

Evaluating Premillennialism

(Part III)

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Israel and the Church

We have frequently noted that one of the principal tenets of Dispensational Premillennialism is the strict separation between God's earthly people, Israel, and his heavenly people, the church. It could even be argued that this separation between Israel and the church is the root principle of classical — as distinguished from 'progressive' Dispensationalism. From this separation of an earthly and a spiritual people stems another basic feature of Dispensationalism, one which we will consider in a subsequent section of this chapter: its insistence on a literalistic reading of the Bible. This actually stems from the insistence of classical Dispensationalism that the promises of the Lord to his earthly people, Israel, must be interpreted in a strictly literal rather than a figurative or spiritual way. Furthermore, among the seven distinct dispensations, the most important from the point of view of the future are those that reflect this separation between Israel and the church. The earliest dispensations of human conscience and government, for example, are of only passing interest in the overall scheme of Dispensationalism.

I. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Before subjecting the dispensational distinction between Israel and the church to biblical evaluation, a brief summary of the basic features of this separation is necessary. The

following notes from the original *Scofield Reference Bible* clearly articulate these features:

(1) 'I will make of thee a great nation.' Fulfilled in a three-fold way: (a) In a natural posterity — 'as the dust of the *earth*' (Gen. 13:16, John 8:37), viz., the Hebrew people. (b) In a spiritual posterity — 'look now toward *heaven*. . . so shall thy seed be' (John 8:39, Rom. 4:16, 17; 9:7, 8, Gal. 3:6, 7, 29), viz, all men of faith, whether Jew or Gentile. (c) Fulfilled also through Ishmael (Gen. 17,18—20) [sic].¹

The Christian is of the heavenly seed of Abraham (Gen. 15:5, 6, Gal. 3:29), and partakes of the spiritual blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 15:18, *note*); but Israel as a nation always has its own place, and is yet to have its greatest exaltation as the earthly people of God.²

As these notes indicate, classical Dispensationalism regards God's purposes in history as twofold, corresponding to these two distinct peoples, the one earthly, the other heavenly. God's dispensational dealings with these two peoples have two quite distinct ends in view: the salvation of an earthly people that is consummated in an eternal kingdom upon the new earth, and the salvation of a heavenly people that is consummated in an eternal kingdom in the new heavens. Thus, just as God has two distinct peoples and programmes of salvation in history, so he has in mind two quite distinct eternal destinies. The line of separation that keeps Israel and the church apart in history will continue into the final state in which the earthly and heavenly natures of these peoples will correspond to salvation blessings that are distinctively earthly and heavenly.

This separation between Israel and the church corresponds to Dispensationalism's emphasis upon a literal understanding of Old Testament prophecies on the one hand, and the contrast between the present 'age of the church' and the coming 'age of the kingdom' or the millennium on the other. The prophecies of the Old Testament, insofar as they are directed to the earthly people of God, Israel, must be understood in their literal or earthly sense. A promise of the possession of the land, for example, must mean the earthly land of Canaan. A promise of a restored temple must refer to the temple in Jerusalem.

The present age of the church, because it represents God's dealings with his heavenly people, must also be regarded as a 'parenthesis' period of history, a period between God's former dealings and his soon-to-be-resumed dealings with Israel in the millennial age to come. During the present age of God's dealings with the church, his dealings with Israel have been temporarily suspended, but when the time of fulfillment comes

¹ *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), note on Genesis 15:18.

² *Ibid.*, note on Romans 11:1. *The New Scofield Reference Bible* retains the second of these notes but revises the first. The revised version, however, does not fundamentally alter the basic dispensationalist insistence that these two peoples are to be kept distinct.

(preceded by the rapture), the prophetic promises will be fulfilled. Because these were directed to Israel, they are silent for the most part respecting God's dealings with the church, dealings comprised by the mystery which God had kept hidden until the gospel age.

Though this represents only a brief sketch of the classical dispensationalist separation between Israel and the church, it will serve as background for our consideration of the question, Who, according to the teaching of the Bible, is the 'Israel of God'? Does the Bible actually draw this line of separation between these two peoples of God, Israel and the church? To answer this question, we will have to consider several features of the Bible's teaching about the Israel of God.

