

The Fourth Foundation: Israel / Church Distinction

by Thomas Ice

The fourth biblical foundation upon which the pre-trib rapture is built is the fact that God has two peoples-Israel and the church. What do we mean by this distinction and how does it impact pretribulationism?

The Distinction Between Israel and the Church

"The New Testament consistently differentiates between Israel and the church," claims Arnold Fruchtenbaum.¹ Fruchtenbaum supports this conclusion through a powerful twofold argument in which he first demonstrates the biblical view of Israel and secondly, by showing that the church is viewed in the New Testament as a separate entity.

Belief that God's single plan for history includes the two peoples of Israel and the church does not imply that there are thus different ways of salvation. When it comes to the issue of salvation there is only one way, since all peoples down through history descend from a single source-Adam. Christ's saving work is the only way of salvation for anyone, whether they are a member of Israel or the church.

Israel

Fruchtenbaum notes that "the term Israel is viewed theologically as referring to all descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, also known as Jews, the Jewish people, Israelites, Hebrews, etc." (113). He notes that national election distinguishes Israel from those peoples who were not chosen that we know as Gentiles (113-14). Fruchtenbaum outlines four reasons for Israel's election: 1) they were "chosen on the basis of God's love . . . to be 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6) . . . to represent the Gentile nations before God." 2) "God chose Israel to be the recipient of His revelation and to record it (Deut. 4:5-8; 6:6-9; Rom. 3:1-2)." 3) Israel "was to propagate the doctrine of the One God (Deut. 6:4)." 4) Israel "was to produce the Messiah (Rom. 9:5; Heb. 2:16-17; 7:13-14) (115)."

No biblically oriented christian would deny these purposes relating to Israel. The differences begins to emerge when we consider Israel in relation to the church. "Some theologians insist," notes Fruchtenbaum "that at some point the church receives the promises given to Israel and thus become the 'New Israel' (known as replacement theology). Some believe the terms church and Israel are used virtually 'interchangeably,' most citing Galatians 6:16 and some Romans 9:6." (116).

However, those commonly known as dispensationalists interpret the Bible literally and thus do not confuse the terms Israel and the church, since there is no basis in the text of any biblical passage for supporting such an approach.

Having noted important aspects of the biblical use of Israel, I will now examine the nature of the church.

The Church

Six reasons are given by Fruchtenbaum from the Bible supporting the notion that the church is a distinct work in God's household from His people Israel.

1) "The first evidence is the fact that the church was born at Pentecost, whereas Israel had existed for many centuries" (116). This is supported by "the use of the future tense in Matthew 16:18 shows that it

did not exist in gospel history" (116). Since the church born at Pentecost is called the "Body of Christ" (Col. 1:18), and entrance into the body is through "Spirit baptism" (1 Cor. 12:13), in which Jew and Gentile are united through the church. It is evident that the church began on the Day of Pentecost since Acts 1:5 views Spirit baptism as future, while Acts 10 links it to the past, specifically to Pentecost.

2) "The second evidence is that certain events in the ministry of the Messiah were essential to the establishment of the church-the church does not come into being until certain events have taken place" (117). These events include the resurrection and ascension of Jesus to become head of the church (Eph. 1:20-23). "The church, with believers as the body and Christ as the head, did not exist until after Christ ascended to become its head. And it could not become a functioning entity until after the Holy Spirit provided the necessary spiritual gifts (Eph. 4:7-11)" (117).

3) "The third evidence is the mystery character of the church (117)." A mystery in the Bible is a hidden truth not revealed until the New Testament (Eph. 3:3-5, 9; Col. 1:26-27). Fruchtenbaum lists "four defining characteristics of the church [that] are described as a mystery. (1) The body concept of Jewish and Gentile believers united into one body is designated as a mystery in Ephesians 3:1-12. (2) The doctrine of Christ indwelling every believer, the Christ-in-you concept, is called a mystery in Colossians 1:24-27 (cf. Col. 2:10-19; 3:4). (3) The church as the Bride of Christ is called a mystery in Ephesians 5:22-32. (4) The Rapture is called a mystery in 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. These four mysteries describe qualities that distinguish the church from Israel" (117-18).

