

The Israelification of the Church and False Traditions We Cling To

GERALD R. THOMPSON



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INTRODUCTION

We all have our traditions, especially religious and church traditions, which can be a good thing, or a bad thing. On the one hand, Paul commended believers to uphold the spiritual traditions he delivered to them. Although, presumably these were mostly *doctrines* or *teachings*, and not so much practices, rituals or ceremonies. Plus, they were worth keeping because they were *from God, and not from men*. (Col. 1:25).

Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the *traditions* even as I delivered them to you. (1 Cor. 11:2). So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the *traditions* that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. (2 Tim. 2:15).

However, Paul wasn't a fan of mere human tradition, even if it was religious. "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to *human tradition*, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ." (Col. 2:8). For His part, Jesus was very critical of the Jews of His day, for failing to properly distinguish between God's commandments (or traditions from God) and merely human traditions.

"You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men." And he said to them, "You have a fine way of *rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!* ... thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do." (Mk. 7:8-9, 13).

He even quoted from Isa. 29:13 to hammer home the point that the Jews were condemned by their own holy scriptures, which they claimed to be following. "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*'" (Mk. 7:6-7).

Which makes this a perfect occasion for a little Christian self-examination. When Jesus criticized the Jews for their religious traditions, Judaism itself was about 1,500 years old. The Church is now about 2,000 years old. Human nature being what it is - fallen, and unchanging - is it possible Christians have substituted merely human traditions for the Word of God any *less* than the Jews did? Now, don't assume that just because Christians have the Spirit of God within them, it overrides human nature - *it does not* - if the apostle Paul is any example. (See Rom. 7:14-25).

Unfortunately, churches today - your church, every church - is full of religious traditions which in reality are merely the commandments of men, but are taught as doctrines coming from God. And up until now, you've been perfectly comfortable with them. *Prepare to become uncomfortable.*

One of the most fundamental ways Christians have invented human traditions resulting in the nullification of the commands of Christ and sound doctrine, is in the **Israelification of the Church**. *By which I mean, taking the Church and viewing it, organizing it, and operating it, according to the pattern God laid down for ancient Israel, which He intended to only ever apply to them.* Or in other

words, blurring the clear distinctions between Israel and the Church, which God designed to be completely unlike each other.

Compounding the error, Christians have for a long time taken these many things which do not belong, and treated them as an essential part of Christian faith and practice, even to the point where today, Christianity itself is unrecognizable apart from them. ***These are the false traditions to which we cling***, to the point where even if someone points out they have no valid part in true Christianity, people staunchly cling to them in the name of *orthodoxy* and refuse to let them go.

Many commonly observed Christian traditions you may love and cherish are based upon a false blurring of the distinctions between Israel and the Church, and in doing so contradict scripture. Let's start by examining why these distinctions, and distinctions in general, are so important.

DISTINCTIONS MATTER

What kind of Christianity do you believe in? Biblical Christianity, or *Churchianity* - the religion of the organized church? Your instinctive response will likely be to take offense - *of course I believe in biblical Christianity, the real Christianity. I don't believe in fake religion.* Oh no? Are you sure? You may believe in the real gospel and the real Jesus, but what about all the other stuff you have been told all your Christian life that supposedly goes with it? Have you ever been to an altar call, observed Christian sacraments, believed in predestination, or practiced tithing? Do you just follow the crowd, or do you think for yourself? *Mm-hmm. We'll see.*

Look at these three sets of scriptures, and see if you can detect a pattern.

And God said, "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it *separate the waters from the waters.*" (Gen. 1:6). And God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to *separate the day from the night.*" (Gen. 1:14).

"Thus you shall *separate the Levites* from among the people of Israel, and the Levites shall be mine." (Num. 8:14). "Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. *Separate yourselves* from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." (Ezr. 10:11).

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and *separate the evil from the righteous* (Mt. 13:49). Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will *separate people one from another* as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. (Mt. 25:32).

It would seem that with God, *there's a whole lot of separating goin' on.* First, in the creation account, God made certain fundamental physical distinctions. Then with Israel, God made separations both between Israel and everyone else, and between the Levites and all other Israelite tribes. Finally, we see that at the end of history, God will separate the righteous from the wicked.

Notice some things about these distinctions God has made. For instance, all of these distinctions are permanent. God will never reverse or undo any of them. Even the primordial vapor canopy which fell to the earth as rain in the Genesis flood was replaced by the atmospheric clouds we have had ever since (*i.e.*, separating the ‘waters from the waters,’ or waters *above* from waters *below*).

Also, God has never given people the authority to ignore, or to blur, these distinctions. Thus, the Jews can never eliminate the Levitical distinctions, nor will the distinction between Jews and Gentiles be abolished. (*Ah, but now I’m getting ahead of myself.*) And woe to anyone who blurs the distinctions between the righteous and the unrighteous, or between good and evil. (*See, Isa. 5:20*).

It is no surprise, therefore, that God expects us to recognize the distinction between good and evil, just as He instructed the Jews. “You are to *distinguish between the holy and the common*, and between the unclean and the clean.” (Lev. 10:10). “They shall teach my people the difference between the holy and the common, and show them how to *distinguish between the unclean and the clean.*” (Eze. 44:23).

The Lord gave very similar instructions to Christians:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may *discern what is the will of God*, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:2).

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and *discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.* (Heb. 4:12).

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their *powers of discernment* trained by constant practice to *distinguish good from evil.* (Heb. 5:14).

The whole point of spiritual discernment is to distinguish right from wrong, what is consistent with God’s will from what is not. You are probably familiar with the scripture, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Mt. 19:6). Allow me to suggest there is an equally valid biblical principle, based on the scriptures quoted above, that ***what therefore God has separated, let not man join together.*** Nor blur the distinctions between them. Nor confuse them with each other, nor say they are the same thing when they are not.

Perhaps you think I’m fussing too much about the Israel v. Church distinction. But some distinctions are fundamental, and the failure to make them is a big deal. Such as by blurring the distinctions between genders, you get me? Or blurring the distinctions between nations (nations without borders, one world government, etc.). What do you think - are these distinctions a big deal? Are you sensing a human tendency here, a sinful tendency, to blur distinctions God has made?

Scripture is very clear, which is to say God has expressly said, that He made mankind *male and female.* (Gen. 1:27). God does not need to ever say, in so many words, *now don’t ever confuse these two with each other, or devise multiple additional genders.* He expects us to use logic and

reason to understand that these things are *fixed* (they never change), and God never gave people the authority to undo anything He has made.

Similarly, because God (not people) made the nations, He expects us to come to the same kind of conclusion that this is not something people can ever undo or disregard. (Gen. 11:8, Acts 17:26). Even though the nation of Israel was formed centuries after the Babel dispersion, nonetheless the general principle still holds that *God did this* - not people - and it is not something people can ever undo or disregard. Consider this text from Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, ... “If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.” Thus says the LORD: “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the LORD.” (Jer. 31:35-37).

Thus, as long as the sun, moon and stars remain, Israel will continue as a nation and the Jews will not be cast off - meaning, *these things will last forever*. Sounds straightforward, doesn't it? But as we will see later on, people have been disregarding Israel ever since the prophet Jeremiah. You might say there is a *longstanding tradition* of disregarding the uniqueness and special position of Israel among the nations. But false beliefs do not become true just because they are held by very many people for a really long time. ***Mere tradition is not authoritative***. God's word, however, is.

DISTINGUISHING ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Let's start with a brief review, for clarity: what is Israel, what is the Church, and in what ways are they the same or different? (I assume you already have some familiarity with these concepts, so I am only providing a quick summary of each distinction here.)

1. Civil Nation v. Spiritual Body. Israel is referred to both as a *kingdom* and *nation* throughout scripture, beginning with Exo. 19:6. Israel also had a *civil constitution*, namely, the Ten Commandments, the text of the national covenant (Exo. 34:27-28). Israel further had a king, and a physical territory, with physical national borders, where its government reigned and its laws were enforced. Thus, the relationship between the people of Israel was as fellow *citizens*, not fellow *believers*. Despite having a centralized religion, *Israel was never a community of faith*.

The Church, however, has none of those things - king, civil constitution, physical territory, etc. The Church is only ever referred to as the body of Christ (Eph. 5:23, Col. 1:18, 24), in the nature of a voluntary association, or perhaps a nonprofit membership corporation. In other words, the Lord gave us a Church without borders, or if you will, ***a Church without dominion***. It has no God-given physical presence, but is spiritual only, which is why it is often referred to as being *invisible*. And this is a good thing, because Israel was only ever able to be a light, or an *example*, to the Gentile nations, but the Church can penetrate (or infiltrate) all the nations around the globe.

Strictly speaking, the Church is never referred to as a kingdom either, at least not in an earthly sense. Sure, the New Testament is full of references to the *kingdom of heaven* and the *kingdom of God*. But by definition, the kingdom of heaven is not of this earth - it is spiritual only, not an earthly kingdom as Israel was. Which is why Jesus expressly said, "***My kingdom is not of this world.***" (Jn. 18:36). So it is impossible that the Church should ever be considered an earthly nation or kingdom.

Don't take 1 Pet 2:9, where Peter wrote to believing Jews (1 Pet 1:1) that *they* were fulfilling Exo. 19:6 by becoming a *holy nation*, as a reference to the Church in general. That verse does not miraculously transform the Church into a nation, nor make Exo. 19:6 applicable to Gentiles. Plus, we don't want to read Peter as contradicting Jesus, do we?

2. Physical Temple v. Spiritual Temple. Just as Israel had a prescribed physical territory for civil purposes, Judaism had a prescribed place for God's presence for religious purposes. Once the law was given and the nation established, God instructed the Jews to construct a place for Him to dwell among them, first in a moveable tabernacle (tent), then in a permanent temple building. The tabernacle and temple were literally the dwelling place of God, 'the house of the Lord,' for God was not out walking among His people, nor did He indwell them with His Spirit.

