

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS
⇒THE CHURCH UNDER JUDAISM⇐
⇒AND THE CHURCH UNDER THE GENTILES⇐

The Christian church was founded in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost as described in the book of Acts. (Acts 2). Its members were all Jews from many parts of the near world who had come to Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Pentecost. However there were some differences amongst them. There were Aramaic speakers who would mostly be from Palestine and there were Greek speakers who would mostly be from outside Palestine. (Acts 6:1). Although these groups could be identified by language, there were also differences within each group. The Aramaic speakers from Galilee were identifiable by their distinct pronunciation, and the Greek speakers were from many varied parts of the near world where Greek was either the mother tongue or a common second language. Whereas almost all the Aramaic speaking Jews would have been Jews by descent, it is probable that some of the Greek speaking Jews were converts of the first or a recent generation. But both groups held one thing in common; they were practising Jews.

Following the killing of Stephen, Philip, one of the seven who had been appointed to oversee the distribution of food, went to Samaria in the North of Palestine and started preaching the gospel there. (Acts 8:1-25).

The Samaritans were not Jews by race. Their history goes back to the period when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the king of Assyria in about 722 B.C. The Assyrian policy following invasion was to take the inhabitants into exile and replace them with inhabitants from other conquered lands. So they placed in the cities of Samaria people from Babylon and other areas. (2 Kings 17:24-41). These people had difficulties getting used to their new location. In particular, they were attacked by lions. They explained their difficulties in terms of not knowing the local god, so, at their request, the king of Assyria sent an Israelite priest to teach them. It is interesting that to this day they have the first five books of the Old Testament, but not the history books and prophets which were written later.

After the end of the Jewish exile the Samaritans offered to help the Jews rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, but the Jews rejected the offer and the Samaritans wrote to the Persian emperor to have the work stopped. (Ezra 4:1-24). This mutual enmity continued, and is often referred to in Jewish literature and in the New Testament.

For our present purpose we will consider the Samaritans as Jewish by religion, with some modifications, though non-Jews racially. It was among them that Philip started preaching the Christian gospel with healings and miracles, and achieved a notable success. When the apostles heard the news they sent Peter and John to pray for the converts and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:1-25). This cemented the relationship between the Christian Jews and the Christian Samaritans and was the first step taken by Christianity out of a Jewish context.

The next step was taken by Peter, though with a measure of reluctance. He took the gospel to the Roman centurion, Cornelius. (Acts 11). Peter had to be persuaded of the rightness of this by God Himself who gave His Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his friends before they were even baptised. The church in Jerusalem then also needed to be convinced. This Peter achieved. (Acts 12:1-18).

From then onwards the way was open in the minds of the Jewish Christians for non-Jews to enter the Christian faith. Antioch was next, and this town became the centre for Paul and Barnabas's missionary activity in Cyprus, Asia Minor and Greece. (Acts 11:19 onwards). At the same time, not everyone in these areas was non-Jewish, that is a gentile. There were small colonies of Jews in a number of places, and Paul preached to both Jews

and gentiles. As a result, many of the churches in gentile lands consisted of both Jews and gentiles.

This chapter will now concern itself with three broad groups. These are Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians living in gentile lands, and gentile Christians living in gentile lands. The last two groups met side by side in the same congregations.

The Church started in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts. (Acts 2). Its members were Jews who had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Passover feast. By becoming Christians they differed from the other Jews in that they accepted that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The leaders of the main Jewish body had condemned him to death and had him crucified. They saw him as an impostor who had claimed the highest possible rank in Judaism in the whole of their history. This, and his claims to be the Son of God and the Son of Man, were seen as the greatest possible blasphemy. The Christian Jews saw themselves as true Jews who had accepted God's Messiah. They did not see themselves as followers of a new religion, but as the true followers of their old religion. The last thing on their mind was the relationship between the covenants!

