

# Biblical Theology versus Dispensationalism

## The relationship between Israel and the Church examined

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Being raised in various evangelical, dispensational churches, I was taught that the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 was the beginning of the fulfillment of end times prophecy. God had two plans for two peoples. The Church of Jesus Christ was the “great parenthesis” in God’s plan for ethnic Israel. After the rapture, God would resume His plan for the Jews and establish His throne during Christ’s millennial reign on earth.

Popular dispensational theologian Charles Ryrie, in his book *Dispensationalism Today*<sup>1</sup>, asserts that first and most importantly, the essence of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the church. Keith Mathison, in his book *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, argues that dispensationalism may be defined as “that system of theology which sees a fundamental distinction between Israel and the church. This distinction is the cornerstone of dispensational theology.”<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we primarily seek to examine the relationship between *Israel* and *the Church*. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into all the various teachings of dispensationalism, to recount its history in detail, or to refute it point by point. Instead, we will focus on the teachings of God’s Word and show that the New Testament, especially the epistles of the apostle Paul, teach a covenant theology that is radically different from dispensationalism. Far from desiring conflict, our hope is that this paper might both reveal the error of the dispensational system and also set forth the truth of God’s Word, with the goal of promoting true Christian unity. It is our purpose to explain what Reformed or covenantal theology is and why we believe that this is exactly what the Scriptures teach. We pray that the Holy Spirit may speak to you in and through His Word, reforming you and conforming your beliefs to the teachings of the Word of God alone.

### Scripture

We begin this study with Scripture. Scripture is axiomatic; it is our starting point and our ending point. Protestant Christians all agree that there are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament. Based on the number of pages in the Christian Bible, the Old Testament comprises 944 pages and the New Testament comprises 275 pages of the 1219 pages of Holy Scripture<sup>3</sup>. This means that the Old Testament is approximately 77.5% of the Bible and the New Testament is about 22.5% of the Bible. So the New Testament is a small (but not by any means unimportant) part of God’s Word.

Conservative, Bible-believing Christians—whether they be Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, evangelical, or non-denominational—agree that the Bible is inspired by God (God-breathed), inerrant (without error), and infallible (never-failing). In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the apostle Paul explained, “All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God [God-breathed], and *is* profitable for

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<sup>1</sup> (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> (New Jersey: P&R, 1995), 8.

<sup>3</sup> These numbers are based on a New King James translation, without any study notes or added features.

doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.”<sup>4</sup>

Bible-believing Christians affirm that the Bible is all-sufficient, as the apostle Peter explained that “His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue” (2 Peter 1:3). Scripture is the only infallible rule for faith and practice, for what we believe about God and for how we live our lives.

Despite all these beliefs about Holy Scripture that conservative Protestants profess to have in common, there is a troubling reality. Dispensationalists have a radically different understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and of the role and meaning of the Old Testament (~ 77.5% of Holy Scripture) for Christian believers today. For the dispensationalist, the Old Testament was written primarily for the Jews, and Israel is very distinct from the new covenant Church. For the Reformed, Calvinist, covenantal Christian, the Old Testament was written for Jews and Christians, and the Church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel of God.

Many dispensationalists wrongly label covenant theology a “replacement theology,” claiming that we teach that the church has replaced Israel. Some talk as though this is nearly blasphemy or heresy, because they believe ethnic / national Israel is still God’s chosen people.

Yet, in reality, covenant theology teaches that the church of Jesus Christ is Israel. We believe that the prophecies regarding Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled in the new covenant Church. God’s promises for Jerusalem are fulfilled in the new Jerusalem, the Jerusalem above. We believe that the Israel of God is the Church of Christ, with Jew and Gentile united together as one body.

Where do we (Calvinist, Reformed, covenant theology folks) get such ideas? From man’s tradition, human wisdom, or mythology? From some Reformed hermeneutic that John Calvin and other theologians created? No, we believe this because this is what the New Testament teaches. Thus, we argue that Reformed theology may properly be called Biblical theology.

Starting in the 1800s, there was a pronounced division among evangelical Christians in regard to how we interpret the Word of God. (This school of study is known as hermeneutics.) A new method of interpretation called dispensationalism arose around the 1830s among various Protestant churches and was adopted widely by Baptists, Pentecostals, and many non-denominational churches in the later 1800s and 1900s. Dispensationalism teaches that God works in different ways in different periods of history. Extreme dispensationalism denies that God saves the Jews by the same Christian gospel that saves us today. Dispensationalists believe that God’s eternal plan is for ethnic Jews and for the nation of Israel in the Middle East (re-established in 1948). They claim that the Church of Christ is “the great parenthesis” (interruption) in God’s eternal plan for Israel (by which they mean ethnic Jews / the Jewish nation).

Reformed Christians respond that we are nothing more and nothing less than Bible-believing Christians. We do not believe we have the authority to impose a manmade system of

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<sup>4</sup> Most Scripture quotations are from: *The New King James Version* (NKJV) © 1984 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

interpretation onto God's Holy Word, which is what we believe dispensationalists have done.<sup>5</sup> In agreement with the Westminster Confession of Faith<sup>6</sup>, written by the Presbyterians in England in 1646-1647, we believe:

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 7: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all;(1) yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.(2) (1)2 Pet. 3:16. (2)Ps. 119:105,130."

Some things in Scripture are more difficult than others. The doctrine of salvation is clearly taught in the Gospels and in Paul's letters like Romans and Galatians, so that "the unlearned" (those not well-taught in the Scriptures) may attain a sufficient understanding to be saved. Yet, there are many teachings in Scripture (that are widely rejected by many professing Christians today) which are not as easily understood. Many of these teachings can be found in the writings of the apostle Paul, especially in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. The apostle Peter not only affirmed that Paul's writings were the word of God but also he acknowledged that poorly taught Christians, false teachers, and their followers might have difficulty with Paul's teachings. Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:15-16: "and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures."

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 9: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.(1) (1)2 Pet. 1:20,21; Acts 15:15,16."

The Westminster Confession affirms that there is only one true and full interpretation of any Scripture. And the only unfailing way to interpret Scripture is to let the Scripture interpret itself. The Old Testament (the first 77.5% of God's Word) provides us the basis for rightly understanding the New Testament. Therein, the will of God and the gospel of God are found, albeit in incomplete form. The New Testament provides us the clear and fuller revelation we need to understand the Old Testament more fully and as God intended. That which is explicit must interpret that which is implicit or less clear. That which is plain must interpret that which is symbolic.

Unlike dispensationalism, which imposes a manmade hermeneutic on Scripture, covenant or Reformed theology uses Scripture alone to interpret Scripture.

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<sup>5</sup> Far from interpreting the Scriptures literally, it is our belief that dispensationalists have been led astray by their use of a manmade, extra-Biblical system of Bible interpretation, which, among other things, contradicts the teachings of the New Testament.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the Westminster Confession of Faith is not a tradition or system of interpretation that we are imposing on Scripture. Rather, it is a confession of what Bible-believers (including Reformed, covenantal, Presbyterian) Christians have believed throughout the centuries since the time of Christ and the apostles.

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 10: “The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.(1) (1)Matt. 22:29,31; Eph. 2:20; Acts 28:25.”

The Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the supreme Judge of all religious controversies and disputes. As the late Dr. D. James Kennedy<sup>7</sup> once said, “God directs us through His Word. As long as we follow Scripture, we can be certain we’re traveling the right path.” As soon as we deviate from the teachings of Scripture, we can have no certainty that what we believe is true or well-pleasing to God. If we follow Scripture alone and reject the doctrines and traditions of men, then we know that we are on the right path.

Biblical Christianity is based on the Bible alone. The Bible teaches that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). If everyone humbles himself before the word of God, there should be few if any denominational divisions. The only divisions we might see would be based on geography and language.

Biblical Christianity tells us that *all* of God's Word is essential truth. If all that was essential was a tract or pamphlet, then that is all God would have given us, but instead He gave us sixty-six books and commanded us to live by *all* of them (Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).

It is not enough for Christians to study Gospel tracts or just the New Testament. God gave us the sixty-six books of Holy Scripture. Yet, sadly, most evangelical churches today do not follow the apostle Paul’s example in studying and proclaiming “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). If you accept the dispensational premise that the Old Testament is really not for Christians but primarily for the Jews, then you will not study the Old Testament in the same way or to the same degree. The New Testament quotes heavily from the Old Testament and applies it to the Christian church today. Reformed Christians read the Old Testament very differently than dispensationalists, because we believe that Jews and Gentiles are part of God’s one, true church, saved by the one and only gospel.

As Paul taught, we must declare the whole counsel of God. The Bible teaches that in a profound way Jesus Christ *is* the word of God (John 1). Therefore, to reject any part of God’s revealed will, the Bible, is to reject Jesus Christ who is God. Jesus Christ is “the truth” (John 14:6). He said to God the Father, “Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:17). The Bible says of the resurrected Christ: “His name is called The Word of God” (Rev. 19:13). The Psalmist declared that God’s “law is truth,” His “commandments are truth,” and “the entirety of [His] word is truth” (Ps. 119:142, 151, 160). God’s word is the “word of truth” (Ps. 119:43; Eph. 1:13; 2 Tim. 2:15; Jas. 1:18). In all of these instances, truth means absolute truth. The Bible does not just speak of a truth but of absolute truth because God is infinitely true; He does not lie. He is sinless (Heb. 4:15), and He cannot lie (Tit. 1:2).

## **The Gospel**

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<sup>7</sup> Pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. As quoted from D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe, *New Every Morning* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 1996), “January 4 Direction and Guidance.”

