

The Church That Jesus Built

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Part 1

The Apostolic Church

What does the word *church* mean? To many, the word connotes a place of worship, a building, perhaps with stained-glass windows and a steeple. In modern societies, “church” is a “religious” word completely devoid of any secular meaning. It applies strictly to either the place of worship, the congregation of worshipers, or to a specific sect or denomination. Some think of “the church” as the body of believers collectively, regardless of denominational boundaries, while others think of “the church” as a specific institution governed by ecclesiastical heads, or leaders.

But what is the biblical definition of “church”? When Jesus said, “I will build my church,” and promised that His church would not be destroyed (Matthew 16:18), was He thinking of an ecclesiastical institution, such as the Roman Catholic Church? Did He envision a continuous line of “successors of the apostles” who would govern the institution and issue infallible decrees on matters of faith and morals for all the faithful?

Meaning of “Church”

The Greek word rendered “church” in English translations of the New Testament is *ekklesia*. According to W.E. Vine, the word “...was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens gathered to discuss the affairs of State....In the Sept. [i.e., the Greek translation of the Old Testament] it is used to designate the gathering of Israel, summoned for any definite purpose, or a gathering regarded as representative of the whole nation” (*An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN, p. 76).

The word is derived from two Greek terms: *ek*, meaning “out of”; and *klesis*, “a calling.” It denotes an “out-calling,” a gathering, or assembly. Anciently, the word had no particular religious connotations. Any assembly of people, gathered for whatever purpose, was called an *ekklesia*.

In Acts 19, the word is used of a riotous mob (verses 32,41), showing that the ancient usage of *ekklesia* was quite different from the modern usage of “church.” We would never call a riotous crowd a “church.” Nor would we use the word in reference to a rock concert, a political rally, or a Ku Klux Klan convention. But *ekklesia*, translated “church” in the New Testament, may be properly used of any of these.

Simply stated, the Greek word means “assembly.” When referring to the people of God, it is used both of the universal assembly, or entire Body of Christ, and each local assembly of believers. When Jesus said He would build His *ekklesia* (Matthew 16: 18), He was obviously speaking of the universal assembly, which, though scattered throughout the world, is viewed from heaven as a single assembly, all united in Christ and gathered spiritually before the heavenly Throne of Grace. This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews had in view when he said: “But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:22,23).

In several passages the word (*ekklesia*) is used in reference to local assemblies. Paul wrote to “the *church* of God which is at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2), to “the *churches* [plural] of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2), and to “the *church* of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1). Similarly, Christ, through the apostle John, addressed “the seven *churches* which are in Asia” (Revelation 1:11), all of which were a part of the one universal church, or Body of Christ.

Which Church?

But if you were looking for that one universal church, what would you look for? Would you look for a church whose governing body claims to be the “successors of the apostles” and offers historical “proof” that its head “apostle” traces the origin of his office all the way back to St. Peter?

Some believe the historical continuity of the Roman Catholic Church, with her line of bishops extending in unbroken succession from the early centuries of Christian history to the present, is “proof” that the Roman Church is the one universal church, the church that Jesus built.

Even if we assume “apostolic succession” to be the key to finding the true church, we are still faced with a huge problem: The Roman Catholic Church is not the only church that claims apostolic succession! In fact, she is not the only “Catholic” church, and she is not the only church who can trace her succession of bishops all the way back to the early centuries. The Eastern Orthodox Church makes the same claim, and, interestingly, each of the two churches accepts the claim of the other, while each claims to be “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.”

If indeed apostolic succession is the key to identifying the true church, then which is the church Jesus built: Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox?

But wait! There are yet other churches whose bishops claim legitimacy through apostolic succession: the Old Catholic and Anglican churches, for instance. The Armenian and Coptic churches, independent of Rome and her constituency since the fifth century, also claim apostolic succession. Apparently, the belief has found its way into several non-traditional sects. So which of these, if apostolic succession is the key, has preserved the true apostolic faith? Which, if any, is the church that Jesus built?

Scripture Plus Tradition

There is no question that the apostles ordained or authorized the ordination of elders in the early church, but is there any biblical evidence that they ordained men as successors to the apostolic office? Did they envision a continuous line of successors?

The answer is clearly no!

Catholic theologians may retort by saying that the Word of God consists not of Scripture alone, but of Scripture *and* “Tradition,” or “oral teaching.” The Bible, they say, reflects the church’s teaching, but is not the complete rule of faith. As Catholic apologist Karl Keating says, “This oral teaching must be accepted by Christians as they accepted the written teaching that at length came to them.... It is a mistake to limit Christ’s word to the written word only or to suggest that all his teachings were reduced to writing” (*Catholicism and Fundamentalism: The Attack on “Romanism” by “Bible Christians,”* Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1988, p. 136).

With such a premise, Catholics need not find scriptural support for apostolic succession; the church’s tradition is all the “proof” they need.

Keating further states: “[I]t is important to keep in mind what the Catholic Church means by Tradition. The term does not mean legends or mythological accounts, nor does it mean transitory customs or practices that come and go as circumstances warrant, such as styles of priestly dress, particular forms of devotion to saints, or even liturgical rubrics. Tradition means the teaching and teaching authority of Jesus and, derivatively, the apostles. These have been handed down and entrusted to the Church (which means to its official teachers, the bishops in union with the Pope)” (ibid., p. 137).

This suggests that “apostolic succession” was an “oral teaching” Jesus gave His apostles, who in turn taught it to their successors. Therefore, a clear and precise scriptural teaching on this subject is not necessary: It has been preserved by the “living teaching authority” of the Catholic Church.

However, if it can be shown that the apostles never envisioned a line of successors to follow them, then we are forced to conclude that the concept of apostolic succession developed later, after the time of the apostles.