They did not separate themselves from the old religion. We see Peter and John going to the temple at the Old Covenant time of prayer. (Acts 3:1). It is true that they were diverted by the miraculous healing of the man who had been a cripple from birth, and Peter ended up delivering a speech in the part of the large temple complex called Solomon's Portico. (Acts 3:1-26). Perhaps this was how Solomon's Portico became the part of the temple they used for their mass meetings. (Acts 5:13). This received the general agreement or acceptance of the population of Jerusalem as a whole.

As Jews, descendants of the ancient tribe of Israel, they had as much right as their fellow countrymen to celebrate the great events of their history, such as the Passover, in memory of their ancestors' escape from Egypt. They had as much right as any to celebrate the giving of the covenant to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the covenant on Mount Sinai. Yet they were aware too that they had a new covenant which they celebrated in their homes. (Acts 2:46). They did not forget that Jesus had predicted the destruction of the temple, which was the centre of the sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. (Matthew 24:1-2). They did not forget that at the time when Jesus died on the cross the great curtain in the temple was torn apart from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:51). This curtain had hidden the innermost holy place from the sight of the priests when entered the next most holy place for the daily services. It was out of bounds to all but the high priest, and he could only enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. Now it had been torn; and no doubt hastily repaired!

It may have been Stephen, a Greek speaking Jew, who first started to put some of these thoughts together. In his speech, following which he was stoned to death, he reminded his hearers that Isaiah had said: "Heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. Where will you build a house for me?" (Acts 7:49 & Isaiah 66:1). The accusation against Stephen had been that: "This man is for ever saying things against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and alter the customs handed down to us by Moses." (Acts 6:13-14). Though we must beware of accepting too much from the prosecution witnesses, who Luke described as false witnesses, it certainly appears that Stephen was aware of a new viewpoint towards the temple, as representing the Old Covenant sacrificial system, and the law of Moses, which was the Old Covenant.

The Old Covenant was a national covenant, as we have seen. The New Covenant was a covenant for individuals. Could the Jewish Christians, who accepted the New Covenant, live in the nation and in harmony with the nation which accepted the Old Covenant? How much of the old should they accept, and how much of the old did they in fact accept?

As Jews they continued with the practice of circumcision, which was the sign of the covenant with Abraham and his descendants. They continued certain purification rites relating to vows. (Acts 21:23-26). They were certainly not in the business of overthrowing the criminal laws relating to murder and theft! And in any case they were not judges implementing such laws. They were private citizens. We can guess that they kept the Sabbath, either out of conviction that it was for them as Jews, or out of courtesy to their fellow citizens. There is certainly no record of a charge against them on that score. From an ideological point of view they would probably have lived quite happily and harmoniously within a Jewish context were it not for the fundamental difference over whether Jesus was the Messiah, and the situation created by his killing. In the year 70 A.D., when the Roman armies destroyed the temple, many areas of possible tension would have been resolved.

A gentile is not competent to advise a Jewish church. Perhaps parts of this chapter should have been written by a Jewish Christian who would have far greater insight into their problems. But this chapter is not only about Jewish Christians, it is also about gentile Christians and the early history of the relationship between the two.

We have identified three groups of Christians for consideration. They are: Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians in gentile lands and gentile Christians. We have looked at the first group. Now we will look at the third, the gentile Christians.

We have seen how gentiles became Christians, in the story of Cornelius, the early life of the church at Antioch and Paul and Barnabas's missionary journeys. They were not Jews. So the covenants with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Israel never had and never would apply to them. They came direct to the New Covenant, which was offered to individuals of all nationalities for the forgiveness of sins. For them the national law of Israel, with its criminal law, its civil law and its religious law, was irrelevant. They lived in countries with different national laws. They were not Jews. It was not for them to celebrate the Passover in remembrance of escape from Egypt, because it was not their ancestors who had escaped! It was not for them to circumcise themselves and their children, because they were in no way descendants of Abraham! It was not for them to enter the temple in Jerusalem, because they were not under the religious laws of that foreign nation!