But it was always *don't touch, don't get too close, only certain people can approach at specified times*, etc. In other words, God's presence among His people always kept them at a distance, physically separated from Him. This was more of God's presence than what any other nation had, but it was a far cry from a personal relationship between God and each individual Jew. Access was restricted, and in order to gain access to God, a Jew had to physically go to the temple, and then only through a human mediator between God and men, that is, a priest.

In the New Testament, God took an entirely different direction. When Jesus gave Himself as a sacrifice for sins, He did so in no earthly temple, but entered the holy place in a heavenly temple. (Heb. 9:11-12). In doing so, He threw open access to the presence of God to all who believe, no longer restricting the presence of God to a specific place, at special times, or only to certain people. To symbolize this, the veil in the Jewish temple restricting access to God was torn from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' crucifixion. (Mt. 27:51).

Thus, the Lord gave us ***a Church without a physical building***. With Christ, the Spirit of God indwells every believer, and every believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 6:19). The presence of God among Christians is distributed and diffused, not centralized. Consequently, Christians never have to go to a particular place to find God, nor to obtain His grace. Rather, He dwells in the heart of every believer. God's house is His people, not any human creation.

3. Levitical Priesthood v. Universal Access. The Jewish temple system required certain people to be devoted solely to its operations. The priests were the ones designated to perform the sacrifices, ceremonies and rituals of the temple. They alone had access to the presence of God. They were intermediaries - go-betweens, and in a sense, gatekeepers - who stood between God and the people. Whatever grace God extended to the Jewish people was delivered to them by and through the Levitical priests in their administration of the ceremonial law.

However, when Jesus sacrificed Himself, He became a new high priest on the order of Melchizedek, bypassing the Levitical priesthood in its entirety. But Jesus did more than just bypass the hereditary system of Israel, he obsoleted all human gatekeepers between God and the people. Jesus, as God, is able to function as the sole mediator between God and men. (1 Tim. 2:5). Thus, all believers have immediate and direct access to God through Jesus, without the need to go through anyone else on earth. In this way, God gave us *a Church without any human mediators, or priests*.

This makes sense, and it is a good thing. If there is no physical temple in Christianity, why on earth would the Church need the specialized people whose sole function is to perform ceremonies in the temple which isn't there? What this does is empower every individual believer to be more effective in doing the work of the Church without needing to get approval or receive instructions from the gatekeepers - or worse, wait for them to do the job. Believers can act on their own, praise God!

Thus, there are no gatekeepers in Christianity. There is no such thing as a special group, or segregated class, of people that believers must go through to get to God or obtain His grace. Each and every believer is fully capable of approaching God on their own, of seeking and obtaining forgiveness of sins, of performing whatever rituals or ceremonies they think will honor God, and of obtaining His grace and favor, all without help from anyone else. If anyone at your church claims the grace of God flows *through them to you*, they are misleading you.

4. Hierarchical v. Egalitarian. Everything in ancient Israel was organized in a hierarchical fashion. The king was at the top, and he was chosen by God. Under the king were the military commanders, the judges and other officials. The entire nation was divided into tribes, and each tribe had a hierarchical system of judges who were chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens, etc. On the religious side, the priests were at the top, but even they were divided into orders, with the high priest being over all of them. Underneath the priests, supporting them, were the Levites, one full tribe out of twelve, and there was a further division of labor among them.

The priests and Levites were selected on the basis of physical ancestry - no one could opt in, or opt out. The duties and authorities of the priests and Levites were all prescribed by law, as were the religious festivals, rituals and ceremonies. Access to God, to the temple, and to the ceremonies and rituals were tightly regulated and limited, and followed the religious hierarchy.

Quite unlike the typical Jew, the average Christian is a co-equal beneficiary of the Great Commission, such that every believer can exercise the full authority of the Church. Each believer can choose how to fulfill the mission of the Church as God leads them individually, and not according to what someone has selected for them or what they have been born into. There are no priests or Levites (or their equivalents) in the Church. In other words, God gave us *a Church without an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and without a bureaucracy*. Which is supposed to position the Church to be nimble, easily adaptable, and *free of any entrenched interests*.

In fact, the rule in the Church, the body of Christ, is this: **no one is in charge; all Christians are equal with each other; and there is no division in the body**. (1 Cor. 12:20-27). According to these verses, each member of the body, though different in form and function, has the same care for

each other, rejoices and suffers together, etc. This assumes an overall equality among members of the Church. The lack of division in the body (that is, between Christians) further speaks to the lack of any hierarchy within the body - no one is superior or inferior to the others. There is no ascending ladder of access or authority. There is no layer of middle management in God's Church.

5. Periodic Covering v. Permanent Forgiveness. In ancient Israel, complying with the ceremonial law offered only a 'covering' for sins, rather than complete forgiveness. That is, none of the sin offerings, Days of Atonement, or other religious ceremonies of the Jews had a permanent effect. None of them lasted for the rest of a person's life when done once, but had to be forever repeated, at least annually if not more often. Obedience to the ceremonial law meant continual compliance that never ended. A person under the Jewish law was neither fully paid up spiritually, nor spiritually free, as it were. (Heb. 10:1).

As a result, a Jew is forever in danger of falling out of compliance. And because all people continually sin, every Jew needed to continually seek a fresh covering for their sins. This, of course, kept the priests and Levites busy assisting people complying with the ceremonial law. The ceremonial law gave the priests and Levites purpose - without it, they would have nothing to do.

Christ, on the other hand, paid the price once for all, so that all believers in Him would obtain a permanent, or eternal, forgiveness of sins. (Heb. 7:27; 10:10). As a result, believers are freed from all repetitive rituals and ceremonies as a means of securing their forgiveness going forward. (Acts 13:38-39). Rather than being constrained by rules and regulations for religious conduct, Christians have liberty to exercise their own consciences about what things they should or should not do. Thus, the Lord gave us *a Church without a ceremonial law*. What we have instead is Christian liberty.

Further, it means that for Christians, there are no prescribed holy days, no designated feasts, and no prescribed rituals that they are morally bound to observe. (Col. 2:16). "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations— 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch' (referring to things that all perish as they are used)— according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting *self-made religion* and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." (Col. 2:20-23).

6. Law v. Grace. The people of Israel were bound to obey the national laws, not merely as a moral obligation, but as a legal duty subject to civil law enforcement up to, and including, capital punishment. Is there anything in the Church comparable to the legal system Israel had? Not really.

The Church has no government branches, so it can exercise no governmental powers. Without legislative power, the Church cannot impose any rules on believers. Without an executive branch, it has no law enforcement authority to compel obedience. Each local church can implement rules of the organization, but these are temporal rules only, not spiritual rules. Thus, Church judgment and discipline is limited to dissociation. In other words, God gave us *a Church without spiritual rulers*. In distributing various spiritual gifts and offices among believers, God never established a pecking order or chain of command.

Further, God gave us *a Church without laws*. As Paul said twice, “All things are lawful for me.” (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). This must apply to all believers, not just Paul, which means it applies to the whole Church. Some of you are no doubt thinking that the authority of scripture requires some admonitions (such as the selection of elders and deacons) to be treated as rules Christians must obey. However, *authoritative* is not the same as *legislative*. Just because God said something through the authority of the Spirit, does not mean He was necessarily making any laws.

We know that Jesus is both the Head of the Body and the *Logos*, the Word of God. When Jesus is king of the world, in the future, the word of the law will go forth from Zion (*i.e.*, from Jesus). But now, Jesus is the proverbial nobleman who went to a far country to receive for himself a kingdom *and then return*. (Lk. 19:12). When Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Father (Heb. 1:3), He did not at that point start making rules, because He had not yet received His kingdom. Just because He speaks with authority, does not mean He speaks as a lawmaker. And no writer of the N.T. was appointed a lawmaker, either. The Church has no *lawgiver*, and you can't have *laws* without one.

Scripture is very clear, that *the Church is under grace, not law*. (Rom. 6:14-15). What do you think that means? That salvation is of grace, but Church worship and practice are under law? What possible sense would that make? That we are free to accept Jesus, but then we are immediately bound by rules and regulations? Jesus came to bring liberty (Lk. 4:18), but that was only to get us in the door, and once in, it was a bait and switch? What kind of Christianity is that?

7. Inheritance v. Faith. Biblically speaking, no one can decide to become a Jew. You are either born a Jew, or you are not a Jew. A person can convert to *Judaism*, as a matter of religious preference, but that does not make them a Jew rather than a Gentile. God's promises to Abraham and the covenant made with him only applied to Abraham's biological descendants. In other words, Jewishness (or membership in the biblical nation of Israel) is something that is *inherited*. The sign of circumcision was given to physically mark Jewish baby boys. Choice and consent (of the baby) were irrelevant.

All Jews are covered under the Covenant of Law, the covenant with Israel delivered by Moses at Mt. Sinai. Who is covered by the covenant is predetermined by ancestry and biology. Strictly speaking, participation in the Mosaic covenant is not a faith-based relationship, but a legal relationship based on inheritance. Participation in the religious ceremonies of Judaism never required faith - only obedience. There is no presumption that any person is forgiven or saved, merely because they are a Jew and/or they obey the Mosaic laws.

Membership in the Church, the spiritual body of Christ, on the other hand, is obtained by the exercise of individual choice, belief or faith. (Rom. 10:9). True, this exercise of faith is sometimes referred to as being born again, but it has absolutely no relation to ancestry or lineage. And unlike physical circumcision, which is performed by the will of a child's parents, the *circumcision of the heart* (Rom. 2:29) is an inward marking of the Holy Spirit which only comes via the faith of the believer. Thus, God gave us *a Church based solely on faith, not ancestry*. And of course, this is a wonderful thing, because it makes salvation available to everyone in the world.

This faith-based relationship is exclusive. Without faith, you aren't a member of the Church. Your parents could not choose to make you a Christian, and you cannot choose to make your child a Christian. Nor is being a Christian something that anyone can inherit, or pass down from one generation to another. Every person must choose for themselves, and *only* for themselves. "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself." (Eze. 18:20). Nothing in Christianity is based on physical ancestry, family groups, or parental choice.

