

# THE CHURCH, THE BRIDE, AND THE BODY

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A surprising amount of controversy has surrounded the use of the above Scriptural terms.

Most Bible-believing Christians agree that the Church of which we are the blood-bought members, is properly called "The Body of Christ." But does the Body of Christ include believers of all dispensations or only those of the present dispensation?

As to the term "Bride of Christ," some contend that this refers only to the Church of this dispensation, while others feel sure that it refers rather to redeemed Israel or to some segment of redeemed Israel.

The term "the Church," again, is held by most Premillenarian Fundamentalists to refer only to believers of the present dispensation, while others hold that it refers to God's people in every age.

What saith the Scripture?

## THE CHURCH

Frankly, we never cease to wonder at the carelessness and inconsistency with which this term is used by dispensationalists. The opponents of dispensational teaching often use it more correctly than dispensationalists do.

The Greek word ekklesia means simply a called-out assembly, and in reference to God's ekklesia, or church, it refers to those whom has called-out of the world to Himself.

This term is interdispensational rather than dispensational in character. God has always had His called-out people. Israel, under Moses, was called: "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38). More than sixty times the word ekklesia appears in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and mostly it refers to God's called-out people.

Our Lord recognized the Church as in existence in His day, for He instructed His followers to "tell ... the Church" about those who obstinately persisted in sin (Matt. 18:17). He announced also the basis upon which He would build His Messianic Church (Matt. 16:16-18).

Thus those who teach that the Church began at Pentecost are in error. Acts 2:41 does not say, or indicate in any way, that the three thousand who were saved at Pentecost were the first members of the Church. It simply states that "there were added" to those already saved, "about three thousand souls" and Verse 47 continues: "And the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved," both verses together indicating that the Church had already been in existence.

We read further that Paul "persecuted the Church of God" before he was saved (I Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13). Thus the Church was certainly in existence before God began baptizing

Jews and Gentiles into one body.

In the light of all this we have never been able to understand why dispensationalists make comparisons between "Israel and the Church." Israel was the Church, God's called-out people, when she was in covenant relationship with Him<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the "My Church" of which our Lord spoke, was to be founded upon a recognition of Himself as Israel's Messiah (See Matt. 16:16; John 1:49; 11:27; etc.) not upon a recognition of Christ as the exalted Lord, the Dispenser of grace to a lost world.

Some, even, who have an otherwise good grasp of the Pauline message, make the mistake of comparing Israel with the Church. We should rather distinguish between Israel and the Body of Christ, or between the Church of that day and the Church of this day. We sincerely pray that many of our beloved "grace" people will take this to heart and avoid using phraseology which our opponents can immediately prove unscriptural.

While it is well to note the distinctions between the various dispensations – and there are many – the word "church" is an outstanding example of the connection that exists between believers in every age. Abraham, Moses, David, and Daniel are to be distinguished from believers today, but there is also a very blessed relation between us all. They were God's people and so are we. They belonged to the Church of that day; we belong to the Church of this day, the Body of Christ.

## THE BRIDE

The question whether or not the Church of the present dispensation is the Bride of Christ, does not represent a disagreement between those of the so-called "grace movement" and other dispensationalists. It rather represents a difference of opinion within both groups. Within both groups there are some who hold that the Church of today is the Bride of Christ and others who hold that redeemed Israel, or some segment of redeemed Israel, is the Bride of Christ. This is not strange, since our Lord and His people seem to be so clearly represented as Bridegroom and bride in both cases.

No one can deny that our Lord is presented as a bridegroom by John the Baptist in his ministry to Israel (John 3:29; etc.) but those who deny that Paul presents Him as a bridegroom in Eph. 5:22-32 must strain their interpretation of that passage to divest it of the thought. And does not this very fact, perhaps, afford us a clue to the solution of this difficult problem? Have we again taken an inter-dispensational figure of speech and tried to apply it to one particular group, even to the forcing of some very plain passages of Scripture?

Let's start from the beginning.

Jehovah had taken Israel "by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt" (Jer. 31:32) and had there, at Sinai, made a covenant with them in which they, in obedience to Him, were to become His "peculiar treasure" (Ex. 19:5). Thus He became "an husband unto them" (Jer. 31:32).