Let’s examine the evidence.

What the Apostles Didn’t Know

Strange as it may seem, the apostles had no idea that Jesus Christ would not return to this earth during their lifetimes. Proof of this is found in several scriptural references.

In Acts 1, the disciples asked the risen Christ, “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (verse 6). Obviously, had Christ taught them that a succession of apostles would follow them, they would not have asked this question. They thought they would live to see the establishment of the Kingdom.

Christ replied: “It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (verses 7,8).

Clearly, the apostles could not at this point have envisioned a line of successors—a strong indication that Christ had not taught them such a concept. Further, Christ’s prophecies about the “end of the age” left the disciples with the impression that the Second Advent would take place in their lifetimes.

When the disciples asked Jesus to reveal to them the time of His coming and the end of the age (Matthew 24:3), His reply gave them every reason to believe that they would live to see the end of the age and dawning of the new, Messianic age.

Notice: “Take heed that no man deceive you” (verse 4). “And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled...” (verse 6). “Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake” (verse 9). “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation...” (verse 15). “But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the Sabbath day” (verse 20).

Christ said that all these conditions were to precede His Second Coming, and His use of “you,” “ye,” and “your” (emphasized in the passage above) certainly left His disciples with the impression that the end of the age would occur in their generation.

In fact, Christ said, “Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled” (verse 34). How were the disciples to take this statement? Did they envision a generation in the distant future? Obviously not. They took it to mean their own generation!

It should be pointed out that the Olivet prophecy (Matthew 24-25), like many Bible prophecies, is a generic prophecy—that is, it pertains to events that are not necessarily confined to a single time-frame. For example, Jerusalem was laid waste and the Temple was destroyed, just as Christ predicted, within a generation of the time this prophecy was given. Further, a certain “abomination of desolation” did “stand in the holy place,” as Christ said. All this happened in A.D. 70, when the armies of General Titus entered the city.

However, the prophecy is yet to be fulfilled in the final sense. But the disciples did not know that the fulfillments they saw were typical of future fulfillments! They simply obeyed the instruction of their Lord: They continued, throughout their lives, to watch, to wait, and to hope.

By simply reading the many New Testament references to the final tribulation period, the Day of the Lord, the Second Coming, the resurrection of the saints, and the establishment of God’s Kingdom on this earth, one can see clearly that James, Peter, John, Jude, and Paul lived and labored in expectation of the imminence of Christ’s coming.

The apostles Jesus called, taught, and trained did not envision a line of successors. True, they authorized the ordination of elders and instructed them in the truth of the gospel. But the office of apostle (as it pertained to the Twelve and Paul) was unique. It was a foundational office, and was restricted to a limited number of men living within a specific period of history. Its unique requirements rule out any claim to the apostolic office in our time.

A Unique Office

According to Catholic theology, “There must be always an apostolic office of teaching and ruling through which alone men can become true disciples of Jesus” (Daniel W.

Martin, C.M., S.T.L., S.S.L., *The Kingdom of Jesus*, Confraternity Home Study Service, St. Louis, MI, p. 49). Peter was appointed head of the apostles, Catholics claim, and his office has been preserved through the succession of popes, who have presided over the “successors of the apostles,” said to be the bishops of the church.

“Never, then, will the office of the bed-rock, Peter, cease to exist. The Church founded by Jesus must have the apostolic group of Bishops who are the successors of the Apostles themselves. This same Church must also have a leader of this apostolic body in the person of the successor of St. Peter, bed-rock on which Jesus has built His Church” (ibid., p. 52).

Some have cited the example of Matthias’ replacement of Judas as evidence of apostolic succession. But, as we shall see, this example gives no support to the belief that the apostolic office was to continue in an unbroken chain from the time of Jesus to the end of the age.

Let’s read the account:

“And in those days [shortly after the ascension of Christ], Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty.) Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit by the mouth of David spake before concerning Judas, which was guide to them that took Jesus. For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of this ministry. Now this man purchased a field with the reward of iniquity; and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels gushed out. And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood. For it is written in the book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishoprick [office, or charge] let another take. Wherefore of these men which have companied with us, all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He [Jesus] was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of His resurrection. And they appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, shew whether of these two thou hast chosen, That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:15-26).

Does this account in any way suggest that the apostolic office was to continue beyond the first century? Is this truly an example of “apostolic succession”?

Let’s notice some important points:

First, the apostles were not appointing new apostles to continue their ministry after them. They were simply replacing Judas. They knew that Christ had appointed twelve men, and that He had said that the twelve, “in the regeneration,” would “sit upon twelve thrones,

judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28; see also Luke 22:30). Notice that Peter said Judas had been “numbered with us.” Obviously, the apostles saw their office as a unique office, and perceived that their ministry was to begin with the full number Christ had established.

Second, Judas’ replacement had to be a witness of Christ’s resurrection. This is all important, for the resurrection of Christ was, and is, central to the gospel. Without it, there is no gospel. For this reason, witness of the resurrection was one of the qualifications of the apostolic office.

With these qualifications in view, can any man today rightfully claim the office of apostle, with teaching authority identical to that of the twelve Jesus chose as foundational pillars of His church? The apostles clearly did not envision a succession of apostles to follow them, for they knew that their office was foundational, and therefore unique. They also knew that once the foundation had been laid, the church could continue to exist, with or without the apostolic office.

Other Apostles

But what about the other men who were called “apostles” in the early New Testament church? Does their existence lend support to the concept of apostolic succession?

It should be noted that the word “apostle,” as it is used in the New Testament, is used in two senses:

First, it is used of the twelve disciples (with Matthias replacing Judas) specifically selected as witnesses of the resurrection. When the Bible speaks of “the apostles,” usually it is referring to these twelve men. Paul was an apostle in the same sense. He defended his apostleship on the basis that he had seen Christ (and was therefore a witness of the resurrection) and that his ministry had produced the fruits of the apostolic office (1 Corinthians 9:1).

