

Once Again

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I thought this would be a good time to revisit and expand on some of the topics that have been covered to date in this column *Notes & Quotes on the Bible* - especially relating to the topic of the Church. This is primarily for the benefit of new readers as well as in response to questions that we've received over the last couple of years. I should note that all past issues of *The Unity of the Spirit* are available from the address on the back of this issue. Feel free to write by letter or e-mail. In order to address topics in this issue as specifically as possible I will use a question and answer format.

Question 1:

Isn't the Church of the Body of Christ the "mystery" that wasn't made known until it was revealed to the apostle Paul? And doesn't this mean that there can't be anything about this Church in the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels? And doesn't this mean that Israel and the Church are two separate and distinct entities with two different biblical programs?

Answer:

No, no and no. The New Covenant Church of the body of Christ stands in direct continuity with the Old Covenant people of God, Israel. This continuity is explicit on almost every page of the New Testament documents - the Gospels, Acts and NT Letters - where Old Testament scriptures are quoted as being fulfilled in the New Testament period by the New Covenant Church (e.g. Acts 2:16f; 3:17f; Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:6-29; etc.). This continuity is also implicit in the OT language and concepts that are used to describe the New Covenant Church (e.g. "seed of Abraham," "Israel of God," "circumcision," "church," "temple," "people of God," "holy nation," "saints," "elect," "royal priesthood," "spiritual house," etc.) In short, what was foretold and/or foreshadowed in the Old Testament scriptures finds its ultimate fulfillment in Christ and, therefore, in his Church (II Cor. 1:20; Col. 2:17).

The Old Testament scriptures clearly foretold the coming of a New Covenant that God would set

up with the house of Israel (Jer. 31:31f). The New Testament clearly and specifically shows that this New Covenant finds its fulfillment in what Christ accomplished for the Church (Luke 22:20; I Cor. 11:17-34; II Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:7-8; etc.). Christ had told his disciples, "On this rock I will build my Church" (Matt. 16:18) and the rest of the New Testament shows him doing just that (e.g. Acts 2:47b; 26:12-18; Eph. 2:19-22; etc.).

Thus, the New Covenant people of God were clearly foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Covenant Church was clearly established - and is built by - Christ himself. There were, however, "mysteries" or "secrets" that had not been made known about this New Covenant people of God. One of these secrets is called the "mystery of Christ." Properly speaking, the mystery is *not* the one body of Christ or the Church of the body of Christ. Instead, the mystery had to do with the *composition* of the Church of the body of Christ - the New Covenant people of God. This mystery is specifically explained in Eph. 3:6:

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:6 NIV).

The key word here is *Gentiles*. The point being made is that through believing in Christ, *Gentiles* share equally in all that God has promised and now made available to his New Covenant people "in Christ." The corporate nature of the people of God was not a mystery. It was implied throughout the OT in language about Israel. It also was implied in specific OT prophecies about the Messiah such as the "chosen servant" of Isaiah and the "one like a son of man" of Dan. 7 - both of whom were portrayed as the corporate representative of God's people. Nor was it a mystery that the Church - the New Covenant people of God - would be "one in Christ." In fact, the oneness of the New Covenant church "in Christ" is specifically stated in John 17:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you

in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23).

These words which were spoken long before the apostle Paul was given his special revelation about the mystery of Christ could not be more emphatic: the Church was to be "in Christ" and "Christ in" the Church as well. What was a mystery was the *composition* of this Church - not that there would be such a Church incorporated "in Christ" - i.e., in the Messiah.