The gospel is the good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. To be saved, you must trust in the work of Christ—that He lived a perfect life, was crucified upon the cross, died, was buried, was raised from the dead on the third day, and ascended into heaven; that He was God and man, the Lord of glory. You must trust in Christ alone as your only hope of eternal life and heaven.

We now have the full light of the gospel of Christ, the same gospel that existed since God told the serpent in the “first gospel” (*proto-evangelium*) in Genesis 3:15: “And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed [Christ]; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”

Bible-believing Christians believe that there is only one gospel, preached under the old and new covenants, in the Old and New Testaments, for Israel and for the Church.

**Noah** was justified by faith alone: “By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7; cf. 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5).

**Abraham** was justified by faith alone: “What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something* to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.” (Romans 4:1-4)

The same gospel was preached by **Moses** to the Israelites at the time of the Exodus: “For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, *was it* not all who came out of Egypt, *led* by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? *Was it* not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness? And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. **For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith** in those who heard *it*.” (Hebrews 3:16-4:2, emphasis added).

**David** was justified by faith alone: “But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: “Blessed *are those* whose lawless deeds are forgiven, And whose sins are covered; Blessed *is the* man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”” (Romans 4:5-8)

So Reformed or covenant theology takes the New Testament seriously; we interpret it literally<sup>8</sup>. There is one gospel. Under the old covenant, believers were justified by faith in the promised

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<sup>8</sup> While we have repeatedly argued that Reformed theology interprets the New Testament literally, we also acknowledge various genres of literature (e.g., poetical, analogical, apocalyptic). Paul’s allegory or analogical account in Galatians 4 must be interpreted through the rest of the New Testament which is written in a less symbolical manner. The symbols and numbers of the book of Revelation must be interpreted through the rest of Scripture, not in isolation. What is clear and explicit must interpret what is less clear or implicit. The New Testament must be viewed with an understanding of the foundation and

Messiah, apart from the works of the law. God did not save people in different ways during different dispensations or epochs in redemptive history.

### Paul's Epistles

Since God has revealed His will in the Scriptures alone and since the Bible is all-sufficient, the twenty-seven books of the New Testament provide the Biblical Christian with the only tools or key available to unlock the meaning of the Old Testament. The book of Hebrews enables us to understand the old covenant and the Old Testament rightly, as well as to see how Christ fulfills the ceremonial law and the old covenant, bringing about a new and better covenant.

Yet, in terms of understanding the identity of the Church and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, Paul's epistles to the Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians provide invaluable insights, which I believe prove the Reformed, covenantal interpretation of Scripture to best reflect what God's Word teaches.

The ceremonial law of the old covenant could not save anyone. The law, ceremonial worship, animal sacrifices, priesthood, tabernacle, temple—they all were ordained by God to show men their sin and their need for a Savior. Old covenant believers were justified by faith in the coming Messiah, the promised Seed. Paul says in Galatians 3:24: "Therefore the law was our tutor [schoolmaster, disciplinarian] to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

Those who sought to be justified by keeping the law were always spiritually blind. True religion was never about being saved by your works, by sacrifices, or by rituals. God always looked to the heart for obedience that flowed from a heart of faith:

**1 Samuel 15:22:** "Then Samuel said: "Has the LORD *as great* delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, As in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams."

### Romans

In Romans, chapter 2, the apostle Paul expresses this same truth, when he says:

For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. Therefore, if an uncircumcised man keeps the righteous requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision? And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, *even with your written code and circumcision, are* a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that 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 2:25-29)

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background of the Old Testament. And, yet, the New Testament must always be allowed to interpret and re-define the Old Testament for a new purpose today. While dispensationalists have used the Old Testament prophets to justify some of their interpretations, we believe that the New Testament (e.g., Jesus, Paul, Peter, Hebrews) provides the correct Christian interpretation of these passages. If we allow the Old Testament to contradict the New, then we risk becoming a cult like the Judaizers rather than a Biblical, Christian church. A Christian church must hold to the teachings of the entire New Testament, as well as the Old.

Physical circumcision was indeed important for the Jews; it was the sacrament marking their entrance into the covenant community, their inclusion among the assembly of God's people. And, yet, an uncircumcised Gentile who had true faith was superior to a physically circumcised ethnic Jew who was a transgressor of the law. The New Testament explains what it means to be a Jew, and Paul, to an extent, redefines what it means to be a Jew. A true Jew, as defined by the New Testament, is *inwardly* a Jew and true circumcision is spiritual ("of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter"). Already, in the second chapter of Romans, we see that what once divided Jew from Gentile was becoming obsolete. The sacrament of physical circumcision was abolished with the coming of Christ, because it was fulfilled in Christ.

In Colossians 2:11-15, the apostle Paul teaches us that spiritual circumcision has the same essential meaning as spiritual baptism:

and **in Him** [in Christ] **you were** also **circumcised** with a **circumcision made without hands**, in the removal of the body of the flesh by **the circumcision of Christ**; having been **buried with Him in baptism**, in which you were also **raised up with Him through faith** in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us *and* which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him. (NAS, emphasis added)

Paul here compares **spiritual circumcision** ("a circumcision made without hands") and **spiritual baptism** (cf. Col. 2:13; Eph. 2:5-6). Physical circumcision never saved a Jew. A true Jew, a spiritual Jew, is one who has been born of the Spirit, born from above—born again. Circumcision, like baptism, was only an outward sign of an inward reality of faith. Water baptism is only an outward sign of spiritual baptism.

In Romans, chapter 3, Paul questions the advantage of being a Jew and the profit of physical circumcision. He affirms that they were at a great advantage "because to them were committed the oracles of God" (Rom. 3:2). They had the Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—approximately 77.5% of the whole counsel of God that we have.

Paul then explains that the Gentiles (non-Jews) are no better than Jews, for we "are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9). No Jew (or Gentile) was ever saved by keeping the moral, ceremonial, or civil laws of Israel: "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh shall be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20).

So "now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe" (Rom. 3:21). **For "there is no difference" between Jews and Gentiles**; "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:22b-26).

There is one gospel for Jew and Gentile, the gospel of justification by faith alone, just as there always has been: "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (Rom. 3:28).

There is only one Lord, only one gospel, and only one bride of Christ, which is the Church: "Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (Rom. 3:29-30).

The old covenant dispensation of the everlasting covenant of grace made with Abraham was a covenant of grace, with the same gospel. Abraham was not just the father of ethnic Jews or regenerate, believing Jews; no, he was the father of all believers—Jew and Gentile:

**Romans 4:13-18:** "For the promise that he would be **the heir of the world** was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but **through the righteousness of faith**. For if those who are of the law *are* heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression. **Therefore it is of faith** that *it might be according to grace*, so that **the promise** might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to **those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all** (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed -- God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became **the father of many nations**, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be.""

All true believers, Jew and Gentile, are the sons of Abraham. Ethnic Jews are physical descendants of Abraham, who received the special covenantal blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. But those who are the true circumcision, those who have Abraham's saving faith—only these are the true, children of Abraham.

Why does the Scripture teach us repeatedly of Abraham's faith—that "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3, 22)? "Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:23-25). We are justified by faith alone, just as our father Abraham was.

Dispensationalism draws a major dichotomy between the new covenant Church and ethnic Jews. So let us pause here and consider further: who are Abraham's children? The Pharisees thought that they were Abraham's children because they had the Law of God, along with their manmade traditions. How did God view them? When the Pharisees said to Jesus, "Abraham is our father," Jesus, who is God, replied:

"If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this. You do the deeds of your father." Then they said to Him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father -- God." Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of Myself, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of *your* father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and *does not* stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own



*resources, for he is a liar and the father of it. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe Me. Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears God's words; therefore you do not hear, because you are not of God."* (John 8:39-47)

Throughout the New Testament, we learn something that was less apparent when reading the Old Testament. What was then implicit has been made explicit. A true Jew is a believer in the Messiah, Jesus Christ, who is justified by faith alone, just as Abraham was.

In Romans, chapter 11, the apostle Paul, gives the clearest picture found in this epistle of the unity of the people of God. Using the symbol of the olive tree, a symbol commonly used in Scripture to represent Israel (cf. Jer. 11:16; Hos. 14:6), Paul shows that Jewish and Gentile Christians are *one* olive tree (the Gentiles having previously been a "wild olive tree," but now having been engrafted into the olive tree that was Israel). In other words, the olive tree which represented Israel in the Old Testament now represents the Church of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. **In effect, Old Testament Israel has been remade or transformed into the new covenant Church, which Paul calls the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16)**<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, there are not two olive trees or an olive tree and an orange tree; no, there is *one* tree, with Jews and Gentiles united together as one in Christ.

God has not cast away all ethnic Jews (Rom. 11:1). The apostle Paul was "an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin" (Rom. 11:2). It is certain that God "has not cast away His people whom He foreknew" (Rom. 11:3). There remains an elect seed, a remnant of regenerate Jewish believers, just as in the days of Elijah (Rom. 11:4-5). Paul assures us that "at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Rom. 11:5). Not all ethnic Jews were saved; only the elect Jews who had the true faith of their ancestor Abraham (Rom. 11:5-10). The majority of the ethnic Jews were spiritually blind and did not obtain what they sought (Rom. 11:7), as was the case with the vast majority of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Salvation has now come to the Gentiles, which is intended to provoke ethnic Jews to jealousy (Rom. 11:11). The fall of the Jews from their state of privileged status has resulted in "riches for the world" (every tribe, language, people, and nation). Yet, God still has a plan to bring in the fullness of the ethnically Jewish remnant.

