

THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH: THE BODY OF THE MESSIAH

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The historical theology of many streams of the Church for the most part was in unity on their understanding of the Church as a third race (dating from as early as the second century), a new people of God and neither Jew nor Gentile. The Church was understood to be composed of people who had been Jews and Gentiles, but were no longer Jews or Gentiles. The identity of the Church was also described as a New and True Israel that had replaced the old ethnic Israel that had been finally rejected by God due to their rejection of Israel.

It is easy to see how texts were used to support this decision. II Corinthians 5:17 states that those who are in the Messiah are a new creation. Today some interpret this to say that when one is in the Messiah, they enter a new creation. We read that in the Messiah, "There is neither Jew nor Greek (Gentile) (Galatians 3:28). Of course the passage also states that there is neither male nor female, and the Church never taught the elimination of the distinction of the sexes. Yet we can understand how the Church understood these texts. Ephesians was especially important in forming this definition. With regard to the relationship of Jew and Gentile, Ephesians 2:14, 15 states that, *"He has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross ..."* So also we read in Ephesians 4:4, *"There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called, one Lord, one faith and one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

Other texts also seem to support this idea of a third race, (the term *genus tertium*, mentioned by Tertullian and taken up again in the 19th century by Adolf Harnack). This was described as a new unified people of God where the old distinctions of ethnicity are no longer valued. I Corinthians 12:12 states that, *"The Body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body, so it is with Christ."* Verse 13 continues that, "We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." We can quote other texts such as Peter noting that all believers are a chosen nation and are being built into a spiritual house made up of living stones (I Peter 2:4,5).

The language of analogy and metaphor is used to describe spiritual realities. We have to be careful to not over-press analogies and metaphors into literal distortion. Analogies and metaphors transcend the univocal literal meaning that can be derived from these literary devices. However, we do need to say in what way these statements of unity, one body, a spiritual building, a new man etc. are to be unpacked. Are they to be taken as literally ending the role of ethnic Israel? Or that ethnic distinctions are of no continuing value? Is the "no difference" between Jew and Gentile, or male and female in regard to all things, or just with regard to

salvation and positional spiritual status with God (Ephesians 2:6 - "Seated us with him in the heavenly realms"). Others have pointed out that we, Jew and Gentile, and male and female, are the same and one in certain regards but not in all regards. So it is only with regard to salvation in the Messiah and spiritual status that we are the same, and indeed that we are One Body. However, other texts make it clear that on other levels in God's working with nations and ethnic peoples, there is still an important distinction and purpose for Israel and distinctive peoples. The other texts of Scripture use other analogies and metaphors and present teaching more in line with the emphases of the Hebrew Bible on the everlasting role of ethnic Israel in God's plan of world redemption and in the Age to Come. The nature of the relationship of Israel, the Church, the Body of the Messiah of Jew and Gentile, is multifaceted and multi-layered. The greatest danger is to over-simplify the Scriptures and to ignore the weight of texts that do not fit into a favored view or to twist these texts to fit.

Indeed, there are texts that lead to a profoundly different theology than the **third race** interpretation of historical theology. These texts lead to a very different definition of the Church than the **third race-new Israel** definition.

To look at this different definition of the Church I will present other texts that qualify the "One New Man" theology of Ephesians.

The Kingdom Theology of the Synoptic Gospels

The preaching ministry of Yeshua in Mark and Matthew begins with the announcement of the Kingdom of God: "The Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15). This is the good news. Since the publication of George Ladd's bookⁱ the Evangelical World has more and more understood the Gospel as preached by Yeshua as the invitation into the Kingdom of God. The text is interpreted to say that with the coming of Yeshua, "The Kingdom of God is available to you." With the coming of Yeshua, the Kingdom of God has broken into this world. The last days (eschatological time) have begun. Thus the ministry of Yeshua is understood as the manifestation of the Kingdom, the Age to Come, in his teaching, his signs and wonders, and ultimately in his resurrection. This is, I believe, the majority understanding in scholarship today. This understanding of the Kingdom is yielding more and more insight.

Thus N. T. Wright understands the Sermon on the Mount as teaching the Torah and applying it as is fitting for the Age of Kingdom in-breaking. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 are understood in a new way. The poor are not blessed because they are poor and the mourning are not blessed because they are grieving. Rather, the in-breaking of the Kingdom brings a great reversal.ⁱⁱ The poor are no longer determined by their poverty and those who mourn are lifted out of their grief. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. This interpretation was foundational to the discipleship writings of Dallas Willard, who brilliantly popularized the scholarship.ⁱⁱⁱ

One of the most central parallel passages for this interpretation of the Gospels is found in Luke 7 and Matthew 11. John the Immerser sends disciples to Yeshua to ask if He is the One, the Messiah, or whether another is to be expected. This confusion about Yeshua could be the result of the doubts John experienced in his imprisonment. It did not look to him like the Kingdom had, or was about to, come. Yeshua's answer is most instructive.

Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me (John 7:22, 23).

These are the signs of the presence of the Kingdom. Yes, Yeshua is the Messiah and the Kingdom has come, but in a partial way. It comes in a way of growing, spreading, expanding, and developing. It comes and advances in an unexpected way. One can miss it and be offended.

I believe that Yeshua's teaching on the privilege of John in the same context brings out the truth in with greater clarity. John is the greatest born of woman from the pre-Kingdom time, but the "least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John." Certainly this does not mean they have greater character! It means that to be part of the Kingdom that has now dawned is a greater privilege than even John. John was the bridge, but not part of the privilege of Yeshua's disciples and those who will be added to them.

The parables of Matthew 13 explain the nature of the Kingdom with greater detail and clarity. The Kingdom has come; it began as a mustard seed but will grow to be the greatest plant in the garden (the world?). It spreads through the sowing of the seed of the Word. Wheat and tares will grow together until a final harvest into judgment and the separation of those who are evil from those who are good. Entering into the Kingdom is the pearl of great price and the buried treasure that makes the field of extraordinary value.

The resurrection of Yeshua and the pouring out of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Shavuot) provide us with another great Kingdom advance. Thus another aspect of the Age to Come, (the Spirit poured out on all flesh, Joel 2:28-30) has begun to be fulfilled.

Understanding the Kingdom of God is grounded in two orientations. First we look to the past, to the history of Israel and see the kind of nation that God was seeking to establish in the midst of the earth. We look to the best of the rule of David and the early reign of Solomon for a picture of the Kingdom in one nation that was a light drawing others to the truth about God. Then we look to the future and the prophetic picture of what will be. That future is an even greater key to understanding the New Covenant Scriptures. Indeed, in that Age to Come, the blind see, the lame walk, the

deaf hear, the poor are delivered into an abundance that permeates all nations, but especially the nation of Israel. The Law of God will be written upon the heart (Ezekiel 36:24 ff. and Jeremiah 31:31ff).

However, the greatest picture of the Age to Come is an international picture. David's greater Son, the King/Messiah, rules from Jerusalem. The nations beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will no longer learn war (Isaiah 2). Israel and the nations will be one under the rule of the Messiah. The extent of his dominion and the duration of his rule will be without limit. The knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas. (Isaiah 11:9). The prophetic picture is repeated again and again; the nations will come to of the light of the Messiah, or the light of Israel's witness (Isaiah 42:4; 49:6, 7; 60:3).

The synoptic gospels all present a defense, an apologetic, that Yeshua is the Messiah and the Kingdom has come, a defense originally delivered in oral form for Jewish people that goes back to the preaching and teaching of Peter (Richard Bauckham).^{iv} Yes, Yeshua is the Messiah and the Kingdom really did come, but not in the way that was expected and not all at once. The proof is the signs and wonders of His ministry and His resurrection from the dead. This case is extended in the book of Acts, an extension of the Gospel of Luke. In Acts 2, the outpouring of the Spirit is just one more proof that Yeshua is the Messiah and that the Kingdom has come, broken into this age.

This brings me to speak about how the New Testament interprets the influx of the Gentiles who respond to the message of the Gospel. Acts 15 is a key passage for our interpretation; and the whole book of Acts is crucial as an interpretive key for the theology of Jews and Gentiles in the Body of the Messiah. As I. Howard Marshall pointed out, the book of Acts is a book of theology not just descriptive history.^v

The immediate question in Acts 15 concerns whether or not Gentiles need to be circumcised and keep the Torah of Moses to be saved (Acts 15:1). However, the answer given to this question has enormous implications for the nature of the *Ecclesia* that is formed in Yeshua. I use the term *Ecclesia*, though a Greek term, to transcend the connotations associated with the word Church. I could also use the Hebrew, the *Kehilah* of Yeshua.

The testimony of Peter and Paul point to the signs and wonders that were part of the Gentiles coming to faith! Indeed. The gift of the Holy Spirit proven by such manifestations was proof that God had accepted the Gentiles by faith in Yeshua without circumcision. This was so in the earlier beginning of Peter's visit to the house of Cornelius and continued in the Antioch congregational situation, and then was repeated again in the mission of Paul.

Circumcision and keeping the whole of the Law would be required if salvation required joining and assimilating into ethnic Israel. However, not circumcising showed an acceptance of people from nations without becoming Jews. How are we

then to understand the expansion of the people of God and the inclusion of Gentiles, those of the other nations?

