

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

An Introduction
to Biblical Doctrine

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But in Ephesians 1:22–23; 4:15–16, and in Colossians 2:19, Paul uses a different body metaphor to refer to the church. In these passages Paul says that Christ is the head and the church is like *the rest of the body, as distinguished from the head*: “We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love” (Eph. 4:15–16).¹³ We should not confuse these two metaphors in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4, but keep them distinct.

The wide range of metaphors used for the church in the New Testament should remind us not to focus exclusively on any one. For example, while it is true that the church is the body of Christ, we must remember that this is only one metaphor among many. If we focus exclusively on that metaphor we will be likely to forget that Christ is our Lord reigning in heaven as well as the one who dwells among us. Certainly we should not agree to the Roman Catholic view that the church is the “continuing incarnation” of the Son of God on earth today. The church is not the Son of God in the flesh, for Christ rose in his human body, he ascended in his human body into heaven, and he now reigns as the incarnate Christ in heaven, one who is clearly distinct from the church here on earth.

Each of the metaphors used for the church can help us to appreciate more of the richness of privilege that God has given us by incorporating us into the church. The fact that the church is like a family should increase our love and fellowship with one another. The thought that the church is like the bride of Christ should stimulate us to strive for greater purity and holiness, and also greater love for Christ and submission to him. The image of the church as branches in a vine should cause us to rest in him more fully. The idea of an agricultural crop should encourage us to continue growing in the Christian life and obtaining for ourselves and others the proper spiritual nutrients to grow. The picture of the church as God’s new temple should increase our awareness of God’s very presence dwelling in our midst as we meet. The concept of the church as a priesthood should help us to see more clearly the delight God has in the sacrifices of praise and good deeds that we offer to him (see Heb. 13:15–16). The metaphor of the church as the body of Christ should increase our interdependence on one another and our appreciation of the diversity of gifts within the body. Many other applications could be drawn from these and other metaphors for the church listed in Scripture.

5. **The Church and Israel.** Among evangelical Protestants there has been a difference of viewpoint on the question of the relationship between Israel and the church. This question was brought into prominence by those who hold to a “dispensational” system of theology. The most extensive systematic theology written by a dispensationalist, Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*,¹⁴ points

¹³This second metaphor is not even a complete or “proper” metaphor, for bodily parts do not grow up into the head, but Paul is mixing the idea of Christ’s headship (or authority), the idea of the church as a body, and the idea that we grow to maturity in Christ, and he combines them into one complex statement.

¹⁴Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*. Although there are several other distinctive doctrines that usually characterize dispensationalists, the distinction between Israel and the church as two groups in God’s overall plan is probably the most important. Other doctrines held by dispensationalists usually include a pretribulational rapture of the church into heaven (see chapter 54), a future literal fulfillment

out many distinctions between Israel and the church, and even between believing Israel in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament.¹⁵ Chafer argues that God has two distinct plans for the two different groups of people that he has redeemed: God's purposes and promises for *Israel* are for *earthly blessings*, and they will yet be fulfilled on this earth at some time in the future. On the other hand, God's purposes and promises for *the church* are for *heavenly blessings*, and those promises will be fulfilled in heaven. This distinction between the two different groups that God saves will especially be seen in the millennium, according to Chafer, for at that time Israel will reign on earth as God's people and enjoy the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, but the church will already have been taken up into heaven at the time of Christ's secret return for his saints ("the rapture"). On this view, the church did not begin until Pentecost (Acts 2). And it is not right to think of Old Testament believers together with New Testament believers as constituting one church.

While Chafer's position continues to have influence in some dispensational circles, and certainly in more popular preaching, a number of leaders among more recent dispensationalists have not followed Chafer in many of these points. Several current dispensational theologians, such as Robert Saucy, Craig Blaising, and Darrell Bock, refer to themselves as "progressive dispensationalists,"¹⁶ and they have gained a wide following. They *would not see the church as a parenthesis* in God's plan but as the first step toward the establishment of the kingdom of God. On a progressive dispensational view, *God does not have two separate purposes for Israel and the church*, but a single purpose—the establishment of the kingdom of God—in which Israel and the church will both share. Progressive dispensationalists would see *no distinction between Israel and the church in the future eternal state*, for all will be part of the one people of God. Moreover, they would hold that the church will reign with Christ in *glorified bodies on earth during the millennium* (see the discussion of the millennium in chapter 55).