The olive tree represents the assembly of God's people, the congregation of the faithful, the Church of God throughout the ages. Prior to the coming of Christ, the vast majority of believers were ethnic Jews, with the exception of small numbers of Gentile converts. Now, "some of the branches [ethnic Jews] were broken off, and you [Gentiles], being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree" (Rom. 11:17). Paul warns the Gentiles that they must remain humble and refrain from boasting, for they "do not support the root, but the root supports" them (Rom. 11:18). They have been engrafted into the congregation of Israel, an assembly with a more than two-thousand year history.

Because of unbelief the Jewish branches, the "natural branches," were broken off (Rom. 11:19-21). Yet, God holds out the promise to all ethnic Jews, that "if they do not continue in unbelief," they will be "grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again" (Rom. 11:22-23). For if the

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<sup>9</sup> We can be certain that the Church is the *new Israel* because John will later reveal that the bride of Christ, the Church, is also called the "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21:2, 9-10).

Gentiles were “cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these [ethnic Jews], who are natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?” (Rom. 11:24)

So “blindness in part has happened to [ethnic] Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel [Jew and Gentile, the true Church] will be saved” (Rom. 11:25-27) While the ethnic Jews, as a whole, set themselves up as enemies of the Gospel, yet they are “beloved for the sake of the fathers” (Rom. 11:28-29). The Gentiles, who were “once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their [the Jews’] disobedience” (Rom. 11:30). Yet, God still has a plan to show mercy to a remnant of ethnic Jews (Rom. 11:31-32).

John Calvin, the greatest theologian of the past millennium of Christianity, explains that when Paul declares that “all Israel will be saved” in Romans 11:26, he uses the word *Israel* to refer to all the people of God, as though he said: “When the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return from their defection to the obedience of faith; and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both; and yet in such a way that the Jews shall obtain the first place, being as it were the first-born in God’s family.” Paul here set forth “the completion of the kingdom of Christ, which is by no means to be confined to the Jews, but is to include the whole world.” Calvin adds, “The Israel of God is what he calls the Church, gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles.”<sup>10</sup>

These teachings will become even clearer after we consider what Paul wrote in the book of Ephesians. But, first, let us consider Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

### Galatians

How ridiculous is the notion that the Bible could be used to justify hatred for ethnic Jews (anti-Semitism), when one of its greatest writers and spokesmen—indeed, the great apostle of God—Paul, was a Jew. Paul confesses, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Gal. 1:14). He adds to this testimony in **Philippians 3:3-6**:

For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit<sup>11</sup>, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

So Paul was an ethnic Jew and also a Roman citizen (Acts 22:25-29). And, as we read in Romans, chapters 10-11, God has a never-ending love for the true Israel among ethnic Israel, those ethnic Jews who have true faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Paul wrote, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved” (Romans 10:1).

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<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. Rev. John Owen (The Calvin Translation Society, 1843).

<sup>11</sup> Note that Paul says *true worship* is one mark of a true Jew. So also is love for Jesus Christ. Jesus said, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15; cf. 14:23).

Who are the children of Abraham? Dispensationalists speak as though God has a special purpose for all ethnic Jews, that the modern nation of Israel in the Middle East is “the holy land,” and that God has a separate plan for ethnic Jews than for Gentiles. Yet, what does God’s Word say?

**Galatians 3:6-9:** “just as Abraham “believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Therefore know that **only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham**. And **the Scripture**, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, **preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand**, saying, “In you all the nations shall be blessed.” So then those who *are* of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.” (emphasis added)

So true Jews, the Israel of God, are only those who have the faith of Abraham. And, just as Paul taught in Romans, chapter 4, “the gospel” was preached beforehand to Abraham, which prophesied the salvation of the Gentiles and their inclusion into the one people of God. Jews and Gentiles are both the sons of Abraham. So there has always been one plan, one people of God, and one gospel!

There never was a dispensation [period of time] under which anyone was saved by works:

**Galatians 3:10-14:** “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed *is* everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” But **that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident**, for “the just shall live by faith.” Yet the law is not of faith, but “the man who does them shall live by them.” Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed *is* everyone who hangs on a tree”), that **the blessing of Abraham** might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive **the promise of the Spirit through faith.**” (emphasis added)

In the Old Testament we find two covenants—a covenant of grace made with Abraham and then the Law or the covenant made with Moses. Paul explains repeatedly that no one was ever saved by keeping the law but only by the gospel, which was preached to Abraham:

**Galatians 3:15-18:** “Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though *it is* only a man’s covenant, yet *if it is* confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, “And to seeds,” as of many, but as of one, “And to **your Seed,**” **who is Christ**. And this I say, *that the law*, which was four hundred and thirty years later, **cannot annul the covenant** [with Abraham] that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance *is* of the law, *it is* no longer of promise; but God gave *it* to Abraham by promise.”

Here God contrasts the law given to Moses with the covenant made with Abraham approximately 430 years prior. God shows us that we must interpret the Old Testament through the fuller light and more developed revelation found in the New Testament. God explicitly reveals to us here that Christ is the promised Seed. He is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham. And, not only that, but every Christian is that seed, insofar as we are in union with Christ; we are members of the body of Christ. If you belong to Christ, “then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

Note well the use of the words *heir* and *promise* in Paul's writings. Frequently in the New Testament, these two terms are loaded with meaning—they refer to the Abrahamic covenant. Not only are Christians heirs to a heavenly inheritance, we also are heirs to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, which finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ, who is the promised Seed.

Why were the Jews under the old covenant subject to the law, including the ceremonial law with its animal sacrifices, rituals, holy days, and all the requirements of the tabernacle and later the temple?

**Galatians 3:19-25:** “What purpose then *does* the law *serve*? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made; *and it was* appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator does not *mediate* for one *only*, but God is one. *Is* the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor *to bring us* to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.”

Paul adds that all Christians are “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” He writes, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Greek**, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for **you are all one** in Christ Jesus. And if you *are* Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:27-29, emphasis added). Spiritually speaking, before God, there is no longer any difference between Jews and Greeks, Jews and non-Jews. Elsewhere, Paul teaches that God has a special, mysterious (Rom. 11:25) plan to save the fullness of the elect, ethnic Jews. But, at the same time, Scripture also teaches repeatedly that Jews and Gentiles are united together as one body in Christ.

In Galatians chapter 4, verses 21-31, Paul describes two covenants, symbolized by Hagar the bondwoman and Sarah the freewoman, along with their respective sons—Ishmael and Isaac. While these covenants might be compared to the Mosaic covenant (the law) and the Abrahamic covenant (the gospel), they are even more representative of the contrast between false religion and true religion.

False religion is symbolized by Ishmael, the son of the bondwoman, who was born according to the flesh (v. 23). True religion is symbolized by Isaac, the son of the freewoman, born according to the promise made to Abraham, which is the gospel.

While Moses was justified by faith (Heb. 11), the law given to Moses, which came from Mount Sinai, gave “birth to bondage” (v. 24). Few of the Israelites had the faith of Moses (Heb. 3:16-19). Paul says that “this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to **Jerusalem which now is**, and is in bondage with her children.” Hagar and Ishmael represent the reprobate, corrupt Judaism, those who cling to the old covenant ceremonies that Christ has fulfilled, those who seek to be justified by the works of the law and by their own merits, those who fall into idolatry and immorality, superstition and false worship, those who crucified Jesus the Messiah. Jerusalem at the time of Christ and Paul was filled with false religion, the religion of the Pharisees with their manmade tradition and human inventions, which nullified the commandments of God. The Jews sought to be justified by their works, by their merits, instead of by faith alone in Christ alone. The Pharisees and Sadducees, as a whole, rejected the

Messiah. Jerusalem in “the holy land” was in fact the center of false worship, the hub of legalistic bondage, and the city of spiritual adultery, as symbolized by Hagar the bondswoman.

Let us not associate the covenant of Hagar and Ishmael too closely with Moses, for Moses was a man of faith who believed and preached the gospel. The writer to the Hebrews highlights several instances of Moses’ faith:

**Hebrews 11:23-29:** “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw *he was* a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's command. By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry *land*, whereas the Egyptians, attempting *to do so*, were drowned.”

Due to his association with the law and Mount Sinai, and, given Paul’s contrasts between the law and the gospel, we might think that the Mosaic covenant was only a covenant of works. And, yet, if Moses was a man of faith and a true believer, then he also must have been a preacher of the gospel. For the writer to the Hebrews tells us that he “esteemed the reproach of Christ . . . for he looked to the reward,” and “he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.” The mention of Christ makes it explicit that Moses walked by faith, not by sight (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7). Like Abraham, Moses trusted in the coming Messiah, Jesus Christ.

And yet for the vast majority of the Jews, the law (of Moses) was only a covenant of bondage and condemnation because they, like Ishmael and Hagar, sought to be justified by their works and not by faith alone in the promised Redeemer.

In A.D. 70 Titus, son of the Roman emperor Vespasian, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and the city of Jerusalem, as prophesied by Christ (Luke 19:43-44; Luke 21; cf. Matt. 24; Mark 13).

Today, the modern city of Jerusalem still remains in bondage to false religion—Christ-rejecting Judaism, Islam (which claims Ishmael among its patriarchs), Roman Catholicism, and all kinds of other religions that reject the teachings of Scripture. God’s promises in the Old Testament regarding Jerusalem refer to the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21), as the writer to the Hebrews assures us that “here [in this world] we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come” (Heb. 13:14).

Christians, whether Jew or Gentile, are the children of Sarah, the freewoman. Isaac was born “of the freewoman through promise.” Christians are citizens of “the Jerusalem above” which “is free, which is the mother of us all” (Gal. 4:26).

As Christians, we are the spiritual descendants of Abraham and of Sarah, the freewoman. Paul explains:

**Galatians 4:28-31:** “Now we, brethren, as Isaac *was*, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him *who was born* according to the Spirit, even so *it is* now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondswoman and her son, for the son of the bondswoman shall not be heir

with the son of the freewoman." So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free."

