

Israel and the Church

The distinction between Israel and the church is the theological *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism. Yet in recent Progressive Dispensational writings, this distinction has become less clear. This is because they claim that the church is fulfilling promises made to Israel or at least they have argued for partial fulfillment. This claim is problematic for two reasons. First, the claim is not clear. Does it mean that a promise is *fulfilled in part*? The Davidic covenant is fulfilled in part since Jesus was born and anointed the Davidic heir. But neither the leaders accepted Jesus' claim to be king at the triumphal entry nor was he enthroned on the Davidic throne by Israel (Deut. 17:15). Thus the promised Davidic heir came but neither the kingdom nor the throne appeared. The other possibility is that there is *partial fulfillment*. But was Jesus partially the Davidic heir? Was Jesus partially enthroned? This seems unlikely. So neither option is a valid alternative of fulfillment.

Second and logically, a covenant as a whole cannot be fulfilled and not fulfilled at the same time. The only logical option is that the church has replaced Israel and fulfills the covenants with Israel. But Progressive Dispensationalism rejects that option. So they have failed to show clearly the nature of the relationship between Israel and the church.

To appreciate the distinction between Israel and the church, it is important to first recognize the similarity between the two. To be viewed as distinct, they must be both similar in some sense and distinct in others. The similarity involves both being the *people of God* at distinct times in history who are called to be *stewards* to *serve* God. The distinction concerns the *revelation* of that which they are *stewards*. This latter distinction accentuates the incompatibility between Classic and Progressive Dispensationalists. As stewards each is entrusted with revelation which both forms their historic identity and which they are to manage as stewards. So *Israel* is formed first by the Mosaic Covenant and then by the New Covenant. They are responsible to manage the covenants of promise (Abrahamic and Davidic) as a covenant people (Exod. 19:5, 6). On the other hand, the *church* is formed by Spirit baptism resulting from Christ's finished work on the cross. Then they are entrusted with the responsibility of the Spirit's ministries and manage the teaching of the Apostles. This is the thesis we hope to defend. So first we will examine the similarities and then we will examine the differences.

One Way of Salvation

At every period in biblical history, the people of God are saved by grace through faith. There is One Gospel. While Ryrie recognized God as the common object of faith, he did not clarify that the content of faith includes one provided by God who would bring blessing.¹ He

¹ Charles C Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995). "The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in various dispensations" (115).

would also be included as an object of faith. That content was introduced in Abraham “through whom all nations would be blessed” (Gen. 12:3b). It was not clear at first whether the blessing was through Abraham personally or through Abraham’s progeny. That clarification was introduced when God promised him an offspring to whom blessing would come (Gen. 12:7). Yet the ultimate identity of that offspring was not clear. Caird called it a “situation vacant” promise.² Abraham would have an offspring whom God would bless but it was not known through the promise who that offspring would be.

So some time later, God promised Abraham a great reward (Gen. 15:1), which confused Abraham. No offspring had yet been provided by God so Abraham sought to resolve God’s silence by himself. The vacancy would be filled by Eliezar of Damascus, but that seemed like no real inheritance for Abraham. For as much as he shared with Eliezer, he was not family. So God repeated his promise and specified that the offspring would come from Abraham’s own body (Gen. 15: 5). Only then is it recorded that Abraham *believed* God and his promise of a physical heir to be blessed. And in direct connection with that clarification, Abraham was declared to be righteous (Gen. 15:6). Paul would later call God’s promise to Abraham the *Gospel* (Gal. 3:8 quoting Gen. 12:3 and 18:18). It is the Gospel in that it is the same type of promise, which is now fully clarified as the *sensus plenius* of the Gospel: God who promised and the heir who provided God’s blessing, Jesus the Messiah.

This promise would be the Gospel for Israel as they awaited the “situation vacant” promise to be fulfilled (Gal. 3:6, 7). In the progress of revelation, the same type of promise was repeated with the Passover lamb. It was a promise of God and a provision from God through whom blessing would come. The provision was a lamb that would be slaughtered and the benefit applied to that household when the blood marked their house. The benefit was the blessing of the firstborn being delivered from the death angel. Thus it was the same type of promise. God’s blessing came to those who believed God and who believed in the provision of God. And the “situation vacant” allowed God to fill in during the progress of revelation both an offspring of Abraham and the sacrifice of the provision.

