

When Did the Church Begin?

Introduction

A rabbi, a priest, and an imam were discussing the question “When does life begin?” The priest said that life begins at the moment of conception. The imam insisted that life begins at the moment of birth. The rabbi thought for a moment, stroked his beard said: “Life really begins at the moment the kids are married off and leave the house.”

Just as there are various views on the beginning of life, so too there are a number of views on the beginning of the Church. We will begin by taking a look at some of these views.

According to Covenant Theology

According to Covenant Theology, the Church began at some point of time in the Old Testament. Some believe that the Church began in the days of Adam. For example, R. B. Kuiper wrote that Adam and Eve constituted the first church. Yet many teach that the Church began with Abraham. Charles Hodge connects the beginning of the Church with the Abrahamic Covenant.

Covenant Theology typically uses an allegorical approach to interpreting certain parts of God’s Word—especially prophetic passages of scripture. By using this method of interpretation some Bible teachers equate (or merge) the nation of Israel with the Church. They say that the unfulfilled promises which were given by God to the nation of Israel now belong to the Church. They argue that Israel forfeited those promises because of their unbelief and rejection of the Messiah.

This creates a huge problem for Covenant Theologians who teach that God’s promises were taken away from ethnic Israel because of their unbelief. If God could not fulfill His promises to Israel because of their unbelief, then what guarantee is there that God will be able to fulfill His promise of salvation to you and me?!

Most of the covenants that God made with Israel were unconditional. An unconditional covenant is based upon the faithfulness of God alone and has absolutely nothing to do with the faithfulness of man. If the failure or unbelief of ethnic Israel could cancel out an

unconditional promise of God, then Christians should also be fearful that their own doubts or failures could jeopardize God's promise of salvation to them.

According to Normative Dispensationalism

According to Normative Dispensationalism, the Church has not replaced the nation of Israel in God's program. The Old Testament promises given to ethnic Israel through God's unconditional covenants have not been transferred to the Church. The promises God made to Israel (for land, many descendants, and blessing) will be ultimately fulfilled in the 1,000 year reign of Christ on earth which is known as the Millennial Kingdom—see Revelation 20. In this age God is focusing His attention on the Church. During the Millennial Kingdom He will again in the future focus His attention on the nation of Israel—see Romans 9-11.

Dispensationalists emphasize that the term *Israel* in the New Testament refers to the physical descendants of Jacob when used in a collective sense. Of course, in the singular sense *Israel* denotes Jacob himself. However, the term *Israel* is never to be confused with the Church. A study of the term *Israel* indicates it is used to denote Jacob's physical offspring. It is never used in a "spiritualized" sense to refer to the Church.

Since ethnic Israel and the Church are distinct, Dispensationalists teach that the Church did not begin in the Old Testament as Covenant Theologians claim. Instead, Dispensationalists insist that the Church began after the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. More specifically, they say that the Church began in the Book of Acts. According to Normative Dispensationalism, the Church began in Acts chapter 2.

However, not all Dispensationalists hold this position. There are a few who claim that the Church began later on in the Book of Acts.

According to Ultra-Dispensationalism

Ultra-Dispensationalism (sometimes called Hyper-Dispensationalism) sees the start of the Church beginning with the ministry of the Apostle Paul. This is a primary difference between Ultra-Dispensationalism and Normative Dispensationalism. Dr. Charles Ryrie explains:

Dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism are related in some ways, but there are some basic differences between the two schools of thought. The primary one is the difference over when the Church, the Body of Christ, began historically. Dispensationalists say that the Church began at Pentecost, while ultradispensationalists believe that it began with Paul sometime later. Both groups, however, recognize the clear distinction between Israel and the Church, and both interpret the Bible literally. Nevertheless, this difference over the beginning of the Church carries with it a number of other divergencies of teaching between the two groups. It affects the important matter of the ordinances, the relevance of the epistles, and the interpretation of the Gospels.¹

Normative Dispensationalists say that the Church began in the second chapter of Acts. They are often referred to as Acts 2 Dispensationalists, by those who teach that the Church began later in the Book of Acts.

Those who hold to a moderate form of Ultra-Dispensationalism are often called Acts 13 Dispensationalists (or Mid-Acts Dispensationalists). They say that the Church began when Paul started his mission to Jews and Gentiles at the beginning of Acts 13.

Those who hold to an extreme form of Ultra-Dispensationalism are often called Acts 28 Dispensationalists. They say that the Church began toward the end of Paul's ministry in Acts 28. According to them, the beginning of the Church Age is in relation to Israel's rejection of the kingdom of God and the sending of God's salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 28:26-28).

However, Paul said "I persecuted the church" (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). Therefore, the Church must have been in existence before Paul's conversion in Acts 9.

[According to Scripture](#)

In light of these various views we need to ask ourselves, "when did the Church begin?" Let's see what God's Word has to say about the beginning of the Church.

¹ Ryrie, Charles. [Dispensationalism Revised and Expanded](#). N. p. Print.

The Church predicted

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus shows us one piece of the puzzle regarding the beginning of the Church. He said, "... on this rock I will (future tense) build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

At this point in time the Church is still in the future. It did not exist at the time that Jesus spoke these words.

