

The Church Is Not Israel!

by Dr. John C. Whitcomb

I. TRUE WORSHIP DURING THE GREAT TRIBULATION WILL BE DISTINCTIVELY ISRAELITE RATHER THAN DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ warned Israelite believers to pray that during the Great Tribulation "your flight may not be ...on a Sabbath" (Matt. 24:20). Only Israel, not the Church, is under a divinely enforced Sabbath law. The apostle Paul warned the Church: "let no one act as your judge in regard to...a Sabbath day" (Col. 2:16; cf. Gal. 4:10, Rom. 14:5). In ancient Israel, the death penalty was even inflicted on one who prepared a meal on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32; cf. Ex. 35:2-3). Thus, no one today, not even the Seventh-Day Adventist, is truly observing the Sabbath.

B. Our Lord Jesus Christ also warned Israelite believers that the Abomination of Desolation would stand "in the holy place" (Matt. 24:15). Only Israel, not the Church, can have a "holy place" on this earth. Our Lord stated to the Samaritan woman; "an hour is coming when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father" (John 4:21). However, Paul spoke of the future "man of lawlessness" who "takes his seat in the temple of God" (2 Thess. 2:4). Compare Revelation 11:1-2.

C. During the coming Tribulation there will be an altar in the Temple for the offering of divinely approved animal sacrifices (see discussion below and my unpublished lecture, "[The Millennial Temple of Ezekiel 40-48](#)"). However, the Church has no altar on earth, nor are animals to be sacrificed (1 Cor. 11:23-26; Heb. 10:1-14; 13:15; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rom. 15:16). The Temple and the altar for sacrifice will be divinely ordained in Jerusalem during this future period, and will not be a mere Jewish cultural center. However, the outer court will be given over to the Gentile nations to desecrate during the last half of the Seventieth Week of Daniel (Rev. 11:2).

The only way the Antichrist will be able to break his 7-year covenant with Israel and to cause the blood sacrifices and the grain offerings to cease (Dan. 9:27) will be to kill God's two witnesses in Jerusalem (Rev. 11:7-12). It is difficult to see how blood sacrifices could be offered on the Jerusalem altar during those first 3 ½ years if the two witnesses of God did not approve of this form of worship; for their teaching ministry will be supernaturally enforced (Rev. 11:3-6), even to the destruction of all enemies. Thus they will authoritatively set the pattern for the true worship of God on earth following the rapture of the Church.

D. Not only will there be a God-approved Temple and altar with appropriate sacrifices in Tribulation Jerusalem, there will also be, of necessity, Levitical priests to carry out this Israelite form of worship. Ever since Roman armies destroyed the Temple and its genealogical records in 70 A.D., Jews have been unable to determine their precise tribal identity. Thus, there can be no legitimate Israelite worship during the Church age.

However, during the early part of Daniel's Seventieth Week, God will reveal the true tribal identity of at least 144,000 Israelites (Rev. 7:4-8), and among these will be 12,000 Levites (Rev. 7:7). It seems probable that this will be revealed through the two witnesses, for Zerubbabel asserted that lost priestly records could not be recovered "until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim" (Ezra 2:63). This has yet to happen,

and cannot happen until the Bride of Christ has been removed from the earth by rapture.

It will probably also be through the testimony of the two witnesses that the 12,000 Levites (among others) will be won to a saving knowledge of the God of Israel. This assumption is based on the biblical principle that conversion can only come through men who are sent by God (Rom. 10:14-15). With the Church now in heaven (cf. Rev. 3:10), the only witnesses on earth will be these two men. It will be through their supernaturally confirmed and protected instructions, therefore, that converted Levites will understand how to offer legitimate sacrifices at the Jerusalem altar. God describes them at "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (Rev. 11:4). In similar fashion, it was through the ministry of two Old Testament "olive trees" or "anointed ones" (ie., Joshua the high priest and Zerubbabel the governor - Zech. 4:3, 14) that the new altar in Jerusalem and its sacrifices were established following the Babylonian captivity, even before the Temple was rebuilt (Ezra 3:1-6).