So the New Testament instructs Christian believers, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, to compare themselves to Isaac.

Sarah and Isaac represent the elect seed, those who practice true religion, those who worship God as He has commanded in His Word, those who seek to be justified by faith, apart from the works of the law. We do not seek our spiritual citizenship in the holy land (Jerusalem) or in any earthly city (Rome, Mecca, or Salt Lake City), for we are citizens of the City of God. The gospel of grace sets us free from the bondage of legalism and false religion. The Church, the Jerusalem above, is free. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty." Jesus proclaimed, "The Spirit of the LORD *is* upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to *the* poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to *the* captives And recovery of sight to *the* blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). The Spirit of the Lord is present now on earth in the Church and will be present forever among the redeemed in heaven.

In **John 8:32-36**, Jesus told the Pharisees:

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, *but* a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed."

Here we see the dichotomy between the children of the freewoman and the bondwoman. The Pharisees thought they were saved by their heritage, because they lived in the holy land, because they were following the law of Moses. Yet, Jesus told them they were spiritual Ishmaelites, slaves of sin, and slaves of the devil. True freedom comes through Christ alone and through obeying Scripture alone. Those who follow the doctrines and commandments of men are in bondage to legalism and manmade religion. The Church, New Jerusalem, the City of God, is our Mother. Those who believe in the gospel that was preached to Abraham, those who trust in his Seed, Christ, alone for eternal life alone know true freedom and liberty.

Paul says in Galatians 4:28 that we, like Isaac, are "children of promise." Our standing in Christ, as "children of promise" is one reason why Reformed churches baptize infants. Our father Abraham "received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:11-12).

Abraham's descendants, beginning with his son Isaac, received circumcision—the sign and seal of faith—as infants. Since the Church under the new covenant is essentially (fundamentally) the same as that under the old covenant and since there is no command to stop applying the sign and seal of entrance into God's church to the infants of believers, Reformed churches believe we should apply the sign of baptism to the infant child of one or more believing parents.

**Acts 2:39:** "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as

many as the Lord our God will call."

**1 Corinthians 7:14:** "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy."

At the conclusion of Paul's letter to the Galatians, he adds this important statement:

**Galatians 6:15-16:** "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but **a new creation**. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon **the Israel of God**."

Continuing on this theme regarding the law and the gospel, the Jews and the Gentiles, Paul concludes that physical circumcision has no meaning after the coming of Christ. Water baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign and seal of entrance into God's covenant community. Yet, in both cases, what is most important is spiritual circumcision and spiritual baptism. God is most concerned about true faith and obedience to His commands, not ceremony, ritual, and sacrifice. Paul elsewhere taught, "if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is a new creation*; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The Israel of God is all God's people, Jew and Gentile—the olive tree of Romans 11. If you are *a new creation*, born again by Christ, then you are a member of the Israel of God and a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem.

### What is Jerusalem?

In the Old Testament, we find many prophecies regarding the future of Jerusalem. We find promises regarding the restoration of Jerusalem and Israel and even dimensions for the rebuilt temple in the last chapters of Ezekiel. Here are two of Ezekiel's prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel:

**Ezekiel 11:17-20:** "Therefore say, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "I will gather you from the peoples, assemble you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.'" And they will go there, and they will take away all its detestable things and all its abominations from there. Then I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within them, and take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God."

**Ezekiel 36:24-28:** "'For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do *them*. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God."

Dispensationalists apply these prophecies to the modern state of Israel, established in 1948, and the future thousand year reign of Christ that they believe will take place on this earth in Israel after the rapture of the Church.

Covenant theology teaches that we can only rightly understand the meaning of Ezekiel's prophecies when viewed in the light of the New Testament's teachings. Viewed in this light, Ezekiel foretold, in shadowy form, that God would gather the fullness of the Jews and Gentiles and bring them together as one in the new Israel, the new Jerusalem, which is the church of Jesus Christ. They would have "one heart," being united together as one body in Christ. God would "sprinkle clean water" on them in the waters of baptism, which is the symbol for the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration, cleansing, and purification<sup>12</sup>. At the new birth, God puts "a new heart" and "a new spirit" in every believer.

The dispensational "literalist" claims that the prophecy that God's people would "dwell in the land" that God gave to their fathers must be fulfilled in the earthly land of Israel in the Middle East. Yet, the writers of the New Testament reveal what Ezekiel could not see in his day—that God's plan for Israel will not be fulfilled on this earth but rather in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem. And this is the Church—a sacred assembly of Jews and Gentiles, which to old covenant believers like Ezekiel was only a "mystery" (Eph. 3:4-5). In the new Jerusalem, God "will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be their God*" (Rev. 21:3).

Who is right? The dispensationalist or the covenant theologian? Like the Bereans, we must search the Scriptures to see if these things are true (Acts 17:11). "To the law and to the testimony!" (Isa. 8:20).

So what does the Bible teach? In the past section, Paul's figurative analogy in Galatians 4 taught us that all Christians are citizens of "**the Jerusalem above,**" the **free city,** "**which is the mother of us all**" (Gal. 4:26). Contrary to the teaching of dispensationalists, the New Testament knows of no "holy land" in the Middle East. Jerusalem is no longer the holy city; it had already ceased to be that prior to the time of Christ and Paul. Rather, the New Testament reveals to us that all the prophecies regarding Jerusalem and "the land" find their fulfillment in the Church of Jesus Christ and ultimately in heaven.

Elsewhere Paul says, "**For our citizenship is in heaven,** from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself" (Philippians 3:20-21).

The writer to the Hebrews explains that "**here [on this earth] we have no continuing city,** but we seek the one to come" (Heb. 13:14).

Shouldn't we be looking forward to Christ's earthly reign from Jerusalem in the Middle East during the millennium? Where is that in Scripture? How would we reconcile that with what the New Testament teaches?

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<sup>12</sup> This prophecy in Ezekiel 36:25 is one of the clearest in Holy Scripture to substantiate the mode of sprinkling for water baptism. The sprinkling of blood and of clean water was used among the Israelites to symbolize cleansing and purification. Since the New Testament is not explicit regarding the mode of baptism, we must consider the whole of Scripture. In doing so, there is strong evidence that water baptism is best performed by the sprinkling or pouring of water. Sprinkling symbolizes the cleansing and purification of regeneration. Pouring symbolizes the Holy Spirit falling upon believers at their regeneration, when they are born again from above.



In Colossians 3:1-2, Paul says, "If then you were raised with Christ, **seek those things which are above**, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. **Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.**"

In **Hebrews 12:18-24**, God again contrasts Mount Sinai (the Law) with the Jerusalem above (the Church and heaven). Here God provides additional names for what Christians seek—Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the *heavenly* Jerusalem:

"For you have not come to the mountain [Sinai] that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard *it* begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." And so terrifying was the sight *that* Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.")

But you have come to **Mount Zion** and to **the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem**, to an innumerable company of **angels**, to the general assembly and **church** of the firstborn *who are registered in heaven*, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, **to Jesus** the Mediator of **the new covenant**, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than *that of Abel*."

Note the similarities here to Paul's figurative analogy in Galatians 4, in which he compares Mount Sinai and the present earthly Jerusalem in bondage with her children to "the Jerusalem above," which is free and the mother of all true believers—Jew and Gentile.

The apostle John completes this teaching for us in the last book of Holy Scripture, Revelation. Contrary to those who interpret Ezekiel to teach that there will be a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, John teaches that New Jerusalem will have no temple. The whole vision of the temple is fulfilled in the Church, which is God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21), because we are in Christ, who is the Temple (Rev. 21:22), the Temple made without hands (Mark 14:58).

Far from interpreting the Bible literally, dispensationalism takes the prophecies of the Old Testament in isolation and acts as though the New Testament does not exist. We believe the 27 books of the New Testament are the key to understanding the Old Testament correctly. The New Testament knows nothing of a restoration of the temple in the Middle East with animal sacrifices. Quite to the contrary, it teaches us that Christ is the *once and for all* sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:1-18).

In **Revelation chapter 21**, we read:

"1 Now I saw **a new heaven and a new earth**, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. 2 Then I, John, saw **the holy city, New Jerusalem**, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride [the Church] adorned for her husband [Christ]. 3 And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, **the tabernacle of God** is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them *and be* their God. 4 "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

5 Then He who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new." And He said to me, "Write, for these words are true and faithful." 6 And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. . . .

9 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "**Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife** [the Church]." 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me **the great city, the holy Jerusalem**, descending out of heaven from God . . .

22 But I saw **no temple** in it, for **the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple**.

23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb *is* its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it." (Rev. 21:1-6, 9-10, 22-24)

Here is the ultimate end times prophecy. In Revelation 21, we find one of the most explicit keys to unlocking the prophecies of the Old Testament. All the prophecies concerning Jerusalem find their consummate fulfillment in the Jerusalem above, the heavenly Jerusalem, **the new Jerusalem**. What is *New Jerusalem*? It is the Church of Jesus Christ, because it is the bride of Christ, the Lamb's wife (cf. Eph. 5:23-32). The tabernacle and temple find their fulfillment in the Church of Jesus Christ, which now is found in various forms upon earth, but, which ultimately is found in heaven. The Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple (Rev. 21:22). Jesus said He was the temple "made without hands" (Mark 14:58). And, because we are in Christ, we are God's temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21).

This passage further defends our contention that the Church is the new Israel—the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16). If the apostle John refers to the Church, the bride of Christ, as the "new Jerusalem," then it makes total sense to refer to it as the new Israel. So Revelation 21 confirms that our interpretation of the Church as the new Israel, corresponds to the teaching of the rest of the New Testament.

