

## Q. What is the relationship between the Old Covenant assembly of Israel and the New Covenant assembly of believers?\*

A. To the uninitiated, this might seem like an obscure, academic question. It is, in fact, a highly contentious issue, with each system of theology answering it differently. And the answer one settles on will shape one's theology.

### **The Dispensational View**

According to Dispensational Theology, God has two distinct groups of people: Israel and the church (more properly, the *ekklēsia*). In answer to the question, "What is the sine qua non of dispensationalism?" Dispensational Theologian Charles Ryrie answers that the number one essential distinction is, "*A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct*. This is stated in different ways by both friends and foes of dispensationalism. Fuller says that 'the basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity'" (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995, 2007] 46; the Fuller quote is from Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" [Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957] 25). Ryrie goes on to say, "This distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation" (Ryrie, 47).

Because of this literal interpretation that Dispensationalists follow, they do not believe that Old Testament Israel was the church or was a

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\* This question is usually worded as, "What is the relationship between Israel and the church?" I changed it because, for the sake of accuracy, I wanted to spell out the covenants involved and I wanted to avoid the word "church," which, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is a mistranslation of *ekklēsia*. Within the article, however, I will occasionally use the word "church" because that is the word theologians usually use when discussing this subject.

type of the church. They believe all of God's Old Testament warnings, prophecies, and promises to physical Israel are for physical Israel. Those that, in their opinion, have not yet been fulfilled, are going to be fulfilled upon physical Israel in the future. They do not apply to the church. Also because of this interpretation, Dispensationalists do not use the New Testament to interpret the Old. What is written must be taken literally, and is not to be interpreted. (To read my refutation of this notion, see my article, "The Superiority of Jesus Christ and His New Testament Revelation") (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/ntsuperiorot.htm>).

Concerning the New Covenant, Dispensationalists believe that the New Covenant is primarily or even exclusively for Israel and will come into effect for Israel in what they believe will be the coming millennial age. Dispensationalists disagree, however, "as to whether there is one new covenant or two, whether the church is party to the covenant, related only through the covenant mediator, shares similar blessings, or has nothing at all to do with it" ("Why Do Dispensationalists Have Such a Hard Time Agreeing on the New Covenant?") ([http://www.bbc.edu/council/documents/New\\_Covenant\\_CDH\\_08.pdf](http://www.bbc.edu/council/documents/New_Covenant_CDH_08.pdf)). For a full discussion of these positions, you might want to read the book, *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012).

In summary, Dispensationalism believes that Israel and the church are distinct, Israel was not the church in its immaturity, Israel and the church do not have a type/antitype relationship, God has distinct plans for both, the church is not Israel, God is not finished with his plan for national Israel, God will give Israel an eternal earthly kingdom, and God will give the church an eternal heavenly kingdom.

### **The Covenant/Reformed View**

The Westminster Confession of Faith calls national Israel under the Old Covenant, "a Church under age" (19.3). Commenting on this, Presbyterian theologian Gordon H. Clark writes, "The Church in the Old Testament was the Church as a minor; in its immaturity, though it was the heir, it was placed under a tutorship. But the tutorship was temporary. For Christ fulfilled the old types and his death did away with those preparatory sacrifices. Thus the Church in the New Testament is continuous with the Church in the Old; and since we are Christ's, we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:23; 4:7)" (Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1965] 183).

The key to understanding the Covenant/Reformed Theology view is found in Clark's statement, "Thus the Church in the New Testament is continuous with the Church in the Old." That is, Israel and the church are one.

The detractors of the Covenant/Reformed position sometimes call it replacement theology, representing it as teaching that the church replaced Israel. Yet, I have never heard a serious Covenant Theologian call it this or teach that the church replaced Israel. A replacement would imply two separate things, one replacing the other. But this is not what Covenant/Reformed Theology teaches. More accurately, Covenant/Reformed Theology says that the Old Covenant was a covenant of grace, Israel was the church under the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is a new administration of the covenant of grace (but still essentially the same covenant as the Old Covenant), and the church has now expanded from being national Israel to encompassing believers of all nations. Michael Milton, President of Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, writes, "In the New Testament, the church, or ecclesia, of Christ is one with the qa-hal [Hebrew word for congregation] of God throughout the Old Testament" (Michael Milton, "Engrafted, Not Replaced") (<http://tinyurl.com/qx2tfdl>). A more accepted term for this belief is supersessionism, but some Covenant/Reformed Theologians avoid even this word.

### **The New Covenant Theology View**

New Covenant Theology's position on the relationship between Israel and the church is often mistakenly believed to be the same as that of Covenant/Reformed Theology, or so close to it that they can both be lumped together as replacement or supersessionist theology. For example, in the Theopedia article, "New Covenant Theology" ([http://www.theopedia.com/New\\_Covenant\\_Theology](http://www.theopedia.com/New_Covenant_Theology)), topping the list of items on which New Covenant and Covenant Theology are considered to be in agreement is, "The Church has become spiritual Israel." This is wrong. Covenant Theology and New Covenant Theology are not in agreement on this topic.

