

Are There Two Peoples of God?
An Amillennial Response
to Dispensationalism
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Differences in Hermeneutical Methods

The Dispensational hermeneutical method rejects or at least discourages any allegorization of the Old Testament and Origen of the ante-Nicene patristic period is often pointed to as the source of the allegorical method of interpretation. The oft-repeated claim of those of the Dispensational tradition is that they interpret the Scriptures “literally” whereas those of the Reformed Amillennial tradition are frequently criticized for “spiritualizing” the Scriptures. In reality, the difference is that the former tradition generally understands the Old Testament from an earthly (carnal) perspective, while the latter insists that the doctrines, rituals, and events of the Old Testament were intended by God to provide a living picture to His people of the greater spiritual truths which are more clearly taught in the New Testament.

Because of the sharp distinction he makes between national Israel and the Church, the Dispensationalist will mainly confine his interpretation of Old Testament soteriology to the Old Testament text itself, and will likewise restrict his interpretation of New Testament soteriology mainly to the Pauline epistles. In fact, the consistent Dispensationalist will deny that the Gospel and the Christian Church are found in the Old Testament.¹

The Reformed expositor, however, sees the New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and will interpret the types and shadows of the Old in light of the clear revelation of the New. There is therefore a continuity between the two Testaments: the Old Testament serves as the foundation of God's revelation, each successive covenant is the addition of another floor to the building, and the New Testament serves as the roof of the completed structure:

But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken.... Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste (Isaiah 28:13, 16;

1. This essay deals with the classic Dispensationalism originally expounded in the *Scofield Reference Bible* and somewhat modified in the writings of John F. Walvoord, Lewis Sperry Chafer, and Charles Ryrie. Significant changes were later made by the so-called "progressive Dispensationalists" which brought their system closer to historic Covenant theology.

cf: Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17).

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of

our profession, Christ Jesus; who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; but Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end (Hebrews 3:1-6).

Contrary to Dispensationalism, the New Testament makes free use of the allegorical method of interpreting the Old Testament. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote:

For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after

the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free (Galatians 4:22-31).

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul pointed to Hagar and Ishmael as a type of national Israel under the bondage of Sinai, which was to be “cast out,” and to Sarah and Isaac as a type of the Church (Zion), the members of which “are the children of promise.” Paul clearly stated in verse 21 that this allegory was the true meaning of the law: “Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?” In Colossians 2:16-17, he again referenced the true spiritual meaning behind the Old Testament, focusing specifically on the ceremonial laws: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.” In 1 Corinthians 9:7-12 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18, Paul gave the Mosaic case law against muzzling an ox a spiritual interpretation and applied it to Christian ministers. The writer of Hebrews likewise wrote that the Temple was a type of “the true tabernacle” (Hebrews 8:2) and that the sacrifices were a “shadow of heavenly things” (verse 5). Two chapters later, we read that the law was “a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things” (Hebrews 10:1). Again, the true interpretation of the Old Testament, according to the New Testament writers, is a spiritual one, not a natural or carnal one. It was because the Jews failed to discern the spiritual meaning of “the law and the prophets” that they were unable to receive their Messiah when

He walked among them:

But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: that the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them. These things said Esaias, when he saw his glory, and spake of him (John 12:37-41).

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:9-14).

[God] also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: how shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory. For even that which was made glorious had no glory in this respect, by reason of the glory that excelleth. For if that which is done away was glorious, much more that which remaineth is glorious. Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: and not as Moses, which put a veil over his face, that the children of Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: but their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil shall be taken away (2 Corinthians 3:6-16).

With all the above scriptural evidence in mind, it is clear that any system which adopts the hermeneutical principle of the Jews – a principle which caused them to reject and crucify the Messiah and thus to be severely judged by God – has to be rejected by the Christian, for surely it will have a negative effect on his faith and understanding of the true nature of the Gospel.