Both the offspring and the sacrifice became fully evident when Jesus Christ filled in the situation vacant promise to bring God’s blessing. Now the *token*, the Gospel was specified in *sensus plenius* rather than a change in the identity of promise in *sensus plenior*. We believe that Jesus Christ is God’s promised provision for salvation of all who believe (Eph. 2:8, 9). In addition, this completed revelation forms the church to be created in Christ Jesus for good works that they might walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

This same message will be the Gospel for the residents of Jerusalem in the future. They will mourn as they look in faith toward the Messiah whom they have pierced (Zech. 12:10-14). So the same type of promise constitutes the Gospel in any dispensation of biblical history. And

² G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 57.

thus true to their historical period, they are *one people of God* based on God's provision of blessing in and through Jesus Christ. He is both the content and object of faith in the Gospel.

One Way of Stewardship

Throughout the dispensations in biblical history, God called *stewards* to *serve* through the revelation with which they were entrusted. Peter recognized this common stewardship between Israel and the church. Addressing the church, he described their service in figurative language, used in the Old Testament to define Israel as God's servant in a literal sense (1 Peter 2:9, 10). Both are called "to proclaim the praises of the One who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light." This is the *service* of stewards whether in Israel or the Church.

Peter described the church in these terms; "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession" (1 Peter 2:9). This description applies after that generation of Israelites had rejected the living stone and thus stumbled over the stone. "The stone that the builders rejected – this One has become the chief corner stone" (1 Peter 2:6, 7). That generation of unbelieving Jews (those who stumbled over the stone, 1 Peter 2:8) did not exclude a remnant of believing Jews scattered throughout the region of Jerusalem (1 Peter 1:2). He further described the people (1 Peter 2:10) in terms that Hosea used to describe Israel about to go into the Assyrian captivity; "once you were not a people" (Hosea 1:8). Then by contrast, he described them as recipients of God's mercy; "now you are God's people; ...now you have received mercy" (Hosea 1:9; 2:23). This description does not claim fulfillment of Hosea, but rather both experience the necessary work of God. The church did not replace Israel nor fulfill their calling.³ Rather they shared a common calling as stewards to serve based on God's provision, but they were entrusted with *distinct revelation* of which they were *stewards*.

Distinct Revelation in Stewardship

Paul stated clearly in writing *to* the church that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable *for*" the church (2 Tim. 3:16). Further, he wrote "all these things happened *to* them as examples and are written *for our* admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11). So there is a distinction between Scripture *written to* and Scripture *written for* God's people. As *stewards*, only Scripture *written to* them is *entrusted to* them. Yet all Scripture is profitable *for* all the people of God. The Scripture addressed *to* a historic people of God is not only entrusted *to* them but also *forms* them collectively as God's people on earth

Israel

³ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2010).

Historically, Israel was heir to the promises initially revealed to the patriarchs. But they were also *entrusted* with the Mosaic covenant. What did this mean? The covenant was a partnership defined by the obligations of the law. Israel accepted the responsibility of that arrangement (Exodus 19:7; 24:3). While the promises sketch out God's plan for history, yet the covenant with Abraham continued to speak to his heirs. As partners under the Mosaic covenant, they would receive what was promised contingent upon obedience to the law (Joshua 1:3-9). Following generations of disobedience, which reached a climax in disobedient kings, the prophets announced that the covenant partnership was broken (Hosea 1:6, 9 and Jeremiah 31:31). The people were deported as captives into Gentile nations.

Jeremiah also announced that at some future time, Israel would be entrusted with the new covenant to frame their national partnership (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Thus it is misleading to claim that "the church is a parenthesis of the program of biblical history."⁴ Rather there is a parenthesis in Israel's national stewardship (Daniel 9:24-26, 27).

