

3. SEPARATION OF THE CHURCH FROM ISRAEL

Today when we consider the Church and Israel we see two totally independent entities. It is evident to those of us who have embraced a vision of establishing churches with Hebraic roots, that both the Church and Synagogue are content with the separation. In fact, any suggestion of change makes both groups very uncomfortable. We want to investigate (1) how this separation took place and (2) who is responsible for it. Finally, we would like to (3) establish a Biblical vision of mutual cooperation which we believe God originally intended.

The first church was established in Jerusalem. It was made up exclusively of people from Jewish backgrounds. We believe from our study of the book of Acts that they were observant Jews in every sense of the word. They evidently worshiped in the Temple,

*“Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth hour, the hour of prayer”.*¹

They studied in the synagogues,

*“But going on from Perga, they arrived at Pisidian Antioch, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down”.*²

They obviously participated in everyday Jewish life. Nevertheless, they were different. They each had experienced God's Holy Spirit bringing them into His presence. They enjoyed this awesome sense of communion with God. Notable miracles occurred through them. They became distinguished as the sect called *The Way*.³ *The Way* implied the way of direct communion with God. Messiah Jesus declared that He was,

*“the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me”.*⁴

The early Church was experiencing this awesome communion with God in Messiah Jesus.

We conclude that the earliest Jerusalem church existed in the midst of the greater community of Israel but were separated from it by a unique God-given anointing. God by His own choice had distinguished or separated the Church from Israel. The Church continued in this situation for a period of two to ten years. During this time there were conflicts between the Church leaders and the leaders of other sects, but this type of opposition was typical of that experienced between the various sects.

The second major step taken by God to further separate the Church from Israel occurred in Caesarea.⁵ A Gentile centurion by the name of Cornelius was told in a vision to send for Peter. God expressly intervened by revelation to Peter convincing him to go to the home of Cornelius. Peter went and while he preached concerning Jesus, the household of Cornelius boldly received the same anointing that the Jewish believers had received on *Yom Hashavuot* (Day of Pentecost).

*“While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God”.*⁶

Those present from Jewish backgrounds were amazed that God had poured out this distinctive anointing upon these Gentiles. Peter, on the basis of what he saw God doing, openly received them into fellowship. He immediately baptized them. This step was very momentous because these Gentiles were openly received within the fellowship without the customary steps of conversion that were required by the Scriptures for Gentiles to be accepted within Israel. As a result, a great conflict was initiated.

After these things, the Church began to be spread throughout the dispersion. Paul made numerous missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire and was very fruitful in establishing churches in many Gentile cities. Much of our New Testament is made up of letters from Paul to these newly-established churches. During this era the Church continued to see itself and to be seen as a part of Israel, i.e., a sect of Judaism, although the distinction between Israel and the Church was evident to all.

¹Acts 3:1

²Acts 13:14

³Acts 9:2

⁴John 14:6

⁵Acts 10

⁶Acts 10:44-46a

We conclude that God sovereignly chose to distinguish the Church from Israel. Israel was already sanctified from the nations by God's covenant with them. The Church was even further sanctified or distinguished from Israel by His anointing. Later we will develop the argument that God did this to provide a vessel of anointing within Israel which would complement His outworking through Israel. We do not believe God intended to initiate a totally separate group unrelated to Israel in function and identity.

World events also began to play a significant role in further separating the Church from Israel. Israel had been under Roman domination since the time of Pompeii (64 BC). Many in Israel were desperate to overthrow Roman dominance in order to establish an independent Jewish State. In 66 AD the Zealots gained an upper hand and war broke out.⁷ Eventually Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem exactly fulfilling the prophecies spoken forty years earlier by Jesus,

*“But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize that her desolation is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who are in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city; because these are days of vengeance, in order that all things which are written may be fulfilled”.*⁸

Jesus instructed His followers to flee in such an event and they did so. The general community of Israel saw them as traitors. Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. He killed or took captive multitudes from Jerusalem and Judea. The open conflict between Rome and Israel continued for the next sixty-five years until the final humiliation of Israel by Hadrian as he harshly put down the “Bar Kochba Revolt”.

The era from 66 AD until 135 AD was most difficult for both Israel and the Church. Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed; that which had provided an important unifying tie between both groups was now lost. Intense persecution of Jews and Christians led both groups to develop a defensive attitude about themselves. The Jewish people could not overlook the fact that the Church had forsaken the revolt against Rome. The Church at the same time began to discover that it was advantageous to see itself independent of Israel and began to embrace a universal (catholic or non-national) identity.

As men from Gentile backgrounds came to leadership positions in the Church, the tie with Israel was further weakened. We see in Ignatius' epistle to the Magnesians, written around 110 AD, that the Sabbath was soon ignored and worship was encouraged on the first day of the week.

*“Wherefore if they who were brought up in these ancient laws came nevertheless to the newness of hope: no longer observing Sabbaths, but keeping the Lord's day in which also our life is sprung up by him, and through his death, whom yet some deny.”*⁹

This was called the *Lord's Day* because the resurrection occurred on this day of the week. The Jewish people were soon seen as having been cut off from God's plan, and the Church began to develop the theological argument that it had replaced Israel and had become the “New Israel”. Eventually, the Biblical feasts or festivals were replaced by Christian festivals. Finally, in the time of Constantine, the Church defined its concept of God's being. The vision of God was changed from the Biblical revelation of the Holy One of Israel who had anointed His unique Messiah by His Ruah Hakodesh (Holy Spirit) and subsequently anointed His chosen vessel (the Church) with the same spirit, and was re-defined as the Holy Trinity (three coexistent and coequal manifestations making up the Being of God). Since such a definition was directly contrary to Biblical revelation, this action sealed the separation between the Church and Israel.

With the Temple destroyed, Israel redefined its faith and practice. The oral interpretation of the Law, the *Mishna*, was codified by 200 AD. Over the next several centuries this was supplemented by the *Gemora* to form the *Talmud*. Temple worship was carried over into the synagogue and the home. Israel prepared for survival in the dispersion.

Thus, today, we see these two entities in the world: the Church and the Synagogue. Each denies union with the other; both are comfortable with the separation. However, it seems obvious that God never intended such a separation. According to Paul's exhortation to the Romans, the Church must see itself grafted into the rich olive tree or it will be cut off. He specifically exhorted the Church,

“Do not be arrogant toward the branches: but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith.

⁷Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, Grand Rapids and Dayton, 1989, pg. 75

⁸Luke 21:20-22

⁹Magnesians 3:3

Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you".¹⁰

Elsewhere, Paul described believers as being part of "the Commonwealth of Israel".¹¹ Obviously, God intended the Church to share a common identity with that of Israel. The Church was to be a simple extension of Israel distinguished by God's anointing, but one in identity and ultimate purpose. God never intended two trees. He intended one and that was Israel, rooted in covenant, Torah, land and people, and branched out in anointing with worldwide scope in introducing God's Kingdom into the world. Today, God is calling for the Church to repent from its separate identity, to humble itself, and to acknowledge its ties with Israel, its "Hebraic roots".

¹⁰Romans 11:18-21

¹¹Ephesians 2:12