The Alleged Distinctiveness of Israel

In his review of John Gerstner's book, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*,² John A. Witmer of Dallas Theological Seminary wrote, "In Scripture Israel's distinctiveness rests in God's choosing the nation as a special people for Himself (Deut. 7:6).... This choice was based on God's oath to the forefathers (Deut. 7:8), which oath is the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 17:1-8), the token of which is circumcision of every male Israelite (vv. 9-14)."³

It should be noted that this covenant was actually made in Chapter 15, when Abraham cut the sacrifices and God Himself passed through the pieces. Chapter 17 merely reaffirms the same promises made in Chapter 15. Were these promises for national Israel alone, or were they ultimately for someone else? The Apostle Paul gave the answer in the third chapter of Galatians:

Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.... That the blessing of Abraham might come

2. John Gertsner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991).

3. John A. Witmer, "A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 149 (April-June 1992), page 15.

on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or added thereto. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.... (Galatians 3:7-9, 14-18, 28-29).

Thus, while the immediate promise in the Abrahamic covenant was the possession of the land of Palestine, the spiritual reality behind that promise was really entrance into the "heavenly country" (Hebrews 11:16): regeneration through faith in Christ Jesus, the Seed to whom the covenant pointed and with whom it was actually made. The writer of Hebrews used the promised land as a figure of the Gospel itself and cautioned his Jewish readers not to provoke God to anger by unbelief just as their forefathers had done. He wrote:

While it is said, To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being

mixed with faith in them that heard it. For we which have believed do enter into rest.... Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying to David, To-day, after so long a time; as it is said, To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. For if Jesus [Joshua] had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God (Hebrews 3:15-4:1-3, 7-9).

If the Abrahamic covenant was a promise that God would “justify the heathen through faith,” and if the promised land was a type of the spiritual rest of regeneration, then there is no longer any reason for a distinction between natural Israelites and Gentiles under the New Testament: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:28-29).

Witmer wrote, “Since this covenant, confirmed through Isaac (vv. 19, 21) instead of Ishmael (vv. 9-14), was an ‘everlasting covenant’ (vv. 7, 13, 19), God’s choice of Israel ethnically as a special people also is everlasting. This truth is confirmed by God’s promise through Jeremiah that Israel will continue as a nation as long as the sun, moon, and stars endure (Jer. 31:35-37, 33:19-26)....”⁴ We have already quoted Paul’s allegorical reference to Isaac and Ishmael in Galatians 4:22-31. Here, he equated the Christian Church – made up of believing Jews and Gentiles – with Isaac, the “son of promise” and he equated the natural and unbelieving Jews with Ishmael, stating that they are

4. Witmer, *ibid.*, page 14.

“cast out.” This is exactly the opposite of what Witmer was attempting to prove by referring to the two sons of Abraham. Witmer’s error is further demonstrated in Romans 9:6-8: “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.” Again, both Jews and Gentiles are equally the “children of the promise” and are “counted for the seed” if they “be Christ’s.” Nothing could be clearer than that God is finished with ethnic distinctions and that His chosen people are now “of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Revelation 7:9).

Witmer did not fare any better in referring to God’s promise in Jeremiah 31:35-37. This is seen when the preceding verses are considered:

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that 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 that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: but this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel: After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of

them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The parallel passage to the above is found in Ezekiel 36:24-28:

For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Turning again to the New Testament, we find this “new covenant” the main topic of discussion at the Last Supper. Holding forth the Passover elements to His Jewish disciples, Jesus said, “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matthew 26:28; cf. Mark 14:24). That this was the same covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel is clear from Christ’s discourse with Nicodemus:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus

by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.... Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? (John 3:1-10)

Nicodemus should have understood what Christ was referring to, for in speaking of the new birth "of water and of the Spirit," He obviously had in mind the promise of God to the Jews that He would "sprinkle clean water" upon them and put "a new spirit" within them. Christ was telling a Jewish leader that it was not enough to be a physical descendent of Abraham ("that which is born of the flesh is flesh"); it was necessary to be regenerated (baptized by the Holy Spirit) in order to "enter into the kingdom of God." A few verses later is the well-known proclamation of the universal Gospel (verses 16-18). This all corresponds to the Apostle Paul's aforementioned distinction between Israel "after the flesh" and spiritual Israel which is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. According to both Christ and Paul, it is the latter, and not the former, which has

inherited the Kingdom of God. The Church, therefore, is the “nation” which continues as long as the sun, moon, and stars endure: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9; cf. Exodus 19:5-6).