Israel's responsibility under the law came into unique focus in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. He claimed that he would fulfill the law's individual responsibility (Matthew 5:17-20). As a result, "Christ is the *end* of the *law* for righteousness to *everyone* who believes" (Romans 10:4). For Jesus, however, his righteousness earned him a death sentence, from Israel's point of view (John 19:6, 7). From God's point of view, Jesus bore the penalty for human sin, defined under the law (Galatians 3:13). "He was delivered up according to God's determined plan and foreknowledge, you [Israel] used lawless people [Rome] to nail Him to the cross and kill Him" (Acts 2:23).

So flawless obedience under the law did not earn blessings that God had promised, but it did position Jesus by faith in the Father's favor (Psalms 22:1-21, 22-31). Thus, "God raised Him up, ending the pains of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24 and Psalms 16:8-11). As Peter recognized concerning Jesus' ascension, it was *necessary* for heaven to receive Messiah as a climax to his first advent. However, it might have been short lived, as the kingdom was again offered to Jewish people in Jerusalem (Acts 3:17-21). But the leadership rejected the kingdom in Jesus name (Acts 4:10-12).

Transition

The transfer of blessing addressed to Israel to the church was not immediately clear but involved a *transition*. That *transition* was focused on Jesus Christ. The ascended Lord received the promise of the Father to his Son, Heir to Israel's inheritance (Acts 1:5). And the down payment of that inheritance was the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). However, the pentecostal pouring out of the Holy Spirit happened once, but the Spirit's works were diverse. One work was explained by Joel 2:28-32 and was included in Peter's message addressed to "the men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem" (Acts 2:14). Joel announced that those receiving the poured out

⁴ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 143.

Holy Spirit would *prophesy* (Acts 2:17, 18) before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord (Acts 2:20). The other work of the Spirit *added* believers to the one hundred and twenty along with the twelve apostles (2:41, 47; 4:4). Later, Peter explained that the pouring out of the Spirit involved *Spirit baptism* (11:15, 16) which *added* believers to a body called the church (2:47, majority text).

Church

The *transitional* ministry of the Holy Spirit noted above had been introduced by John the Baptist's message concerning Messiah's ministry (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). A portion of that message was later repeated by the resurrected Lord speaking to his disciples (Acts 1:5). The actual *transition* would begin to happen after the Lord was ascended.

James D. G. Dunn has proposed an intriguing synopsis of the *transition* featuring the shared message between John and Jesus.⁵ While his interpretation of the *transition* will be used as the basis of our argument about the formation of the church, still there are aspects of his construct that will not be used.

The basis of the composite interpretation is that the revelation of Spirit-baptism does not appear in the Old Testament. Dunn concludes that Jewish tradition prior to John the Baptist does not have an expectation of the Spirit as a gift from Messiah.⁶ While Saucy does not regard that as significant,⁷ yet they both accept that John gave birth to the metaphor, "baptized in Spirit."⁸ So we will conclude that the revelation concerning the formation of the church was introduced in the New Testament as a result it is an event of which the Old Testament said nothing.

John's message compared and contrasted his own baptism in *water* with Messiah's baptism in the *Holy Spirit* and *fire* (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:11). Dunn interprets John's metaphor in the context of Jewish apocalypticism, but the contexts of biblical uses of the metaphor by John and Jesus are to be preferred for primary consideration.

Fire speaks of judgment in John's message to his generation (Matthew 3:10, 12; Luke 3:9, 17). Dunn then contends that there is a relationship between Jesus' interpretation of his own ministry of judgment (Luke 12:49, 50) and John's message of judgment. "The Baptist's prediction about the Coming One was accepted by Jesus . . . in v. 49 Jesus depicts himself as the

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 2: *Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 93-117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99-101.

⁷ Saucy: "While the Old Testament prophecies depict the Spirit as coming from God and never expressly from Messiah. . . it is not difficult to see how John could look upon the Messiah as the means of the coming Spirit" (*Ibid.*, 176-77).

⁸ Dunn, *Christ and the Spirit*, 103-17.

eschatological dispenser of fire in line with the Baptist's prediction; in v. 50 Jesus seems to depict himself rather as the one who must endure eschatological baptism."⁹

The next time Jesus spoke of the disciples' baptism, it was after the cross when Jesus endured baptism with fire, thus the disciples benefiting from Jesus' death, they will *only* be baptized with/in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). At the same time, Peter used related language speaking to the people in Jerusalem and warned them of national eschatological judgment on that generation (Acts 2:19-21; 39, 40). While Christ had borne the fire of judgment upon himself on the cross, that generation would bear the responsibility of collective judgment (AD 70) from Christ (Luke 21:20-24). In addition, there would be a climactic collective judgment from Christ as well (Matt. 24:15-31; Luke 21:25-28).