II. THE CHURCH IS NO PARENTHESIS

The biblical understanding of the church, however, cannot be squared with this understanding of it as a parenthesis. In the New Testament, the church is commonly understood to be in direct continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament; the images used in the Old Testament to describe the people of the Lord are used in the New Testament to describe the church. The New Testament word for the church, *ekklesia*, is the equivalent of the common Old Testament word, *qahal*, meaning the 'assembly' or 'gathering' of the people of Israel.³ The New Testament church is also called the 'temple' of God (*1 Cor.* 3:16—17, *Eph.* 2:21—22), evoking the imagery and symbolism of the Old Testament, in which the temple was regarded to be the special place of the Lord's dwelling in the midst of his people. Just as the temple was the place where fellowship between the Lord and his people was provided for (through the sacrificial rites and ordinances) and experienced, so the church is the place of the Lord's dwelling by his Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the church can also be identified with Jerusalem, the city of God, which is above and which comprises believers from every tribe and tongue and nation. In Hebrews 12:22—23, this is expressly stated: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.'

Rather than being regarded as an interruption in God's dealings with his people, Israel, the church of the new covenant is regarded as the fulfillment of the Lord's promises to the people of God of the old covenant. The great covenant promise made to Abraham was that in his seed all the families and peoples would be blessed (*Gen.* 12:3; 22:18). Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord's dealings with Israel are never isolated from his promises of redemption for all the nations and peoples of the earth. This theme of the salvation of the nations is interwoven throughout the fabric of the Old Testament, not only in the provisions in the law for the inclusion in the community of Israel of

³ The Septuagint (LXX) rendering of this Hebrew term for the 'assembly' of Israel is commonly the word *ekklesia* (*Exod.* 12:6, *Num.* 14:5, *Deut.* 5:22, *Josh.* 8:35).

strangers and aliens,⁴ but also in the explicit language of the Psalter, the song book of Israel's worship, and in the prophets.

The Psalms contain references throughout to the Lord's purpose to gather the nations into the fellowship of his people. Psalm 2 includes a record of the Lord's vow to grant the nations to his beloved Son. Psalm 22 speaks of how 'all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will worship before Thee (verse 27). Psalm 67 calls all the nations to join Israel in singing God's praises. These are not isolated notes; they echo and re-echo throughout the Psalms. Furthermore, in the prophets, many promises speak of the day when the Gentile nations will be joined with the people of Israel in the service and praise of the Lord (for example, *Isa.* 45:22; 49:6, *Mal.* 1:1).

The simplest understanding of the Old and the New Testament people of the Lord recognizes the church to be his new covenant people, in direct communion with Israel, his old covenant people. Though salvation may historically be to the Jew first and, secondly, also to the Gentile (*Rom.* 1:16), the Lord is gathering to himself in history only one people, comprising Jew and Gentile alike. However, lest this appear to be a premature conclusion based upon an inadequate consideration of the biblical material, we turn now to other biblical considerations.

III. THE KINGDOM IS NOT POSTPONED

Closely linked to the idea that the church is a parenthesis in history is the dispensationalist claim that God's dealings with Israel have been postponed during the present time. It is taught that because the Jews did not receive him as their promised Messiah and King, Jesus deferred the establishment of the kingdom, the earthly manifestation of God's salvation to the Jews, until after the dispensation of the gospel to the Gentiles. This idea of the kingdom's postponement has several problems.

First, it suggests that the church is an afterthought in the plan and purposes of God. This view of history seems to teach that Christ was frustrated in his original purpose for the establishment of the Davidic kingdom for Israel and was obliged to adjust the divine programme of redemption accordingly. However, such a suggestion is consistent neither with the biblical presentation of God's sovereignty over history nor with the Bible's view of the church.