Second, the word is used in a broader sense of anyone who was “sent forth” as a messenger, or envoy. When used in this sense, “apostle” does not necessarily denote a special office, and may be used of persons who had not personally witnessed the resurrection.

The word *apostle* comes from the Greek *apostolos*, which means “one sent forth.” Anyone “sent forth” by another is an “apostle.” In this sense, the ministers of God’s church today are “apostles,” for they have been “sent forth” to minister. But it is clear that the original twelve, Paul, and perhaps Barnabas and a few others, were apostles in a special sense.

When Paul described himself as “an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God” (Ephesians 1:1), he was using the word (*apostolos*) in the official sense, recognizing the divine origin of the foundational office. But when he called Epaphroditus “my brother, and companion in labour, and fellow-soldier, but your messenger [*apostolos*], and he that ministered to my wants” (Philippians 2:24), he was using the word in its general sense. Epaphroditus was an “apostle” in the sense that he was the Philippians’ messenger (“one sent forth”) to Paul during his imprisonment at Rome.

But do the various references to “apostles” other than the twelve offer any evidence that Christ intended to perpetuate the apostolic office through an endless succession of popes and bishops?

None whatsoever! On the contrary, Paul went to great lengths to defend his independent apostleship. He described himself as “an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead)” (Galatians 1:1). He said: “But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace, To reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:15-19).

Later, he said: “[W]hen they [the apostles at Jerusalem] saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed to me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For He that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the Same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles:) And when James, Cephas [Peter], and John, who seemed to be the pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision” (Galatians 2:7-9).

Paul was defending his apostleship because he was being discredited.

Apparently, rumor was circulating among the Galatians that Paul was not an authentic apostle; that he had received the truth of the gospel from Peter or from the twelve, and had failed to preach it accurately. He was therefore an inferior apostle with an inferior message. Doubtless, this attempt to discredit Paul, whose preaching brought about the conversion of the Galatians, was really an attempt to discredit his message—a message his Judaizing opponents (the circumcision party) took to task.

But Paul insisted that his apostleship was not of men! God had called him independently of the twelve. The gospel he preached was taught to him by Christ, not Peter or anyone else.

Paul’s example shows that God is fully capable of raising up a ministry without the use of “succession.” It also shows that the apostles at Jerusalem accepted his apostleship on the

basis of the fruits of his ministry, not on whether he fit within a line of successive ordinations by the hands of men.

As for other men designated “apostles,” there is no good reason to conclude that they were considered “successors” of the original apostles, or that they ever appointed successors. In most cases, their prophetic and teaching ministries seem to have been directed primarily at the unconverted, which means that most of them probably had little or nothing to do with organizational matters within the church. It is extremely unlikely, then, that they made up a hierarchy of ruling bishops or higher-up board of prelates.

Barnabas was called an “apostle” (Acts 14:4, 14) because he was “sent forth” by the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:22), and later, along with Paul, by the church (guided by the Holy Spirit) at Antioch (Acts 13:24). It is not certain that he was considered an apostle in the same sense that Paul was an apostle, or whether he witnessed the resurrection. In any case, he played an important role in laying the foundation of the church.

James, the Lord’s brother, appears to have been considered an apostle, but this is not entirely certain. In 1 Corinthians 15:7, “James” seems to be contrasted with “all the apostles,” indicating that he was not considered an apostle. Paul, speaking of a visit to Jerusalem, said that he saw Peter, “But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:19). This could be taken to mean that James was the only other apostle Paul saw. On the other hand, it may mean that, besides Peter, Paul saw none of the other apostles, though he did see James, the only other person he visited while there.

In 2 Corinthians 8:23, certain unknown brethren are called “messengers [*apostolos*] of the churches.” The word, used in connection with “the churches,” probably should be understood as “messengers,” or “representatives,” either sent by, or to, the churches.

A comparison of 1 Thessalonians 1:1 with 2:6 seems to indicate that Timothy and Silvanus were apostles, hut the wording of the text does not demand this conclusion, Paul could have been using the word (*apostolos*) in the general sense of “messengers” or “representatives.”

In Romans 16:7, Andronicus and Junias are said to be “of note among the apostles.” This could mean that Andronicus and Junias were apostles, or it could mean that their good work was acknowledged by the apostles. Further, Paul may have been using “apostles” in the general sense.

Ruling Bishops?

In all of this, it is important to realize that the word *apostolos* was an ordinary word used in everyday speech. Like *ekkllesia* (“church”), it carried no special “religious” meaning.

So it's easy for modern English-speaking readers to read a meaning into a passage that was not intended by the original writer.

Probably, in most instances where *apostolos* is used of persons other than the twelve or Paul, it should not be taken to mean "apostolic office." It is clear that Paul and the original twelve were apostles in a special sense. They were witnesses of Christ's resurrection, and were handpicked by Christ Himself as the key instruments through which He would establish His church.

So do any of the scriptural references to "apostles" suggest a hierarchy of ruling bishops that would continue through history in unbroken succession?

Obviously not. Such an idea was foreign to the minds of those first-century disciples who zealously proclaimed the gospel to an unaccommodating world. Their aim was to preach the gospel far and wide, to reach as many as possible with the message of salvation, to make disciples of all nations. They didn't care about exalted positions or lofty titles; they cared about people, about the work Christ had given them to do.

If you are looking for the true church, don't look for an unbroken chain of bishops, or for men calling themselves "apostles." Don't look outward; look upward!

And if God is calling you, He'll see to it that you find the true church—the one that Jesus built.