8. Corporate v. Individual. The Jews are referred to as the chosen people of God numerous times in scripture. But because this choice on God's part traces back to before Jacob/Israel was even born, it means that God did not choose the Jews individually, but as an extended family group consisting of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For that reason, God has always dealt with the Jews corporately - as a group. Blessings, curses, salvation, and dispersion were and are imposed corporately.

Thus, the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants have always applied to the Jews as a group. Which is to say, no one can opt in or out of any of these individual covenants - they are a package deal. They are a package in the sense that to be a participant in one covenant is to be a participant in all of them. They are also a package in the sense that they apply to all Jews equally regardless of individual consent. Anyone born a Jew is a participant in all three covenants, end of discussion.

Similarly, the new covenant with Israel foretold in Jer. 31:31-34 (when all Israel is saved - see Rom. 11:26) will apply to the Jews *as a group*. True, when the Jews pass through the Tribulation, God will winnow them out so only the worthy will survive as a remnant. But when salvation is extended to them, it will not be on an individual basis, but as a group.

This is in stark contrast to the New Testament, in which salvation through Christ is extended on an individual basis only. (Rom. 1:16; 1 Jn. 5:1). Sure, there are statements in Acts to the effect that, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (E.g., Act. 16:31). But that just means every member of the family chose to believe on that day - not that one person was choosing salvation for another person. God gave us *a Church based on individual choice, not affiliation with a group*. Which of course makes it available to anyone in the world.

9. Physical v. Spiritual. Everything about the nation of Israel can, in a sense, be characterized as physical, or earthly. I don't mean this in a negative sense, or as a judgment, but simply as a statement of reality. Israel had a physical territory, a physical kingdom, and an earthly dominion. Its laws were physically enforced. Its members were defined on the basis of physical ancestry. Its religious ceremonies took place in a physical temple, with a physical altar, and were often accompanied by animal sacrifices or other physical offerings.

It is understandable that God would deal with the Jews in a very physical or tangible way when it came to rewards and punishments, and also implement them corporately. Thus we see in Dt. 28:1-14, for example, God's blessings for the obedience of His laws. Take the time sometime to see what these blessings are: physical, economic, and prominence *as a nation*. Then the rest of the chapter describes in even more detail God's curses for the disobedience of the Jews, which once again relate

to health, wealth and stature *as a nation*. A physical nation, with physical promises of land and offspring, has physical blessings for obedience and physical curses for disobedience.

What do Christians get - land and offspring? No, eternal life. What is their reward in this life - health, wealth and world prominence? No - more like the promise of persecution and trials. Along with spiritual gifts, fruit of the spirit, and spiritual armor. Consider the beatitudes (Mt. 5:3-12) - what exact blessings did Jesus promise to believers? The kingdom of heaven - not heaven on earth. Comfort - emotionally, not a comfortable standard of living. Inheritance of the earth - but only after the resurrection. The other blessings are all spiritual as well - righteousness, mercy, to see God, the kingdom of heaven, etc. In other words, God gave us *a Church with spiritual blessings only*.

Same analysis for Mt. 19:28-29: "You who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life." The phrase *in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne* is, of course a reference to the Millennium, after the resurrection - not in this mortal life.

10. Restoration of Israel v. Reigning of the Church. This distinction between Israel (physical) and the Church (spiritual) carries on beyond the present age into the future. Granted, in eternity when the New Jerusalem is revealed, what people commonly call *heaven*, all believers, whether Jew or Gentile, will share in the same heavenly estate. But before then, during the earthly kingdom of Christ, commonly called the Millennium, the nation of Israel and the Church will still be treated in very different ways. And before you can understand what I'm referring to here, you need to get over the hurdle placed in your way by the teaching of many churches that denies the Millennium will be physical, historical and earthly.

As for the Church, when Jesus returns all believers past and present will be caught up in the air to meet Him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. All believers will be transformed and given new, immortal bodies to replace their mortal ones. They will no longer marry or reproduce, and will never die. They will return to the earth with Jesus to rule and reign for 1,000 years. This is what is meant by the promise to *inherit the earth*. It is not a promise of personal riches or offspring in the meaning of the original Dominion Mandate, but is more like an assurance that we will lack for nothing when that time comes. God gave us *a Church with a kingdom future*.

As for Israel, the Old Testament is full of promises that when Messiah returns (the Second Coming), a remnant of the Jews will survive the Tribulation, they will be regathered in their ancestral land, they and the land will be healed and made very fruitful, and their historic enemies will be destroyed. Thus, *God gave Israel a future physical restoration*. These Jews will be ordinary, mortal human beings, who will marry, have kids, and die just as people do now, though they may live much longer. They will also - every one of them - be spiritually saved by the special act of God. This is known as the Messianic Era, the restoration of Israel that the disciples asked Jesus about in Acts 1:6.

Also, Jerusalem will become the world capital for both political and religious purposes. (Eze. 34:26-

30; Mic. 4:1-3). Can you say *world prominence*? In keeping with the corporate nature of Israel, the Messiah will both save the Jewish remnant as a group, and act as a national deliverer. This deliverance and restoration will very much be physical and material, and is for the nation of Israel *alone*. Gentile nations and the Church will *witness* these things, but not directly be part of them.

No Resemblance Whatsoever

What can we say, then? Israel and the Church are completely different from each other. They are the opposite of each other in every possible way. Is it conceivable that God would have constituted both Israel and the Church in this way so that they could be blended or merged? That God would have intended for them to become indistinguishable from each other, impossible to separate? Or that God would be pleased by the efforts of people calling themselves Christians to emulate the pattern of Israel when God Himself declined to follow it? *God forbid.*

It is impossible that a nation, defined by biological ancestry and governed by a covenant of law, should have any common ground with a spiritual body, based on individual faith and governed by grace. It is inconceivable that God would so construct the Church with the goal of combining it in any fashion with the Jewish system laden with much unwanted baggage, such as a physical temple and human priesthood, which are the trappings of an inferior and obsolete system.

It is a simple, undeniable fact that ancient Israel was a nation with all the normal attributes of being a nation - a king, territory, dominion, government, laws and law enforcement. It also had genealogical and tribal attributes that are absolutely crucial to understanding what Israel was. Reflecting this, Judaism was a centralized religion with an ecclesiastical hierarchy, a built-in bureaucracy, legally regulated worship and religious rituals, limited access to God, and all the accoutrements that went with these things (altars, implements, clothes). *None of which things were part of the manner in which God constructed the Church.*

The scripture says, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). And I ask, what partnership has imperfection with perfection (Heb. 8:7), or sin with grace (Rom. 5:20-21)? Any partnership between Israel and the Church is an unequal yoking that could not possibly hold. The distinctions between them matter greatly.

THE FALSE TRADITIONS WE CLING TO

I have made the case that Israel and the Church are the opposite of each other in every possible way. And yet, very many church traditions, undoubtedly some of which are practiced in your very own church, constantly revert back to the ways the ancient Jews did things under the law of Moses. So instead of maintaining a clear distinction between the Church and Israel, the outward form of church worship and practice is made to resemble the worship and practice of Judaism. These beliefs and practices are *necessarily false*. I don't like it any more than you do - I'm just pointing it out.

A large part of these corruptions betray an adherence to theological beliefs which confuse or blend

Israel with the Church. They are the result of erroneous biblical interpretations made manifest in outward practices. Granted, many Christians and even church leaders are merely doing what they were taught, or are following the example set by other churches, but *this is no excuse*.

Unfortunately, these errant practices are not only nearly universally observed, they are deeply entrenched traditions, viewed by many as constituting *orthodoxy*, (just another name for *other people's opinions*). Despite anyone's best intentions, these traditions have been entirely created by men, not God. Rather than continuing to be embraced, they need to be rooted out and cast off.

1. Dominion and Sovereignty. The Church is not a nation, but an invisible body in the nature of a worldwide association. But I challenge you to look at the track record of organized Christianity and tell me that it has not, every step of the way, tried to establish a Christian dominion on earth, and to become *a kingdom of this world*. The accumulation of wealth and property, *i.e.*, earthly dominion, in the name of Christianity is just staggering.

The most obvious example is Vatican City, which has a physical territory with a border, and the Catholic church in general which has amassed great wealth. The Holy See claims a sovereignty that gives it the status of a Non-Member State at the United Nations. Biblically, however, *no church is any kind of sovereign territory at all*. Just because Jesus will have a worldwide dominion in the future does not mean the Church has it now. But the Vatican is not alone. There is a nearly universal belief among Christians that *every church is an autonomous sovereignty*.

Sometimes it takes the form of claiming certain physical spaces are sacred spaces or holy ground. Commonly, it manifests in the belief that churches enjoy a certain immunity from regular civil laws, which undergirds the historic concept of *sanctuary* - an obvious throwback to the Mosaic law of sanctuary cities. More often, it manifests as an assertion that a religious organization engaged in "the Lord's work" is accountable solely to God and not to men, allowing it to ignore certain civil laws. Specifically, this is one basis asserted for the tax exemption of churches and religious ministries.

Those who attempt to justify such things often point to Eph. 2:19 and Php. 3:20, where believers are referred to as citizens of heaven. This word *citizen* is often misinterpreted as implying an autonomous sovereignty, when that is not what it means at all. Citizenship in heaven is spiritual only, to secure our salvation and bodily redemption. It is not something which can be recognized on earth for civil purposes. It does not carve the Church out from regular civil society.

To desire such things (sacred spaces, wealth and property, immunity from civil laws, tax exemption) *is to desire to be like Israel*, which was subject to *no laws except those which came directly from God*. Yet, every church does it, and it is universally justified as being not merely a good thing, but absolutely necessary to honoring God and keeping the Church unstained by the world. Oh, the irony! I will explain why this is so **unbiblical** when we examine traditional tax exemption, below.