Christ's Great Commission to his disciples (*Matt.* 28:16—20), fulfils his earlier declaration regarding the church that he will build, against which the gates of Hades shall not prevail (*Matt.* 16:18—19). Far from being an afterthought or interim project, the

⁴ Perhaps this is the place to note how Matthew, in writing his genealogy of Jesus Christ, seems deliberately to have included names of Gentiles whose incorporation into the family of David (and of God) serves as a reminder that God's saving purpose never fixed exclusively upon Israel as a racial or national entity (*Matt.* 1:1—17).

church in these passages is described as the central accomplishment and interest of the Lord Jesus Christ in history. Indeed, this church which is being gathered from all the nations can be understood only as a fulfillment of the promises God made to the Son of David, to whom the nations would be given as his rightful inheritance (see *Psa. 2:8*). Consequently, when the Apostle Paul describes the church of Jesus Christ, he can speak of it as the 'fullness of him who fills all and all' (*Eph. 1:22—23*), through which the manifold wisdom of God is being made known 'in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord' (*Eph. 3:8—11*). None of these descriptions of the church suggest that it is anything less than the central focus and instrument through which God's final purpose of redemption in history is being realized.

Second, the dispensationalist idea of a postponement of the kingdom is based upon a misreading of the Gospel accounts of Christ's preaching of the kingdom. Though it is true that many of the Jews in Jesus' day did reject him as the Messiah, it must not be forgotten that Jesus himself was born from among the Jewish people — and he is a member, indeed the foremost member, of the church! — and that many of the Jews did respond to him in faith and repentance, though his proclamation of the nature of this kingdom did not always accord with the expectations of many of the people.

It should not be overlooked, for example, that the twelve disciples, the nucleus of the New Testament church, were all from among the Jewish people. In the account in Acts of the growth of the early church, the pattern of 'to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile' is clearly in evidence. Though some among the Jewish Christian community resisted the inclusion of Gentile believers, it is clear that Christ's work through his apostles was directed to the salvation of Jew and Gentile alike. Christ and his apostles preached the gospel of the kingdom (for example, *Acts 20:28*), a kingdom that Christ proclaimed was 'among them' (*Matt. 12:28*) and that would be built through the preaching of the gospel (*Matt. 16:19*). The idea that Christ offered the kingdom to the Jews, only to have them reject it, is contradicted by these realities and Christ's own testimony that they had misunderstood his kingdom (see *John 18:36*). Were Christ to have offered the kingdom to the Jews, only to have them reject it, one would expect this to have been included among the charges brought against him at his trial. However, the Gospel accounts make no mention of any such charge brought against him, namely, that he had offered to establish the kingdom among them only to have this offer refused.

Third, the idea of a postponement of the kingdom implies that the suffering and crucifixion of Christ might have been delayed, even become unnecessary, were the Jews of his day to have received him as their earthly king. This means that Christ's own teaching, that he must first suffer and only then enter his glory, would have been invalidated (*Luke 24:26*). It also means that the uniform testimony of the New Testament Gospels and epistles, that Christ came in order to be obedient to his Father's will, including his death upon the cross, would be compromised. Though dispensationalists might attempt to argue that Christ's death would have nonetheless been necessary, even were his offer of the kingdom to have been accepted by his countrymen, it seems difficult to envision how it might have occurred. Surely the

establishment of his earthly kingdom would have mitigated any need to endure suffering and death on behalf of his people.⁵

The mere suggestion that Christ's death was the result of the Jewish people's unbelief contradicts a variety of New Testament teachings. In the Gospel accounts of Christ's suffering and death, the evangelists frequently note that all of this occurred to fulfill what was written in the Scriptures (for example, *Matt.* 16:23; 26:24, 45, 56). After his resurrection from the dead, Christ was compelled to rebuke the men on the way to Emmaus because they did not believe in 'all the prophets had spoken'. They did not understand that it 'was necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter his glory' (*Luke* 24:25—26). The Gospel of John frequently testifies that Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, came into the world for the express purpose of doing his Father's will, namely, to be the 'Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (cf. 1:29; 2:4; 6:38; 7:6; 10:10—18; 12:27; 13:1—3;17).