Part 2

Apostolic Practice

If the apostles were here today, what would they think as they examined modern Christianity? Would they acknowledge the Vatican as the agency through which the truth of the gospel has been preserved? Or would they side with the Protestant claim that the Reformers restored the true apostolic faith to its pristine purity?

Would they observe Sunday as the "Lord's Day," join in the celebration of Christmas and Easter, participate in the "feast days of the saints," and confirm the claim that the Law was "nailed to the cross"?

Or would they be shocked to find customs and beliefs, now labeled "Christian," that were completely unknown to the first-century church?

To answer these questions, let's go to the foundation of the New Testament church and seek to understand the historical and cultural setting wherein it was established.

Foundation of the Church

In Part 1, we saw that Jesus Christ selected twelve apostles as the foundational pillars of the church He promised to build. He taught and trained these men and commissioned them with the responsibility of making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19,20). Prior to His ascension, He told them to remain in Jerusalem and await the arrival of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8).

The Holy Spirit arrived on the Day of Pentecost, and some three thousand were converted on that day (Acts 2). In the days that followed, “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (verse 47). Thus began the New Testament church.

Jesus had said that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47). True to His prophecy, Jerusalem was the “birthplace” of the New Testament church. In time, envoys from the mother church would carry the message of repentance and remission of sins to Samaria, to Asia Minor, to far-off Rome, to the “uttermost parts of the earth.” Thousands would be converted. New churches would be planted, all sharing the common Faith, believing the message proclaimed first in Jerusalem.

But what did the first-century church look like? Did the early Jewish converts abandon their Jewishness and take on new uniquely “Christian” customs? Did they abandon the “Jewish” Sabbath and adopt Sunday observance as a weekly commemoration of Christ’s resurrection appearances?

And what of the earliest non-Jewish Christians? Did their entry into the church introduce new customs to Christianity?

The Jerusalem Church

Before we examine the circumstances that led to the planting of churches in regions outside Judaea, let’s look more closely at the mother church in its earliest days.

First, as we have noted, the church began on the Day of Pentecost, one of the annual holy days God had given to Israel centuries earlier (Leviticus 23:15-20). This feast day, also called the “Feast of Firstfruits” and “Feast of Weeks,” was the spring harvest festival in ancient Israel. How appropriate that the “harvest” of lives for the Kingdom of God should begin on this day.

The Day of Pentecost obviously took on new meaning to the thousands of Jews who were converted on that day. It is simply not believable that the early Christians would have abandoned this festival, or considered it archaic or having no meaning for New Covenant

believers. Indeed, the Day of Pentecost carries far more meaning for the New Testament church than it ever did for ancient Israel.

With this new understanding on the meaning of the Day of Pentecost, it was a short step for the early Christians to recognize the New Covenant significance of the other annual festivals and holy days God had revealed to Israel (see Leviticus 23). Doubtless, little time passed before they associated Christ, the Lamb of God, with the sacrificial lamb of the Passover feast. They saw the New Covenant significance of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, recognizing the necessity of putting sin (typified by leaven) out of their lives. And, no doubt, as time went on they began associating the Feast of Trumpets with the Second Coming of Christ, the Day of Atonement with God's reconciliation ("at-one-ment") with the world, the Feast of Tabernacles with the future reign of Christ, and the Last Great Day (or "eighth day") with the final judgment.

Amazingly, tens of thousands of Christians have never heard of God's holy days, have never been taught of the tremendously deep, spiritual, Christian significance of these festivals. Most theologians and church leaders today claim that "Israel's holy days" have been abolished, or "nailed to the cross."

But such was not the case with the earliest Christians. They kept God's weekly and annual sabbaths, and would have been dismayed at the thought of abandoning them.

Many assume that the first-century church abandoned the weekly and annual sabbaths and adopted Sunday observance as the "Lord's Day." They argue that Sunday (the first day of the week) was singled out as a special day for the earliest Christians because Christ's resurrection appearances and the beginning of the New Testament church took place on that day. This argument fails, however, in view of the fact that the earliest church was entirely Jewish, and that the resurrection appearances and arrival of the Holy Spirit took place during God-ordained festivals that were well-known to the Jews.

Indeed, Christ's resurrection appearances did take place on a Sunday, but that Sunday was the day of the "wave sheaf" offering (Leviticus 23:10,11), which took place on the "morrow after the Sabbath" during the Days of Unleavened Bread. The firstfruits sheaf pictures "Christ the Firstfruits" (1 Corinthians 15:23) being presented alive before the Father.

Further, the Sunday on which the New Testament church began was not just any Sunday; it was the Day of Pentecost, which occurred fifty days after the wave sheaf offering.

Far from giving special meaning to the first day of the week, Christ's resurrection appearances and the arrival of the Holy Spirit gave new meaning to the spring festival and the Day of Pentecost, thus giving the early church all the more reason to continue keeping these feasts.

Obviously, the earliest Christians, being Jewish, associated the important events of Christ's resurrection appearances and the arrival of the Holy Spirit with the festivals they

were familiar with, not with the first day of the week. They saw themselves as the “remnant of Israel” (see Romans 11:5-7), and never thought that the law God had given to their forefathers no longer pertained to them.

They continued to worship in the Temple at Jerusalem (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 21:20), continued to keep the weekly Sabbath and annual holy days. In fact, history tells us that the descendants of the Jerusalem church were still keeping the Sabbath and holy days as late as the fourth century, A.D.

But what about the Gentiles who were converted to Christianity during the apostolic period? Did they adopt practices different from those of the Jerusalem church? Did they regard the weekly and annual sabbaths as “Jewish” customs that had no relevance for non-Jewish believers?

To answer, let’s see how the New Testament church expanded beyond Jerusalem, and who its first members were.