These prophecies find partial fulfillment through the Church on earth, but their ultimate fulfillment awaits God's people in heaven, in the "city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem," when we are amidst "an innumerable company of angels," in fellowship and communion with the saints from all ages, "the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven," in the presence of "God the Judge of all" and "the spirits of just men made perfect," in the presence of "Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant" (Hebrews 12:22-24).

### The Church

For an excellent examination of the Bible's teaching on the Church in both the Old and New Testaments, we highly recommend Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 805-836. Reymond concludes, "the church, from the Old Testament perspective, is the redeemed "assembly" (Gk. *evklhysi,a|, ekklesia*) standing reverently in the presence of God and his holy angels to worship and serve Yahweh. From the New Testament perspective, the church, also God's "assembly" (Gk. *evklhysi,a|, ekklesia*), is specifically founded on Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of the living God and on his confessing apostles as his authoritative teachers of doctrine" (p. 836).

At the time of Christ and Paul, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint or LXX, was in common use. Here, we find the nation of Israel referred to as the *ekklesia* of God, which means the “assembly” or “congregation” of Israel. This same word *ekklesia* became the most common term in the New Testament to designate the people of God. The Old Testament provides the background to the New Testament’s representation of the church as God’s *evkkIhSi,aI*, *ekklesia*. The word *ekklesia* is used 114 times in the New Testament to refer to the Church.

Thus, Reformed or covenant theology teaches that the Church is the *new* Israel, the new covenant manifestation of the assembly or congregation of God’s people. If God’s Word uses the same word to refer to Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament, then it seems clear that the Church is the new Israel, the new congregation or assembly of God’s people.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the term *evkkIhSi,aI*, *ekklesia*, the New Testament employs many other figurative expressions to describe the church, many of which show the unity of the Church under the old and new covenants (as shown in the Old and New Testaments):

One flock (John 10:16), the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18), the temple of God (or of the Holy Spirit) (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22; 2 Thess. 2:4), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:2), the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13), the light of the world (Matt. 5:14), a letter from Christ (2 Cor. 3:2-3), branches (of the vine) (John 15:5), the olive tree (Rom. 11:13-24), God’s field (1 Cor. 3:9), God’s building (1 Cor. 3:9), the elect lady (2 John 1), the wife or bride of Christ (Eph. 5:22-31; Rev. 21:9), wearers of wedding garments (Matt. 22:1-14; Rev. 19:7), fellow citizens with the saints (Eph. 2:19), God’s house (Eph. 2:19), strangers in the world (1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11; Heb. 11:13), ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:18-21), the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10), a chosen race (1 Pet. 2:9), a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), the circumcision (Phil. 3:3-11), Abraham’s sons (Gal. 3:29; Rom. 4:16), the tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16), the remnant (Rom. 9:27; 11:5-7), Israel (Gal. 6:15-16), God’s elect (Rom. 8:33), the faithful in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:1), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), a new man (Col. 3:10), the kingdom of God (or of heaven) (Matt. 13), disciples (Matt. 28:19), the way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), slaves of God, of Christ, and of righteousness (Rom. 6:18, 22), sons of God (Rom. 8:14), the brotherhood (1 Pet. 2:17; 5:9), and Christians (Acts 11:26).<sup>14</sup>

### Ephesians

Just as he describes Christian citizenship as in heaven in Philippians and exhorts Christians to set their minds on things above in Colossians, so also in the opening chapter of Ephesians, the apostle Paul tells us that “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:3).

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<sup>13</sup> In the new Israel, baptism has replaced circumcision, the Lord’s Supper has replaced the Passover, and the Lord’s Day (Sunday) has replaced Saturday as the Sabbath day of worship and rest. There is a continuity and discontinuity in the new covenant of Christ.

<sup>14</sup> Reymond, *Systematic*, p. 810. See Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), for additional New Testament descriptions and figures of the church.

We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and we are united as one in the kingdom of heaven under Christ our King and Lord:

**Ephesians 2:4-9:** “But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* [in the heavenly, new Jerusalem!] in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in *His* kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.”

Now, in Ephesians, chapters 2 and 3, the apostle Paul reveals to us the mystery of the Church. Why is it called a mystery? It was a mystery to the Jews because the prophecies regarding Jerusalem and the Abrahamic covenant were only revealed in the Old Testament in shadowy form.

God told Abraham, “As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations” (Gen. 17:4-5).

God prophesied the new covenant Church in Isaiah 54:1: “Sing, O barren, You *who* have not borne! Break forth into singing, and cry aloud, You *who* have not labored with child! For more *are* the children of the desolate Than the children of the married woman,” says the LORD.” Paul tells us that this prophecy was fulfilled in the Church, which is our mother, the Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:26-28).

It is difficult to understand how someone could believe the teachings of dispensationalism, if they have studied Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Here, in Ephesians, we find God’s revelation of the identity and relationship of Israel and the Church, and it is quite different from what we find in dispensationalism.

Paul says that the “Gentiles in the flesh” were “called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands” (Eph. 2:11). Jews did not like Gentiles. To them, Gentiles were unclean, uncircumcised, and not God’s people. Before Christ, the Gentiles were “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise [the Abrahamic covenant], having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). “But now in Christ Jesus,” those who once were “far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:13).

So Christ has reconciled Jew and Gentile. As Paul pictures through the metaphor of the two olive trees in Romans 11, Gentiles, who were part of a wild olive tree, have been grafted, contrary to nature, into the “commonwealth of Israel.” The Church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel and the new Jerusalem. It is not separate; it is the same olive tree. Gentile believers were brought into “the commonwealth of Israel” by Christ.

Is that some sort of blasphemy or heresy? By no means! It is what Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:12. He adds in verse 14-16: “For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

Wow! Christ has made both—Jews and Gentiles, two groups who were so diametrically opposed to one another—one. Only God could do that. He has broken down the middle wall of separation; the hatred, the enmity, the ill will—they are all gone. There is no more physical circumcision or old covenant ceremonial laws and rituals to divide Jews and Gentiles. God has created one new man from the two, thus making peace.

Jew and Gentile are reconciled together **in one body** through the cross. Thus, there is no place in Christianity for racism. Nor is there any place for denominational divisions between Jews and Gentiles. The Church has not replaced Israel; the Church is the new Israel, composed of Jews and Gentiles, without separation. Thus, the practice of some Baptists in encouraging Messianic Jewish synagogues where ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus (or “Yeshua”) continue to practice old covenant practices (e.g., Jewish holy days and ceremonies) and separate from Gentiles is repugnant to the teachings of Paul and the New Testament.

Paul adds that Jesus “came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:17-18).

**Emphasizing the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, Paul describes the new covenant church as the transformed, remade Israel of God.** Just as Paul teaches in Ephesians 4:22-24 that individual believers have been transformed by Christ, so also here in Ephesians 2 we see that the entire assembly of God’s people has been remade or transformed, as well, into “one new man.” Jew and Gentile are “fellow citizens,” “members” together of the same “household of God,” built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. They are one olive tree (Romans 11), supported by the root of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, as written and expounded by the prophets and apostles of God.

**Ephesians 2:19-21:** “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief *cornerstone*, in whom the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

Paul refers to the church as a *building* and God’s *temple*, a term rich in Old Testament meaning. Indeed, the Church is the anti-type, the fulfillment, of the tabernacle and the temple. In Christ, “the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21). And the Church, as the new Israel, is a temple building in which the former distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and the distinctive Jewish markers of circumcision and ceremonies have ceased. In Christ, Jew and Gentile are “being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:22), which promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in the new Jerusalem in heaven.

The fact that heaven is referred to as the Jerusalem above, the heavenly Jerusalem, and the new Jerusalem, provides further evidence for the organic unity of the people of God throughout the ages and the idea that the new covenant Church is the new manifestation of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

John further explains the unity of the old and new covenant people of God in Revelation 21:12-14: “Also she [the City of God, the new Jerusalem] had a great and high wall with **twelve gates**, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are *the names* of **the twelve**

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<sup>15</sup> Also, note the contrast the Bible makes between the **new, heavenly** Jerusalem, which is from **above**, versus the old, earthly Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem, the Church, is clearly a *spiritual* kingdom.

**tribes of the children of Israel:** three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had **twelve foundations**, and on them were **the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.**” Here we see the Church, which unites Jew and Gentile together as one new body.

Paul reveals “the mystery” with more explicitness in chapter 3 of Ephesians. Paul says that the “dispensation of the grace of God” was given to him for the Gentiles and that “by revelation” God “made known” to him “the mystery” of Christ (Eph. 3:1-4).

If you read the Old Testament apart from the New Testament you will not rightly understand the church of Jesus Christ as the new Israel, composed of Jews and Gentiles, together as one body. God says that “in other ages” it “was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:5). This is why God gave His people the New Testament so that we would have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16), the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), and the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

And what is the mystery of Christ? Paul tells us explicitly in Ephesians 3, verse 6: “that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel.”

That is the mystery—that there is one body, that there no longer remains any divisions, that the Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs, heirs together, fellow members, fellow partakers of the promise made to Abraham and fulfilled in his Seed, which is Christ.

This means that the Church of Jesus Christ is the new Israel and ethnically Jewish believers find their identity in Christ and in His Church, not in the earthly Jerusalem, which is in bondage with her children (Gal. 4:25). “The Jerusalem that now is” is no longer the holy land. The holy land is the heavenly, new Jerusalem, the holy city of God (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 21:2).

Paul, the ethnic Jew, was sent as a preacher to the Gentiles: “To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what *is* the fellowship of **the mystery**, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly *places*, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him” (Eph. 3:8-12).