2. Temples, Sanctuaries and Altars. The Church, in a biblical sense, is the people who are members of the body of Christ, whose bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Strictly speaking,

the Church is not a place. A church building is merely a place where members of the body of Christ meet - there is nothing special or holy about any building. ***There are no holy places in Christianity.*** Do you really think God is glorified by cathedrals? They may be beautiful architecture, but spiritually they are *meaningless*. So why do so many churches build grandiose buildings?

Why do so many churches use the words *temple* or *tabernacle* in their names? What possible purpose can this serve, except to appropriate an aspect of Judaism to give the false impression that God's presence is more tangible there compared to other places? The same is true for the extremely widespread use of the phrases, *house of God*, *house of worship*, or *the Lord's house* to refer to a church building. God is not glorified by the use of these phrases, because it minimizes the extent of His presence elsewhere in the world.

This temple mentality is closely aligned with the almost universal practice among churches to call their main meeting room a 'sanctuary,' when it is merely an *auditorium*. But calling it a sanctuary makes it sound so much more spiritual, doesn't it? So much more like a Jewish temple. Almost as though it is a place where people go to meet God. Not in the Church Age, it isn't. And how many times have you been admonished to follow the example of David, who said "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'" (Ps. 122:1). However, David was talking about the Jewish tabernacle, not a church. *For shame.*

But if there are no temples in Christianity, neither are there any of the things in Judaism which only existed in the temple, and nowhere else. Does the stage on which the worship team and the preacher stand also double as an *altar*? Have you sacrificed any lambs or goats there recently? Does your church have holy spaces, where only clergy may go? Two pulpits, with one reserved for clergy? Holy objects, or holy water? Special robes for special people? All of these things are an appropriation of Jewish religious practices into Christianity where they do not belong.

3. Return of the Priesthood. The whole point of Jesus being a high priest on the order of Melchizedek and the elimination of all human priests in the Church was to avoid the importation of anything like the Levitical priesthood into Christianity. Equality is the rule within the body of Christ. Every believer has equal access to God - no one has any special or greater access, and no one is a conduit of God's grace to another person. Without a physical temple, sacraments or a ceremonial law, there is no need to qualify and select certain people to supervise such things, *like Israel did.*

Yet, churches today are almost universally led by *clergy*, who perform these very services, and who claim that their participation and oversight is not merely optional, but necessary. In very many churches, they actually call themselves *priests*, but even in churches where that term is avoided in favor of *pastor* or *minister*, they function as priests and regard themselves as priests. You would likely be surprised by how many Protestant denominations, in their internal governing documents, explicitly refer to pastors and ministers as serving a priestly function.

That there should be anyone in any church to routinely hear the confession of sins by other believers, unavoidably brings to mind a comparison with the Levitical priests who interceded on behalf of

other Jews before God. When the scripture commends us to confess our sins to one another, it is for the purpose of healing relationships between people - not for obtaining forgiveness from God. The very idea, that any person can declare a forgiveness of the sins of another person is a gross perversion. It's a good thing Protestant churches don't do anything like that. Oh wait - does your church engage in pastoral counseling? *Hmmm.*

This idea has even filtered down to the way most churches do worship. Only a clergyman can set or approve the order of worship, only a clergyman can preside over a corporate worship service, and with rare exceptions only a clergyman can preach a sermon. Even the 'sacrifice of praise' all believers are to practice has been perverted to mean that what you do at home or privately doesn't count - only praise uttered in corporate worship counts, and only songs sung under the direction of a worship leader. However, *scripture nowhere says believers are supposed to be led in worship*, as opposed to doing it on their own. Much less is anyone in the Church designated as a worship leader in scripture. *Anyone can lead worship - this isn't ancient Israel, after all.*

4. Ecclesiastical Hierarchies. No one is in charge of the Church other than Jesus Christ. The idea that any person could be the Vicar of Christ - head spokesman for Jesus to the entire worldwide body of believers - is a lie. But so is the idea that individual churches themselves are part of some larger hierarchy. There is no earthly church hierarchy ordained by God - all churches are equal with each other. Every church on earth has the same authority as any other church. It is not the right of any church to claim it is the only true church, to refuse to extend fellowship to believers from other churches, or to claim that human excommunication changes any person's relationship to God.

Similarly, within each individual church, all believers are equal. There is no pecking order, no chain of command or authority structure, ordained by God for any church. All believers stand in equal relation to Christ, no one higher or lower than all others, that there may be unity in the body. Thus, when God appoints apostles, prophets and teachers, etc. as per 1 Cor. 12:28 and Eph 4:11, ***no one is put in charge, and no one is at the top.*** The scripture never even indicates, in these places or elsewhere, *what the authority of an apostle is, what the authority of a pastor is, what the authority of a teacher is*, etc. Much less are pastors ever put in charge of every local church. *Really, really.*

Now if God did not institute a priesthood or clergy within the Church, how could there possibly be a hierarchy of clergy ordained by Him? It is nonsense. Yet, nearly every church has a diocese, a presbytery, or something similar, which is ***an organization of clergy*** within the denomination, and which is separate from any denominational church. In very many denominations, clergymen aren't even members of the local church where they work, their membership lies exclusively with fellow clergy. They are merely assigned to a local church until they are assigned elsewhere. Oh excuse me, I mean *called* - called to another church. But ***all such things are of men, not God.***

Also, throughout the New Testament, the Church is continually referred to as having *members*. The ***body of Christ is defined by its members, not by its leaders.*** And when the N.T. writers referred to *brothers*, it is a reference to fellow believers as equals - not a reference to pastors, ministers, clergy or leaders. Yet, the vast majority of denominations only accept member churches which have an approved leadership structure (*i.e.*, an ecclesiastical hierarchy) in place, *as if a church is defined*

by its leaders, not its members. There is also an alarming trend today where churches are incorporating themselves as *directorship corporations*, which means they have a governing board (*i.e.*, leaders), but *no members for legal purposes*. Keep these things in mind when we look at tax exemption.

Hierarchies of churches, and hierarchies of clergy. Churches organized and defined top-down (based on leadership), rather than bottom-up (based on members). Church practices and procedures run by an elite group (clergy), with control centralized rather than diffused among the people. Instead of church leaders equipping the saints (*i.e.*, members), the members are encouraged to equip and support their pastors for more effective leadership. Yep, all the things ancient Israel had in its religious system. This whole scenario smacks of having a *plan*. The question is, *whose plan*?

5. Return of the Ceremonial Law. The ceremonial law in Israel was the product of having a physical temple, a mandated human priesthood, legally regulated religious practices, and only a temporary covering for sins. *None of which exist in Christianity*. Therefore, there is no need (nor any desire) to replicate those things, because they were merely a shadow of things to come. The things God gave the Church are governed by grace and liberty, not law or rules of requirement.

Consider communion, a/k/a the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. The Jewish sacraments were all prescribed as to where, when, how and by whom they were to be observed. But there are no similar requirements for communion. Jesus said only, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." Which is the functional equivalent of "Do this whenever you feel like it." No, I'm not being smug - ***there are no time, place or manner restrictions***. The same thing is true for baptism, and any other sacrament you have been led to believe the Church must observe. There are no prescribed rules for observance, nor any special people needed to make it "official."

There is not even any biblical command to observe any sacraments. Sure, the early Church adopted certain regular practices, but their example does not bind us today. Don't fall for that old "approved practices found in scripture" crap. Just because someone did something one time that God approved, does not make that a universal rule. ***There is no such thing as making rules by example.*** That is simply not where rules come from. Think of all the rules in your life, and name one that came solely from someone else's example - you can't.

Similarly, ***there is no regulative principle of worship*** for Christians. This supposed principle holds that God commands churches to conduct corporate worship services using certain distinct elements affirmatively found in scripture, and conversely, that God prohibits any and all other practices. In other words, allegedly, God has a ceremonial law that Christians should observe in corporate worship. But there is no verse in scripture saying these things. This so-called principle is derived from "approved practices" and "godly examples," which can never form the basis of a command.

And no, ***communion and baptism are not ordinances of the Church.*** *Ordinance* is just another word for a *law*, and the Church has no laws. Nothing in the N.T. ever says anything like, "this shall be a statute for you throughout your generations." God, as the supreme lawgiver (Isa. 33:22), certainly knows how to make a law, and He did so many times in the Old Testament. But no person

of the holy trinity ever went into lawgiver mode in the N.T. The only time the word *ordinance* is used in the New Testament, it either refers to the laws of Caesar, or the ordinances of God which were laid down at creation. In other words, no new ordinances of God after the birth of Christ.

Look, celebrate Christmas and Easter if you want - or don't. Nothing in scripture makes those high holy days by God's decree. Be baptized and observe communion if you want - or not. Nothing in scripture requires that you do them. You are *authorized* to do them, but not *required*. You want to observe Advent, or Lent? Fine, but those are just made up seasons, carried on by human tradition - they mean nothing to God. Why submit to a works-based religion, like the Jews were under?

6. His Tithes and Our Offerings. If you ever want to do a deep dive into how and why tithing was made a part of Jewish law and practice, read Numbers, ch. 3 and 18. Here's the short version: After the descendants of Aaron (a Levite) were set aside to function as priests before God in the tabernacle and eventually the temple, the rest of the tribe of Levi was set apart to assist them and care for the temple. All the priests and Levites were legally disabled by God's command from owning land or engaging in any other occupation. In order to provide for their physical needs, the system of tithing was set up, where the other tribes of Israel contributed 10% of their material increase (*i.e.*, newborn animals and newly harvested crops) to the priests and Levites.

In other words (short, short version), tithing assumed a physical temple and physical sacrifices which required a full-time staff to tend to. These people never chose to go into this service, but were born into it on the basis of family ancestry. And they were prohibited by law from doing anything else. *None of which things even remotely exist in Christianity.* Although Christians should care for each other, no one in particular is a designated recipient or a designated donor of charity. Jesus left not one stone upon which a system of tithing could be rebuilt in the Church. ***Tithing is not God's plan for financing the Church.*** Even the word *offerings* is a throwback to Judaism.