The Samaritans Receive the Gospel

The first several chapters of the book of Acts tell of how the church began in Jerusalem, of the “birth pangs” the church experienced, of the boldness of the apostles as they proclaimed the gospel, of Stephen’s powerful testimony, and of his becoming the first Christian martyr.

Jesus had said that His disciples would be witnesses of Him “in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The disciples were faithful in preaching the Word of God in Jerusalem. The time had now come for the gospel to spread throughout Judaea and into Samaria.

Notice how persecution against the church led to the expansion of the church:

“And Saul was consenting to his [Stephen’s] death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles....Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word. Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in the city....But when they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the Kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:1,4-8,12).

Later, the apostles at Jerusalem, having heard that the Samaritans had received the gospel, sent Peter and John to them (Acts 8:14). When Peter and John arrived, they prayed for them, laid their hands on them, and the believing Samaritans received the Holy Spirit (verses 15-17). The two apostles gave further instructions to the people, and then, on their way back to Jerusalem, “preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans” (verse 25).

A “daughter” church had now been established in Samaria. But who I were the Samaritans? What religious practices were they accustomed to? Should we expect the Samaritan church to have practices and customs different from those of the Jerusalem church?

Both Scripture and history reveal that great animosity existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. This animosity predated the time of Christ and the apostles by several centuries. As Harrison points out, “The Jews’ unwillingness to permit the Samaritans to participate in the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 4:1-2) produced a deep antagonism, reflected in the New Testament, and it led to the setting up of the schismatic worship at Mt. Gerizim [ancient location of the Samaritans’ temple] referred to in John 4” (Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, Revised Edition, 1971, p. 4).

The Samaritans of the New Testament were the descendants of the idolatrous peoples the king of Assyria had placed in the land (formerly occupied by the people of Israel) after the captivity of Israel in 721 B.C. (2 Kings 17:24). Once established in the land, the “new Samaritans” continued their idolatrous practice, resulting in God punishing them by sending lions in their midst (verses 25). The king of Assyria, learning of this plague, sent a priest from the captives of Israel to “teach them the manner of the God of the land” (verses 26,27).

The priest instructed the people on “how they should fear the Lord” (verse 28), but the people of the land refused to renounce their idolatrous practices. They mingled the worship of God with worship of their own gods. They “feared the Lord, and served their graven images, both their children and their children’s children, so do they unto this day” (verse 41).

By New Testament times, the Samaritans were claiming to be the descendants of Jacob. This was perhaps due to their fierce competitiveness with the Jews—they claimed that Mount Gerizim was superior to Jerusalem as a place of worship and that their copy of the Torah was of origin more ancient than the Jews’ Torah—and due to the influence of certain Jews who had taken refuge among them.

According to Smith, the Samaritans in New Testament times “had abandoned their polytheism for a sort of ultra Mosaicism” (William Smith, L.L.D., *A Dictionary of the Bible*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville; Camden; New York, 1962, p. 585).

Evidently, the Samaritans in the time of Jesus were aware of the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at “Jacob’s well” (John 4) said, “I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when He is come, He will tell us all things” (verse 25). When she told the men of Samaria of her meeting with Jesus, they went out to meet Him, and asked that He remain with them two days. His teaching persuaded them that “this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world” (verse 42).

While some residue of pagan practice still remained in Samaria by New Testament times (see Acts 7:9-11; 18-24), John’s account of Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritans indicates that many of the people sincerely worshiped and obeyed the true God, believed the prophecies about Christ’s coming, and actually looked for His appearance. They were fully familiar with the weekly and annual sabbaths, the commandments, statutes, and judgments God had revealed through Moses.

Probably, many of the Samaritans who believed the gospel upon the preaching of Philip were the same people who had met Jesus and His disciples some time previous (John 4). With their understanding of the Law and of the prophecies about the coming of Christ, they readily received the gospel; believed Philip when he told them of Christ’s death and resurrection, of His promise to return and establish His kingdom; repented of their sins, which they understood to be the transgression of God’s law, and turned to God through faith in Jesus Christ and His redemptive work. There is no reason to believe that their religious practice—their observance of the weekly Sabbath and annual holy days, their obedience to the Ten Commandments—differed from that of the Jerusalem church.

But the expansion of the church did not end with the conversion of the Samaritans. Soon, the gospel would expand into new regions, bringing about many new conversions and the planting of new churches.

Peter and Cornelius

Among the pious Jews of the first century, uncircumcised Gentiles were generally considered “unclean.” It was considered “unlawful” (according to Jewish tradition, not the Law of Moses) for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile and eat with him. But God had no intentions of excluding the Gentiles from His church, so Jewish attitudes about Gentiles would have to change.

The necessity of this change of attitude was shown to Peter in a vision. We read of it in Acts 10.

The opening verses of the chapter tell of how a Gentile centurion named Cornelius received a vision wherein an angel told him that God had heard his prayers, and instructed him to send men to Joppa, where they would find Peter.

As Cornelius' messengers approached Joppa, Peter went up to the housetop to pray. "And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven" (Acts 10:10-17).

At first, Peter didn't understand the meaning of this vision (verses 17,19). He knew it didn't mean that "unclean" meats (Leviticus 11) were now fit for human consumption, but wasn't sure what it did mean.

The answer came at some point after Cornelius' men arrived. God revealed to Peter that he should go with them because He had sent them (verses 17-20).

By the time Peter met Cornelius at Caesarea, he understood the meaning of the vision. Notice what Peter said to Cornelius and his companions:

"Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing [according to Jewish tradition] for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me [through the vision of the unclean animals] that I should not call any man common or unclean" (verse 28).

Peter clearly did not take the vision to mean it was now permissible to eat unclean animals. He understood that God was showing him that the prejudices the Jews had for Gentiles must be put aside, for the time had come for the door of salvation to open wide to the Gentiles.