This was not immediately obvious to every Jewish Christian, in spite of the previous experience of Peter with Cornelius. Conflict first arose at Antioch when: "Certain persons who had come down from Judea began to teach the brotherhood that those who were not circumcised in accordance with Mosaic practice could not be saved." (Acts 15:1). Paul, Barnabas and some others prepared to set off for Jerusalem to settle the matter with the apostles and elders there.

In Jerusalem, some of the Christian Jews who had been Pharisees said of the gentile Christians: "They must be circumcised and told to keep the law of Moses". Peter disagreed, reminded them of his experience with Cornelius, and finished: "We believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we are saved, and so are they". (Acts 15:1-35).

Paul was very clear on this point in many of his letters. It was probably between the outbreak of conflict in Antioch and the visit to Jerusalem that he wrote to the congregations he had founded with Barnabas in Galatia during his first missionary journey. In his letter he said, for example: "My companion, Titus, Greek though he is, was not compelled to be circumcised" and "If you receive circumcision Christ will do you no good at all". (Galatians 2:3 & 5:2). It is also interesting to compare Paul's speeches to Jews, for example his speech to Jews in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14-41) with his speeches to gentiles, for example his speech in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). They are very different. In the former speech he refers to Jewish history, in the other

he ignores it. Acceptance of the Old Covenant is not a precondition for acceptance of the New Covenant.

The final group of Christians we need to consider is the Jewish Christians living in gentile lands, and sharing in the same Christian congregations as the gentile Christians. By migrating from Palestine these Jews would already have left the community based on the Old Covenant. They would already be living in countries with national laws different from the laws of the Old Covenant. In many cases they lived in Jewish communities in gentile towns. When Paul and others preached the gospel in their synagogues, or at their prayer places, some of them became Christians. This brought tension between them and their Jewish communities which sometimes flared into violence.

At the same time they became members of Christian congregations which also contained gentiles. This naturally led to some problems in those congregations. There was of course the natural tendency for people of the same cultural background to be closer to each other than they were to others, because they would share more in common. But there were also some specific problems. Mealtimes together presented some difficulty. (Galatians 2:12). The exact reason is not given, but it could have been related to different methods of slaughtering animals. The council in Jerusalem gave instructions for Christians to avoid strangulation as a means of slaughter, perhaps for this reason. (Acts 15:29). Sabbath observance could have been a problem. The Jewish Christians might well have continued to observe the Sabbath, partly out of tradition and partly to assist them in maintaining their links with their national, Jewish, community. The gentile Christians would have had no reason to start to do so. Paul dealt with this problem by asking for mutual respect for differences. He wrote: "This man regards one day more highly than another, while that man regards all days alike. On that point everyone should have reached conviction in his own mind. He who respects the day has the Lord in mind in doing so". (Romans 14:5-6). What was required was a clear understanding of principles, a mutual tolerance of differences in cultural tradition, and an effort on all sides to make friends across the cultural divide.

So the New Covenant brought together both Jews and gentiles in one new body, the church. Paul put it like this: "Gentiles and Jews, he has made the two one, and in his own body of flesh and blood has broken down the enmity which stood like a dividing wall between them; for he annulled the law with its rules and regulations, so as to create out of the two a single new humanity in himself, thereby making peace." (Ephesians 2:14-15). The annulled law was of course the law of the Old Covenant.

Theory is not always easily turned into practice, as Paul's last visit to Jerusalem illustrates. He went with some Christians from the gentile world carrying gifts for the poor among the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. (Acts 20:3-4, 21:17, 1 Corinthians 16:1-9). We might have expected him to stay with the Jewish Christians there; but aware perhaps of the sensitivity of the situation, the Christians in Caesarea arranged for a Christian from Cyprus to provide the lodgings in Jerusalem. Paul then met James and the elders. It appears Peter was no longer there, and that James, the half-brother of Jesus, was in control. This could have been the result of the traditional Jewish attitudes to inheritance and dynasty. James was the nearest to Jesus in the flesh! So Paul was asked to demonstrate his loyalty to the Jewish tradition. This he did and was arrested. (Acts 21:18-26 and onwards).