The statement "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14) did not bring tithing into the Church. That statement, a reference to Mt. 10:10, only meant that preachers of the gospel be paid by contributions as they go from place to place. The only rule for believers is this: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." (2 Cor. 9:7). *No fixed percentages, no predetermined recipients, no stipulated purposes, and no moral or legal obligations.*

The people of God ought to know that temples, priesthoods and separated classes are not only unnecessary to the work and purpose of the Church, they are its greatest liabilities. By reinstating the tithe, Christians implicitly affirm that the things Christ did to eliminate the Levitical system either didn't work, or were undesirable, thereby subverting the work of Christ. No church would need tithes if it didn't have an unnecessary and bloated bureaucracy (with health benefits and a pension plan). Only by functioning as the body of Christ without division can this be done.

7. The Family of God. You might think, given that Israel was/is an entity defined exclusively by physical ancestry, and the Church is defined exclusively by an exercise of faith, that people would easily keep these things entirely separate and not confuse them. Not so, unfortunately. The

Catholic Church to this days clings to the myth that each pope is the inheritor of a spiritual legacy from the apostle Peter. However, Peter possessed nothing which could be inherited or obtained by others, either as to spiritual status, or as to leadership position. Whatever Peter had was his own, and he could not bestow it on another.

People make the same kind of mistake talking about the *line of Seth* and the *line of Cain*, as if those things have any meaning. There are no godly lines of ancestry or descendants in the human race. Every single person, without exception, is born into sin and separated from God at birth. All are born ungodly, none are born godly, to an equal degree. The one and only spiritual quality that can be inherited, and it is inherited by everyone, is the sin nature imparted to all descendants of Adam by reason of the Fall. Neither righteousness nor anything spiritual can ever be inherited.

Now consider infant baptism, the christening of children, and the like. What are these ceremonies, except an attempt by the church (with parents as willing dupes) to induct a child into the body of Christ at an age when they completely lack the capacity to choose Christ on the basis of individual faith? Such maneuvers are often performed with reference to the ‘household of faith’ or the ‘family of God’ - terms which, in their original contexts, only referred to other believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, a purely spiritual relationship. But the terms have been corrupted to refer to earthly families where at least one parent is a Christian - a purely physical relationship between people which, coincidentally, mirrors the Jewish model.

Truth be told, it is an attempt to replicate circumcision, except (hooray!) it also applies to girls, by denoting the child as a Christian *by the will of their parents*. However, no one can choose salvation for another person. Nothing in Christianity can be passed down from one generation to the next except knowledge. Circumcision only applied to the Jews. There are no authorizations in scripture to baptize or christen infants. “Let the children come unto me” is not such an authorization. So-called child dedication is no better, as it attempts to make an entire church congregation responsible for a child’s spiritual upbringing, when God only ever gave that responsibility to the parents. It is a naked attempt by a church to assert control over a child before the child can choose the church.

8. Corporate Christianity. Given that salvation is based on individual choice, and since the main point of ministry is to equip individual believers (Eph. 4:12), it is odd that nearly all churches place a great deal of emphasis on *corporate worship*. Yes, Jesus said that “where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” But this was said specifically in the limited context of church discipline (Mt. 18:15-20), and was merely an example of believers putting into practice the biblical principle to let every fact be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Jesus never said He would be with a group of Christians *more* than He would with an individual believer, or that there is something *special* - extra spiritual - about corporate worship.

I can find no command or rule that believers should engage in regular corporate worship. And no, Heb. 10:25 is not such a rule (“don’t neglect to meet together”). There are no time, place or manner restrictions - *how and when people meet together is a matter of individual discretion*. Neither is there a suggestion anywhere in scripture that a meeting must be *officiated* (i.e., led by clergy). In fact, Paul’s admonition to the early church sounds very much like a meeting of equals, where no one

is in charge (which is exactly what we would expect). “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.” (1Cor. 14:26). In fact, I believe this is the very opposite of an “order of worship” which is predetermined, but is rather spontaneous and organic.

Just think *logically*. If Jesus is among two or three people gathered in His name, then when you and a friend go to lunch and pray over your food or discuss biblical topics, *that’s Church*. If you and a friend travel by car and pray for a safe journey, *that’s Church*. Nothing says you have to listen to a sermon, or sing praise and worship songs for it to be ‘official.’ Nothing says you need a worship leader who is ordained. Two or three people, *whenever and wherever*, is all it takes. The only people urging you to regularly attend a formal church service are the people whose livelihoods depend on you being there. Doesn’t our modern conception of corporate worship sound exactly like a *holy convocation* of the ancient Jews found in the Old Testament? Coincidence?

Now shift gears for a moment. The fact that God chose the Jews in the time of Abraham, well over 400 years in advance, means that no individual Jew decided to be one of God’s chosen people - the choice was made by God. Isn’t that *exactly* what the doctrine of predestination is? That before the foundation of the world (well over 400 years ago), God chose believers as a group, you did not choose Him? It is taking the way God chose Israel and applying that concept to the Church. The Israelification of the Church, in a nutshell. Not surprisingly, many who believe in predestination also believe that Israel has lost its chosenness. *I wonder why ...*

9. Physical Blessings for All. We have already seen that the blessings Jesus promised to His Church are exclusively spiritual, not material. Yet Christians, being imaginative people, have devised a number of ways in which to appropriate material blessings for the spiritually minded.

First, there is the *Prosperity Gospel*, or the *Word of Faith* movement, which makes the claim that God wants His people to prosper, and that God rewards increases in faith with increases in health and/or wealth. However, if you look into the biblical evidence used to support such claims, you will find a heavy reliance on O.T. scriptures specifically directed towards the Jews, which are taken as applicable to any believer in God, when that is not the context in which they were given.

Though not part of the Prosperity Gospel, *per se*, a common misinterpretation of Mal. 3:10 is quite similar. “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.” It *seems* innocuous to believe that people who tithe will receive a material blessing, but *tithing never applied to the Church*. Distinctions matter.

Second, there is *Replacement Theology*, also known as *supersessionism*, which essentially teaches that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plan. Adherents of replacement theology believe the Jews are no longer God's chosen people, and God does not have specific future plans for the nation of Israel. The result of which is that the promises of material blessings to Israel can only be fulfilled with respect to the Church. I will examine this claim in more detail below.

Third, there is *Anglo-Israelism*, a/k/a *British Israelism*, which holds that the Anglo-Saxon peoples (coincidentally, who settled primarily in Britain and the United States) are genetically, racially, and linguistically the direct descendants of the “Ten Lost Tribes” of ancient Israel. Of course, the fallacy here is that the northern ten tribes of Israel were ever really “lost.” But then, miraculously, these dispersed tribes all supposedly migrated *together* to northern Europe, which contradicts the fact that God *dispersed* them. But in truth, most of the ten tribes actually migrated south into Judah, and joined the rest of the Jews until the whole lot of them were scattered around the world later. (*See*, 2 Ch 11:13-16; 15:9).

Similarly, the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) teaches that its members are either by genealogy or by adoption *all* made members of the tribe of Ephraim (one of the “lost ten tribes”). My advice: don’t get suckered by any of these false theologies.

10. Diminishing Prophetic Israel. Let’s now take a closer look at *Replacement Theology*, or *supersessionism*. Supposedly, the Jews are no longer God's chosen people, and God does not have specific unfulfilled plans for the nation of Israel. In effect, this renders Israel irrelevant and unnecessary in the future. It also holds that many of the things making Israel unique have been *transferred* to the Church, so that Israel has in a sense been *swallowed up* by the Church. Which helps explain why these churches have adopted many Jewish religious practices as their own.

According to this view, the reconstituting of Israel as a nation state in 1948 was purely the act of men, not God, leading some to conclude the modern nation of Israel “isn’t really the Jewish people.” The net effect of which is to hold, as a doctrinal position, that the original promise of God to Abraham in Gen. 12:3 - “I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you” - no longer literally applies to the Jews. Obviously, not all churches fall into this category, as many churches that have the trappings of Judaistic practices in their own forms of worship nonetheless support modern Israel. But it helps explain why some churches take that position.

Closely aligned with supersessionism are the end-times prophecy positions known as *amillennialism* and *post-millennialism*. Both hold there will never be a physical and political Millennial kingdom of Christ here on earth before eternity sets in, in which He will rule the world from a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Both views preclude the possibility that Israel will be physically restored in the future. So the promises of restoration given to Israel are necessarily read only in a spiritual or allegorical sense as being fulfilled with respect to the Church. Thus, the hallmark of Replacement Theology is an *allegorical*, rather than a literal, reading of scripture. And among all Christian churches worldwide, this is the most common view.

It is therefore no accident that churches holding these views have appropriated attributes of Judaism and to model themselves after that pattern. For if Israel is biblically irrelevant, there is no reason for maintaining a strict separation between it and the Church. [It’s not like, *as I believe*, Israel as a nation is still a living and active entity, the Jews are still a chosen people of God, and the Mosaic law and Abrahamic covenant are still in effect.] The whole idea of supersessionism is that the Church has *subsumed* Israel, in other words, the Church has encompassed Israel as a subordinate or component element, *i.e.*, ***Israel has been made a part of the Church***. Why shouldn’t they be like

each other?

Because of the prominence of these views among many Christians, and the wide-ranging effects on Christian practice, we'll continue to examine them in the next section.

Twin Sons of Different Mothers

Perhaps you have been taught to believe that when the emperor Constantine accepted Christianity and introduced it into the Roman Empire nearly 300 years after Christ, this was a good thing. It would be naïve to think that this actually made true believers in Christ out of the mass of people in Europe. Most people simply adopted the religion of the emperor in its outward form and became *nominal* Christians (that is, Christians in name only). The true effect of the "Christianization" of the Roman empire was *to make the Church a kingdom of this world* by vesting it with civil powers. And not a godly kingdom, for the Roman empire is repeatedly viewed in biblical prophecy as an example of the kingdom of Satan.