On the day of Peter's visit, Cornelius and his companions received the Holy Spirit (verse 44), thus becoming members of God's church. The Jews who had come with Peter were astonished when they witnessed these uncircumcised Gentiles receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 45).

Later, after Peter had returned to Jerusalem, several of the Jewish converts contended with him because he had violated Jewish tradition by going into a Gentile's home and eating with uncircumcised men (Acts 11). But when Peter told them what had happened, they "held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (verse 18).

Soon, many Gentiles would enter the church, as the gospel continued to penetrate new areas, reach more people. But does this mean that the church's "Jewish" character—the Sabbath, the annual festivals and holy days, the Ten Commandments—would now be set aside; that the church would take on a new face, perhaps adopt new customs?

Many seem to think that Cornelius was a Gentile who disregarded the “Jewish” laws and commandments, such as the clean/unclean laws, the Sabbath, and the Ten Commandments. But did he?

Notice how he is described: “There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feareth God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway” (Acts 10:1,2). “Cornelius the centurion, a just man, and one that feareth God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews...” (verse 22).

A devout and just man, who fears God and prays to Him daily, and who has a good reputation among the Jews: Does that sound like someone who knows little of the God of the Hebrews or of the so-called “Old Testament Law”? Hardly!

Scholars recognize that the Gentile world of the first century may be divided into three distinct classifications: First, there were the pagans, both the idolatrous and the irreligious. Second, there were the full-fledged proselytes of Judaism who had submitted to the rite of circumcision and had, for all practical purposes, become Jews. Third, there were those known as “God-fearers” who, though uncircumcised, worshiped the true God, believed the Hebrew Scriptures, and frequented Jewish synagogues on the Sabbath day.

Cornelius was a “God-fearer.” Notice again that he is described as “one that feared God” (Acts 10:2,22). When the New Testament speaks of those who “fear God,” it is usually speaking of those Gentiles who worshiped the true God and were frequently seen in the synagogues on the Sabbath day.

Most of the earliest Gentile converts to Christianity had been God-fearers before their conversions. Once converted, they continued to obey God, continued to keep the Sabbath, and, as long as Christians and unbelieving Jews were able to coexist on friendly terms, continued to meet in the synagogues. There was no reason for the Gentile converts to abandon the form of worship—including Sabbath observance—they had previously embraced.

Paul Sent to the Gentiles

Once Peter and his fellow-workers had witnessed the conversion of Cornelius, and once the Jewish Christians understood that they were to abandon their bias against the Gentiles and no longer “call any man common or unclean,” it was now time for the gospel to go “unto the uttermost parts of the earth.”

Acts 9 tells of the conversion of Saul, who later became known as the apostle Paul. He was specially chosen as a vessel to bear Christ’s name “before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel” (verse 15). He began his ministry in the synagogues, preaching

Christ to the Jews (Acts 9:20,21). In time, his efforts turned primarily to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46,47).

A large number of the Gentiles who were converted through Paul's ministry were God-fearers. When he was in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia (in southern Galatia), "Paul stood up, and beckoning with his hand said, Men of Israel, and ye that fear God, give audience" (Acts 13:16). Notice that he addressed the Jews ("men of Israel") and "ye that fear God," meaning the God-fearing Gentiles. These God-fearers were in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Obviously, they were accustomed to keeping the Sabbath.

During his address, Paul again identifies the two groups: "Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham [i.e., the Jews], and whosoever among you feareth God [i.e., the God-fearing Gentiles], to you is the word of this salvation sent" (verse 26).

Notice what happened after Paul finished his speech: "And when the Jews were gone out of the synagogue, the Gentiles besought that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. Now when the congregation was broken up, many of the Jews and religious proselytes [Gentiles] followed Paul and Barnabas: who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. And the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming" (verses 42-45).

It makes no sense to assume that once the church was established in this region, the Gentile converts, who were keeping the Sabbath and receiving instructions from the Law and the Prophets before Paul arrived there, abandoned Sabbathkeeping. Further, Paul's preaching to them on consecutive Sabbaths, and his use of the Old Testament in preaching Christ, must have reinforced their convictions and encouraged them to continue keeping the Sabbath.

In Iconium, Paul again preaches in the synagogue, and again both Jews and Gentiles are present. When Paul proclaimed the gospel to them, "a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed" (Acts 14:1).

Interestingly, the book of Galatians is often cited as "proof" that the "Old Testament Law" has been abolished for Christians, especially Gentile Christians. Yet, the people of Antioch (in Pisidia) and of Iconium were Galatians. Acts 13 and 14 are about Paul's efforts in southern Galatia.

There is much additional evidence that a large number of those converted through Paul's preaching were Sabbathkeepers. Lydia, a "seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God [Greek: *sebomene ton theon*: "a worshiper of God," or "God-fearer"]," was a Sabbathkeeper who was converted through Paul's teaching (Acts 16:13,14).

In Thessalonica, Paul, "as his manner was, went in unto them [in the synagogue], and three Sabbath days reasoned with them out of the Scriptures.... And some of them

believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few” (Acts 17:2,4).

In Berea, Paul “went into the synagogue of the Jews” and preached Christ. Many “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few” (Acts 17:10-12).

In Corinth, Paul “reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and the Greeks” (Acts 18:4).

Clearly, many—probably a great majority—of the Gentiles converted during the apostolic period were God-fearers, not idol-worshiping pagans who had no knowledge of God or of His law. And there is no reason to believe that they deserted the Sabbath after becoming members of the New Testament church. On the contrary, scriptural evidence indicates the whole apostolic church—both Jews and Gentiles—continued their familiar practice of observing God’s festivals and Sabbaths.

