An amil stresses the unity and similarities of all saints of all ages but does see some distinctions.

Church is Stated to be in the Old Testament: The New Testament declares that the church was in the Old Testament (Acts 7:38). This should be translated, "This is the one who was in the church in the wilderness . . ." Israel was not just a political entity but also a separated group, a chosen people, a called out congregation.

The Greek Old Testament Used the Word "Church": In the Septuagint (LXX), the Hebrew word for "congregation" translated *ekklesia* (church) about 86 times. The early church read Greek Bible and would immediately see the church was in the Old Testament.

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews translates "congregation" *kahal* with the word church (*ekklesia*), "in the midst of the church I will sing Thy praise" (Heb. 2:12 quoting Psa. 22:22).

The Apostle Paul Taught the Church Was in the Old Testament

The mystery in the Old Testament was not that the church would come into existence but that Jews and Gentiles would be fellow-heirs, fellow-members and fellow-partakers of the church, Christ's body. Jews always thought themselves superior to Gentiles. Ephesians 3:5 states this mystery about Christ (and the church) in other generations "was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to

His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” The as qualifies the statement so as to say the truth of the church was partially revealed in the Old Testament.

Truths of the Church Were Known in the Old Testament: The Jews knew the full salvation in Christ was not for them but for the day of the gospel (1 Pet. 1:19-22). They understood something about the salvation we now enjoy since Christ has come before the church came into existence in its New Testament form.

The Old Testament saints had the gospel preached to them (Gal. 3:8). The gospel preached was not the full gospel of today but there was truth about Christ and man’s need to respond by faith to Him.

Moses knew about Christ (John 5:46-47).

There is one flock of elect people (John 10:16); therefore there can only be one church for all ages. The Gospel Days of the church were foreknown by the prophets (Acts 3:24).

The Church Was in Existence Before Pentecost: There are two mentions of the church, which occur before the Day of Pentecost (Matt. 18:17). Therefore, the church was in existence before Pentecost.

DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIAL CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

The Dispensationalists believes the church began on the Day of Pentecost and will continue until the rapture of the church just before the tribulation period. They see the church as a distinct and unique body, totally separate from Israel of the Old Testament.

Definition of the Church: The church is the body of Christ alone, distinct from Israel of the Old Testament, formed by the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and will exist until the rapture of the church. A Dispensationalist has a far more restricted view of the church than does the amil because he sees the church consisting only of believers in Christ after Pentecost.

Usage of *Ekklesia* in the New Testament: The word *ekklesia* (church) refers to:

1. A secular, political assembly of citizens (Acts 19:39)
2. An assembly of Christians in a local church (Acts 8:1,3; 11:22,26)
3. A group of local churches assembled together (1 Cor. 16:19; Gal. 1:2)
4. Professing Christendom without reference to locality (Acts 12:1; Rom. 16:16)
5. The Body of Christ, composed of all those baptized by the Holy Spirit into the church (1 Cor. 12:13).

The word *ekklesia* means “assembly” and does not have to take the technical meaning of the body of Christ. Therefore, Acts 7:38 may refer only to an assembly in the Old Testament and not to the body of Christ.

The Church Was a Mystery: The Old Testament saints had no understanding of the church as a distinct body of believers, separate from Old Testament believers. This was a mystery hidden until revealed by the Lord Jesus and the Apostles. Ephesians 3:4-6 tells us that the mystery of Christ, the church, is that Gentiles would be fellow-heirs and partakers with the Jews. This was the mystery hidden from the ages. The “as” in “as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets” is not a qualifying phrase but an adjectival phrase giving additional *information*. Furthermore, other Scripture tell us clearly that the church was a mystery hidden from past ages (Col. 1:24-27; Rom. 16:25-26).

Even if it could be proven that the church was revealed in the Old Testament, it cannot be proven that the church was in actual existence in the Old Testament.

