

THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 97-2

Dear Reader,

Professed Christianity is divided right down the middle as to when the Church began. That might be a bit surprising for those of us who have come from “brethren” (so-called) or some “Baptist” backgrounds where *dispensationalism* generally is taught. But the battle rages! What is it all about? Let’s look at the two sides.

Those who believe the Church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), 50 days after the Lord’s resurrection, generally are known as *dispensationalists*. Dispensationalists believe that God works in different ways with His people in different *dispensations* -- periods of time when God operates on a unique principle such as with one nation (Israel) as opposed to the whole world, or today, through the Church, or in the future *Millennium* by Christ personally reigning in righteousness. These “times” or eras can also be called *administrations*. In the United States in recent years, we have had the *Reagan* administration, the *Bush* administration and the *Clinton* administration. Each “administration” ran the country in a different manner, using different approaches to government, although all within the framework of the United States constitution. This is an imperfect example of what God has done (and will do) in His governmental dealings with mankind in relation to earth since Adam and Eve. He is the one perfect *Administrator* who acts differently but always properly and perfectly at different times.

Those who believe that the Church is simply a continuation of Old Testament Israel are known to some as *covenant theologians*, among other names. To the covenant theologian, the Church has an earthly character and will go on through the Great Tribulation to be blessed along with Israel at the time of Christ’s 1000 year kingdom reign, the so-called Millennium. Many of the main-line Protestant and Catholic “churches,” along with some others, believe in covenant theology -- that the covenants given to Israel are for us today.

The covenant theologian goes *back* to the unconditional promises to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3; 15:4-5; 22:15-18), as well as the conditional ones (Ex.19:5-6,8) and considers those promises to be for us. The earthly blessings promised to Abraham extended to the blessing of all nations -- by Christ! The conditional blessings depended on being able to keep God’s law. But the blessings under most of the covenants are earthly.

The covenant theologian goes *forward* to the judgment of the nations (Mt.25:31-46) and assumes *that* judgment to be *our* judgment as to whether we are fit to go into the kingdom with Christ. Missed altogether is the heavenly character of the Church, which, as we will soon see, never existed in Old Testament times, and which will be raptured to glory well before the judgment of the nations (Mt.25:10; Jn 14:1-3; 1 Cor.15:51-53; 1 Thes.4: 13-18; Rev.3:10). We will consider this further, the Lord willing, in the next issue of the newsletter.

So what! you say. Well, the ramifications are far reaching. If covenant theology is right, we are in for a very rough time in the near future with the virtual destruction of civilization as we know it, during the *Great Tribulation* (Mt.24:21-24) under the reign of the Satan-led “beast” of Revelation 13-20 and Daniel 7-12 (see some of the suggested reading at the end of this newsletter). The judgments and wrath of God as shown in Matthew 24 and throughout Revelation will be ours to bear. There will be no heavenly company: the best we can look forward to are earthly blessings for the faithful if we survive the “cut” at the judgment of the nations (Mt.25:31-46). But if the *dispensationalist* is right, then we will never see any part of the Tribulation; we will be raptured to glory before God’s wrath falls on the godless nations, including Israel. We will comprise part of the *heavenly* company, completely distinct from even *blessed* Israel, and will have a unique closeness to Christ forever, as His heavenly bride and wife, as we saw in the last issue of the newsletter.

There are still further ramifications if the *covenant theologian* is correct. If the present Church is simply an extension of Old Testament Israel, with all its regulations and laws, then it will have:

- an earthly elite priesthood responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people. We today call it a clergy.

- the "common man" (layman) relegated to an inferior religious or ecclesiastical position, far from God, and shut out of a near relationship to God (which position was reserved for the priesthood).
- elaborate earthly structures to go to, to meet God, such as Solomon's temple.
- an earthly outlook, often with material possessions indicating God's approval.
- a looking for the fulfilment of the covenants with Israel.
- emphasis on law-keeping as the way to meet God's approval.
- often no *assurance* of one's salvation.