In relating the interpretations of various constructions of baptism in the Spirit, Dunn posits a plausible Pauline synthesis. *First*, John's comparisons, water and Spirit are parallel in substance. Jesus would immerse a repentant believer in the river of the Spirit. *Second*, Paul specified a significant new dimension. That river of the Spirit formed them *into one body* (1 Corinthians 12:13). Earlier Paul had used the metaphor in an explicit fashion, "*baptized into Christ*," "putting on Christ" (Galatians 3:27).¹⁰ This was the truth that Saul had been exposed to on the road to Damascus. Paul's *persecution* of Jesus in heaven (Acts 9:3, 4) happened when he *persecuted* believers on earth. So Paul would describe that union between believers and Christ as caused by Spirit baptism just as Luke had expressed (Acts 1:5; 11:16).

Third, Dunn recognized the synthesis as involving baptism into Christ's body that included baptism into Christ's personal experiences on earth (Roman 6:3). Baptism is "a metaphor of judgment . . . it is in one sense already past; but in another sense it is a continuing aspect of the relationship with Christ."¹¹ The Spirit of baptism into Christ's death and burial also implied blessing, that "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life" (Romans. 6:4, 5). While believers await their bodily resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:2, 23), now they are spiritually resurrected and enabled to live in a new life in the power of the Spirit's indwelling. This speaks of the church's partnership with Christ. The believer both participates in Christ's death and resurrection in the Spirit and also invests himself to live in these truths. He is a steward of this truth and manages his life by "putting on Christ."

While Dunn follows many commentators and attributes Christ's ministry of Spirit baptism to his own anointing, the Pauline synthesis and the account in Acts attributes it to Christ's ascension. Peter and Jesus attribute the gift to Jesus' exaltation to the right hand of God where he received "from the Father the promised Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33). The unique gift of a father is a father's promise of inheritance to his heirs. Thus it is not without significance that Paul would say, "you were also sealed with the *promised* Holy Spirit. He is the down

⁹ Ibid., 110.

¹⁰ Ibid., 114, 115.

¹¹ Ibid., 116.

payment of our *inheritance*, for the redemption of the possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13, 14).

Conclusion

Why is it *essential* to recognize a *distinction* between Israel and the church? There are two reasons.

First, there is a distinct *revelation* entrusted to them. Israel was addressed by covenant revelation which was entrusted to them as partners. This revelation anticipated Messiah. That revelation which anticipated Messiah’s advent was *fulfilled in part*. That revelation which spoke of Messiah’s ministry on behalf of Israel was *not yet fulfilled*. On the other hand, the church would be stewards of the revelation concerning Messiah’s finished first advent work. So in the progress of revelation, there is a dispensation of *law* entrusted to Israel and there would be a dispensation of *grace* entrusted to the church.

Second, the two stewards are distinct in historic *identity*. Israel is a national/ethnic people formed as covenant partners who were called to service. That service is enumerated in covenants of which Israel alone is party (Romans 9:4). The covenants were realized *in part* in Messiah’s first advent. He was the seed of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). He was the heir of David whose right to rule was rejected by that generation of Israel. Yet, Messiah’s right to rule has not been lost and will be realized at his Second Advent. Since the ethnic people who were party to the covenants continue to exist; thus they await the *consummation* of the promissory covenants. Thus Israel is *not replaced* but will reign with Christ.

The church is the gathering of elect believers, both Jews and Gentiles with equal status, in each generation until Messiah’s Second Advent. While the church is called to serve on earth as Christ’s body, that service does *not fulfill* the call of the national /ethnic people. The Church will be raptured to accompany Christ in His second advent to share in His subsequent mediatorial reign on earth. The church participates as the bride of Christ. Redeemed Israel will remain on earth to reign with Christ and *fulfill* their call to service in the kingdom as His new covenant partners.