In the next chapter of Ephesians, chapter 4, Paul returns to the theme of Christian unity. He exhorts Christians to endeavor “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). For “**there is one body** and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Eph. 4:4-6).

If all Christians would follow Scripture alone and believe the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, there would be no need for denominations. While differences of geography (distance) and language might necessitate separation between churches, it is quite un-Biblical to have divisions by race, ethnicity, and tradition. All Christians should hold to the apostolic tradition, which is Scripture alone. And all Christians, Jew and Gentile, black and white, Hispanic and Asian, male and female, should be united together as one body in Christ. Sadly, this is not the case, due to the presence of sin and false doctrine in this world.

## 1 Peter

The next New Testament book we will consider in this study is the first epistle of Peter. Peter teaches us that Christians are “living stones,” “being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5). Here, again, we see that the Church is the fulfillment of the tabernacle and temple. The Church of Jesus Christ is *the true temple*. We find this teaching elsewhere in the New Testament:

**1 Corinthians 3:17:** “If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which *temple* you are.”

**1 Corinthians 6:19-20:** “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *who is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.”

**2 Corinthians 6:16:** “And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: “I will dwell in them And walk among *them*. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.”

**Revelation 1:5b-6:** “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him *be* glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

Like Paul, so also the apostle Peter teaches us that the Church is the true Israel of God:

**1 Peter 2:9-10:** “But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.”

The Church is clearly the new Israel, as it fulfills the types of old covenant Israel. Just as the Israelites were God's chosen ones, so all Christians are chosen by God; we are God's elect, the children of promise. Just as Israel was a royal priesthood, so all Christians are priests (Rev. 1:6), in submission to our great High Priest, Jesus Christ. He is a better priest of a better priesthood, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 4:14-5:11).

Just as Israel was “a holy nation,” so also is the Church of Jesus Christ. All Christians are holy, set apart or consecrated to God. We are God's own special people, from every tribe, language, people, and nation. The Gentiles, “who once were not a people,” are now included among the people of God. Both Jews and Gentiles are united together in the new Israel, which is the Church of Jesus Christ.

## Covenants

Throughout redemptive history, God has worked through covenants. God made covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ. For further study on the covenants, we highly recommend *The Christ of the Covenants* by O. Palmer Robertson (New Jersey: P&R, 1980). For a further look at dispensationalism, we recommend *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* by Keith A. Mathison (New Jersey: P&R, 1995). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all the covenants in depth. For the sake of brevity, we will not

discuss the meaning and nature of covenants either. For this study, we have been focusing primarily on God's covenant with Abraham and the covenant of Christ, along with a discussion of law versus gospel.

In regard to the covenants, we begin by acknowledging the Covenant of Creation. At Creation, God established three ordinances that are eternal, never-changing principles that undergird God's creation for all time: the Sabbath (Genesis 2:3; Mark 2:27), marriage (Genesis 2:18-24; Matthew 19:6), and labor (Gen. 1:27-28; 2:3, 15; Eph. 4:28; 2 Thess. 3:10).

Furthermore, when we look at the law of Moses and when the New Testament contrasts the law with the gospel, we must understand that the old covenant law had two aspects—an eternal and a temporal one. The moral law of God is eternal. The ceremonial and civil laws of the Old Testament were temporal.

The moral law of God is eternal and is a reflection of God's own character, defining for us what is right and wrong and what duty God requires of us. The moral law of God is summarized in the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ. It was full of types or symbols that pointed forward to Christ, the Messiah, and which are fulfilled. Even though the ceremonial law was fulfilled in Christ, this does not mean it is worthless for Christians to study. It shows us in shadowy, symbolic form great spiritual truths. Also, the wisdom found in the ceremonial law still has lessons to teach us today.

The ceremonial law included the Jewish dietary laws and the holy days and seasons. Since these laws were fulfilled (Acts 10), they are no longer binding on Christians. The church does not have the authority to bind the consciences of Christians to these old covenant laws. Thus, Christians have the liberty to eat pork or various birds and seafood prohibited to the Jews under the old covenant. But that spiritual freedom does not necessarily mean that it is wise to eat many or most of these foods. Avoiding the eating of pork and avoiding the blood of animals and various impurities may still help us to avoid illness and disease. There may be contamination and other impurities associated with eating predatory animals and bottom feeders, which facts would argue against the practice. While the Christian is not subject to the ceremonial laws, they still show us the importance of holiness to God, as seen in their old covenant context, and, therefore, they are an important part of God's Word.

The third part of the old covenant law was the civil law, which pertained to the theocracy (the holy nation) of Israel under the old covenant. This also was fulfilled in Christ and in the establishment of the Church as the new Israel of God. It no longer is binding on us today as law, but it still provides divine wisdom to direct civil governments today in certain respects.

In regard to the law, Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches *them*, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-20).



The Bible teaches that the Abrahamic covenant is “an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:7): “He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised<sup>16</sup>, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant” (Genesis 17:13). Since we interpret this statement literally, the Abrahamic covenant must still be in effect. However, we believe that the New Testament teaches that, under the new covenant, baptism has replaced circumcision as the *outward sign* of God’s covenant. Both ordinances have essentially the same meaning. Christ instituted baptism, because it more appropriately symbolizes the baptism of the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and the cleansing/purification of Christ described in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

### Hebrews and the New Covenant

In the book of Hebrews, God provided His Church with a much greater understanding of the meaning and spiritual significance of the types, ceremonies, rituals, teachings, and prophecies found in the Old Testament. The book of Hebrews contrasts the old and new dispensations of the everlasting Abrahamic covenant; the old covenant (the covenant of Moses) and the ceremonial law are contrasted with its fulfillment in the new covenant (the covenant of Christ).

Hebrews presents Jesus as the last and greatest of the prophets (Heb. 1:1-2); He is our Prophet, Priest, and King. God’s revelation of Himself and His will for His children has reached its fullest realization in Christ and the new covenant that He has ushered in. Jesus is the “Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Heb. 3:1), who has been “counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house” (Heb. 3:3). Christ is compared to Moses: While Moses was “faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward,” Christ was faithful “as a Son over His own house” (Heb. 3:5-6).

Christ is our Hope. “This hope we have as an anchor for the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:19-20).

Christ, the King of the heavenly Jerusalem, is of the same priesthood as Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God (Heb. 7:1; Gen. 14:18-20). Melchizedek was the “king of Salem, meaning “king of peace,” (Heb. 7:2), just as Jesus is the King of New Jerusalem and the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). Just as Melchizedek was the “king of righteousness” (Heb. 7:2), so also God has raised up Jesus as the Son of David, the “Branch of righteousness,” “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:6).

The writer to the Hebrews explains that the old covenant Levitical priesthood, according to the order of Aaron, was imperfect. By contrast, our High Priest Christ, the sinless Son of God is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners . . .” He “does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have

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<sup>16</sup> Note the presence of household circumcisions under the old covenant just like the household baptisms of new covenant (Christian) believers featured in Acts and 1 Corinthians.

<sup>17</sup> We believe that water baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling. For further study on the mode of baptism, we recommend the article “Sprinkling is Scriptural” by Dr. Francis Nigel Lee, featured on the Resources page of Wabash Bible Ministries [www.wabashbible.org](http://www.wabashbible.org). Also, we recommend “A Biblical Case for Infant Baptism” on the Writings page of the same website.

weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever” (Heb. 7:26-28).

In Hebrews, chapter 8, God reveals that Jesus, our High Priest, “is seated [now as King!] at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man” (Heb. 8:1-2). Thus, the New Testament helps us to see more clearly that the earthly tabernacle was merely a type or symbol of a far greater heavenly reality. The writer to the Hebrews further elaborates,

**Hebrews 8:4-6:** “For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, “See *that* you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.” But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.”

So the Levitical priests served “the copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” The tabernacle and later the temple were mere symbols for Christ and His Church, which is the new Jerusalem.

He continues by explaining that the Old Testament prophets acknowledged that the old covenant was imperfect. The writer to the Hebrews quotes from Jeremiah’s prophecy from **Jeremiah 31:31-40** in **Hebrews 8:8-13**:

Because finding fault with them, He says: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make **a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.” In that He says, “A new *covenant*,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

So here we see that the old covenant of Moses, which included the ceremonial law and the Levitical priesthood, was vanishing away because the new covenant, the covenant of Christ, had replaced it. Jeremiah’s prophecy is similar in several ways to the previously quoted prophecies from Ezekiel. In this context, how do we interpret the prophecies of Jeremiah correctly?

Three principles of Biblical interpretation must be adhered to in this case—what is clear must interpret what is less clear; newer revelation (Hebrews and the New Testament) must interpret older revelation (Jeremiah); and Scripture cannot contradict itself.

So it cannot be taken literally (in an absolute sense) that under the new covenant every Christian will know the Lord fully without the need of a teacher, a preacher, or the Scriptures. Such an interpretation would contradict (1) the apostle Paul, who did not shun to declare “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27); (2) the apostle Paul’s teaching in Colossians 1:28: “Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every

man perfect in Christ Jesus”; (3) Paul’s teaching in Romans 10:14-15, 17: “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, Who bring glad tidings of good things!” . . . So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God”; (4) the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age.”

What Jeremiah’s prophecy *does* mean is that the new covenant is conveyed through clearer, more explicit, propositional truth, with the benefit of the fuller light of the New Testament and the fuller revelation of Jesus, who is the light of the world (John 8:12) and the incarnate word (John 1:14). As the book of Hebrews said in the introduction: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by *His* Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of *His* glory and the express image of His person, having become so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they” (Heb. 1:1-4).

Jesus is the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy that “none of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for all shall know Me.” Jesus is no longer the Messiah who is to come; He is the Son of God, who has made Himself fully known to the world.