On the other hand, if the *dispensationalist* is correct and the present Church is unique to the New Testament and began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and is comprised of a unique set of people from Jew and Gentile alike, "called out" to be the Lord's unique people who have a heavenly, not earthly future, with the Lord Himself (Acts 15:14; Tit.2:14), then:

- every believer is a priest before God (1 Pet.2:5-9) to both worship and serve Him,
- and has a heavenly outlook, to be with the Lord forever (Jn.14:1-4; 1 Thes.4:13-18), and
- is not under Law (which was never for the Gentile or the Church -- Rom.3:20,28; 7:4; Gal.2:16; 3:10-25).
- every true, born-again believer has absolute assurance of eternal salvation (Jn.10:27-30).

I see it's important, you say, so what does Scripture tell us? Well, let's find out.

When Did the Church Begin?

According to the Bible the *Church of the Living God* (1 Tim.3:16) is comprised of *a unique set of people* -- all true, Bible-believing, born-again Christians over about a 2000 year time span, which includes ourselves, if we have accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior! Have you? Are you sure?

How can we be so sure the Church is only 2000 years old when the nation of Israel is nearly *another* 2000 years older? *The simple answer is that the Church had not begun while the Lord was on earth* (Mt.16:18). Therefore, it could not possibly have existed in Old Testament times: *the Lord* was shortly to *begin* building what He called "My Church." But before it could begin, it needed a heavenly *Head* (Eph.5:23; Col.3:18) -- a Man in the glory -- since the Church is the *body* of Christ (Eph.1:22; Col.1:24). It also needed a divine Person, the Holy Spirit, on earth to *indwell* the Church *collectively* (Jn.14:16-18; 15:26; 16:7; Acts 2:4; 1 Cor.3:16-17) and to "baptize" (immerse, enter) the believers into "one body" (1 Cor.12:13) -- into the Lord's "Church" (Eph.1:22-23; Col.1:18). That combination of necessary events did not occur until after the Lord's death, resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Only then could the Church begin. And it did!

In fact, instead of the Church being an advancement of Judaism, it strongly contrasts with Judaism. Judaism was for a previous dispensation and as seen throughout Hebrews, the *good* of Judaism is compared to the *better of Christianity*. Galatians shows that the Christian position is new and in contrast with Judaism and its law-keeping. Judaism was for Israel in the Old Testament economy; the Church is for Christianity, based on the new set of conditions unique to the time after the cross -- the Lord as Man in glory to be the Church's Head, and the Holy Spirit on earth to collectively *dwell* in the Church (1 Cor.3:16, where the pronoun is plural, collective), as well as in the individual believer (1 Cor.6:19). See John 14:17-18.

The Greek word *ekklesia* (or, *ecclesia*) means "called-out ones" and is used in the New Testament in several ways. It is used *once* each for the congregation of Israel in the wilderness in Old Testament times, *called out* of Egypt by God (Acts 7:38); for an unruly, unsaved mob (Acts 19:32) *called out* by wicked Demetrius for the purpose of attacking Paul and other Christians (Acts 19:23-29); and for a lawful court of law (Acts 19:39) *called out* by the government to settle disputes. These three uses of the word *ekklesia* have absolutely nothing to do with the Church (or Assembly) that the Lord said in Matthew 16:18 that He was about to build. This fact is very important, for covenant theologians will point to Acts 7:38 to *prove* (they think) that the Church existed in the Old Testament. But, although God had an *ekklesia*, a called-out *Jewish* congregation in the Old Testament, that fact doesn't make that Jewish earthly company in any way related to the New

Testament Church -- the Lord's Church -- any more than to the unruly, unsaved mob of Acts 19:32 or the court of law of Acts 19:39.