E. A foundational truth of Christian ecclesiology is the unity of the body of Christ. Thus, it is unthinkable that the true Church could ever have a distinct Jewish subdivision. The apostle Paul insisted that Christ "broke down the barrier of the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14) so that now "there is no distinction between Greek and Jew" (Col. 3:11), and we are thus "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Therefore it is biblically impossible to have the Bride of Christ bearing witness to her Lord throughout the 70th week of Daniel with one segment of the Bride doing distinctively Christian things and another segment, divided into twelve tribes, doing distinctively Jewish things! The angel Gabriel made it clear to Daniel, after all, that "the seventy weeks (including the 70th!) have been decreed for your people and your holy city" (Dan. 9:24).

II. TRUE WORSHIP ON THE EARTH DURING THE COMING KINGDOM AGE WILL BE DISTINCTIVELY ISRAELITE RATHER THAN DISTINCTIVELY CHRISTIAN

A. The Bible provides abundant testimony to the Israelite form of worship which will characterize the Kingdom Age. The Temple, which will be the focus of worship on the earth during the thousand-year reign of Christ, is described in much detail by Joel (3:18), Isaiah (2:2; 6:13), Daniel (9:24), Ezekiel (40-48) and Haggai (2:7,9).

Furthermore, the animal sacrifices which will be offered in that Temple are carefully described in Isaiah (56:6-7; 60:7), Jeremiah (33:18), Zechariah (14:16-21), and especially in Ezekiel (40-46).

God even stated, through Jeremiah, that just as "David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel," so "the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to prepare sacrifices continually" (33:17-18). Ezekiel goes even further and narrows down these Levitical priests to the family of Zadok, who was faithful to King David to the very end (Ezek. 40:46; 43; 19; 44:15; 48:11; cf. 1 Kings 1:34).

B. Inevitably, those who deny that true worship on earth during the Great Tribulation will be distinctively Israelite also go on to deny that true worship during the Millennium will be distinctively Israelite. For a defense of a literal interpretation of God's covenants with Israel, see Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1959).

III. SERIOUS THEOLOGICAL ERROR RESULTS FROM EVERY EFFORT TO INCORPORATE ISRAELITE FUNCTIONS INTO THE CHURCH TODAY

- A. By denying to Israel her functional distinctives, Christians fall under the warning of the apostle Paul: "Do not be arrogant toward the [Israelite] branches...lest you be wise in your own estimation" (Rom. 11:18,25).
- B. The hermeneutical error and danger of denying the clear revelation of God's prophetic program for Israel: "O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!" (Luke 24:25).
- C. The soteriological error of mixing Mosaic and Christian programs and thus falling into the heresy of Galatianism (Gal. 3:1-3).
- D. The missionary disaster of confusing Israel's distinct pattern of government, society and economics with the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ to His Church.

Note how this has helped to bring about such ecclesiastic monstrosities as the Roman Catholic Church. Note also the trends in Seventh-Day Adventism and other socio-economic cults. Watch carefully the rise of postmillennialism within evangelical Protestantism, and the new "two-pronged Gospel" or social/political/evangelism blend that characterizes the neo-evangelical movement today and its appeal to the theocracy of Israel for its basic guidelines. For one recent critique of the "two-pronged Gospel," see Gary T. Meadors, "John R. W. Stott on Social Action," Grace Theological Journal (October, 1980).

IV. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH CANNOT BE USED TO OBSCURE THEIR PROFOUND DIFFERENCES

Similarities

1. Israel and the Church do share some basic similarities.
2. They worship the same God.
3. They are related to this living and sovereign God through the same basic plan of salvation (divine election and justification by grace through the merits of Christ's blood and through faith in His Word; and regeneration and indwelling by the Holy Spirit with the same hope of future glorification).
4. They share the same divinely normative moral standards.

Differences

1. The differences between Israel and the Church are equally important to recognize.
2. The Church, as the Bride of Christ, was first established on the Day of Pentecost by means of the Son of God baptizing people in the Holy Spirit into His Body (Acts 1:5; 11:15-18).
3. The Church has been given a unique commission and message, as well as freedom from the non-normative aspects of the Law of Moses (including the Sabbath and other holy days, a special group of priests, and a geographically localized holy land and city and altar for animal sacrifices).

Since these similarities and differences are clearly explained to us by God in such passages as Romans 11 and Ephesians 2-3, it is vitally important for us, as God's people today, to build our Christian lives and ministries solidly upon the rock of biblical revelation. No other foundation can withstand the inevitable pressures that a sinful and Satanic world system will bring.

"Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things; for as you do this you will insure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you" (1 Tim. 4:16).