Witmer wrote:

This separate identity of Israel in distinction from the Gentiles and from “the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32) continued in the New Testament. It was recognized by Paul (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:3-5; 10:1-3), who insisted that “God has not rejected His people” (11:1-2a). Paul supported this conclusion of God’s continuing choice of Israel with two arguments: (a) “At the present time [there is] a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (v. 5), including Paul himself, that becomes part of the body of Christ, the church (Eph. 2:13-18). (b) Later after “the fulness of the Gentiles has come in... all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25-26) because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). This final salvation of Israel is seen at least in part in the “one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (Rev. 7:4-8) and in the repentance of Israel at the Lord Jesus’s return to earth (Zech. 12:9-13:1, 9).⁵

5. Witmer, *ibid.*

Witmer completely misunderstood Paul's point in Romans 9:6-8: "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." Paul then responded to the hypothetical objection, "Hath God cast away his people?" (Romans 11:1) by noting that God's covenant was always with the remnant of Israel – the true seed "according to the promise" – not with the unbelieving Jews. To this remnant have now been added believing Gentiles (verses 15-19). To be reckoned once again as God's people and to be grafted back into Israel, the unbelieving Jews must become Christians: "And so [οὕτως - *houtôs*: "in this way"] all Israel shall be saved" (verse 26). This same doctrine is taught in John 1:12-13: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." Inclusion in Israel under the New Testament is strictly by regeneration, not by physical descent from Abraham.

Witmer also erred in speaking of a "final salvation of [national] Israel" at the "Lord Jesus's return to earth." No such post-second advent salvation is taught anywhere in the Bible, but quite the opposite. According to Paul's doctrine in 1 Corinthians 15:24, when Christ returns, "then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power." Those, whether they be Jews or Gentiles, who have not believed by that time will have no more opportunity: "When the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his

mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; when he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe... in that day" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

Let us now consider Witmer's selected proof text in Zechariah: "And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all nations that come against Jerusalem. And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (Zechariah 12:9-10). A parallel passage is found in Joel 2:28-30: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit." Both prophecies referred to a time when the Holy Spirit would be poured out upon the Jews resulting in a mourning for their part in the crucifixion of Christ and their salvation according to the New Covenant promise of Ezekiel 36. However, we need not look for this momentous event in the future when Christ allegedly returns to set up an earthly kingdom, for, according to no less an authority than the Apostle Peter himself, the fulfillment of the prophecy is found in Acts 2:14-18:

But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice, and said unto them, Ye men of Judea, and all ye

that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: for these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel; and it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh: and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: and on my servants and on my handmaidens I will pour out in those days of my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

Peter was speaking to the very crowd referred to in Zechariah 12:9: “the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” What followed was the first sermon of the Christian Church in which he expounded upon the Old Testament prophecies concerning Christ, proving that it was “the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God” that the Jews would take and kill their own Messiah. In concluding his sermon, Peter said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (verse 36). The reaction of his audience was exactly as Zechariah prophesied it would be: “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (verse 37) Peter responded by instructing them to be “baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (verse 38) – another clear reference to the New Covenant in Ezekiel 36. Peter continued: “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (verse 39). What promise was he referring to? The promise given to Abraham: entrance into the “land” of regeneration.

Was this promise for ethnic Israel only? No, it was also “to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” – the Gentiles who were once “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise” (Ephesians 2:12) and who were once “afar off” but now “are made nigh by the blood of Christ” (verse 13).

Witmer quoted Romans 11:29 in an attempt to prove that unbelieving Jews still have a covenant relationship with God based, not on faith, but upon blood, which, as we have already seen, is directly contrary to Paul’s point in Romans 9:8 that “the children of the flesh... are not the children of God.” This corresponds to Christ’s discourse with the scribes and Pharisees in the Gospel of John:

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free. They [those Jews who did not believe on Him] answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?

Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever commiteth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. I know that ye are Abraham’s seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father.

They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham’s

children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father.

Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.

Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God's words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God (John 8:31-47).

Here we see the unbelieving Jews clinging to the very same error now held by Dispensationalists such as Witmer: that God is the unconditional covenantal Father of the physical descendants of Abraham. Jesus responded by calling them instead children of their father, the Devil, who is the father of lies. Again, we see that faith in Christ is what makes one "the seed of Abraham," not blood.