The Church Began on the Day of Pentecost

1. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter and the other disciples, “Upon this rock I will build my church.” The future tense indicates that the church was yet future at that time, i.e. during Christ’s public ministry.
2. In Acts 1:5, Jesus said to His disciples, “John indeed baptized with water but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence.”

3. This baptism of the Spirit took place for the first time on the Day of Pentecost, ten days later, and although Acts 2 does not specifically call the event the baptism of the Spirit, it is designated as such by Peter in Acts 11:15-16, when describing the events that took place in the house of Cornelius.
4. The baptism of the Spirit is the means of entrance into the Body of Christ, according to 1 Cor. 12:13, “For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit.”
5. The body of Christ is a term used synonymously for the church, according to Colossians 1:24, “Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body’s sake, which is the church.”
6. Therefore, the church began on the day of Pentecost, when the baptism of the Spirit was took place for the first time.

HISTORIC PREMILLENNIAL CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

A historic premil may side with a premil and see the church in the Old Testament in seed form or he might side with a Dispensationalist and see the church beginning exclusively on the Day of Pentecost.

Church in the Old Testament: Historic premils who see the church in the Old Testament take the same basic interpretation, as do the amils concerning the church. However, they do see something unique and different happening on the Day of Pentecost. With Abraham, God chose to call out His own through one family line, through Israel. At Pentecost, God began to call out His own in all nations. The Old Testament phase of the church would be the incomplete body of Christ and could not be completed until the wall of partition was broken down (Eph. 2:14ff) and Christ the Lord had died and rose again and ascended into heaven to be the Head of the church. This is the organism, which Christ had in mind in Matthew 16:18 when He said, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.” This organism, which was the completed Body of Christ, was not yet in existence. Therefore, the New Testament phase of the church is usually called the Body of Christ; a name, which is only used of the New Testament phase of the church, the Old Testament phase, is commonly called “Israel”. A recognition of this preserves the unity of God’s people in all ages and assigns to them all the comprehensive term “church”, but allows for various phases of the church.

There have been various major visible manifestations of the church. In the patriarchal period families of believers constituted the religious gatherings with the father serving as priest. At the flood the church was saved in the family of Noah and continued especially in the line of Shem. Then when true religion was about to die out, God covenanted with Abraham, separating him and his descendants from the world to be His peculiar people. After the exodus the nation Israel was not only a nation but also constituted the church of God, the Lord calling them “a peculiar treasure unto me above all people,” “a kingdom of priests and an holy nation” (Exo. 20; Deut. 7).

For Israel the church, life and worship of God was regulated down to the minutest detail and salvation was of the Jews. The New Testament church, commonly called the Body of Christ, is essentially one with the Old Testament church. Like all visible manifestations before, it represents a mixture of good and evil. Now, however, the church is worldwide and is not restricted to any one nation. Moreover, the ritual worship of the past is replaced with a more spiritual worship in harmony with the greater privileges of the present age. During the millennium the church will take on still a different outward manifestation. At this time there will be universal peace and righteousness with the sovereign king Jesus Christ ruling from the throne of David over all His subjects.

Church Began at Pentecost: It seems that the New Testament teaching that the church is a new revelation is quite valid. The church began on the Day of Pentecost as the organism of the Body of Christ. The church does seem to be a distinct entity from Israel of the Old Testament. However, this does not prove that Old Testament saints (those who died and those living at Pentecost) are not now part of the church. The Old Testament believers were not part of the church during Old Testament times, but they may have become part of the church at Pentecost. We know that all living Israelites under the old economy were placed into the Body of Christ at Pentecost. Then why not all dead Old Testament saints as well? Christ's death was effective for all Old Testament saints who died, then why not the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit as well?

Dead Israelites would not be less blessed than living Israelites who were alive at Pentecost, would they? Surely their deaths did not bar them from the church and the ultimate relationship to Christ, which Christians enjoy? Dead Israelites would not be relegated to a blessed, but somewhat inferior, position because they died before Pentecost, would they?