However, there is still a difference between progressive dispensationalists and the rest of evangelicalism on one point: they would say that *the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel will still be fulfilled in the millennium by ethnic Jewish people* who will believe in Christ and live in the land of Israel as a "model nation" for all nations to see and learn from. Therefore they would not say that the church is the "new Israel" or that all the Old Testament prophecies about Israel will be fulfilled in the church, for these prophecies will yet be fulfilled in ethnic Israel.

The position taken in this book differs quite a bit from Chafer's views on this issue and also differs somewhat with progressive dispensationalists. However, it must be said here that questions about the exact way in which biblical prophecies

of Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel, the dividing of biblical history into seven periods or "dispensations" of God's ways of relating to his people, and an understanding the church age as a parenthesis in God's plan for the ages, a parenthesis instituted when the Jews largely rejected Jesus as their Messiah. However, many present-day dispensationalists would qualify or reject several of these other distinctives. Dispensationalism as a system began with the writings of J. N. Darby (1800–1882) in Great Britain, but was popularized in the USA through the Scofield Reference Bible.

¹⁵Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:45–53.

¹⁶See Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), and Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, eds., *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993). See also John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988).

about the future will be fulfilled are, in the nature of the case, difficult to decide with certainty, and it is wise to have some tentativeness in our conclusions on these matters. With this in mind, the following may be said.

Both Protestant and Catholic theologians outside of the dispensational position have said that the church includes both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers in one church or one body of Christ. Even on the nondispensational view, a person may hold that there will be a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people (Rom. 11:12, 15, 23–24, 25–26, 28–31),¹⁷ yet that this conversion will only result in Jewish believers becoming part of the one true church of God—they will be “grafted back into their own olive tree” (Rom. 11:24).

With regard to this question, we should notice the many New Testament verses that understand the church as the “new Israel” or new “people of God.” The fact that “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) would suggest this. Moreover, this present church age, which has brought the salvation of many millions of Christians in the church, is not an interruption or a parenthesis in God’s plan,¹⁸ but a continuation of his plan expressed throughout the Old Testament to call a people to himself. Paul says, “For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. *He is a Jew who is one inwardly*, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Rom. 2:28–29). Paul recognizes that though there is a literal or natural sense in which people who physically descended from Abraham are to be called Jews, there is also a deeper or spiritual sense in which a “true Jew” is one who is inwardly a believer and whose heart has been cleansed by God.

Paul says that Abraham is not only to be considered the father of the Jewish people in a physical sense. He is also in a deeper and more true sense “*the father of all who believe* without being circumcised . . . and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had” (Rom. 4:11–12; cf. vv. 16, 18). Therefore Paul can say, “not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his descendants . . . it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned as descendants” (Rom. 9:6–8). Paul here implies that the true children of Abraham, those who are in the most true sense “Israel,” are not the nation of Israel by physical descent from Abraham but those who have believed in Christ. Those who truly believe in Christ are now the ones who have the privilege of being called “my people” by the Lord (Rom. 9:25, quoting Hos. 2:23); therefore, the church is now God’s chosen people. This means that when Jewish people according to the flesh are saved in large numbers at some time in the future, they will not constitute a separate people of God or be like a separate olive tree, but they will be “grafted back *into their own olive tree*” (Rom. 11:24). Another passage

¹⁷See chapter 54, pp. 1098 and 1104, where I affirm the conviction that Rom. 9–11 teaches a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people, even though I am not a dispensationalist in the commonly understood sense of that term.

¹⁸Chafer’s term is “an intercalation,” meaning an insertion of a period of time into a previously planned schedule or calendar of events (p. 41). Here Chafer says, “The present age of the church is an intercalation into the revealed calendar or program of God as that program was foreseen by the prophets of old.”

indicating this is Galatians 3:29: "And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Similarly, Paul says that Christians are the "true circumcision" (Phil. 3:3).