Jesus again addressed these same unbelieving Jews in Matthew 21:33-43:

Hear another parable: there was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: and when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen?

They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.

Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.

Jesus continued speaking to the same Jews in Matthew 23:32-36:

Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city. That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

This all seems to be very strange language for the Son of God to use in addressing His Father's chosen people. Witmer insisted that God's covenant with the physical house of Israel has never been revoked, but what did Jesus say? "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (verse 38). This was not just a reference to the Temple only, but to the very covenantal status of the nation of Israel itself. As Jesus said to the fig tree (a type of Israel), "No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever" (Mark 11:14).

Before we leave this subject of the cutting off of unbelieving Israel, let us return again to Witmer's proof text from the prophecy of Zechariah:

Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow, saith the LORD of hosts: smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scat-

tered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones. And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the LORD, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them: I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The LORD is my God (Zechariah 13:7-9).

The context of the above prophecy shows that it refers to the time of Christ's crucifixion, not His second advent. The two parts that "shall be cut off and die" are the unbelieving Jews to whom Jesus was speaking and to whom Paul referred to as "branches broken off" in Romans 11:17. The "third part" which is brought "through the fire," is the "remnant according to the election of grace," also referred to by Paul in Romans 11:5, and addressed by Peter in 1 Peter 1:1-7:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be re-

vealed in the last time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Witmer wrote, "In addition to Israel's continuation as God's chosen people and her continuing title to the promised land is her continuation as a political entity, a nation. This involves God's covenant with David concerning the everlasting establishment of David's house (lineage), kingdom, and throne (2 Sam. 7:16; cf. vv. 24-25; Ps. 89:19-37). God stated that sin by David's descendants would bring divine chastisement (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:30-32), but that His mercy would not depart from them as He had removed it from Saul (2 Sam. 7:15; Ps. 89:28-29, 33-37)."⁶ First of all, his claim that God promised that Israel would continue as a nation is contradicted by Genesis 49:10: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." That this is a prophecy of Christ is beyond dispute. Also indisputable is the declaration that the sceptre (symbolic of a kingdom) would indeed "depart from Judah" when the Messiah began to gather the people: the "third part" remnant of Israel along with the believing Gentiles (cf. Matthew 21:43).

Furthermore, God's promise that David would never lack a descendant to sit upon his throne was and continues to

6. Witmer, *ibid.*, page 15.

be fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the “son of David.” He is not waiting for His second advent to sit upon this throne, but sat upon it when He was resurrected and ascended to the “right hand of the Father” (Psalm 2; cf. Matthew 28:18; Acts 13:22-23; Ephesians 2:4-7).

Witmer concluded his section on the distinctiveness of Israel by citing a string of proof texts which allegedly prophesy “the future kingdom for Israel and its character (e.g., Isa. 2:1-5; 4:2-6; 9:6-7; 11:1-12:6; 14:1-3; Zech. 8:1-8; 14:1-21; Acts 1:6-7; 3:20-32; 1 Cor. 15:20-26).” Upon examination, however, none of these passages support his claim, but rather find their fulfillment in the preaching of the Gospel in Jerusalem by the Apostles and its acceptance, first by the Jewish remnant, and then by the believing Gentiles. The “future kingdom for Israel” is actually the present kingdom of Christ and His Church.

The Alleged Distinctiveness of the Church

Witmer then moved on to discuss the logical conclusion of his thesis regarding Israel: that the Christian Church is a completely unique entity that was unknown in the Old Testament era. We need not spend as much time on this subject since his claims regarding the distinctiveness of the Church depend upon the veracity of his claims regarding the distinctiveness of Israel, which have already been disproved above. Witmer wrote, “The distinctiveness of the church rests in its identity as ‘the body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; cf. Rom. 12:5; Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23-30; Col. 1:18, 24). The formation of the church as Christ’s body is based on the Lord Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to heaven (Eph. 1:20-23; 4:7-16; Col. 1:18). As a result no redeemed person before Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God in heaven could be a