4) "The fourth evidence that the church is distinct from Israel is the unique relationship between Jews and the Gentiles, called one new man in Ephesians 2:15" (118). During the current church age God is saving a remnant from the two previous entities (Israel and Gentiles) and combining them into a third new object-the church. This unity of Jews and Gentiles into one new man covers only the church age, from Pentecost until the rapture, after which time God will restore Israel and complete her destiny (Acts 15:14-18). 1 Corinthians 10:32 reflects just such a division when it says, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God."

5) "The fifth evidence for the distinction between Israel and the church is found in Galatians 6:16" (118). "It appears logical to view 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16) as believing Jews in contrast to unbelieving Jews called 'Israel after the flesh' (1 Cor. 10:18)" (124).² This passage does not support the false claim of replacement theologians who claim that Israel is supplanted by the Church. Instead, the Bible teaches that a remnant of Israel is combined with elect Gentiles during this age to make up a whole new entity the New Testament calls the church (Eph. 2).

Replacement theology tries to teach that because Gentiles believers are described as the "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29) that this is equivalent to saying that they are Israel. This is clearly not the case. Paul's description of Gentile believers in Galatians 3:29 simply means that they participate in the spiritual (i.e., salvation) blessings that come through Israel (Rom. 15:27; 1 Cor. 9:11, 14). "Those who are the spiritual seed are partakers of Jewish spiritual blessings but are never said to become partakers of the physical, material, or national promises" (126). Therefore, Israel's national promises are left intact awaiting a yet future fulfillment.

6) "In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term Israel is used twenty times and ekklesia (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct" (118).³ Thus, the replacement theologian has no actual biblical basis upon which he bases his theological claim that Israel and the church have become one.

The Significance of the Distinction

If Israel and the church are not distinguished then there is no basis for seeing a future for Israel or for the church, as a new and unique people of God. If Israel and the church are merged into a single program, then the Old Testament promises for Israel will never be fulfilled and are usually seen by replacement theologians as spiritually fulfilled by the church. The merging of Israel's destiny into the church not only makes into one what the Scriptures understand as two, it removes a need for future restoration of God's original elect people in order to fulfill literally His promise that they will one day be the head and not the tail (Deut. 28:13).

The more that the believer sees a distinct plan for Israel and a distinct plan for the church, the more they realize that when the New Testament speaks to the church it is describing a separate destiny and hope for her. The church becomes more distinct in the plan of God. Israel's future includes the seven-year tribulation and then shortly before Christ's return to Jerusalem she will be converted to Jesus as her Messiah as the veil is removed and then she looks upon the one Who was pierced and is converted. On the other hand, the distinct hope (the rapture before the 70th week of Daniel) for the church is Christ's any-moment return.

Thus, a distinction between Israel and the church, as taught in the Bible, provides a basis of support for the pre-trib rapture. Those who merge the two programs cannot logically support the biblical arguments for the pre-trib position.

ENDNOTES

1 Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church" in Wesley Willis, John Master, and Charles Ryrie, ed., *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 129. This article by Fruchtenbaum is a highly regarded defense of the Bible's distinction between Israel and the church and should be read by all interacting with this subject. The remaining citations of Fruchtenbaum's article will appear in brackets after a quotation in the rest of this essay.

2 For an extensive and convincing treatment of Galatians 6:16 see Fruchtenbaum's article, 120-26.

3 Fruchtenbaum lists all 73 times Israel is used in the New Testament and demonstrates that Israel always is used to refer to ethnic Jews and never is used of the church (118-20). For an exhaustive and definitive study of the word for church and how it is never merged with Israel in the New Testament, see Earl Radmacher, *What the Church is All About* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 366-84, 389-93.