Sad to say, the Reformation did little, ultimately, to keep the Protestant churches from adopting the same Israelifications of the Church that the Roman Catholics had adopted. Maybe Protestants don't have a pope, a college of bishops, or call their ministers priests, but they still have a clergy and an ecclesiastical hierarchy that are functionally equivalent. Protestants still preach and practice tithing, perform sacraments, observe holy days, and call their church building *God's house*. And Protestants are every bit as adept at claiming tax exemption and autonomous sovereignty as Catholics. So it's not as if the Reformation started things with a clean slate - most of the crud carried over.

At what point do the trappings of church religious practice become not merely minor errant practices or denominational quirks and inconsistencies, but full blown denials of true Christian doctrine and subversive of true Christian belief? On what basis can anyone claim that the matter of temples and altars, a human priesthood, religious ceremonial law, tithing or infant baptism are small matters of minor importance? Things over which reasonable Christians may disagree? *Non-essentials*? These things cut straight to the heart of what Christianity is and is not. Is remaking the Church in the image of Israel advancing the gospel, or is it negating the work that Christ intended to do?

I suggest that the pattern which is evident here - converting the Church into a likeness of ancient Israel - is too consistent, too pervasive, and too longstanding, to be merely random or accidental. There is a method behind this madness, which I will begin to probe next. Meanwhile, the scriptures speak about the Church falling away from the true faith, or becoming apostate, in the time of the end. (Mt. 24:10; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Th. 2:3.) Friends, is there any doubt this has already happened?

A CORRUPTION OF THE WORD

Of all the issues which divide Christians worldwide, one that provokes some of the strongest disagreements has to do with the relationship between Israel and the Church. Has the Church absorbed (or subsumed) Israel? Do they remain separate physically, but the Church has taken Israel's place for spiritual purposes? Or are they completely separate and distinct? How you come

down on this issue has enormous religious, political and worldview consequences that affect your life in multiple ways.

The same is true for your preacher. Things you have been taught all your life - whether you have been told in so many words or not - are direct logical consequences of the position that person takes on the Church vs. Israel question. Even if your pastor, priest or minister has never directly talked to you about the relationship between Israel and the Church, the things they have taught you have reflected their underlying beliefs. Allow me to shed a little light on this matter.

Consider this text from Jeremiah, for example.

The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: “Have you not observed that these people are saying, ‘The LORD has rejected the two clans that he chose’? Thus they have despised my people so that they are no longer a nation in their sight. Thus says the LORD: If I have not established my covenant with day and night and the fixed order of heaven and earth, then I will reject the offspring of Jacob and David my servant and will not choose one of his offspring to rule over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. For I will restore their fortunes and will have mercy on them.” (Jer. 33:23-26).

Here’s what these verses say, *if taken literally*. God starts out asking Jeremiah whether he has noticed that some people say God has rejected Israel (*the two clans that he chose*). This is exactly the problem I am examining here - specifically, whether the blessings God promised to Israel in the future have somehow been transferred to the Church - which is a rejection of Israel as a beneficiary of God’s promises. God then says that the people who say He has rejected Israel *have despised my people*. In other words, not a good thing.

The result, as God sees it, is that Israel is *no longer a nation in their sight* (*i.e.*, to the people who think God has rejected Israel). Certainly, to those who believe Israel has merged into the Church, or the Church has subsumed Israel, Israel is no longer a nation of any biblical or spiritual significance in their sight. The result is the same for Christians who believe the blessings promised to Israel have been transferred to the Church. In that case, even if Israel exists physically, it is no longer significant to God spiritually or prophetically - strongly implying that Israel as a nation has been diminished in God’s sight. To which God says, those who believe this have despised the Jews (*and are wrong*).

Now Jeremiah lived around 600 B.C., or 2,600 years ago. So this is not a new problem. But what is new is that these days, people who take this position do so supposedly on the basis of New Testament scriptures, which the people in Jeremiah’s time didn’t have. But I say, if God’s promises to physically restore biological Israel are to only be fulfilled spiritually for Christians, then God is a liar. What - did God not foresee that His plans would change? Was God misleading the Jews? I assure you, in spite of how Christians read those promises, the Jews have never understood those promises to mean anything other than what they literally say.

But then God lays this on Jeremiah: *only if I have not forever established day and night, and the*

fixed order of heaven and earth, will I reject Israel. This is, of course, a rhetorical question. There can be no doubt that God has forever established day and night, and the fixed order of heaven and earth. The creation - the universe - is the same now as it has always been. Therefore, God will never reject the offspring of Jacob (*i.e.*, Israel), and the heir of David (Christ) will always be available to rule over the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not rule over the world, but *rule over Israel.*

In other words, God told Jeremiah that as long as the present universe exists, the physical, biological offspring of Jacob will **not** ever be rejected, and **they** are the ones whose fortunes will be restored. The First Advent of Jesus changed nothing. The destruction of Jerusalem changed nothing. The Reformation changed nothing. Only if the physical creation is changed, will God's promises to biological Israel change. Not for any other reason. (*If only God knew how to use the right words, to say (you know) what He really meant. Sigh.*)

The New Testament agrees. "As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. ***For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.***" (Rom. 11:28-29). Now, *the calling of God* mentioned here specifically refers to *the calling of Israel*, as a biological nation. And the *election* referred to here is being *chosen* by God to be His special people. Do I really have to explain what the word *irrevocable* means?

All this would be perfectly obvious, except most Christian clergy believe it only allegorically (non-literally). To them, *Israel* means *Church*, and *offspring* means *spiritual believers*, not physical descendants. Why do they believe this? Partially, it's from a confusion of the divine covenants, and partially, it's because it is so wonderfully self-serving. We'll look at both of these, in turn.

Confusion of Divine Covenants

The various divine covenants between God and people in the scriptures are not that hard to understand, taken at face value (literally). All of the O.T. covenants (Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic) apply to the people who first agreed to them and their biological descendants. Thus, the Adamic covenant (Dominion Mandate) applies to all the descendants of Adam and Eve, which is everyone ever born. The Noahic covenant applies to all the descendants of Noah, which is everyone born since the flood.

The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants apply to all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that is, the Jews (Israel). The Davidic covenant applies to the male descendants of David, concluding in Jesus. None of these particular covenants ever did, and do not now, apply to Gentiles or to the Church. God never said that the Jews stand as representatives for all the people of the world.

The Church covenant is unlike all of these. It only applies to those who believe in each generation, and does not apply to biological descendants at all. That's what makes the Church fundamentally different from Israel, and why the Church covenant cannot be mixed with any of the O.T. covenants. ***Faith (or belief) and ancestry cannot be mixed.***

Further, all of these divine covenants are eternal, meaning that none of them have ended, in whole or in part. Thus, the Dominion Mandate did not end, in whole or in part, when mankind fell into sin. What happened was that fulfilling the Mandate *became more difficult*, but its terms remained unchanged. The Noahic covenant regarding the eating of meat, capital punishment and the promise of the rainbow, are all still in full force and effect.

God's covenants with Israel regarding circumcision, the promised land, the chosenness of the people, and all the requirements of the Mosaic law have not gone anywhere, or become less binding *on the Jews*. Neither the death or resurrection of Christ, nor the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., had any effect on the Mosaic law. Granted, with the destruction of the Jewish temple and dispersion of the Jews from the land, keeping the Mosaic laws *became more difficult*, and offering sacrifices in the temple became impossible *for a time*. But these things will *resume* when the temple is rebuilt.

The Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants were all enacted by God speaking the words, "*this shall be my covenant with you,*" or words to that effect. Which means that in order for any of these covenants to be modified, terminated or abolished, in whole or in part, *God has to say so* in so many words. Mere circumstances (the destruction of Jerusalem, or the death and resurrection of Christ) do not modify a verbal covenant. ***It takes words to modify a covenant of words.*** And God has never spoken words saying that any of His divine covenants have changed. Which means that *they haven't changed*. The Church covenant did not terminate the Mosaic covenant just because it came along later. ***No one annuls a covenant ratified by God, not even God.*** (Gal. 3:15, 17).

Which also means that until God ***verbally says*** the Mosaic covenant applies to Gentiles or the Church, it does not. ***Reconstructionism*** (the belief that the Mosaic civil laws apply in substantial part to Gentiles or the Church) **is a lie**. The teaching that the ceremonial laws of the Mosaic covenant have been terminated by Christ **is a lie**. The popular ***Calvinist or Reformed*** belief that any of the ancestry-based divine covenants of the O.T. have merged into, been absorbed or subsumed by, or have culminated in, the faith-based Church covenant **is a lie**. The common ***Dispensational*** belief that some of the O.T. covenants have ended **is a lie**. It's not that complicated.

WHY WOULD ANYONE THINK THIS WAY?

What would lead Christians to think about Israel and the Church in ways which completely contradict a literal reading of the scriptures? ***Unfortunately, there is no shortage of bad reasons.***

Anti-Semitism. The sad fact is many so-called *church fathers* were deeply antisemitic from very early on, even as early as the 2nd century A.D. Some condemned the Jews for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah and/or as "Christ killers." Others viewed the God of the Old Testament as an inferior deity compared to the God of the New Testament, and the O.T. scriptures as a partial, and flawed, divine revelation compared to the N.T. Many interpreted Paul's reference to the *partial hardening* of Israel (Rom. 11:25) to be an implicit condemnation of all Jews for all time. As a result, the Jews endured many persecutions and national expulsions over the years, often at the hands of Christians and with church approval. Such sentiments were even continued by Martin Luther, who wrote the hateful book, *On the Jews and Their Lies* in 1543.