Jesus gave us the new and better covenant prophesied by Jeremiah: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt [lit., tabernacled] among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). He is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15).

Unlike old covenant believers, we no longer live in the shadows, looking forward to the promised Seed, the Messiah. We know Him clearly, as He is revealed in His fullness in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament. No longer do we learn through the ceremonial law with its types and symbols—rituals, animal sacrifices, the Levitical priesthood, incense, holy days, musical instruments, vestments, and the earthly tabernacle and temple worship. The new covenant is the fulfillment of the old covenant promises and the revelation of the mysteries that previously, “from the beginning of the ages” had “been hidden in God” (Eph. 3:9). Now, in fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy, God has given us the Holy Spirit in all His fullness to teach us all things in and through the Word of God, which includes the twenty-seven additional books of the New Testament. Jesus promised, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you” (John 14:26).

In Hebrews, chapter 9, God further contrasts the ritual of the tabernacle with the spiritual reality that was fulfilled in Christ. For example, in the lampstand, we see Jesus, who is the “light of the world” (John 8:12; 9:5). In the showbread, we see Jesus who is “the bread of life” (John 6:35, 48).

We see God’s infinitely holy presence in the Most Holy Place. We read in the three synoptic Gospels that the veil in the temple was “torn in two from top to bottom” in response to the death of Christ upon the cross (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Hebrews 10:19-20 further explains: “Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest [Most Holy Place] by the

blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh.” Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant, and He reconciles us to God (Heb. 8:6; 12:24; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20; 1 Tim. 2:5). Jesus is the complete, final sacrifice—“the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

All the types and symbols of the old covenant were never able to save anyone; their primary purpose was to drive men to the promised Redeemer, the Christ:

**Hebrews 9:11-15:** “But Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come, with **the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation**. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.”

The elements of the tabernacle were mere “copies of the things in the heavens” (Heb. 9:23). Christ is the anti-type, the fulfillment, the tabernacle and temple made without hands. All God’s promises are fulfilled in Him:

**Hebrews 9:24-28:** “For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, *which are copies of the true*, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another -- He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.”

Through His once and for all sacrifice for sins upon the cross at Calvary, Jesus “offered one sacrifice for sins forever” and “sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool” (Heb. 10:12-13). “For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10:14).

All the old covenant believers were justified by faith (Hebrews 11). For the old covenant believer, faith was in the promise of the coming Messiah. For the new covenant believer, our faith is in the revealed Son of God.

**Hebrews 11:13-16** suggests that even old covenant believers were looking for the heavenly City of God, which is revealed to us in the New Testament as the new Jerusalem:

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced *them* and **confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth**. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that *country* from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now **they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country**. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

If old covenant believers were looking forward to a thousand year reign with the Messiah in the Middle East or a restoration to the land of Israel on this earth, then why does Hebrews say they were “strangers and pilgrims on the earth,” that this world was not their “homeland,” and that they desire a “better,” a “heavenly country”? Lest there be any doubt what this city is, God revealed its name in Hebrews 12:22-24—it is the “heavenly Jerusalem” (Heb. 12:22).

Are those dispensationalists following Scripture who predict the restoration of animal sacrifice in Israel during a future millennium? **Hebrews 13:10-14** says,

We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come.

The New Testament here reveals that the old covenant altar was a type of the Cross; Christ was sacrificed for us; He “Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24). Jesus suffered outside the city gate of Jerusalem—Jerusalem, the city which Paul says is spiritually represented by Hagar the bondwoman (Gal. 4:25). And, here in verse 14, we read that in this world “we have no continuing city;” believers seek the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, the City of God, the eternal city that is to come. We, like Abraham, look expectantly for “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10). We, “as sojourners and pilgrims” on this earth (1 Pet. 2:11), “according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet. 3:13; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22).

If you are a dispensationalist or have believed the teachings of dispensationalism, what is your response to God’s Word? Scripture alone should be your authority, and God’s Word seems quite clear. All the promises of God are fulfilled in Christ and in His body, the bride of Christ, which is one church, composed of Jews and Gentiles, together as one new man. The Old Testament prophecies concerning Jerusalem and the holy land find their fulfillment in the Church, which is the Israel of God, and in the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, New Jerusalem. As believers, we are all citizens of that holy land. So let us forsake every false teaching and every corruption of sound doctrine. And let us follow Jesus and His Word alone and never look back to worldly wisdom (cf. Gen. 19:26). Let us cling to the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help us God!

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## **Biblical Theology versus Dispensationalism**

**Addendum: A Brief Overview of the End Times,  
focusing on the Millennial Kingdom and the Return of Christ**

A key distinctive of dispensationalism is its view of the end times, as popularized by Hal Lindsey of *The Late, Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins of the *Left Behind* book series. Dispensationalism holds to a premillennial, pretribulation eschatology or view of the end times. Its adherents claim that the Church will be raptured before the Great Tribulation, which

will then be followed by a thousand year reign of Christ on earth from the earthly city of Jerusalem in the Middle East.

Obviously, these teachings contradict what we have been discussing throughout this paper; these teachings do not correspond to what the New Testament teaches about the future of Jerusalem. We will respond to several of these key teachings with the Reformed response, which we believe is what the Scriptures teach.

### **The Millennial Kingdom**

The religious people of Jesus' day were looking for an earthly king. Like dispensationalists, they mistakenly thought that the Messiah would reign as king on this earth. We read in John's gospel that after the feeding of the five thousand, "when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone" (John 6:15). Jesus testified to Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Note that Jesus speaks of His kingdom as a present reality. Already while He was on earth, He was the King of kings, the King of the kingdom of God, the King of the kingdom of heaven. This was not some future reality to take place more than two thousand years later in an earthly millennium.

In Scripture, the number one thousand is symbolic for a very large or complete number. For example, God says in Psalm 50:10: "For every beast of the forest *is* Mine, *And* the cattle on a thousand hills." The apostle Peter says, "beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Pet. 3:8).

The book of Revelation is apocalyptic literature. Not everything in the book of Revelation is intended to be interpreted literally. For example, in Revelation 14:1, the apostle John wrote, "Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred *and* forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads." We read the Bible literally, but that does not mean that we disregard the use of symbols, metaphors, and hyperbole (exaggerations). The "Lamb" that John sees "standing on Mount Zion" is clearly the Lamb of God—Jesus Christ. The number 144,000 is 12 times 12 times 1,000. This is symbolic for the saints in their complete number. (The number 12 is frequently used in Revelation to refer to the Church. Combined with the number 1,000, we see the totality of God's elect.) We do not believe that exactly and only 144,000 saints will be in heaven, for this would seem to contradict Scripture, which elsewhere refers to the elect as "a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" (Rev. 7:9). So John sees Christ, the Lamb of God, with all His sheep on the heavenly mountain. Furthermore, while all Christians belong to the Lord, we don't believe that Revelation 14:1 means that all Christians will have a literal name tattooed on their foreheads; this also is presumably symbolic, providing a contrast between Christians who belong to God and unbelievers who bear the mark of the beast—666 (Rev. 13:15-18).

The book of Revelation is filled with symbols. Here is another example: John says, "He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. And I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And *I will write on him* My new name" (Rev. 3:12). Just as in Revelation 21, we see John referring to the Church of God as the New Jerusalem, the new Israel of God (cf. Gal. 6:16). We believe that we will have the mark of God written on us, figuratively speaking, but most likely not literally tattooed on us. We believe that we will be figuratively pillars in God's temple—the Church triumphant. Yet, we do not subscribe

to a radically and absolutely literal interpretation—that we will be inanimate pillars in God’s temple. That is absurd and in no way is taught elsewhere in Scripture.

So with this in mind, let us consider the thousand years in Revelation, chapter 20. In **Revelation 20:1-3**, John says,

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is *the* Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

John says that Satan will be bound for a thousand years<sup>18</sup>. We believe that the binding of Satan has already taken place through Christ’s first coming, and, especially, His death and resurrection. A key phrase in this passage is that Satan “should deceive the nations no more.” Before Christ’s advent, the world was in bondage to Satan’s deception; the Gentile nations were spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, devoid of the light of the gospel of Christ, which alone is the power of God to salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Pet. 1:5).

Jesus’ first coming changed all that. We read in Matthew 4:16 that Jesus quoted from Isaiah 9:2, declaring, “The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned.” Jesus is “the light of the world” (John 8:12). Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection turned the world upside down, for now the Gospel went forth to every tribe, tongue, people and nation. The Scriptures have been translated into numerous languages, and the gospel has been freely offered on every continent and in every nation and is now even present on the internet (the world wide web). While finite man is unable to understand fully how close we are to the fulfillment of this promise, Jesus promised that “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14).

In **Revelation 12:9-11**, John writes,

So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. Then I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, "Now salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.

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<sup>18</sup> Dr. D. James Kennedy once explained, “The first thing that should be said about the millennium is that the Bible never mentions such a thing. The Bible never mentions a “millennium.” Why, to hear some people talk, you’d think it was the main theme of the Bible, wouldn’t you? But it’s not in there. . . . it is important for us to know that the Bible simply mentions the term of a thousand years, and the Bible doesn’t say anything at all about many of the things that people will say refer to the millennium.” D. James Kennedy, *The End Times: A Historical Perspective* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: D. James Kennedy Ministries, 2016), 82-83.

In John 12:31-33, Jesus said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world [Satan] will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all *peoples* to Myself. This He said, signifying by what death He would die.”

Paul says of Jesus, “Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it” (Colossians 2:15).

Relatively speaking, Satan is bound because the Gospel has saved and spiritually freed the nations—in Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia, and the Americas.