Luke, writing of Paul’s travels, said, “And we sailed away from Philippi after the Days of Unleavened Bread...” (Acts 20:6); said that Paul “hasted, if it were possible for him, to be at Jerusalem the Day of Pentecost” (verse 16); referred to “the fast” (Acts 27:9), meaning the Day of Atonement. And, as we have noted, Luke pointed out that the New Testament church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

Paul said, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us,” and admonished the Corinthians to “keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Corinthians 5:7,8). He advised the Colossians, “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” (Colossians 2:16,17). Evidently, certain Colossian ascetics were judging the Christians on how they observed God’s sabbaths and festivals, and Paul told the church to disregard such judging.

Considering the origin of the church, the conversion of the Samaritans and God-fearing Gentiles, and the New Testament references to God’s sabbaths and festivals, is it not clearly obvious that the New Testament church was a commandment-keeping, Sabbath-observing church, and that the Sunday “Lord’s Day” was unknown to the earliest Christians?

Yes, it is obvious; and, in the next section, we’ll see more proof that the apostolic church was quite different from the church that emerged in the centuries that followed.

PART 3

The Israel of God

As we saw in Part 2, the earliest Christians were Jewish. They knew that God had promised to make a New Covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31), and saw themselves as the recipients of God's covenantal promise to "put [His] law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts" (verse 33).

They understood the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost to be the fulfillment of certain Old Testament prophecies (Acts 2:16-21), and could not have imagined that the law God had revealed to their fathers had become archaic or obsolete.

Their esteem of the Law is reflected in the book of Hebrews. Years after the church's foundation, the writer of this epistle expounded the redemptive and eschatological meaning of the Sabbath rest, and said, "There remaineth therefore a rest [a keeping of the Sabbath] for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Obviously, the Jewish Christians to whom this epistle was addressed were still keeping the Sabbath, and were able to see its New Covenant significance, just as they could see the New Covenant significance of Passover, Pentecost, and other "Old Testament" festivals.

James, the "Lord's brother," who had served as presiding elder in the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13-21), encouraged his readers to obey the Ten Commandments in all its points (James 2:10,11); and spoke of "your assembly [Greek: *sunagoge*, meaning "synagogue"]" (2:2), which suggests that Sabbathkeeping was still common at the time James wrote (probably in the early 60s, A.D.).

During one of Paul's Jerusalem visits, James said to him, "Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law" (Acts 21:20). In this case, the "law" James was speaking of included the sacrificial rites and ceremonies associated with worship at the Temple. The sacrifices and ceremonies were not essential to Christian worship (Hebrews 9:9,10), but the point is that James would not have pointed out the Jewish Christians' zeal for the Law had they abandoned Sabbath-observance.

But many believe that the church underwent a radical change after the apostles and elders convened at Jerusalem (Acts 15) to address the question of whether Gentiles should be circumcised.

What really happened at the Jerusalem conference?

The Jerusalem Conference

While the church was entirely Jewish, circumcision was not an issue. But when uncircumcised Gentiles began converting to Christianity, the subject did become an issue, especially among believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees.

Acts 15 tells us of this controversy:

“And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (verse 1).

Notice that the Judaeans Christians were claiming that Gentile believers had to be circumcised before they could be saved. They probably reasoned that since the New Covenant was to be made with the covenant people—the House of Israel and the House of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31)—and since circumcision was required for membership in the covenant community (Genesis 17:9-14; Exodus 12:48,49), it was necessary that the Gentiles first be admitted into the covenant community through the rite of circumcision. Only then—only after they had become full-fledged proselytes of Judaism—could the Gentiles become recipients of the New Covenant promises.

But Paul and Barnabas, having witnessed the conversion of uncircumcised Gentiles, vigorously disputed the claim of the circumcision party, and agreed to meet with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem to settle the matter once and for all (Acts 15:2).

“And the apostles and elders came together for to consider this matter, And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel [Acts 10], and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (verses 6-11).

What was the “yoke” that neither the ancient Israelites nor the Jews of Peter’s time were able to bear? The “yoke” was not the rite of circumcision, per se, for the Jews had been able to bear that “burden” quite well. The “yoke” Peter spoke of was the inability to remove the burden of past sins. Neither circumcision nor adherence to any law could accomplish that.

Peter argued that since the Gentiles had received the grace of God through faith, there was no need to burden them with additional requirements—for salvation had already been accomplished!

Paul and Barnabas confirmed Peter’s statements by relating their experiences in their work among the Gentiles (verse 12), after which James, summarizing the conclusions of the meeting, offered his recommendations:

“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath

in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day” (verses 19-21).

Biblical scholars recognize that these four rules regarding idols, sexual misconduct, things strangled, and blood are a summation of the sins described in Leviticus 17 and 18, where God says that such things are forbidden both to Israelites and “any stranger [non-Israelite] that sojourneth among you.”

James was not saying that these four laws were the only laws the Gentile converts were to observe. He didn't see any need to mention commandments concerning honoring parents, murder, taking God's name in vain, theft, bearing false witness, or covetousness; yet, we know through many New Testament passages that Christians were to observe these commandments.

For whatever reason, James thought it necessary to mention only the four laws. He knew that the Gentile converts were already fully familiar with the Ten Commandments and other laws, for Moses was read in the synagogues every Sabbath—and he knew that most of the Gentiles who had embraced Christianity were “God-fearers” who were accustomed to entering the synagogues on the Sabbath to hear the reading of the Law of Moses.

Later, after James' recommendations had been adopted and recorded, messengers were sent to the Gentile converts to report the conclusions of the conference:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you [Gentile converts] no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well” (verses 28,29).