Making a similar mistake, Michael J. Vlach, after stating, "both CT [Covenant Theology] and NCT [New Covenant Theology] view the NT [New Testament] church as the only true people of God," he concludes, "Thus, both CT and NCT promote supersessionism" (Michael J. Vlach, "New Covenant Theology Compared with Covenantalism" *The Master's Seminary Journal*, 18/1, Fall 2007, 217)

(<http://tinyurl.com/kg7jlup>). It is true that New Covenant Theology sees the New Testament church (*ekklēsia*) as the only true people of God (other than the remnant few saved during the Old Testament period), but this does not imply that we promote supersessionism, which teaches that Old Covenant Israel was the church in its day.

New Covenant Theology teaches that Israel was never more than a shadow of God's true people. Israel was the type; the New Covenant called out assembly (the *ekklēsia*) is the antitype. New Covenant Theologian, Steve Lehrer, writes, "I do not like the term 'replacement' because of the way it is often used and because of certain misunderstandings that can result from the term. Instead I would rather use the term 'fulfillment theology.' Israel was simply a picture of the true people of God, which the church fulfills" (Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology—questions answered* [2006], 203). I agree.

Lehrer goes on to illustrate this idea with the analogy of a frozen dinner. The picture on the box is not the meal. It only represents the meal. Further,

the food inside does not replace the picture but rather is the reality to which the picture is supposed to lead me. In the same way, Israel was called God's chosen and redeemed people, but they were not chosen for spiritual salvation or redemption from God's wrath. They were always an unbelieving people as a whole (with a tiny remnant of believers always present). So in one sense there never was a true people of God to "replace," but there was an expectation of a true people of God that builds to a crescendo throughout the Old Testament and is finally satisfied in the New Testament. This true people of God actually love Him and are made up of Jews and Gentiles.

Lehrer, 203-204

Israel was no more the genuine *ekklēsia* or the true people of God than circumcision really converted someone or than animal sacrifices truly took away sins. All of these were just Old Testament pictures or types of the reality that would come with the Messiah and His New Covenant.

As Lehrer mentions, there always were a small remnant of believers in Israel. These individuals were truly godly people. But the nation of Israel as a whole was only a picture of the body of God's people that

could not come until after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

**Doesn't Stephen specifically call  
the assembly of Israel the *ekklēsia*?**

Yes, he does. Speaking of Moses to the Jewish Sanhedrin, Stephen says, "This is he who was in the assembly in the wilderness with the angel that spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, who received living oracles to give to us" (Acts 7:38). The word "assembly" is *ekklēsia*. Why does Stephen use that word? Exactly because of what we've learned. Old Testament Israel in the wilderness was a type of the New Testament *ekklēsia*. Like the New Testament *ekklēsia* that God called out of this world of sin, God called Israel out of Egypt. In a physical, typological way, Israel was God's special people, physically assembled before Him. In those places in the Old Testament where English versions refer to Israel as an assembly or a congregation, the Greek Septuagint uses the word *ekklēsia*.

We must bear in mind, though, that the *ekklēsia* of Israel was merely a picture, not the reality. Being called out of Egypt was not the same as being called out of sin. It was only a picture. Assembling before Mount Sinai was only a picture of our assembling at Jerusalem above which is free (Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:18-24).

The Old Testament tells us about sin offerings, but the New Testament tells us, "For it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). The Old Testament sacrifices were only pictures of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that really took away our sins (Hebrews 10:10). We read in the Old Testament of certain meats that, if eaten, can defile a person (Leviticus 11). But they didn't really defile the person. They only pictured defilement. Jesus, in the New Testament, tells us, "There is nothing from outside of the man, that going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are those that defile the man" (Mark 7:15). The Old Testament gave us types that were a shadow of things to come, but the Body that cast those shadows was Jesus Christ (see Colossians 2:16-17). The *ekklēsia* of Israel was one of those types, and it has now been fulfilled by the *ekklēsia* of Christ. As Paul writes, "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

This brings up the important point that it is only in Christ that the New Covenant *ekklēsia* fulfills the picture of the *ekklēsia* of Israel. We are

members of the *ekklēsia* only as we are members of Him: "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:5); and, "to the assembly [*ekklēsia*] of God which is at Corinth; those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, both theirs and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2). It is, therefore, true to say that Jesus Christ is the direct and primary fulfillment of the *ekklēsia* of Israel, and that the New Covenant *ekklēsia* is the fulfillment in a secondary sense, through Christ.

This fulfillment of the Old Testament types by Jesus Christ is the result of His fulfilling the law and the prophets (see Matthew 5:17). These types have now served their purpose, Jesus has fulfilled them, and they have passed away. Just as God will never again use animal sacrifices, He will also never again consider Israel a special nation. As we saw in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "The old things have passed away." Just as Israel was a type to be fulfilled with the coming of Christ, God's promises and prophecies for Israel that were not immediately fulfilled in the Old Testament were also types that awaited fulfillment in Christ (and, in fact, they were fulfilled).