When will the thousand years be finished? John says that “after these things he must be released for a little while.” It is probable that just before the second coming of Christ, the world will once again be under great deception and that the church of Christ may be very small. In Luke 18:8, we read, “when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” Just before this statement, in **Luke 17:26-33**, Jesus taught,

“And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed *them* all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. In that day, he who is on the housetop, and his goods *are* in the house, let him not come down to take them away. And likewise the one who is in the field, let him not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”

So it is very likely that the persecution of Christians may become worse and the spiritual darkness greater just before Christ's second coming, as Satan will once again be allowed to deceive the nations “for a little while” (Rev. 20:3). Pastor D. James Kennedy once commented, “I think it is interesting that in our day we have a resurgence of the sin of sodomy. And this might make us take heed that today it is surely as it was in the days of Lot. Within a sinful world, the Church is a small remnant, which God will send His angels to deliver before the destruction comes. So this is the picture, the type, which Jesus describes for us.”<sup>19</sup>

In regard to the millennial kingdom, we believe that Christ already is King ruling and reigning over His kingdom. Jesus is King, seated on God's holy hill of Zion (Psalm 2:6-9). Jesus not only will be but He already is “the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15). He presently is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14).

It is outrageous that anyone would teach that Christ is not yet King or that His kingdom will not commence until an earthly thousand year reign in the future. The New Testament says that He is both Lord and King. This is a present reality!

The wise men said at Jesus' birth, “Where is He who has been born **King of the Jews**? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him” (Matt. 2:2; cf. 27:11, 37). He is the “King of Israel” (Matt. 27:42).

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<sup>19</sup> D. James Kennedy, *The End Times: A Historical Perspective* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: D. James Kennedy Ministries, 2016), 79.



Jesus frequently preached about the kingdom of heaven (Matthew) and the kingdom of God (Mark, Luke, and John). Who is the king of this kingdom? Of course, Jesus Christ is. Who are the citizens of this kingdom? The fullness of God's elect from throughout the ages are, including those Christians alive today (cf. Luke 10:9-11; Luke 21:31).

At Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the disciples said, "Blessed *is* the **King** who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:38). Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy "Behold, your **King** is coming to you, Lowly, and sitting on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey" (Matt. 21:5; cf. Zech. 9:9).

The apostle Paul said, "For He [Christ the King] must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25).

### The Rapture and Christ's Second Coming

Scripture knows nothing of a secret rapture of only some Christians. Paul assures us that all Christians believers will be raised with Christ on the last day in **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive *and* remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven **with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God**. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

This is the true rapture. There is only one rapture—at the last day. Scripture knows nothing of the multiple returns of Christ that some dispensationalists envision.

The writer to the Hebrews explains in **Hebrews 12:25-29**:

See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more *shall we not escape* if we turn away from Him who *speaks* from heaven, whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "**Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven.**" **Now this, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken**, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since **we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken**, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God *is* a consuming fire.

God here teaches us that there is only *one* kingdom of God—a heavenly kingdom, "which cannot be shaken." It would seem that any future earthly kingdom would contradict this New Testament prophecy. In regard to this passage, Simon J. Kistemaker comments:

Through the prophet Haggai, God spoke to the Israelites concerning the rebuilt temple and said, "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory" (2:6-7). . . . The prophet predicted a shaking of the heavens and

the earth. . . . The earth shook when Jesus died and when he arose (Matt. 27:51; 28:2), but more importantly the preaching of the gospel and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit shook the entire world. The heavens also experienced change: the angelic hosts sing Christ's praises (Rev. 5:12); angels rejoice when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10); angels are sent out to minister to the needs of the believers on earth (Heb. 1:14); and angels long to look into the mystery of salvation (Eph. 3:10; 1 Peter 1:12). It is Christ, therefore, who is at the center of this upheaval on earth and in heaven. He will cause heaven and earth to shake when he appears a second time (Matt. 24:29; 2 Peter 3:10).

. . . Also, the prophet Isaiah foresees the end of this present world when he transmits what the Sovereign Lord says: "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind" (65:17; also see 66:22). And last, the only things that survive this world are those that are unshakable and eternal. The kingdom of Jesus Christ cannot be shaken.<sup>20</sup>

The apostle Peter also prophesied the return of Christ. Peter says nothing of the dispensational rapture or of an earthly millennial reign of Christ from Jerusalem. He wrote in **2 Peter 3:10-13**:

But **the day of the Lord** will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; **both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up**. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless **we**, according to His promise, **look for new heavens and a new earth** in which righteousness dwells.

The day of the Lord refers to the second coming of Christ. In the Old Testament, when we read of the day of the Lord, it may refer to the first or the second coming of Christ, as both comings were combined in their view. But in the fuller light of the new covenant, the New Testament talks of the day of the Lord as Christ's second coming, which will come suddenly and unexpectedly. Peter teaches that the entire universe will pass away at that time. As John teaches, there will be "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1).

Unlike dispensationalists, Peter does not tell us to look for an intermediate state like a thousand year reign of Christ on earth or a premil, pretrib rapture. No, Peter tell us to "look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells," which is the Jerusalem above (Gal. 4:26), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), the City of God!

As we conclude this brief study of the end times, let us consider something else the apostle John says about the return of Christ. The same apostle John who wrote Revelation also wrote the Gospel of John. We believe that a further study of what the apostle John tells us about Christ's return in his Gospel, shows us that a thousand year literal reign of Christ on earth in the future is inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament's teachings.

In the Gospel of John, John knows nothing of multiple returns of Christ. There is only the now and the not yet. The kingdom of God is now present in the Church but will only be fully realized

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<sup>20</sup> William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Thessalonians, the Pastorals, and Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 397-399.

at the last day. The church militant will at the last day become the church triumphant. Note the many references to *the last day* by John:

John 6:39-40: "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at **the last day**. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at **the last day**."

John 6:44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at **the last day**."

John 6:54: "Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at **the last day**."

In John 11:24, Martha said to Jesus, concerning her brother Lazarus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at **the last day**."

In John 12:48, Jesus said, "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him -- the word that I have spoken will judge him in **the last day**."

John says nothing of an intermediate rapture or millennial reign on earth. Why wouldn't he tell us about this in the Gospel of John, if that is what he was referring to in Revelation, chapter 20?

Keith Mathison reminds us that more obscure texts in Scripture must be interpreted in the light of clearer texts. He writes, "The clearest texts of Scripture tell us several things about the last days:

1. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 15:22-24 that the end immediately follows the resurrection of Christ's people at His coming (v. 24: "then comes the end").
2. Jesus informs us that this resurrection will occur on the "last day" (John 6:40).
3. Jesus also indicates that the resurrection of His people will be simultaneous with the resurrection of the wicked (John 5:28-29; 2 Thess. 1:6-10; cf. Dan. 12:2). An "hour" is coming, a point in time, when "all" will rise. The resurrection of the righteous and the resurrection of the wicked are not separated by a thousand years. Both occur on the Last Day.
4. Paul says that this resurrection spells the defeat and destruction of the last enemy, death (1 Cor. 15:26, 54-55).
5. John teaches that the destruction of the last enemy—death—takes place at the Great White Throne judgment, which follows the millennium (Rev. 20:11-14). The second coming of Jesus and the Great White Throne judgment, therefore, cannot be separated by a thousand-year period of time. Both occur on the Last Day, the day when all men are resurrected and death is destroyed.
6. Paul also informs us that on this Last Day Christ gives the kingdom over to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24). The Last Day is not the time when Christ receives the kingdom. It is when He hands it over to the Father. So the messianic kingdom must be prior to the Last Day, when Christ comes again."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (New Jersey: P&R, 1995), 125-126.

Much more could be said about these topics, but suffice it to say that the Reformed understanding of the end times has much more Scriptural support than alternative views. The dispensational view of the end times is closely tied to the hermeneutic or lens invented in the 1800s, which they have adopted, and through which lens they interpret the Bible. A proper understanding of the Scripture's teaching on Israel and the Church does much to dispel any notion of a future literal reign of Christ from Jerusalem in the Middle East, as does the teaching of John, Paul, Peter, Jesus, and the rest of the New Testament writers.

To those Christian believers who have up until now held to a dispensational interpretation of Scripture, we urge you to study God's Word as it is written, allowing each passage of Scripture to be interpreted by the rest of Scripture. If you are a Christian, then you must allow God's newer revelation—the New Testament—to interpret the Old Testament promises regarding "Israel," "the land," the restored Jerusalem, and the temple. We hope you would agree that God has the right to provide greater clarity and insight into the meaning of what was not yet clear in the Old Testament. Surely a Christian cannot impose the Old Testament onto the New Testament; to the contrary, the Old Testament provides the foundation, and the New Testament helps us to interpret it as God intends. Under the old covenant, the light was dim like the light of the moon; under the new covenant, we live in the full sunshine of noon day, for the Sun of Righteousness has arisen and revealed to us His complete, all-sufficient truth (Malachi 4:2).

God wills for all true believers to be united in the "one Lord" and "one faith" (Eph. 4:5). While this will not be fully realized until heaven, God's will is for us all to "come to **the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God**, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ" (Eph. 4:13-15).

If we will submit ourselves to the word of God alone and study the word of God day and night, we can come to a mutual understanding of and belief in the truth.

The topic of the end times should be handled with humility, sobriety, and care, for Scripture does not give us as much detail as we might like, but we know what we need to know. And that is that Christ will come again, that all true believers will spend eternity in heaven with Him, and that this world is passing away. We know that one minute after we die, we will be with Christ in Paradise, for "to be absent from the body" is "to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8). Christ call us to be "redeeming the time", making the most of our brief time on this earth to serve Him and His kingdom, "because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5).