Israel was not true to Him, however, and broke the solemn covenant so flagrantly that He finally divorced the nation (Jer. 31:32; Hos. 2:2-13) and called her "Lo-Ammi,"

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<sup>1</sup> Granting, of course, that "they are not all Israel which are of Israel" (Rom. 9:6).

"not My people" (Hos. 1:9)<sup>2</sup>.

The fallen nation will be restored, however, and reunited to Jehovah in marriage. The Old Testament Scriptures have much to say about this:

**"They say, If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? shall not that land be greatly polluted? But THOU HAST PLAYED THE HARLOT WITH MANY LOVERS; YET RETURN AGAIN TO ME, SAITH THE LORD."**

**"Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel, saith the Lord."**

**"A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the Lord their God."**

**"RETURN, YE BACKSLIDING CHILDREN, AND I WILL HEAL YOUR BACKSLIDINGS..."** (Jer. 3:1,20-22).

**"For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God."**

**"FOR A SMALL MOMENT HAVE I FORSAKEN THEE ; BUT WITH GREAT MERCIES WILL I GATHER THEE"** (Isa. 54:6,7).

The Scofield Reference Bible says with regard to this: "A forgiven and restored wife could not be called either a virgin (II Cor. 11:2,3) or a bride" (P. 1348). This reflects the Scofield view that the Church of this dispensation alone is the Bride of Christ. But this view limits the infinite grace of God, for the prophetic Word teaches that, forgetting all the past, Jehovah will in fact restore Israel as a virgin and a bride:

**"FOR AS A YOUNG MAN MARRIETH A VIRGIN, SO SHALL THY SONS MARRY THEE: AND AS A BRIDEGROOM REJOICETH OVER THE BRIDE, SO SHALL THY GOD REJOICE OVER THEE"** (Isa. 62:5).

**"GATHER THE PEOPLE, SANCTIFY THE CONGREGATION, ASSEMBLE THE ELDERS, GATHER THE CHILDREN, AND THOSE THAT SUCK THE BREASTS: LET THE BRIDEGROOM GO FORTH OUT OF HIS CHAMBER, AND THE BRIDE OUT OF HER CLOSET."**

**"AND YE SHALL KNOW THAT I AM IN THE MIDST OF ISRAEL, AND THAT I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD , AND NONE ELSE : AND MY PEOPLE SHALL NEVER BE ASHAMED"** (Joel 2:16, 27).

Thus Jehovah and restored Israel are in fact represented as a bridegroom and his bride.

John the Baptist doubtless hoped that these prophecies would be fulfilled in his day, for he sought to get Israel to repent and fall in love with Christ.

Those who argue, technically, from John 3:29, that John the Baptist himself could not belong to the Bride, miss the whole point of the passage. It was in response to the

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<sup>2</sup> Remember Rom. 9:6 here again, for He could not and did not divorce the believing remnant.

questions of those who thought that he might be the Messiah, that John replied:

**"Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before Him. HE THAT HATH THE BRIDE IS THE BRIDEGROOM..."** (John 3:28,29).

And then John described himself as "the friend of the Bridegroom," standing by and rejoicing as the multitude went after Christ.

Our Lord too presented Himself to Israel as the Bridegroom in His statement that "the Bridegroom is with them" (Matt. 9:15) and in the parables of the marriage feast (Matt. 22:1,2) and the ten virgins (Matt. 25:1,5,6).

Before we go to the Pauline Epistles, however, let us be careful lest we become so technical that we miss the sense of Scripture. Let us ask ourselves very simply what the Scriptural figure of the bride and groom signifies. Clearly this: that He loved her, desired her for Himself, would die for her and would some day exalt and glorify her. Now let us ask ourselves: Is this not true of our Lord and every company of believers that ever lived?