I am amazed that anyone could read Romans 11 (the root and the graft) in its entirety and miss the very clear fact that God has *not* rejected Israel as a nation or the Jewish people, and there will come a time when He will restore them *spiritually*, not just physically. Rom. 11:22 even makes it clear that the Gentiles are no more secure in their participation in the “olive tree of God” than the Jews, or perhaps I should say Israel is no less secure than the Church. “Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen [Israel], but God's kindness to you [Christians], *provided* you continue in his kindness. *Otherwise you too will be cut off.*”

The Jews in Jesus' time were plagued with a “holier than thou” mentality, since they had been told for 1,500 years they were God's chosen people. They pinned their righteousness on being the children of Abraham, but Jesus said they were of their father the Devil. (Jn. 8:44). Then the Church comes along, and because it is based on faith, not ancestry, many Christians have developed the same attitude - that Christians are holier than the Jews. However, the scripture plainly says that faith is not something anyone can boast about (Eph. 2:9). Further, “do not be arrogant toward the branches [Israel]. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you [the Church].” (Rom. 11:18). Thus, there is *no excuse* for antisemitism in the Church.

Does that mean all people who have ‘Israelified’ the church are antisemitic? No, of course not. Many have simply followed their teachers, who followed their teachers, without questioning whether their teachers were right. However, I say *Shame!* to all those students who never questioned their teachers, or their teachers' teachers.

Lack of Faith. Let us be frank with each other, and not give in to wishful thinking. The early church fathers, and the reformers, were all just ordinary people, every one of them. They were not super-spiritual, super wise and discerning, or super faithful. They were merely born at an earlier time, when it was easier to make an impact on future generations. None of which made them more knowledgeable or prescient about the future.

Admittedly, from A.D. 70 until 1948, the nation of Israel was a non-entity. The Jews were scattered around the world, and their culture regarded as vanished by many Gentiles. The Hebrew language was dead (no one spoke it). The idea, at the time of the Reformation, that Israel would be physically reconstituted and restored seemed impossible, and a foolish pipe dream to many. The choices at the time seemed to be: A) portray God as being unable to fulfill His promises (*wrong!*), or B) construe the promises so as to be fulfilled in the present-day Church (*supposedly better*). Few picked option C): given enough time, God's promises to Israel will be fulfilled literally.

Under option B), essentially, God needed help in making good on His promises, because it simply was not possible for them to be literally fulfilled. But why was it regarded as not possible? Why was literal fulfillment *not* the obvious interpretive choice? Remember what Jesus told Thomas after His resurrection? “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet have believed.” (Jn. 20:29). Similarly, Heb. 11:1 informs us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen.*” So the fact the church fathers and the reformers did not see Israel physically restored in their lifetimes, nor could they envision it in the future, *does not excuse them.*

It may seem harsh, but I don't know how to construe this as anything other than a lack of faith. I'm not trying to be disparaging. I'm just saying what I think Jesus would say. The church fathers and the reformers, on this matter, were simply wrong. *They lacked faith*. No one today should be holding them up as an example to be followed in this matter. Let us be charitable and suppose they did their best, and tried their hardest, but in spite of this, *their faith came up short*. Let's stop treating them as though they had some special insight, which they did not really have.

Honest Mistake? Perhaps the church fathers and the reformers were honestly mistaken, and believed in good faith the scriptures should be read allegorically? I admit, I have a hard time seeing that as a credible explanation. Why would anyone, who had not been specifically *trained* to read the scriptures that way, adopt that as a methodology when it does violence to the ordinary meaning of words? And why would anyone reject the literal understanding of words when their meaning can be easily understood? On what *honest* basis is the literal meaning of words, as understood by the people who wrote them and first received them, to be rejected?

Was God unable to find the right words to say what He meant, and mean what He said? Or was God intentionally concealing what He meant to say so that only those with special knowledge (*i.e.*, not the ordinary reader) would decipher His meaning? This, of course, smacks of Gnosticism and mysticism. Or was it the scripture writers themselves who purposely obscured the true meaning of their words? To second-guess the motivations of the writers and to assume ulterior motives - this is not *honest* scholarship, this is the methodology of higher criticism and revisionist history. None of these are good options, or decent justifications.

The principles of the interpretation of language applicable to the Bible are exactly the same as those applicable to the U.S. Constitution, because *language is language*. When people talk about *original intent*, they mean that the words of the Constitution should mean today exactly what they meant when first written. If it is possible to allegorize the Bible, then it is also possible to allegorize the Constitution, and that is exactly what has happened over the years. Words are no longer taken literally, or at face value, and are construed to mean all sorts of things the authors of that document could never have possibly imagined.

The result has not been a greater understanding of the document, but a twisting of its meaning to tear it apart and undo its foundations. The tendency is always to interpret other people's interpretations (whether a court opinion, or a Bible commentary) and to ignore the original text. The net effect of which is always bad - subverting the author's intended meaning, while falsely claiming to abide by the original language. No good thing ever comes from this.

I believe God is a literalist. When Uzzah put his hand out to steady the ark of the covenant, God struck him dead. (2 Sam. 6:3-8; 1 Chr. 13:6-12). This *literally* fulfilled Num, 4:15, "they must not touch the holy things, lest they die." Similarly, in Acts 5:1-11, God dealt with Ananias and Sapphira very harshly (striking them dead) for a lie of omission. Just because most of the time God withholds His immediate judgment and extends grace and mercy to people, does not mean He treats His words or our words allegorically. Do you really think burning in hell is only an allegorical concept? I'll bet you think eternal life in heaven is a very *literal* concept though, don't you?

Law vs. Theology. Consider the case study of *In Re Father Abraham*, decedent. In the local probate court, the will of the decedent has been admitted into the court record, and the judge is about to rule on the distribution of the estate. The decedent possessed, among other things, a substantial tract of land the size of a small country, the boundaries of which have been established by a metes and bounds description documented in a most ancient title deed. He also possessed a number of covenants running with the land, properly witnessed and attested to. The beneficiaries of the estate, all heirs at law descended from the decedent, have been determined and identified.

Suddenly, a delegation of people burst into the court making the claim that they, and the people they represent, should be named the sole beneficiaries of the decedent, not the heirs at law. Asked to state the basis for their claim, they reply that they are “religious offspring” and “spiritual heirs” of the decedent. Also, they possess a sincerely held religious belief that, in spite of the plain language of the will, the title deed, and the covenants running with the land, the estate should pass to them to the exclusion of the lawful heirs. Further, they boldly assert, this merely religious belief trumps all legal claims by the heirs. And (they claim) it doesn’t matter what the legal heirs think about the matter, or even who the decedent believed his heirs would be.

The judge - in spite of the claims of the interlopers - is duty bound to follow *the law*. Belief doesn’t set aside the laws of inheritance - not under the scriptures, not under the law of nature, and not in this universe. Theologians, and people working in religious ministries, often tend to think theology trumps law. *Think again*. Allow me to suggest that is merely wishful thinking by people who seek to validate a point of view which also happens to coincide with their choice of a career. (Of course, a lawyer would never do that.) But we really must ask, at some point ...

QUI BONO - WHO BENEFITS?

The reality of human nature is such that most people, in most circumstances, act out of self-interest. They say and do things, believe things, and take positions that aren’t motivated out of a quest for truth so much as what will benefit them the most personally. This is who we are, as human beings: fallen, sinful, corrupt of reason, and selfish. No matter how much you may love or revere the Church as the body of Christ, it is simply naïve to believe that religious people, people who work in Christian ministry, or Christians in general, do not suffer from these same human tendencies.

One thing the apostle Paul made abundantly clear in Rom. 7:14-25 is that so long as we are in these mortal bodies (the “sinful flesh”), irrespective of the fact that our spirits may have been regenerated in Christ, nonetheless our bodies will not be delivered from sin until we die. Thus, even when it comes to religious, theological and spiritual differences of opinion, including without limitation the distinctions between Israel and the Church, we are right to ask, “Who benefits?” Who benefits from taking the position that the Church has replaced Israel in the plan of God, of molding church practices after the fashion of Israel, and the Israelification of the Church?

Let’s be perfectly frank - there is only one option. I’m just being realistic. There is no reason to have blinders on, or rose colored glasses. *Just follow the money*. The people who benefit most directly from temples, sanctuaries, altars, corporate worship, infant baptisms, etc. are the people who

make a living working in, and tending to, these very things. The people who benefit most from tithing are the ones who are on the receiving end.

The people writing all those Bible commentaries, teaching all those seminary courses, preaching all those sermons, reading the scriptures allegorically, discounting Israel, and adopting all those Judaistic practices, are the very people (clergy) who directly gain the most from them. Taking those positions keeps them in the place of greatest power, influence, and income within the Church. But it also makes the position they take immediately suspect, because they have a vested interest in skewing the analysis in their favor. They're only human. However, that is no excuse.

It's what lawyers call a classic *conflict of interest*. A conflict of interest is any situation in which someone in a position of trust, such as a minister, has competing professional and personal interests. In other words, scripture tends to point one way, but the preacher's personal interests point a different way. And the presumption is that *any person in a conflict of interest will inevitably tend to support the position which benefits them the most*.

Let's face facts. Every church practice I've discussed benefits someone monetarily, and those people just happen to be overwhelmingly members of the clergy. Who also happen to overwhelmingly be the people who teach, advocate and promote the church practices discussed. *There is a causal connection here*. Do you now know why these church traditions are both universal and entrenched? The livelihood of every priest, pastor or minister depends on it.

TRADITIONAL TAX EXEMPTION

The Israelification of the Church is not simply a matter of self-interest, however. There is also a strong element of *hubris* involved, which becomes evident when we look at traditional church tax exemptions. You may not think of church tax exemption as a Christian tradition, but that's only because you aren't one of the privileged few who get to take advantage of it. For those who do benefit, it is a tradition they cling to mightily. But what about that - how does it square with the scriptures we have considered? As it turns out, the whole scheme is based on several half-truths.

A half-truth is something people say, in this case religious people, which is true as far as it goes, but omits those additional facts or principles that make the initial truth irrelevant. *Example*: In Jn. 8:5, the Pharisees (religious people) told Jesus the Mosaic law commanded that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned. True, as far as it goes, but what did they omit? In that case, they failed to mention that the law (Dt. 22:22) required both the man and the woman to be stoned together, yet they failed to produce the man - even though the woman was *caught in the act*. Which, in the end, proved to be the most crucial piece of information in the whole case, because it rendered the proceeding against the woman invalid. See? Half-truth.

