

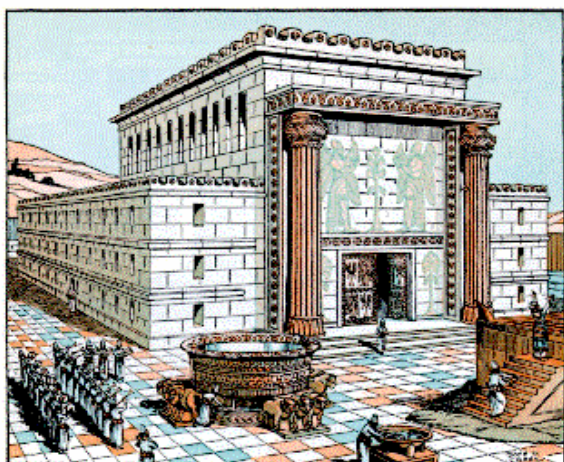
The Church in God's Program

Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 13–60. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these issues in class.)

1. On page 22, Clowney suggests that evangelicalism has made the same kinds of compromises with secular culture that made liberalism redundant. What compromises does he have in mind? Do you think he's right?
2. Clowney's second chapter begins the biblical story of the church in the Old Testament. He sees more continuity between Israel and the church than do most in our tradition. As you read through this section, try to identify ways in which the church and Israel are similar, along with ways in which they are different from one another. Meditate as well on the relationship between Christ, the OT promises, and the establishment of the church.
3. Clowney focuses on two very important questions on pages 53 to 58. How would you answer them?

Comment: Different Perspectives on Israel and the Church



Clowney's Reformed perspective treats the New Testament church as essentially continuous with Old Testament Israel – they are the people of God. Some have described

this as a "replacement" theology in which the church as the "new," "true," or "spiritual" Israel has replaced national Israel as God's covenant community. In defense of this position, one might consider the following arguments:

- Israel frequently assembled in corporate worship, and the Hebrew word for that assembly, *qahal* (לִהְיוֹת), is often translated in the LXX with *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), the term used in the New Testament for the "church."
- Several images used to describe Israel in the Old Testament are carried over into the New Testament and applied to the church (e.g., "flock," "people of God," "bride," etc.) Cf. 1 Pet. 2:9.
- Paul refers to the church as "the true circumcision" (Phil. 3:3) and "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16).

By contrast, dispensationalists have traditionally spoken of the church as a distinct community, a “heavenly” people who were not a part of the Old Testament expectation. The Old Testament, they have argued, looked forward to the eschatological establishment of God’s kingdom, an event that was postponed due to the Jewish rejection of Jesus, the Messiah. In the wake of that rejection, God established the church as something unforeseen, bringing the gospel to the Gentiles for a time until He turns once again to Israel and His ancient promises to them. In this sense, dispensationalists have often spoken of the church age as a “parenthesis” in God’s dealings with Israel. The distinction between the two groups has contributed to other aspects of dispensational theology, including eschatology, ethics, and soteriology. Arguments for a clear distinction between the church and Israel include the following:

- There can be many “assemblies” of people (Acts 19:32), but the church is uniquely described as the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23).
- The church as the body of Christ is constituted by the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). Since Spirit baptism did not take place until the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the church did not exist prior to that event.
- Even in the OT, the concept of the “people of God” may also refer to those outside Israel (Isa. 19:24–25), and even in the NT, the phrase is still used of ethnic Israel (Rom. 11:1–2).
- Paul did not think of the church as “the Israel of God,” but called for a blessing upon ethnic Israel to soften potential misunderstandings after his strong words against those demanding circumcision.
- The church is not a political entity and does not fulfill the prophetic expectation of a restored national Israel with David as king (Ezek. 37:22–24).



In recent years “progressive dispensationalists” have suggested modifications in this synthesis, following what many have perceived as a mediating position between the Reformed and dispensational models. Progressive dispensationalists believe that there is more continuity between Israel and the church than more traditional dispensationalists have realized, but they continue to see the church as a more distinctive community than Reformed theologians have acknowledged. This system typically emphasizes the distinctive character of the church with regard to the work of the Spirit, the believer’s relationship to the Law, and the multi-ethnicity of the believing community. Like other dispensational positions, it also anticipates an earthly reign of Christ in the future (one that will fulfill promises regarding political Israel). However, unlike other dispensationalists, progressives regard the church not as a parenthesis but as an initial expression of

Christ's kingdom, one that was inaugurated at His resurrection and glorification.