At first glance the response of the leader of the Jerusalem Congregation, Jacob (James), is curious. He quotes a passage from Amos 9 that is millennial in its original context. In the Septuagint version, which some think is the better reading, Jacob states,

Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written,

*“After this I will return
and will rebuild David’s fallen tent,
Its ruins I will rebuild
And I will restore it
That the remnant of men may
seek the Lord
and all the Gentiles who bear
my name
says the Lord, who does these
things
that have been known for
ages.”*

Jacob’s view is that God is taking a people for himself from the Gentiles, not that he is taking some people and converting them to be Jews or to be now a part of a third race. His quotation of Amos looks toward the *eschaton*, the final things, the last Age, when Israel and the nations are one under the rule of the Messiah. So let’s look at the quote from Amos with greater focus.

Jacob’s argument fits the whole context of the Synoptic Gospels. If the Kingdom has come, has broken into this world, as proven by the signs and wonders of Yeshua and the Apostles, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, then another aspect of the Kingdom would also be fitting. That other aspect is the coming of the Gentiles to submit to the government of David. Though Yeshua does not yet rule on a throne on earth from Jerusalem, He has begun to rule and is seated at the right hand of God. The prophets speak in multiple places about the conversion of the nations, their coming to the light of the Messiah. He is a light to the nations, a banner for the peoples, and brings God’s salvation to the ends of the earth. Gentile inclusion without conversion to Judaism is the picture of the prophets, and this is now already taking place. However, there is still the “not yet” of the full turning of the nations to the God of Israel.^{vi} The Amos text is seen as already beginning to happen. The Tent of David is the re-establishment of Davidic covenant and the gathering is coming under his rule, under the covering of his Tent. The coming in of the Gentiles is

another evidence that Yeshua is the Messiah and the Kingdom has broken into this Age.

This orientation is clear in several texts where the Gentiles do not become Jews and where the Jews and Gentiles do not become a third race together. For example, Romans 15 provides us with a very important text.

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written.

*Therefore I will praise you
Among the Gentiles
I will sing hymns to your
Name*

*Again it says,
Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his
People.*

*And again,
Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles
And sing praises to him, all
Your peoples*

*And again, Isaiah says,
The Root of Jesse will spring up,*

ii N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, pp. 288, 289.

iii Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, New York: Harper Collins, 1998, pp. 100, 101.

iv Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses, The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, pp. 155, 181, especially 179.

v I. Howard Marshall, *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978. Marshall argues that Luke purposes to show the relationship of one people that maintain unity with the distinction of Jew and Gentile.

vi Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2000, pp. 5-7, 81-82, 147-148, 158, 160-162. He argues that the New Testament reflects that debate between the school of Shammai where salvation was only possible to those who converted to Judaism, verses the school of Hillel which taught that people from the nations could find salvation by commitment to God and following universal law. He sees the distinction between universal law and Jewish specific law as already understood in the school of Hillel.

*One who will arise to rule over
The nations
The Gentiles will hope in him. (Romans 15:8-12)*

The Pauline use of these texts, when we translate the word 'gentiles' from the Greek to 'nations', shows us the promise in clear terms. Israel and the nations are destined to become one under the rule of the Messiah. However, at the present time, even now, we see Jews and Gentiles (those from the nations) as one in the Messiah. They are an eschatological foreshadowing of the Age to Come. They show the Age to Come as already demonstrating itself in the present Age.

The perspective in Revelation 21 is very similar. After describing the New Jerusalem as having foundation stones with the names of the 12 Apostles, and on the gates were the names of the 12 tribes of Israel. Then we read,

The Glory of the nations will be brought into it. (21:26)

The picture seems to be that every nation or *ethnos* has its own distinct glory to be brought into the New Jerusalem. This would then help us to make sense of Revelation 7 where the 144,000 would represent the Messianic Jews and those from all nations represent the Gentiles. The idea that both groups are the same but with different symbolism does not fit as naturally as seeing them as two groups that are part of the people of God.^{vii}

The most important classic text using the analogy of the Olive Tree also preserves unity with distinctions. The Olive Tree represents the people of God. The people of God are for the most part the Jewish people until the Gospel goes out to the Gentiles. Romans brings out these distinctions.

1. The nations are portrayed as wild olive trees. Those saved from them were cut out from these trees and grafted into the cultivated olive tree.
2. The only cultivated nation is the Jewish Olive Tree.
3. They both share in the nourishing sap from the olive root.

The Jewish people are the natural branches, some are broken off. We should not assume that the broken off branches are simply the ones who have not received Yeshua. That issue at the time of Paul's writing was still being worked out. It was known among faithful Jews that some were unfaithful, and Paul addresses that in Romans 2. However, God is able to graft these broken off branches back into the olive tree. The wild branches are branches from the nations and still represent those nations, or are the saved remnant from their nations just as the Jewish followers of Yeshua are the saved remnant of their nation (Romans 11:6). The Jewish Yeshua/followers are the offering of the first fruits that brings sanctification to the rest of their nation, Israel (Romans 11:16). So the nation of Israel, the Jewish people, remain elect and chosen.