Does some reader object that the terms "bride" and "bridegroom" are not used in the Pauline Epistles? Perhaps not, but the symbolism is. How else shall we interpret such passages as the following:

**"Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law...THAT YE SHOULD BE MARRIED TO ANOTHER..."** (Rom. 7:4).

**"For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I HAVE ESPOUSED YOU TO ONE HUSBAND, THAT I MAY PRESENT YOU AS A CHASTE VIRGIN TO CHRIST" (II Cor. 11:2).**

**"Husbands, love your wives, even as CHRIST ALSO LOVED THE CHURCH, AND GAVE HIMSELF FOR IT;**

**"THAT HE MIGHT SANCTIFY AND CLEANSE IT WITH THE WASHING OF WATER BY THE WORD,**

**"THAT HE MIGHT PRESENT IT TO HIMSELF A GLORIOUS CHURCH, NOT HAVING SPOT, OR WRINKLE, OR ANY SUCH THING; BUT THAT IT SHOULD BE HOLY AND WITHOUT BLEMISH" (Eph.5:25-27).**

Some would interpret this last passage as referring only to the Church as the Body of Christ, but a man does not die for his body, or present his body to himself. This illustration clearly involves the love of husbands to their wives (ver. 25). Anyone who does not see the lesson that husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it, has not read the passage carefully or with unbiased mind.

And as to II Cor. 11:2, who can miss the analogy with John 3:29? Just as John the Baptist sought to get Israel to fall in love with Christ on earth, so Paul sought to get the Corinthians to fall in love with the exalted Christ in heaven.

Does a reader ask how the Church of today can be both Christ's Bride and His Body? A two-fold answer is found in Gen. 2. This chapter first relates how Adam's wife, Eve, was taken from his body (Vers. 21,22) and then goes on to say:

**"THEREFORE SHALL A MAN LEAVE HIS FATHER AND HIS MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE UNTO HIS WIFE; AND THEY SHALL BE ONE FLESH" (Ver. 24).**

The truth about the Body is a higher one than that of the Bride, but let us not use one to cancel out the other.

Thus in the bride we have another interdispensational figure. This is why those who insist that Israel the Bride, will never be able to convince those who insist that the Church of today the Bride, for both have Scriptures with which to answer the other. Neither the Bride, but both belong the Bride.

This should prepare us to consider the passages in the Revelation where the Bride is referred to.

It has always been difficult for us to accept the teaching that the Church of today is not to be found in the Book of the Revelation. Granted, its subject matter deals overwhelmingly with Israel and the nations. Granted, too, that Chapters 2 and 3 do not contain a prophetic history of the Church of this dispensation. Yet it would be strange if the Church of today were excluded.

Perhaps all of our readers would agree that Genesis is "the seed plot of the Bible" and that outstanding among its germ ideas is that of Eve as part of Adam's body, one with him. Doubtless, too, our readers will agree that the Revelation is the complement to Genesis; that the Revelation gathers up all the great thoughts begun in Genesis.

Thus in Genesis we have Satan's appearance in Eden, and in the Revelation his doom in the Lake of Fire. In Genesis we are told about the entrance of sin, and in the Revelation about God's final judgment upon sin. In Genesis we have the curse pronounced; in the Revelation it is removed. In Genesis the tree of life is denied to the fallen pair, while in the Revelation it is restored for the healing of the nations. In Genesis we have the marriage of the first Adam; in the Revelation the marriage of the last Adam.

On this basis, would it not be strange if the Body of Christ, so prominently foreshadowed in Genesis<sup>3</sup>, were excluded entirely from the Book of the Revelation?

It is true that in Rev. 21:2,9,10 the Bride is called "New Jerusalem" and "that great city, the holy Jerusalem." But should this not remind us that it is the Apostle Paul who, by divine inspiration, wrote to the Galatian believers that, unlike Jerusalem on earth:

**"... JERUSALEM WHICH IS ABOVE IS FREE, WHICH IS THE MOTHER OF US ALL" (4:26).**

Does someone object that in Rev. 21:12-14 we are told that the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and of the twelve apostles are found in the gates and foundations of New Jerusalem? Well, what of it? Does this prove that only Jews occupy the city?

We know from Verse 23 that Christ will be there, for He will be the light of the New Jerusalem and we are the members of His Body, eternally and inseparably united with Him. Let us not, "think beyond what is written," or come to rash conclusions from incomplete evidence hastily gathered.

Considering that the Bride is comprised of all those whom Christ loved and died for, how natural it is to find in this, the great closing book of the Bible, the following

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<sup>3</sup> Though it could not be recognized as such a foreshadowing until Paul was sent forth with the truth about the Body.

invitation:

**"AND THE SPIRIT AND THE BRIDE SAY, COME. AND LET HIM THAT HEARETH SAY, COME. AND LET HIM THAT IS ATHIRST COME. AND WHOSOEVER WILL, LET HIM TAKE THE WATER OF LIFE FREELY"**  
(Rev. 22:17).