### **What about Romans 11 and the Wild Olive Tree?**

Dispensationalists often cite Romans 11 to support their belief that God deals with the Jews and Gentiles differently and will renew His special relationship with national Israel and literally fulfill His promises to them of a new temple, a restored theocracy, and living peacefully in the Promised Land. To give a line-by-line exegesis of this chapter is beyond the scope of this article. Perhaps I will do this in the future. In the meantime, I ask you to read this chapter and see if you find any promise of a restoration of national Israel, a rebuilding of the temple, a political theocracy, and so forth. You will see none, either in this chapter or anywhere in the New Testament, and the Old Testament passages are merely pictures.

What is missing from the Dispensational view is the fulfillment of the promises and the prophecies in Jesus Christ. Dispensationalism is too focused on Israel, whereas Scripture is centered on and finds its purpose and reality and future in Christ. This is sometimes called Christocentric eschatology. To talk of Israel as the heir of the promises is to miss who Jesus is. No one is the heir of any of the promises to Abraham and the fathers except as that person is in Jesus Christ, the Seed and Heir of all. The Bible never promises anything to

unregenerate, unbelieving, rebellious Israel—beyond what they have already received and then been removed from—except curses.

On the other hand, you will see that the promises are only to the believers, Jew and Gentile alike. Read Romans 4 and notice in verse 13 that the promise that was "to Abraham and to his offspring that he should be heir of the world wasn't through the law"—the very thing that Jews (and too many who call themselves Christians) trust in—"but through the righteousness of faith." Romans 8:17 says that we—believing Jews and Gentiles alike—are all heirs. Why? Because we are "joint heirs with Christ."

How could anyone who is not blind say that the promises to national Israel must, because of physical descent, be literally fulfilled or the Word of God has come to nothing when Romans 9:6-8 says, "But it is not as though the word of God has come to nothing. For they are not all Israel, that are of Israel. Neither, because they are Abraham's seed, are they all children. But, 'In Isaac will your seed be called.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as a seed."

And who is the Seed? "But the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his Seed (it does not say, And to seeds, as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' which is Christ).... And if you are of Christ, then you are a seed of Abraham, even heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:16, 29, LITV). Anyone who thinks that there are promises that deal in a separate way with national Israel apart from Christ and the believers who are in Him as the Seed are sadly mistaken: "For however many are the promises of God, in him is the 'Yes.' Therefore also through him is the 'Amen,' to the glory of God through us" (2 Corinthians 1:20). To repeat the point, quoting from another version of Galatians 3:16, God is not dealing with two separate groups, Jews and Gentiles, the church and Israel: "He doesn't say, 'To descendants', as of many, but as of one, 'To your offspring', which is Christ." All are one in Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Do you want a promised land? I'm sorry, it was only typological. How about settling for the reality: all things! "[God] has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:2); "He put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things for the assembly [*ekklesia*]" (Ephesians 1:22); "The one

overcoming will inherit all things, and I will be God to him, and he will be the son to Me" (Revelation 21:7, LITV).

Do you want a temple and a priesthood and sacrifices? Those in the Old Testament were merely shadows of the reality we now have. "Don't you know that you are a temple of God, and that God's Spirit lives in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16); "So then you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God, being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone; in whom the whole building, fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22); "You also, as living stones, are built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Does Romans 11 say that God did not reject national Israel? No. It says, "God didn't reject his people, which he foreknew" (verse 2). Whom did He foreknow? "For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. Whom he predestined, those he also called. Whom he called, those he also justified. Whom he justified, those he also glorified" (Romans 8:29-30). This is not carnal, national Israel. This is Jesus Christ and the elect in Him, "even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and without blemish before him in love; having predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his desire" (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Those of national Israel whom Paul has in mind in Romans 11 are the "remnant according to the election of grace" (verse 5), not national Israel as a whole. Remember, "they are not all Israel, that are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). But the unbelievers were broken off the tree (Romans 11:20). Yet, they, "if they don't continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in" (verse 23). So, by the grafting in of these believing Jews and when "the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (verse 25), "so all Israel will be saved" (verse 26). "All Israel will be saved" doesn't mean that all national Israel will be saved. It means that all spiritual Israel will be saved, Jews and Gentiles alike, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit not in the letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:28-29).



Remember what Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). The people God has called out from all nations, His *ekklēsia*, are now His chosen race, His royal priesthood, His holy nation, the people for His own possession—all of the points that Israel could once claim, but only typologically. Israel pictured what the *ekklēsia* became at Pentecost and remains today. It may be composed of people of many nations, but once in the *ekklēsia*, they become God's holy nation.

### **Conclusion**

So, what is the relationship between the Old Covenant assembly of Israel and the New Covenant assembly of believers? It is one of type and antitype, shadow and reality. The Old Covenant *ekklēsia* was never any more true Israel than the picture on the cardboard box of frozen food is the real food. The New Covenant *ekklēsia* is not a continuation of Old Covenant Israel, for this would make it a continuation of a shadow. Neither did the New Covenant *ekklēsia* replace Old Covenant Israel because Old Covenant Israel was never true Israel in the first place. Old Covenant Israel only pictured what the New Covenant *ekklēsia* has now fulfilled as the true Israel of God.

*For in Christ Jesus neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. As many as walk by this rule, peace and mercy be on them, and on God's Israel.*

Galatians 6:15-16