On the surface, this instruction seems to say that the four laws were the only “burdens” the Gentiles were required to bear. As we have seen, however, the New Testament reveals that all Christians, regardless of race, were to observe many other laws. Further, abstaining from sinful activities such as idolatry and fornication, and harmful practices such as eating blood or things strangled, could hardly be described as “burdens.” The above passage (Acts 15:28,29) simply means that it was entirely unnecessary to burden the Gentiles with lengthy instructions. For whatever reason, it was necessary to mention only the four laws. No other instructions were needed.

Acts 15, then, should be understood in view of the fact that the people in question were fully familiar with the Law of Moses, the synagogue, the Sabbath day, and the Ten Commandments. To the Romans, the Christian church was so closely aligned with Jewish religion that it appeared to be just another sect of Judaism. Had it been seen as an entirely “new religion,” its existence probably would have been a cause of concern for Roman officials; yet, we find little concern on the part of the Romans.

Not an Illegal Religion

Under Roman law, certain religions were identified as *licita* (legal), while others were considered *illicita* (illegal). Judaism enjoyed the status of *religio licita*.

Any new religious movement would have been looked upon with suspicion, especially if it professed loyalty to any other than Caesar, and would have been subjected to scrutiny and, possibly, harsh treatment from Roman officials.

Yet, the New Testament shows that Roman officials generally did not consider the Christian movement a threatening or disconcerting force, in spite of the unbelieving Jews' attempts to bring the charge of *religio illicita* against the Christians.

Notice the following examples:

Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus, is said to have “believed,” apparently meaning he converted to Christianity (Acts 13:7-12). Cornelius, to whom Peter was sent, was a Roman centurion (Acts 10). These men were not secretive in their desire to learn more about the true Faith, and there is no evidence of charges of treason or of loss of official status for becoming Christians. Their openness indicates that the Romans did not consider Christianity an illegal religion.

The magistrates at Philippi apologized to Paul and Silas for beating and imprisoning them illegally (Acts 16:22-40). Had Christianity been illegal in Roman occupied territory, no apology would have been made.

The governors Felix and Festus found Paul innocent of the charges of being “a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world... Who also hath gone about to profane the temple” (Acts 24-26). Had Christianity been declared *illicita*, Paul's defense would have been useless.

Clearly, the Christian movement was not considered an illegal religion during the first decades of the apostolic period. No doubt, one reason the church was able to enjoy the status of *religio licita* was that it did not appear radically different from Judaism. Even the conversion of the Gentiles was not seen as a radical departure from legitimate religious practice, probably because informed Roman officials were aware of Jewish proselytization and were willing to give proselytes the same privileges they gave the Jews.

Spiritual Israel

Many see the church and Israel as two entirely separate and completely unrelated entities. When Israel ceased to be the people of God, they say, the Law, which had been given exclusively to Israel, was abolished.

But is this true? Did the apostles see no continuity between Israel and the church?

Notice an analogy Paul used: “For if the casting away of them [the majority of Israelites] be the reconciling of the world [the non-Israelite peoples, or Gentiles], what shall the receiving [conversion] of them be, but life from the dead? For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches [individual Israelites] be broken off, and thou [Gentiles], being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them [in place of the branches broken off], and with them partakest of the olive tree” (Romans 11:15-17).

Notice that the olive tree represents Israel! Converted Israelites are not pictured as being grafted into a brand new olive tree (representing the church); rather, unbelieving Israelites are depicted as being broken off the tree representing Israel! These detached branches are no longer part of the tree—no longer part of Israel, except in a physical, fleshly sense.

The branches from the wild olive tree are the Gentiles who turned to God through Christ. When grafted into the “Israel tree,” they became Israelites (in a spiritual sense). Thus, the “Israel tree” represents the converted “remnant of Israel” (Romans 11:5,7) and the Gentiles who were “grafted” in the place of those “broken off.”

The apostle Paul clearly recognized the continuity between Israel and the church. He saw the church as the “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16); said that “they which are of faith [whether Jew or Gentile], the same are the children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7), and that “if ye be Christ’s [regardless of race], then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (verse 29).

Speaking to the Gentiles of the church of Ephesus, Paul said: “That at that time [before conversion] 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...Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:12,13,19).

The converted Gentiles were no longer “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel”; they were now true citizens of the Israel of God—Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Failure to see the continuity between Israel and the church is, at least in part, the reason many today believe the Ten Commandments and other aspects of God’s law have been “done away.” The same disassociation with things deemed “Jewish” also played a part in the early church’s abandonment of the Sabbath and adoption of pagan customs.

While all its members are not Israelites according to the flesh, the church that Jesus built is made up of spiritual children of Abraham. The apostles and earliest Christians recognized the Scriptures (the “Old Testament”—the only Scriptures they had) as their

authority; believed the Messiah sent to Israel was their Savior; believed the promises God gave to Abraham and his descendants, and the promise of a New Covenant for Israel, applied to them.

Obviously, they did not believe the Law had been “done away.” Rather, they believed that “the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12); that “the law is spiritual...” (verse 14).

Think about it: With their view of the Law as holy, just, good, and spiritual, and with their understanding of continuity between Israel and the church, could the apostolic church have believed that the Ten Commandments had been abolished? Could the earliest Christians have believed that the spiritual law that had been given to carnal Israel did not apply to spiritual Israel?

Hardly! The apostolic church—the church that Jesus built—was a Sabbathkeeping church! Its members are described in the book of Revelation as those who “keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17).

In spite of widespread apostasy—abandonment of the Sabbath and holy days, incorporation of pagan holidays and customs into “Christianity,” acceptance of Platonic philosophy—the true Church of God, made up of those who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus, existed through the second, third, and fourth centuries, and continues to exist today.

Though small, it continued to exist. Though persecuted, it continued to survive. It didn’t have an infallible board of prelates, impressive cathedrals, great political influence, or wealth.

But it did have—and still has today—the promise of its Founder:

“And, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the [age]” (Matthew 28:20).

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