Unity with distinction is maintained. The Acts 15 decision not to require the specifics of Jewish responsibility for Gentiles, including circumcision and other specific markers of Jewish identity (which the New Perspective Pauline theology interprets as the “works of the law”) does not release the Jewish Yeshua/believers from this specific Jewish covenant responsibility. Acts 21 clarifies the implications of the Acts 15 Council for Jewish Yeshua/believers when Jacob enjoins Paul to offer sacrifices for the completion of Nazarite vows for four men. Paul had taken a such a vow and completed the time period for the vow according Acts 18:18. Paul’s public offering was made so that everyone would know that Paul walked in an orderly way, keeping the Torah. The implication here is that Jews are called to keep the specifics of Jewish covenant responsibility. Paul easily complies with the request of Jacob. It does seem to be the purpose of Luke to show the unity with distinctions of Jew and Gentile in the Messianic movement.

I Corinthians 7 enjoins continued distinction between Jew and Gentile in the Body of the Messiah.

This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised ... Each should remain in the situation he was in when God called him. (vv. 17,18,20)^{viii}

Galatians 5 fits the same pattern of teaching. The Gentiles are enjoined not to receive circumcision. If one does, “*He is obligated to obey the whole law.*” However, by clear implication, since a Jew is so circumcised, he is so obligated. This necessarily leads to a distinction in ways of life.

Ephesians 2 provides us with a different description that can be interpreted in a way that coheres with what we have written to this point.

The pagan past of the Gentiles is presented in stark terms. They were, “*excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope in the world*” (2:13). But now the wall of partition has been broken down; the wall of separation in the Temple, used figuratively as a barrier, since it divided the court of the Gentiles from the court of the women and then the inner court that only Jewish men could enter. From this God has created one new humanity. This should not be taken as a third race but the newness of life shared by Jew and Gentile that make us one people together in the Messiah. This transcends race, while it yet maintains distinctions of ethnic callings. So Paul states that they are, “*Fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.*” It is analogous to the unity of male and female in marriage.

viii David Rudolph, “Messianic Judaism in Antiquity and in the Modern Period,” in David Rudolph and Joel Willitts, *Messianic Judaism*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2013, p. 23, 24.

The RSV version provides the helpful interpretive translation that states that the Gentiles have become part of the commonwealth of Israel. The idea is that the Gentiles are in some sense part of an expanded Israel since they are bonded to Israel by their bonding to the King of Israel and the saved remnant of Israel. This is in a way that does not do away with their ethnic identities that represent those identities before God. This is why the word commonwealth is so helpful. They do not become Jews, though a Jew lives within them. They do not replace Israel either as part of a third race or in any other way. Yet there is an expanded Israel in a broad sense, as the people of God, and Gentiles share in priestly calling!^{ix}

In conclusion, with this reading, we see that Israel is part of the identity of the *Ecclesia* and that the *Ecclesia* is part of the identity of Israel. These identities are still to be discovered by some. So what is the *Ecclesia*? It is all who are in Yeshua, but it is also those from the nations who have been bonded to the Messianic Jewish remnant and thereby connected or bonded to or united with Israel for the sake of world redemption. This bonding takes place through being united with the King of Israel, Yeshua who brings Jew and Gentile together and into connection to the nation of Israel. The destiny of the Church is tied to the destiny of Israel, a joint destiny. The destiny of Israel is also tied to the destiny of the Church. The people from the other nations that are joined to the Body are also joined to the heritage of the Jewish people, as their spiritual ancestry. Therefore we could say in a short form that **the Church is those from the nations who have joined themselves to Israel, the Jewish people, and its destiny for the sake of the redemption of the world.** Of course, their first joining to Israel is with the saved remnant of Israel and its King. However we should see what Mark Kinzer calls an “Israel-Christology” whereby there is no separation in being joined to the King of Israel and Israel since Israel and its King are corporately one.^x

ix Mark Kinzer, *Searching Her Own Mystery*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2015, loc. 1276-1292, 3900-3949; Daniel Juster, *Growing to Maturity*, Rockville, Maryland: Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, 1982, 1985, pp. 221-223; *Jewish Roots*, Shippensburg, Pa: Destiny Image, 2013, p. 57, 58; *The Irrevocable Calling*, Clarksville, Maryland: Lederer, 2007, pp. 44, 46, 47. All of these books argue for this type of definition. Do note that Kinzer's is the most comprehensive response to the Catholic Church on these issues.

i George Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1959. 2

x Kinzer, On Israel-Christology, loc. 2336-2375, 2482.

vii David Frankfurter commentary on the book of Revelation, p. 476, in Amy-Jill Levine and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1996, p. 169-171.