F.F. Bruce sums up the NT teaching about the "mystery of Christ" in his commentary on Ephesians 3:5-6:

The "mystery of Christ" into which Paul has received such exceptional insight is the content of the "revelation of Jesus Christ" of which he speaks in Gal. 1:12 ... Paul sometimes uses the term "mystery" of one particular element in his message - the transformation of believers into spiritual bodies at the last trumpet (I Cor. 15:51) or Israel's final restoration as the goal of its temporary relegation in favor of the Gentiles (Rom. 1:25). But his use of the term in Ephesians to denote the gospel in its fullness is in keeping with his general practice. The gospel which he received on the Damascus road by "revelation of Jesus Christ" was the law-free gospel which he proceeded to preach throughout the rest of his life; and precisely because it was law-free it was applicable to Gentiles as to Jews (the law being the barrier that had formerly kept them apart). The incorporation of Gentiles along with Jews in the new people of God - incorporation by grace through faith - was implicit in that gospel. This incorporation is the aspect of the "mystery of Christ" which is now [Eph. 3:6] emphasized.

This is a mystery in the sense that it was not made known to human beings in other generations. Similar language is used in the doxology at the end of the letter to the Romans, where Paul's gospel, "the preaching of Jesus Christ," is said to be "the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages" (Rom. 16:25), and in Col. 1:25-27, where the "word of God" which Paul is commissioned to make known is called "the mystery which has been concealed for ages and generations." In Col. 1:27 this mystery is summed up in Christ, dwelling in the hearts of Gentile believers as their hope of glory.

Elsewhere Paul insists that his gospel is no innovation. It was promised in advance though the prophets in the holy scriptures (Rom. 1:2); it was

preached beforehand to Abraham (Gal. 3:8). That faith was the principle by which God would justify men and women, Gentiles as well as Jews, was not a truth concealed in earlier generations. It is a truth attested, according to Paul, in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. He adduces evidence from the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings to establish that Christ came not only "to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" regarding their descendants but also "in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (Rom. 15:8-12), and in this evidence he finds the scriptural basis for his own Gentile mission.

That God would bless the Gentiles, then, was not a new revelation. What then was the new revelation, the mystery hitherto concealed? It was this: that God's blessing of the Gentiles would involve the obliteration of the old line of demarcation which separated them from Jews and the incorporation of Gentile believers together with Jewish believers, without any discrimination, in the new, comprehensive community of God's chosen people.

This had not been foreseen ... what has now been revealed is the plan of God that human beings without distinction - Gentiles as well as Jews - should on the common ground of faith be his sons and daughters in Christ. "If children, then heirs" (Rom. 17). To Abraham God had pledged a noble heritage of blessing, and of that heritage Abraham's descendants were the heirs ... But now the divine plan has been revealed that "all families of the earth" should through the gospel not only be blessed in Abraham's posterity but should be reckoned among his posterity, children of Abraham because they all share the faith of Abraham, who "is the father of us all" (Rom. 4:16). Gentile believers are therefore with Jewish believers "fellow-heirs" of all the blessings pledged to Abraham and his descendants - "heirs of God," in fact, "fellow-heirs with Christ," as Paul puts it elsewhere (Rom. 8:17). For, as readers of this letter have already been told, it is in Christ that believers receive their inheritance and have been sealed with the Spirit as the guarantee of their eventual entry upon it (Eph. 1:13-14).

Gentile believers, moreover, have been incorporated into the same body as Jewish believers; they are fellow-members of the body of Christ ... Even proselytes from paganism to the Jewish faith were debarred from a few minor privileges which were reserved for Israelites by birth. In the new community there were no such restrictions.

In adding that Gentiles were "joint-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel," Paul emphasizes a truth which he had taught at some length in Gal. 3:6-29. The promise was made to

Abraham; it was fulfilled in Christ, Abraham's offspring *par excellence*, "that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22). "If you are Christ's," Paul continues, it makes no difference whether you are Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female: "you are Abraham's offspring, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). [*The New Int. Com. on the NT, The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians*, pp. 313-316, Eerdmans].