Questions for Further Reflection

- Take a look at “church” or *ejkkhsva* in a concordance. It appears to be used pretty consistently in the NT epistles to refer to the gathering of believers in a particular city. The more universalistic references in Colossians 1:18, 24 and Ephesians 1:22–23 may also retain this sense of “gathering,” possibly referring to the church as a heavenly assembly of the redeemed (see P. T. O’Brien, “Church,” in the *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp. 124–26). Can this assembly be distinguished from the worshipping community in the OT primarily by the fact that these are people who assemble together *in the name of Jesus* (1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1)? Or, might their regular gatherings have created a new understanding of *ejkkhsva* for those who used the term in the NT?
- How do you understand the use of “church” in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17? Might it have been the equivalent of “synagogue,” describing a gathering of pious people? Might Jesus’ original words (most likely uttered in Aramaic) have been restated in a way that would have had particular significance for readers living in the context of a new Christian community? Marshall argues that Matthew 16 has a particular Qumran saying in view, one which speaks of God building His own “congregation” as a righteous community (I. H. Marshall, “Church,” in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 124). From this perspective, Matthew 18 may simply repeat what would at that point be a recognized phrase. Is that a sufficient response?
- Matthew 16 and 18 might be regarded as the exceptions which prove the rule. Luke uses *ejkkhsva* more than twenty times in Acts, but never in his gospel account. Mark and John do not use it at all. Luke uses the term in Acts 19 to speak of a non-Christian assembly, but has he otherwise reserved its use for the post-Pentecost gathering of believers? (See further L. Coenen, “Church,” in the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 1:297–98.)
- We should avoid identifying the *visible* church with the kingdom of God, lest the church itself be regarded as a contemporary political entity and the rule of the church (perhaps even through the state) be identified with the rule of God. Still, in what sense might the church be regarded as an outpost for the coming kingdom, or perhaps as an expression of the kingdom, functioning under the reign of the already-exalted Savior? In what ways might the present and the future differ by degree (e.g., the obedience of the King’s subjects) and in what ways might they differ by kind (e.g., political vs. “spiritual”)?
- What is the point of Peter’s statement in 1 Peter 2:9–10? Giles has said that Peter, in drawing these titles from Ex. 19:6 and Isa. 43:20–21 and applying them to the church, “is emphatically saying that the church is now Israel” (K. Giles, “Church,” in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, p. 199). Is he correct?
- R. K. Harrison speaks of both continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church. Writing in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* on “the Church,” Harrison argues that “the church and Israel are portrayed in the Bible as being in a continuous relationship” but “the church . . . is not coterminous with Israel” (p. 95). “Although the church is a progression beyond Israel, it is not the permanent replacement of Israel.” Similarly, “the church and the kingdom of God are related,” but “the church and the kingdom of God are not identified” (p. 96). Take a look at his arguments by reading the article for yourself. Is his an appropriate position?
- Many contemporary New Testament scholars and theologians are very uncomfortable with a pure “replacement” model of Israel and the church because that model seems anti-Semitic in a post-Holocaust society. At the same time, some dispensationalists have been accused of neglecting distinctively Christian

priorities because of their high regard for the current state of Israel. What might be some of the political or social implications of your own theology here?

Additional Reading

- For extensive discussion of the relationship between the church and Israel (perhaps more specifically, the relationship between Christians and unbelieving Jews) in the New Testament, see W. S. Campbell, "Church as Israel, People of God," in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, pp. 204–19.
- For dialogue between dispensational and Reformed theologians about the relationship between the church and Israel, see *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.)*, edited by John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988). See especially the articles by Marten H. Woudstra and Robert L. Saucy on "the people of God" in that volume.
- For a traditional dispensational perspective on the nature of the church, see the attached pages from Lewis S. Chafer's *Systematic Theology*. (Note: this reading comes from his "doctrinal summarization." Each argument is stated in longer form in the volume on ecclesiology [vol. 4 in the original set].)
- For a progressive dispensational discussion of these issues, see Blaising and Bock (eds.), *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). See also the last chapter in my book, *Humanity and Sin* (Nashville: Word, 1999). This is my attempt to summarize the promise of redemption in biblical theology, and it ultimately describes the place of the church in that program.