member of that body.”⁷

We have already seen from the third chapter of Galatians that New Testament Christians are fellow-partakers of the very same promises that were given to Abraham. According to verse 7, “they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.” Paul went on in verses 19-25 to teach that the Mosaic law, which was “four hundred and thirty years after” the Abrahamic covenant (verse 17), was “added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made” (verse 19). Its purpose was to “conclude all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe” (verse 22) and it was the Jews’ “school-master to bring [them] unto Christ, that [they] might be justified” (verse 24). Clearly then, the ultimate intent of the Mosaic covenant was not to grant national Israel possession of the land of Palestine, but to cause them to turn from attempting to establish their own righteousness and instead place their faith in the coming Messiah. In verse 8, Paul wrote, “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.” Consequently, “ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.... There is neither Jew nor Greek.... for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (verses 26, 28-29). Paul further expounded on this subject in Romans 11:24 when he spoke of the Church as a “good olive tree” into which Gentiles have been grafted. The root of this olive tree is in Abraham, not in the New Testament; therefore, the believing remnant of Old Testament Israel is of the same

7. Witmer, *ibid.*

body as the believing Jews and Gentiles of the New Testament Church. This was the point of the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews in chapter 11, especially in verse 40: "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." The Old Testament saints only saw the coming heavenly Kingdom of Christ by faith (verse 16), but that they were saints and belonged to Christ is clear. In fact, in Hebrews 12:1, they are described as "so great a cloud of witnesses" – witnesses to Christ (cf. Isaiah 43:10; Acts 1:8).

Moreover, the sermon preached by Stephen prior to his death is a thorough rebuttal of Witmer's claim that "no redeemed person" in the Old Testament was a member of the Church: "This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear. This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: to whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt" (Acts 7:37-39). Witmer wrote, "The church... constituting all individuals 'in Christ,' where 'neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation' (Gal. 6:15), was never envisioned in the Old Testament...."⁸ If all this were true, then Stephen erred in calling the saints of the Old Testament "the church in the wilderness." Witmer's statement is directly answered by Galatians 3:8-9: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they

8. Witmer, *ibid.*, page 16.

which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.”

Again, in Romans 4:11-16, Paul wrote:

And [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, through they be not circumcised; that the righteousness might be imputed unto them also: and the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised. For the promise, that he should be heir of the world, was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.... Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all.

Witmer quoted Charles Ryrie, ““This relationship was unknown in Old Testament times....”” and then added, “Abram was justified on the basis of his faith in God’s promise of a son, not a conscious, explicit faith in Jesus Christ.””⁹ However, according to Galatians 3:16, the object of the Abrahamic covenant was Christ Himself. Moreover, Paul began his epistle to the Romans with these words: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy

9. Witmer, *ibid.*, pages 16, 23.

scriptures" (Romans 1:1-2). How then can it be said that faith in Christ was "not possible" prior to His death, burial, and resurrection, and that a relationship with Him was "unknown in Old Testament times"? Though it was displayed in types and shadows, and thus obscured from the view of the unbelieving masses, it was nevertheless seen by the believing remnant: "Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:1-4).

Paul also wrote in Romans 10:16-21:

But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world. But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you. But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.

Witmer used the unbelief of the majority of Old Testament Israel to support his claim that the Gospel was unknown at that time, but Paul's point is exactly the opposite: they were

disobedient because they would not believe the Gospel that was indeed preached to them:

While it is said, To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. For we which have believed do enter into rest.... Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying to David, To-day, after so long a time; as it is said, To-day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. For if Jesus [Joshua] had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God (Hebrews 3:15-4:1-3, 7-9).

Witmer claimed that “the object of faith in every age is the promise of God; the content of God’s promise changes in various dispensations. This takes into account the distinction between God’s promise to Abram accepted by faith and God’s

promise to believers in this age of grace.”¹⁰ To the contrary, the object of faith in every age is none other than Christ Himself and the content of the promise remains precisely the same throughout the various “dispensations”: regeneration, or entrance into the spiritual Kingdom of Heaven by grace through faith:

Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust (Romans 15:8-12).

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.... And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:16, 29).

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that

10. Witmer, *ibid.*, page 23.

heard it (Hebrews 4:1-2).

And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee (Hebrews 6:11-13).

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