Now let's look at the half-truths that prop up every church's claim to tax exemption. **Half-truth #1**: Every church is self-sovereign under God, because God created the Church, gave it a unique authority and mission (the Great Commission, Mt. 28:18-20), and God holds the Church directly accountable. True, as far as it goes. *But there's something they're not telling you ...*

Whole Truth #1: *Everyone is self-sovereign under God.* God created the family, gave it a unique authority and mission (the Dominion Mandate, Gen. 1:28), and God holds the family directly accountable. And everyone in society is a member of a family. Take it further. Every individual person is created by God in His image, has a unique authority and mission (to love God and neighbor, Mt. 22:37-40), and is directly accountable to God for their soul. Meaning, a church has no more or better claim to self-sovereignty under God than you and I. The church's claim is not unique - so it is not entitled to any special treatment on that basis *compared to you and me.*

Half-truth #2: Every church is devoted to the things of God, has a religious purpose and has a right to religious liberty. True, as far as it goes.

Whole Truth #2: Religious liberty does not flow from the Great Commission, or because a church professes Christ. ***Religious liberty flows from being made in the image of God*** as a free and responsible moral agent. In other words, religious freedom belongs to every human being, regardless of what they believe. Plus, every individual should devote themselves to the things of God (do everything for His glory) and has a religious purpose (faith, belief, and a duty to love God). So again, the church's claim is not unique - and is not entitled to any special treatment on that basis.

Half-truth #3: A church as an organized body and as an ecclesiastical hierarchy is entitled to a special status that you as an individual do not have. Actually, that's just a lie. It's just another false claim to corporate Christianity.

Whole Truth #3: *There are no God-given corporate rights,* as all God-given rights are conferred on individuals only. In fact, since every visible church is just an association of people, a church only has what the individual members bring to it. People don't get rights from the church they belong to, every church gets its rights from its members. So whatever status the church claims for itself ultimately came from *you* - God gave nothing to the church as a corporate body. Meaning, the church is not greater than its members, it is less. ***You are the church,*** the body of Christ - ***not some corporation formed by men*** (God never yet signed Articles of Incorporation filed with any state).

The fact is, every person is an individual, a member of a family, a citizen of a nation, and potentially a member of the body of Christ, all at the same time. You, me, and every clergyman in the world. Just because a person *chooses* to go to seminary, *chooses* to be ordained, and *chooses* to work in a church, does not mean they can subordinate their status as an individual, family member and citizen, and make their status as a church member preeminent. Nothing about their situation entitles them to a special tax status based on Church membership that you and I don't equally share.

Although, admittedly, there *are* some things an organized church has that you don't. A physical temple with a sanctuary and a baptismal. A human priesthood with a built-in ecclesiastical structure. Special clothes, special objects and special places. Ceremonies and rituals you can't do at home. In other words, all the things that don't count with God, and all the things that are like what ancient Israel had. "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." (1 Sam. 16:7). Yep, that's why they have tax exemption and you don't - ***they have the outward appearance of religion,*** and that's what people (*i.e.*, unbelieving government) recognize.

So what is your excuse? Why do you accept this tradition, even supporting and defending it? If you think about it - and you really should think about it - when your church claims tax exemption for itself, it is necessarily declaring that ***you individually are not the true Church, only your church organization and its leaders are***. Why else would they claim that status only for themselves, and not for every believer? That's where the *hubris* comes in. Who is the true Church - the invisible body of believers God made which includes you, or entities formed by men who know how to look religious? Put your money where your mouth is.

SANTA CLAUS, TRADITIONS AND TRUTH

Speaking of truth, it's time for a little self-test. How good are you at recognizing the truth, and separating it from what is false? Take Santa Claus, for example. Let's suppose, hypothetically of course, that after exhaustive study and the examination of all available evidence, you conclude there is no such person named Santa Claus who is an elf, living at the North Pole, who employs other elves to make toys, and who distributes them to good little boys and girls around the world via a flying sleigh pulled by reindeer each Christmas Eve.

All well and good. But when the season comes around, do you listen to or sing songs about Santa? ***How committed are you to the truth?*** Do you put gifts under the Christmas tree and mark them "From Santa"? How many posters, figurines and ornaments of Santa, reindeer or a sleigh do you have displayed in your house? How many Santa-themed TV shows and movies do you watch with friends or your kids? You say Christmas is really about Jesus, and your Christmas cards are all religiously themed. You go to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and sing all the traditional carols about the Christ child, born the king of Is-ra-el.

But how much do you commingle the profane with the holy? There they are, little baby Jesus in a manger and Santa Claus, both hanging on your Christmas tree next to each other. There they are, prominently displayed in your home - the little choo-choo train and Santa's village, all boldly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus, across the room from your stockings hung with care. There they are, a copy of *The Night Before Christmas*, and a copy of the Bible, sitting next to each other on your table. But at least you give equal time to both of them when reading to the kids, right? What a witness for Christ you are!

See how many things are plainly false, or plainly have nothing to do with the reason for the holiday, yet we openly tolerate them along with the true symbols of the holiday, commingled together like one big happy family. How easy it is to mix the truth of God with things that are merely human traditions born from pagan roots. How easy it is to say, "well, those things are really just harmless." You've probably also fooled yourself into believing that the Santa figurine on your porch, on your roof, or in your yard, isn't really an idol either - saint that you are. You prominently display the idol, but you don't bow down to it - you just light it up. *Well done, thou good and faithful servant.*

One can only hope that your children, who witness your strong lukewarm convictions, will grow up to be just like you. You know, carrying your firmly held values and traditions of equally holding on to the sacred and the profane, the truth and the lies, together into the next generation.

Sure, you know in your mind there is no Santa Claus - he is just a myth, in reality a falsehood. And your heart is fully devoted to Jesus - so you believe, just as you believe you do not worship Santa. So why do you tolerate these things and cling to them, even though they are merely human traditions, and not traditions having any real value, at that? Why are you so unwilling to disgorge these things from your life, even though they are false? Why do you hold on to those things which rob Christmas of its true meaning, all the while telling yourself their presence doesn't really lessen your spiritual experience? Yet you just cannot for the life of you, *let them go*.

No wonder then, that you cling to your favorite church and religious traditions for dear life, even though very many of them have no basis in scripture, and more often than not contradict or nullify the Gospel. But you grew up with them, you're comfortable with them, and your friends and family hold to the same traditions you do. It builds a sense of community. Besides, what is the harm? You know what is true, and what isn't. Your heart is in the right place. Your salvation is secure. What difference does it make in the long run?

It makes a difference. *Distinctions matter*. Truth and lies cannot dwell together. "For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?" We might as well ask, *for what partnership have the things of God with the traditions of men?*

Now suppose you want to spread your knowledge of the truth among the well-churched. Many of their cherished church traditions have nothing to do with God's will for His Church. They need to be warned. Who will oppose you? Sure, some people who are simply too comfortable with their human traditions. But mainly, the people who make a living trading on the false traditions - *and their friends and supporters*. Recall what happened in Ephesus when Paul was preaching there (Acts 19:23-28). Who opposed him, but the silversmiths and other tradesmen who made idols and were afraid of losing their livelihoods? So it always is.

But in truth, you are not responsible for what your preacher believes or teaches. Nor is that person responsible for what you believe. *You are responsible for what you believe - and practice*. What drives you more, the desire for the truth, or the desire to fit in, go with the flow, and not rock the boat? Which do you honor more - your own reading of scripture, or church traditions and so-called *orthodoxy* (do you even know how many different Christian orthodoxies there are)? ***Orthodoxy be damned***. I urge you, don't hesitate between two opinions. If scripture is supremely authoritative, follow it; but if orthodoxy and tradition are supreme, follow them. (*See*, 1 Ki. 18:21).

CONCLUSION

Do you treasure the holy bride of Christ, the Church of Jesus Christ? If so, which church do you cherish? The one meeting in a building you call the house of God, organized and led by clergy, which performs rituals and ceremonies it calls sacraments or ordinances? The one which bids you to give tithes and offerings, to perform works pleasing to God, and regularly participate in corporate worship? The one which preaches predestination, and has an altar and a sanctuary?

Do you cherish the church which baptizes or christens infants having no actual personal knowledge

of the Savior? Perhaps your church teaches that all or portions of God's covenants with Israel have expired or terminated? Or maybe it simply teaches that it has taken the place of Israel in the future plans of God? Does your church teach that the many future blessings God promised to Israel are now yours to claim and possess? Does your pastor, priest or minister teach that scripture is to be read allegorically, not literally? Is that the church you hold so dear? The one which teaches some or all of these?

Churches like this are a house divided against themselves. With their lips they preach the gospel, but with their actions they practice a works religion. If you attend a church like this, you may be a true Christian believer, and so may others who attend the same church as you. I'm not saying you aren't saved. I'm not saying your church leaders aren't truly saved. But the church you attend itself - the organization and its practices - are merely shadows of the true body of Christ, not the genuine article. Not *biblical Christianity*, but an adulterated *Churchianity*.

Go ahead, be satisfied with that, if you like. It's your choice, for which you will be held to account by God, not by me. But why settle for second best? Why is your church trying to be a new Israel? No doubt, your church leaders think that what they have is a vast improvement over the old Jewish system. But the real improvement will only come when they fully and finally throw off the harbingers of the past. Would you be willing to talk to people about it?

Church traditions are not merely harmless or benign. Many of them subvert God's design for the Church, making it something other than what it was intended to be. And that ultimately manifests itself in failing to do what God intended the Church to do. Mainly, to *equip believers*, not the clergy, to carry out the mission of the Church. And to carry out that mission in ways the Church has neglected to fulfill. "For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17).

I hear a lot of people *talk* about purity of the gospel, but I don't actually *see* very much purity of the gospel in practice. *Maybe somebody ought to do something about that.*

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