## THE BODY

As the symbolism of the bride takes us higher, spiritually, than that of the church, so that of the body takes us higher than that of the bride, for it illustrates our oneness with Christ, He as the Head, and we as the members of the Body. Thus Paul progresses from the former to the latter in Eph.5:28-32.

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have long held that the term "the Body of Christ," like "the Church" and "the Bride," refers to the God's people in every age. Some use Rom. 16:7 to prove this. Here Paul sends greetings to certain believers who, he says, "were in Christ before me."

But to be "in Christ" is not necessarily to belong to the Body of Christ. There is a judicial sense in which even those of Old Testament times stood before God either in themselves, in their own "merits," or in Christ, who was to die for them. Paul, God's great herald of justification in Christ makes much of this, but this is not the same as being in Christ in the sense of belonging to His Body. There are numerous proofs that "the Body of Christ" is a dispensational term, referring only to the Church of this present dispensation.

1. As we have seen, Jehovah's people are called His "Church" and His "Bride" in the Old Testament Scriptures, but never His "Body." Not even in the Gospel records are Christ's people called His "Body." NO one until Paul uses this figure of speech.

2. The truth of the "Body" has to do, not only with our baptism into Christ, but with the baptism of believing Jews and Gentiles into one body by the Holy Spirit. The term could not apply, then, to the company of God's people before "the door of faith was opened to the Gentiles" through the ministry of Paul.

3. The Apostle Paul explicitly states that the truth "that the Gentiles should be joint heirs and of a joint body" with the believing Jews, was a mystery "in other ages not made known," but first revealed to him (Eph. 3:1-6) and the revelation of this purpose produced the "joint body." The divine Record could not have made this clearer.

4. The joint body is the result of the breaking down of "the middle wall of partition" between Jew and Gentile, which, of course, did not take place until the raising up of Paul (Eph. 2:14).

5. The joint body is composed of Jews and Gentiles "reconciled to God in one body by the cross" (Eph. 2:16) and the Scriptures plainly teach that reconciliation was not proclaimed to Israel while she was still in covenant relationship with God, but only after God had begun to set her aside. "The casting away of them," opened the way for "the reconciling of the world" (Rom. 11:15) Hence our Lord and the twelve did not proclaim

reconciliation – and certainly not to all mankind. Their message went back no farther than David and Abraham, the covenant fathers. Not until the raising up of Paul, that other apostle, did God offer reconciliation through Christ to all the fallen sons of Adam and so reconcile both Jews and Gentiles to Himself in one body (See Matt.1:1; Acts 2:29-31; 3:25,26 and Cf. Rom. 5:10-19; Eph. 2:16,17).

6. God broke down the middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile "to make in Himself, of twain, ONE NEW MAN" (Eph. 2:15).

7. He broke down the middle wall of partition by "concluding all (mankind) in unbelief that He might have mercy upon all" (Rom. 11:32). Thus this "new man," this "one body," is composed of "you (Gentiles) which were afar off, and...them (Israel) that WERE NIGH."

All this indicates that while the Body of Christ, indeed, was conceived in the mind and heart of God before the ages began, it did not come into being historically, until the raising up of the Apostle Paul.

We do not deny that "in the dispensation of the fulness of times" God will "gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in Him" (Eph. 1:10) nor that this, essentially, is "the mystery of His will" (Eph. 1:9,10). Nor do we deny that this will involve more than a judicial standing before God, for the Body of Christ of this dispensation is a demonstration of what God will do on a grander scale in "the dispensation of the fulness of times." But by this very token the one Body had a historical beginning under the ministry of Paul.

God is demonstrating today that true unity can be found only in Christ. Only that which centers in Him and over which He rules as the living Head can enjoy true peace and unity. Even the professing Church cannot know true unity, for it does not find its place Him. Indeed, even true believers find such unity only Him. In Him "we, being many" are truly "one body." In Him each member cares for the others with the tenderest solicitude (I Cor. 12:26,27). In Him "the whole body, fitly joined together ... maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). And "the bread which we break" is called "the communion of the Body of Christ" for it is In Him that "we, being many, are one bread" (I Cor. 10:16,17).