Far from thinking of the church as a separate group from the Jewish people, Paul writes to Gentile believers at Ephesus telling them that they were formerly "alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12), but that now they have been "brought near in the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). And when the Gentiles were brought into the church, Jews and Gentiles were united into one new body. Paul says that God "*has made us both one*, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might *reconcile us both to God in one body* through the cross" (Eph. 2:14–16). Therefore Paul can say that Gentiles are "*fellow citizens with the saints* and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:19–20). With his extensive awareness of the Old Testament background to the New Testament church, Paul can still say that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body" (Eph. 3:6). The entire passage speaks strongly of the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers in one body in Christ and gives no indication of any distinctive plan for Jewish people ever to be saved apart from inclusion in the one body of Christ, the church. The church incorporates into itself all the true people of God, and almost all of the titles used of God's people in the Old Testament are in one place or another applied to the church in the New Testament.

Hebrews 8 provides another strong argument for seeing the church as the recipient, and the fulfillment, of the Old Testament promises concerning Israel. In the context of speaking about the new covenant to which Christians belong, the author of Hebrews gives an extensive quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34, in which he says, "The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new *covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*. . . . This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Heb. 8:8–10). Here the author quotes the Lord's promise that he will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and *with the house of Judah*, and says that that is the new covenant that has now been made *with the church*. That new covenant is the covenant of which believers in the church are now members. It seems hard to avoid the conclusion that the author views the church as the true Israel of God in which the Old Testament promises to Israel find their fulfillment.

Similarly, James can write a general letter to many early Christian churches and say that he is writing "To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (James 1:1). This indicates that he is evidently viewing New Testament Christians as the successors to and fulfillment of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Peter also speaks in the same way. From the first verse in which he calls his readers "exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Peter 1:1)¹⁹ to the next-to-last verse in which he calls the city of Rome "Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13), Peter frequently speaks of

¹⁹The "Dispersion" was a term used to refer to the Jewish people scattered abroad from the land of Israel and living throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

New Testament Christians in terms of Old Testament imagery and promises given to the Jews. This theme comes to prominence in 1 Peter 2:4–10, where²⁰ Peter says that God has bestowed on the church almost all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament. The dwelling-place of God is no longer the Jerusalem temple, for Christians are the new “temple” of God (v. 5). The priesthood able to offer acceptable sacrifices to God is no longer descended from Aaron, for Christians are now the true “royal priesthood” with access before God’s throne (vv. 4–5, 9). God’s chosen people are no longer said to be those physically descended from Abraham, for Christians are now the true “chosen race” (v. 9). The nation blessed by God is no longer said to be the nation of Israel, for Christians are now God’s true “holy nation” (v. 9). The people of Israel are no longer said to be the people of God, for Christians—both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—are now “God’s people” and those who have “received mercy” (v. 10). Moreover, Peter takes these quotations from contexts in the Old Testament that repeatedly warn that God will reject his people who persist in rebellion against him and who reject the precious “cornerstone” (v. 6) that he has established. What further statement could be needed in order for us to say with assurance that the church has now become the true Israel of God and will receive all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament?²¹

6. The Church and the Kingdom of God. What is the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God? The differences have been summarized well by George Ladd:

The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God’s rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself. Jesus’ disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of men.²²

Ladd goes on to summarize five specific aspects of the relationship between the kingdom and the church: (1) The church is not the kingdom (for Jesus and the early Christians preached that the kingdom of God was near, not that the church was near, and preached the good news of the kingdom, not the good news of the church: Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). (2) The kingdom creates the church (for as people enter into God’s kingdom they become joined to the human fellowship of the church). (3) The church witnesses to the kingdom (for Jesus said, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world,” Matt. 24:14). (4) The church is the instrument of the kingdom (for the Holy Spirit, manifesting the power of the kingdom, works through the disciples to heal

²⁰The remainder of this paragraph is largely taken from Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter*, p. 113.

²¹A dispensationalist may grant at this point that the church has been the recipient of many *applications* of Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel, but that the true *fulfillment* of these promises will yet come in the future for ethnic Israel. But with all these evident New Testament examples of clear application of these promises to the church, there does not seem to be any strong reason to deny that this really is the only fulfillment that God is going to give for these promises.

²²George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 111.