The same emphasis upon Christ's death as the purpose for his coming is found in the book of Acts and the epistles of the New Testament. In his sermon at Pentecost, the Apostle Peter notes that Jesus was 'delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God' (*Acts* 2:23). When the Apostle Paul summarizes his gospel, he speaks of how 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. . . and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures'. The writer to the Hebrews describes at length the manner in which Christ's coming, priesthood and sacrifice are the fulfillment of the old covenant types and shadows. Christ came, he writes, in order 'that He might become a merciful and faithful priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people' (2:17). In a striking passage, this writer also speaks of God bringing Jesus up from the dead 'by the blood of the eternal covenant' (13:20). Nothing in this is congenial to the view that Christ's death was occasioned primarily by the Jewish people's refusal to acknowledge him as their earthly king.

And fourth, the idea that the kingdom has been postponed does not correspond to the New Testament's insistence that Christ is now king and Lord over all. In the New Testament accounts of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, it is evident that Christ has been installed as King at the Father's right hand.⁶ He exercises as Mediator a rule over all things for the sake of the church. This kingly rule of Christ, moreover, fulfils the

⁵ For a dispensationalist's defense against this charge, see Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), pp. 161—8. Ryrie appeals to statements of dispensational authors that affirm the necessity of Christ's crucifixion for the salvation of Jew and Gentile alike. He also notes that the language of postponement lends credence to this criticism of Dispensationalism. However, he does not provide an adequate account of how the necessity of the cross can be accounted for on dispensationalist assumptions about the radical distinction between Israel and the church, or between the kingdom and the church age.

⁶ See the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on 2 Samuel 7:16 and Revelation 3:21, for a representation of the dispensationalist denial that Christ is currently seated upon the throne of his father, David.

promises that had been made to his father, David, regarding his inheritance of the nations. At the angel Gabriel's announcement of Christ's birth, it was declared that 'the Lord God will give him [the child to be born to Mary] the throne of his father David' (*Luke* 1:32).

When Christ mandated that the disciples go and make disciples of all nations, he declared, 'all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth' (*Matt.* 28:18). Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost, claimed that with God's raising of Jesus from the dead, 'all Israel' was to acknowledge that 'God has made Him both Lord and Christ' (*Acts* 2:33—36). Christ is the Davidic King to whom the nations will be given as his rightful inheritance (see *Acts* 4:24—26). Or, as the Apostle Paul describes the Lord, he has been 'declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead' (*Rom.* 1:4). Christ has now been given all rule and authority and power and dominion (*Eph.* 1:20—23; cf. *Phil.* 2:9—11). Therefore, he must 'reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet' (*1 Cor.* 15:25).

In the light of these and other passages that describe the present kingship of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, it seems wrong to distinguish sharply between the present age of the church and the future age of the kingdom. Though the present form and administration of the kingdom of Christ may not be earthly or physical in the dispensationalist sense of these terms, there is no escaping the biblical teaching that Christ now reigns upon the earth through his Spirit and Word and manifests his kingly rule primarily through the gathering of his church from all the tribes and peoples of the earth. Serious injury is done to the biblical conception of Christ's kingship when Dispensationalism relegates it to some future period during which God's dealings are directed narrowly to the earthly people of God, Israel.

IV. GOD'S ONE PURPOSE OF SALVATION FOR HIS PEOPLE

The basic reason why Dispensationalism wrongly speaks of the church as a parenthesis in history and of the postponement of the kingdom, is that it fails to see that God has one purpose of salvation for his people in the old and new covenants. Contrary to the dispensationalist view, the Israel of God of the old covenant is one people in direct continuity with the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ, of the new covenant. Israel and the church are different ways of referring to the one people of God. To put it as straight-forwardly as possible: Israel is the church, and the church is Israel. This can be illustrated in various ways from the New Testament.