In short, the New Covenant people of God, the Church, is clearly foretold in the pages of the OT (e.g. Jer. 31:31ff) and clearly spoken of and established by Christ himself. OT prophecies about this new covenant people of God are specifically said to be fulfilled, and/or confirmed, throughout the pages of the New Testament. What was *not* foreseen was that this body of believers in Christ would be composed of both Jew *and* Gentile on an equal basis - as one *new* man in Christ - thus, creating the true "circumcision" (Phil. 3:3), the true "seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:29), and the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 2 and Vol. 2 Issue 3]

Question 2:

But doesn't the term "bride of Christ" refer to Israel while the term "body of Christ" refer to a new and distinct church entity?

Answer:

No. There are several expressions used to denote the New Covenant people of God. The word "church" is only one among many terms including "temple," "building," "house," etc. Describing the church as a "bride" is one metaphor emphasizing certain truths while "body" is another metaphor emphasizing different truths. This is an emotional subject with many, but F.F. Bruce again explains the matter in his commentary on Ephesians:

The conception of the church as the body of Christ helps us to understand how Paul can not only speak of believers as being "in Christ" but also of Christ as being in them. They are "in Christ" as members of his body, "baptized into Christ" (Gal. 3:27); he is in them because it is his risen life that animates them. Similarly, in the organic analogy of John 15:1-8, the branches are in the vine and the vine at the same time is in the branches.

He uses it [the term "body of Christ"] when he wishes to bring out certain aspects of the relation

between church members, or between the church and Christ; when he wishes to bring out certain other aspects, he uses other terminology. From other points of view, for example, the church is thought of as the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-32), or as the building of which he is either the foundation or the chief cornerstone, and so on. Some theologians, indeed, treat the conception of the church of the body of Christ differently from those other conceptions, admitting that they are metaphorical while insisting that the term "body of Christ" is to be taken "ontologically and realistically."

But if they were right, one could go to make assertions about the church's relation to Christ, on the analogy of the relation which the human body, with its parts and their functions, bears to the head, beyond what Paul has to say. It is better to recognize that Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ for certain well-defined purposes, and to follow his example in using such language for these same purposes. It can be appreciated that those presentations which bring out the vital relation between Christ and the church are more adequate than others (there is no organic relation between a building and its foundation-stone ...); for this reason the head/body and husband/wife analogy have an especially firm grasp on reality [*The New Int. Com. on the NT, The Epistles to the Colossians, Philemon and Ephesians*, pp. 71, 70, Eerdmans].

[See also, Vol. 2 Issue 2]

Question 3:

But isn't the Church of the body of Christ the subject of a special "dispensation" or "administration" that was hidden in God until it was revealed to the Apostle Paul?

Answer:

No. The word that is sometimes translated as "dispensation" (KJV, NKJV, etc.) or "administration" (NIV) does not refer to a period of time. It is the Greek word "oikonomia" which primarily means the "stewardship" or "administration" of a household. This stewardship or administration is usually used in an "active" sense in the NT. It is therefore often equivalent to "stewarding" or "administering" or the "putting into effect" of something. Andrew Lincoln explains further the nuances of the word *oikonomia* in his commentary on Ephesians 1:10:

Oikonomia can refer to (1) the act of administering, (2) that which is administered, an arrangement or plan, and (3) the office or role of an administrator, a person's stewardship; it is often difficult to decide which nuance is in view with a particular usage. In the Greek world *oikonomia* was regularly used for God's ordering and administration of the universe. Here in 1:10 it also appears to have the active force (cf. 3:9), while elsewhere (cf. 3:2; I Cor. 4:1; 9:17; Col. 1:25) it refers to Paul's apostolic role and office [Word Biblical Commentary, Ephesians, pp. 31-32, Word Books, Dallas).

There are a great variety of terms used to translate *oikonomia* in the different Bible versions. But it is never used to describe a period of time like an "age" or "epoch" as is usually done in classic dispensationalism. Instead, in Ephesians 1:10 it is God himself who will "put into effect" (NIV) his formerly secret plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." In a similar way, Paul was given the stewardship of "stewarding" or "administering" or "putting into effect" the grace of God as revealed in the "mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:2, 9 and Col. 1:25-27). He did this by making it known to others through his apostolic ministry.