But there are about 110 further uses of *ekklesia* in the New Testament. In each of these other cases, *ekklesia* is used to define *God's Church* or Assembly, God's unique *called-out ones* of this present dispensation (Acts 15:14; Tit.2:14) -- called out from among Jews and Gentiles alike to be the Father's love-gift to Christ (Jn.10:29; 17:2,6).

This divinely called-out New Testament company, this *ekklesia*, is seen in these 110 references either in its united whole (encompassing every believer of this dispensation) or in that which *represents* God's one true Church in the local community -- the local church or assembly. The *context* of the word *ekklesia* decides what is meant. Remember, the English words *church* and *assembly* are simply two ways to translate the Greek word *ecclesia*.

This Church, the *Lord's Church*, the New Testament *ekklesia*, began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). We are not told that directly, but the facts prove it to be true, as we shall see. About 120 disciples had gathered at the Lord's command in a room in Jerusalem to await the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5, 12-15). Suddenly, they experienced His coming, His indwelling-presence and power (Acts 2:2-4). They were "*added together*" (Acts 2:47); they didn't immediately understand to *what*, but they knew something unique had happened. They, and the 3000 added in one day (Acts 2:41), felt a unique, wonderful oneness: *they were a family!* The thought of *togetherness* with the Lord is seen in Acts 2:47; 4:32; 5:14; Eph.2:14-16; etc. These believers were not called the *ekklesia* (*Church* or *Assembly*) until Acts 5:11* but they clearly were "the Church" since Acts 2.

- * The King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV) use the words "added to the Church" in Acts 2:47. Although that would be a big help in proving our point, there is not much manuscript authority for *ekklesia* being used in that verse. In the Stephens Greek-English text, used for the KJV translation, 4 of the 7 editors remove "to the Church." "The Lord added to the Church daily those who were being saved" should be "the Lord added *together* those who were being saved." Only later in the book of Acts do we find out that "*together*" meant being an integral part of the one body of Christ, the Church. See JND note on Acts 2:47-3:1. The NASB and NIV use "was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" with *together* in the NASB margin. But, however you accept the translation of Acts 2:47, the same conclusion is reached: the Church began on Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit to baptise the believers into one body (1 Cor.12:13).

Those who understand God's Church as His unique "called-out ones" of this present dispensation probably know the Church is pictured in the Bible as the *body of Christ* (Col.1:24; 1 Cor.12:12-13; Eph.1:22-23; 4:4), as we saw in the previous newsletter. This picture of a body united to a head gives the thought of the Church's wonderful *unity* with Christ as Head and every believer a member of His "body." It also shows that each of us is responsible to do a job as directed by Christ, the Head of His body (Eph.5:23; 4:15; Col.3:18), for the good of the whole body, just as a hand, a foot, an eye, a stomach, all have unique and necessary jobs to do for the human body to function effectively, and each is properly fitted to do the assigned function. This unique position and closeness to Christ of every believer was never true of Israel in the Old Testament: it is entirely unique to "My Church." In the Old Testament God was at a distance and it meant death for the common person to draw near (Nu.18:22).

The Church also is pictured in Scripture as the future heavenly *bride of Christ*. Christ is pictured as the Bridegroom who loves the Church -- "My Church" -- and gave Himself for her (Eph.5:25-27). Today, the Church is seen as bindingly-engaged to Christ (2 Cor.11:1-2). The future *marriage of the Lamb*, when the Church, the bride and wife, is "married" to Christ, is seen in Revelation 19:6-8. Then, finally, we see "the bride, the Lamb's wife" -- the Church (Rev.21:9) -- pictured as a *city* where every resource for perfect administration is found. Christ reigns as King over the earth, and we reign with Him, as His wife, co-administrating, for 1000 years (Rev.20:4-6). But Scripture also speaks of *Israel* as the unfaithful *earthly* wife of *Jehovah*. As a consequence of their collective sin, Israel has been rejected (Lo-Ammi -- not My