In 1 Peter 2:9—10, the apostle gives a summary statement regarding the New Testament church. Writing to the scattered believers and churches throughout Asia Minor, Peter defines the new covenant church in terms drawn from the old covenant descriptions of the people of Israel:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called

you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.⁷

What is so remarkable about this description of the church is that it identifies the church with the exact terminology used in the Old Testament to describe the people of Israel with whom the Lord covenanted. The best reading of this language takes it literally to mean that the new covenant church is altogether one with the old covenant church. The Lord does not have two peculiar peoples, two holy nations, two royal priesthoods, two chosen races — he has only one, the church of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, in Romans 9—11, the Apostle Paul discloses God's purposes of redemption in the salvation of the Gentiles and subsequently of all Israel (*Rom.* 11:25) in a way that makes it unmistakably clear that the people of God are one, not two.⁸ Dispensationalists argue that the salvation of all Israel mentioned in Romans 11:25 refers to the future national conversion of Israel and her restoration to the land of Palestine. This salvation will occur in the context of God's resumed dealings with his earthly people, Israel.⁹ The great problem with this reading of the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 9—11 is that the argument depends upon the most intimate interrelationship between elect Israel and the elect Gentiles in God's purposes of redemption.

The main thrust of the argument in these chapters is that the unbelief of many of the people of Israel has been in the purpose of God the occasion for the conversion of the 'fullness of the Gentiles'. This conversion of the fullness of the Gentiles, however, will in turn under God's blessing provoke Israel to jealousy and lead to the salvation of 'all Israel'. No mention is made regarding the restoration of the nation of Israel as a racial entity to the land of Palestine. Nor is anything said about the establishment of an earthly form of the Davidic kingdom. On the contrary, the salvation of all of God's people, Jew and Gentile alike, is described in terms of their belonging to the one olive tree, the church of Jesus Christ. All who are saved are saved through faith in Jesus Christ and are incorporated into the one fellowship of his church. This passage militates in the strongest possible terms against the idea of the existence of two separate olive trees or two separate purposes of salvation, a present one for the Gentiles, a future one for the Jews.

Thus, in the account of the growth of the church in the book of Acts, the earliest members of the church were drawn predominantly, though by no means exclusively, from among the Jewish people. Indeed, the incorporation of Gentile believers into the one fellowship of the church was initially resisted considerably. It is especially striking, then, to read the account of the Apostle Paul's preaching at the synagogue (note well!)

⁷ In these two verses alone, the apostle explicitly refers to the following Old Testament passages: Isaiah 43:21, Exodus 19:6, Hosea 1:10; 2:23.

⁸ For a more complete treatment of this passage, see my earlier discussion of it in Chapter 5.

⁹ See the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, notes on Romans 11:1 and 11:26.

in Antioch. In his preaching, the Apostle Paul announces that the 'holy and sure blessings of David' are being fulfilled through the proclamation of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ. In this sermon, the apostle declares that Jesus is the promised Davidic King and Saviour through whom the promised blessings to the fathers are now being realized in the community of those who believe. No clearer identification could be imagined of God's purposes with Israel through David and his Son, and his purposes with the church through Jesus Christ. The words of this sermon speak for themselves:

And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, 'Thou art My Son; today I have begotten Thee.' And as for the fact that He raised Him up from the dead, no more to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David' (Acts 13:32—34).¹⁰

In these respects, as well as in those previously mentioned, it is apparent that God's purpose of redemption in history is to gather one people, all of whom are the spiritual descendants of Abraham (*Gal.* 3:28—29), the father of all believers. The Lord has but one people, not two. Indeed, it is his purpose to join this people together in the most perfect unity (*Eph.* 2:14), not to leave them forever separated from each other into Israel and the church.

V. WHO BELONGS TO THE 'ISRAEL OF GOD' (GAL. 6:16)?

In addition to the cumulative force of the preceding points against the dispensationalist view of a separation between Israel and the church, one text by itself sufficiently refutes this position: it is Galatians 6:15—16. We will conclude this part of our evaluation of Dispensationalism with a consideration of this text.