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 2]

Question 4:

But doesn't the Bible teach that the Christian hope is different from the hope of Israel? Isn't the Christian hope "heaven" while the hope of Israel is a "kingdom" on earth?

Answer:

No. In the Bible there is one God, one people of God and one hope for all of God's people. Jesus, as the Messiah of God, is also the one Lord and Christ for all of God's people - Old Testament and New. When he "comes" in glory he will raise all "those who belong to him" (I Cor. 15:23). This one biblical hope is summarized in Jesus' own saying:

"Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

In biblical thought the future hope, reward, or inheritance, of God's people is "stored up" (Col. 1:5) or "kept" (I Peter 1:4) in heaven until the time of Christ's return when he will establish God's "heavenly kingdom" (II Tim. 4:1,18) in a renewed earth. In a sense then, the biblical hope is "heaven

on earth." The idea that an inheritance, reward, kingdom, city, etc. is "kept in heaven" until the time of its being received in the future is simply a Hebraic way of thinking and speaking that is reflected throughout the New Testament. The NT, for example, teaches that Abraham and the other OT Patriarchs looked for a "heavenly country" (Heb. 11:16). In the same way, the "reward" of Jesus' disciples is "in heaven" but they will only receive it when they "inherit the earth" - i.e., the "kingdom of heaven" or "kingdom of God" (Matt. 5:1-12). These are the same truths that are taught by Paul in II Cor. 5:1-5 when he speaks of a "heavenly building", "heavenly house" or "heavenly dwelling". In short, as we have born the image of the "earthly" so we will bear the image of the "heavenly" - at Christ's return, when we "inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:42-57).

The NT scholar G.R. Beasley-Murray sums up the biblical perspective about the use of such "heavenly" language:

While the majority of Christendom has been in the habit of thinking of "heaven" as the place for which the children of God are destined, Jesus makes the startling statement that the meek are to possess the earth. This accords with the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions almost in their entirety ... The Kingdom of God *comes* from heaven to earth, and earth will be fitted to be the scene of such rule" [*Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, p. 163, Eerdmans].

When NT language is understood according to its original intent it is plainly that the hope of Abraham, Moses, David, and all the OT saints is the same hope as that of the NT saints: "eternal life" in the coming age of the kingdom of God.

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 1 and Vol. 3 Issue 2]

Question 5:

But don't the Old Testament and New Testament foretell the coming of a "millennial" kingdom for Israel which will fulfill God's Old Testament promises to it as a nation? And doesn't the term "kingdom of God" as used in the Gospels, Acts, NT Letters, etc. refer to this "millennial" kingdom which is spoken of in Revelation chapter 20?

Answer

No, and no. There is nothing about a "millennial" [one thousand year] reign of Christ anywhere in the Bible except in the Book of

Revelation. It is "revealed" only in Rev. 20. The Old Testament expectation about the coming "kingdom of God" which is to be ruled by the "Messiah" is *always* that it will be "everlasting" or "without end." Look at a few examples:

For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of peace.

*Of the increase of his government there will be **no end**. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time and **forever** (Isaiah 9:6-7).*

*In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up **a kingdom that will never be destroyed** ... it will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure **forever** (Dan. 2:44).*

*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with clouds of heaven ... He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an **everlasting dominion that will not pass away**, and his kingdom is one that will **never be destroyed**.*

*But the saints of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it **forever** - yes, **for ever and ever** (Dan. 7:13-14, 18).*

This expectation for an everlasting kingdom - *not* a one thousand year reign - is consistent throughout both the Old Testament and New Testament with the single exception of Rev. 20. Look at Luke 1:31-32 which reflects the NT view all the way through:

*You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob **forever**; his kingdom will **never end**.*