people)(Hosea 1:9; 2:2). But she will be restored (Hos.1:10-11; 2:7,16,19,23; Rom.11:1-26). Remember these “marriage expressions” are pictures of love and nearness. The Church is the Lord’s *heavenly* bride and wife; Israel, restored in the Millennium, is His *earthly* wife. He loves them both. Remember too, that throughout the eternal state, there will be both an *earthly company* (those on earth who live through the Millennium and then inhabit the new earth) and a *heavenly company* (the Church and the heavenly saints -- John 3:29; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1 -- who will always be with the Lord -- 1 Thessalonians 4:17), but the two will be in close connection (Rev.21:2). So some aspects of earthly Israel and the heavenly Church are parallel truths in many ways, but completely distinct. These parallel truths will continue through the 1000 year reign, but in the eternal state God will make all things new and will dwell with men. *Then*, there will no longer be distinct nations, *not even Israel*, but the Church abides as the bride of Christ for all eternity.

The Church also is pictured in Scripture as the *house of God* (1 Tim.3:16) where God expects proper order to be maintained. This house of God is seen as the dwelling place of God (Eph.2:19-22) and is built up of living stones (1 Pet.2:5) -- ourselves. In the Old Testament there also was a house of God. In Genesis 28:17 it was a place -- *Bethel*. The temple built by Solomon was “the house of the Lord” (1 Ki.6:1). The many references in the concordance show how often the expressions *house of God* and *house of the Lord* were used in the Old Testament. *What was physical then is now spiritual*. Today, under a new administration, no city or building is the house of God. Again, there are parallel truths concerning the house of God between Israel and the Church, but the application of these truths is completely distinct. RPD

Caution! A Needed Perspective as to the People of God

In this and future editions of this newsletter, we will (in the will of the Lord) contrast Scripture with the different viewpoints of professed Christians as to the Church and seek to search from Scripture what is the mind of God. Such a contrast is an effective learning tool. This contrasting will necessarily result in us not agreeing with the *position* taken by Christians here and there. For example, it should be clear from what you’ve read in this edition of the Assembly Messenger that we don’t agree at all with the position taken by so-called covenant theologians on when the Church began. Yet *we* want to -- and we want *you* to -- distinguish clearly between the *people* and their *position* or *teachings*. We recognize many truly saved, personally very godly Christians among “covenant theology” and in some other “Christian” religious systems of men, who are devoting their lives to the service of the Lord they love, and they appear to be true ministers of God. And we will spend eternity with these dear brothers and sisters in Christ. *Yet, if their position and practice and teachings are wrong, we need to know that and not follow them in their wrong position, practice and teachings, for that would not be faithfulness to our Lord.*

Sometimes it is difficult to separate the man from his message, but we want to try to do so in most cases. Even if we mention names (which will be rare), it will only be to attempt to help you see a serious problem and consequently avoid it in the future.

Recommended Reading

As we stated in the last issue of the newsletter, we believe you will profit from the reading of good books on the Church. We recommended two -- “The Church of the Living God” by R.K. Campbell and “The Church: Its Beginning, Doctrine and Order,” by R.P. Daniel. To have a better understanding of some of the prophetic points made in this Newsletter and their ramifications, see “An Outline of Prophecy” and “From Rapture to Reigning,” both by R.P. Daniel. All of these books, as well as many other outstanding publications, are available through Believers Bookshelf, POB 261, Sunbury, PA 17801 (717-672-2134) or 5205 Regional Road #81, Unit #3, Beamsville, Ontario, Canada, L0R-1B3 (905-563-4929). You can write or call for their catalog or to place an order. The brethren at the Bookshelf may be able to recommend further reading on these subjects.

Miscellaneous

- Some have asked whether there is a legal entity called “The Assembly Messenger.” The answer is “No” -- no assumed name, no bank account, no copyright. Nor is one planned since this newsletter is sent free

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- The copyright holder of the NKJV have asked that the following exact statement appear in the newsletter. “All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”
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