These verses come towards the end of the Epistle to the Galatians, and they draw upon many of the emphases previously set out. The Apostle Paul makes this solemn and sweeping declaration: 'For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will follow this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.' In Galatians, it is clear that the Apostle Paul is emphatically

¹⁰ It is interesting to note how matter-of-factly the oneness of the people of God is expressed by our Lord in his answer to the question put to him, 'Are there a few who are being saved?' (*Luke* 13:23). Jesus concludes with the confident declaration that 'they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God'. This description of the growth of the kingdom uses the imagery of a banquet hall and table, in which a great throng gathers, of Jew ('Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God', v. 28) and Gentile ('from east and west, and from north and south'), all of whom are reclining at the same table in the same kingdom.

rejecting the idea that what commends anyone to God is obedience to the law, particularly the law prescribing circumcision as a sign of the covenant. He is opposing the false gospel of the Judaizers who were teaching that in order for a person to be acceptable to God, to be justified or found innocent before him, they had to submit to the requirements of the law, specifically the stipulations regarding circumcision. Against this false gospel, the apostle places the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, a gospel that is equally valid for Jew and Gentile alike. He sums up his argument with the formulation, 'neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation'.

Having stated this governing principle, however, the Apostle Paul goes on to pronounce a benediction upon 'those who will follow this rule': 'peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.' The language used in this benediction is striking. The blessing of God rests upon those and only those who follow this specific rule or canon.¹¹ Conversely, those who do not follow or acknowledge it may not expect to receive God's peace and mercy.

But what is even more striking, for our purpose, is the apostle's identification of the church, comprising Jew and Gentile alike, as the Israel of God. The Israel of God in this text refers to the church as it honours this rule or canon, making no distinction, so far as justification before God is concerned, upon the basis of circumcision or uncircumcision. The Apostle Paul here sets forth a rule for the whole people of God, the church consisting of Jews and Gentiles, that seems to conflict with any separation at all between Israel as an earthly people and the church as a heavenly people. Such a separation makes the matter of circumcision and uncircumcision a fundamental principle of distinction between those who are of Israel and those who are not.

Now, it is possible to argue that when the apostle speaks in this text of 'peace and mercy upon them, *and* upon the Israel of God', he is actually distinguishing the Gentile church ('them') from the Jewish believing community ('the Israel of God'). This has in fact been proposed by dispensationalist authors.¹² However, the problem with this suggestion should be clear: it excludes believing Jews from 'all who will follow this rule', an exclusion which would be contradictory and self-defeating. Were the word 'and' here to have this sense of 'and also', as dispensationalists maintain, the Apostle Paul would be pronouncing a benediction not only upon those who follow this rule, but also upon others, believing Jews, who may not follow it. The apostle would thus be denying the very rule or canon that he had asserted previously. Believing Jews would be exempt from this rule, thus rendering it null and void as a rule for faith and practice among all the people of God. Perhaps for this reason, the New International Version translates these verses as follows: 'Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel

¹¹ The word used here for 'rule' is the Greek word, *kanon* or 'canon'. It has the sense of a binding and absolutely authoritative rule or principle of faith and practice.

¹² For example, John F Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), p. 170.

of God.’ Here the NIV is following a long tradition of interpreters, including Calvin, who understand the connector, ‘and’, as equivalent to ‘even’ or ‘that is’.¹³

The sense of this text is that the apostle extends peace and mercy to those who follow this rule that in the church of Jesus Christ circumcision and uncircumcision count for nothing so far as our standing with God is concerned. He pronounces this benediction ‘to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God’. Thus, he answers the question — who belongs to the ‘Israel of God’? — by declaring emphatically that the Israel of God comprises all believers, Jews and Gentiles, who subscribe to and live by the principle that what alone counts before God is a new creation.

In short, no more emphatic word could be spoken that in the church illegitimate distinctions are no longer permitted between Jew and Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised. This should not surprise us, coming as it does from the same apostle who reminded the church in Ephesus that Christ ‘Himself is our peace, who made both [Jew and Gentile] one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall’ (*Eph. 2:14*). By the standard of this apostolic teaching and rule, Dispensationalism seems to be in serious error in its distinction between Israel and the church.

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¹³ In this instance, the NASB, the version I have been using, may be liable to misunderstanding, since it simply translates the connector (Greek: *kai*) as ‘and’. The context makes clear, however, that this connector has here the sense of ‘even’ or ‘that is’, one of its normal uses in the New Testament and in the Greek language. The NIV is not alone in making clear the sense of the connector here. This is also true, for example, in the Revised Standard Version, the Jerusalem Bible and the New English Bible.