All of the references by Jesus, Paul and the other NT writers to the "kingdom of God" can only fit within the Old Testament perspective of this kingdom being a kingdom that is "everlasting" or "without end." It was also expected to be a kingdom

with no evil, death or corruption of any kind and inhabited only by the righteous who had been made immortal (Luke 20:34-38; Matt. 25:31-46; I Cor. 15:50-57). This can especially be seen in Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God (e.g. Matt. 13:24-30; 47-50; etc.). Because of this the consistent NT expectation is that "the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God" (I Cor. 6:9; etc.). There is no "neutral" third category - one is either "righteous" and made immortal or "unrighteous" and burned up. In short, in NT thinking the kingdom of God would usher in the "age to come" (Luke 18:29-30). A time when there would be a "universal restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21), or the "making new of all things" (Matt. 19:28-29), or "a new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness" (II Pet. 3:13).

Almost all NT scholars recognize these truths and it is for this reason that the subject of the "millennial" reign of Christ, which is only spoken of in Rev. 20, is so controversial. The picture of this millennium simply cannot fit the picture of the "kingdom of God" that is elsewhere consistently portrayed throughout the NT. For in the millennium of Rev. 20 there are both immortal *and* mortal people while there is also evil, death and destruction. For these reasons the millennium is the subject of a great deal of controversy among Christian NT scholars. There is however a great deal of unanimity that the millennium is nowhere spoken of outside the Book of Revelation. Consider the following statements by NT Christian scholars concerning this subject of the millennium:

Only in Rev. 20 do we find any NT teaching about the millennium [Robert H. Mounce, *The New International Commentary on the NT, The Book of Revelation*, p. 356-7, Eerdmans's].

When we turn to the New Testament, we find no trace of belief in a millennium in any writer other than John [G.B. Caird, *Black's New Testament Commentaries, The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 251, Hendrickson Pub.]

We cannot pause here to discuss the question of the millennium ... Rev. 20 is the only passage in the Bible which speaks of it and, whatever be its interpretation, it supplies a very slender base for the elaborate and exact theories that have been erected upon it [John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 241, Abingdon Press].

The idea of a limited messianic reign on earth of specified duration, falling immediately prior to the

inauguration of the eternal reign of God on earth, is not found in the OT or in any Jewish writing of John's day. What one does find, however, in both the OT and intertestamental writings, is a firm hope in the eternal reign of God on earth *that begins with triumph and reign of God's Messiah* [Robert Wall, *New International Biblical Commentary, Revelation*, p. 235, Hendrickson Pub.].

The millennial reign of Christ in Rev. 20 must be understood in the light of the Book of Revelation as a whole and not read back into the statements of other OT or NT biblical writers. Even in the Book of Revelation itself the millennium does not take place in "the age to come." Instead the age to come begins in Rev. 21 when the "former things pass away" and "the new heavens and earth" "come down from heaven." In contrast, everywhere else in the NT the age to come begins immediately at Christ's return.

NT scholar Richard Bauckham summarizes the issue of the millennium in the light of the overall NT

teaching about the Christian hope for the "kingdom of God":

It should be emphasized that no other passage of scripture clearly refers to the millennium. To apply OT prophecies of the age of salvation specifically to the millennium runs counter to the general interpretation of such prophecies, which find their fulfillment in the salvation already achieved by Christ and to be consummated in the age to come. This is also how Rev. itself interprets such prophecies in chs. 21f. Within the structure of Rev. the millennium has a limited role, as a demonstration of the final victory of Christ and his saints over the powers of evil. The principal object of Christian hope is not the millennium but the new creation of Rev. 21f. [Richard J. Bauckham, *New Bible Dictionary*, "Eschatology," p. 347, Tyndale]

[See also Vol. 2 Issue 1 and Vol. 3 Issue 2. And, for a good explanation of how the millennium *may* fit within the NT doctrine of the two ages see G. E. Ladd's book *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, chapter 2 "The Kingdom is Tomorrow," esp. pp. 35-39.]

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