Lewis Sperry Chafer correctly notes:

When the stress falls on the word *will*, the prophetic aspect is introduced, and the reader is reminded that the Church did not exist at the moment Christ was speaking but was to be realized in the future. This is a difficult aspect of truth for those who contend that the Church has existed throughout the period covered by the Old Testament, or any part of it.²

Covenant Theologians have a difficult time explaining the prophetic aspect of Jesus' statement. If the church began in the Old Testament, as they claim, then why does Jesus say, I *will* build My church? Covenant Theologian, Charles Hodge, had a curious way of attempting to explain away the obvious meaning of Jesus' words. He wrote:

The mere future form of the verb itself, however, certainly does not require us to say that the building process had not already begun. As a matter of fact, the verb translated "I will build" also means to *edify, build up, amplify, or enlarge*. Jesus could easily have meant... that He would in the *future* edify and enlarge His already existing Church.³

But was Jesus' really speaking about edifying, building up, amplifying or enlarging a church that had already begun in the Old Testament? The facts say, "no!"

According to Louw and Nida, the Greek word οἰκοδομέω means "to make or erect any kind of construction—"to build, to construct."⁴ This is the primary sense of the word.

² Ryrie, Charles C. [*The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*](#). Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2005. Print.

³ Radmacher, Earl. *The Nature Of The Church*. Portland, OR: Western Baptist Press, 1972. 196.

⁴ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. [*Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains*](#) 1996 : 518. Print.

There is a secondary sense in which οἰκοδομέω could mean to *edify* or *build up*. But that is not the primary meaning in the New Testament. If you look at how Matthew uses the word οἰκοδομέω, you will find that every other occurrence in his gospel has to do with a structure being built. Where οἰκοδομέω is used metaphorically in the New Testament, the English translators have used words such as *edify*, *strengthen* or *build up*. And yet nearly every English translation of Matthew 16:18 uses the word *build*. Why is that? Jesus is using an illustration of a building (the church) being constructed on a rock (the foundation). When an architect designs a building, he places it upon a solid foundation. Jesus used a similar illustration earlier in His teaching:

“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built (οἰκοδομέω) his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built (οἰκοδομέω) his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall” (Mt. 7:24-27).

When Jesus said, “on this rock I will build My church,” He was obviously using the illustration of a structure being built upon a foundation. He was not using the word οἰκοδομέω in a metaphorical sense to mean *edify*, *strengthen* or *build up* as Hodge claims. If we understand Jesus’ words in a plain, straightforward sense then the only reasonable conclusion that we can come to is that He was predicting the future building or establishment of His church upon a solid foundation.

If this were the only verse in the Bible which indicated the beginning of the Church, it would refute the teaching of Covenant Theology which claims that the Church began in the Old Testament. However, this is not the only verse in Scripture which tells us when the Church began.

Spirit baptism predicted and fulfilled

Before Jesus ascended into heaven He told His disciples, “... you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5b). As we continue reading, we see the Holy Spirit filling believers on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2.

When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Act 2:1-4)

However, these verses only describe what happened on that day. They do not specifically say that this filling by the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of Acts 1:5.

In Acts chapter 11 Peter described the conversion of a group of Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. He recounted,

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God” (Acts 11:15-17)?

From this text we have to conclude that somewhere between Acts 1:5 and Acts 11:15 Jesus prediction of Spirit baptism was fulfilled. It seems that the only logical place to put this fulfillment is Acts 2.

However, this is not enough evidence to say that the Church began in Acts 2. It only indicates that the promise of Spirit baptism occurred in Acts 2.

Spirit baptism explained

The apostle Paul explained the purpose of Spirit baptism in his first letter to the Church in Corinth. He wrote, “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Spirit baptism formed the Body of Christ. But what exactly is the Body of Christ?

The Church is the Body of Christ

The apostle Paul used the idea of a “body” to describe the Church. To be more specific, Paul spoke of the Church as being Christ’s body. For example:

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph. 1:22-23)

And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the Church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence. (Col. 1:17-18)

Conclusion

By putting all the pieces of the puzzle together it seems quite clear that the Church must have had it's beginning in Acts chapter 2.

1. Jesus predicted "I will (future tense) build My Church" (Mt. 16:18).
2. Jesus predicted that His disciples would be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5b).
3. The disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).
4. In Acts 11, Peter described how the Holy Spirit fell upon the new Gentile converts. He said that event was similar to what happened to them "at the beginning." Then he equated the Holy Spirit falling on them "at the beginning" with Jesus' prediction of the baptism of the Spirit. From this we can conclude that the baptism of the Spirit occurred sometime between Acts 1:5 and Acts 11. The day of Pentecost in Acts 2 seems like the most logical event that corresponds to the baptism of the Spirit.
5. Paul explained that the purpose of Spirit baptism was to form the Body of Christ.
6. Paul also explained that the Body of Christ is the Church.

We know that the Church was formed before Acts 11. Therefore, we must question the position of Ultra-Dispensationalists who place the beginning of the Church in either Acts 13 or Acts 28.

This evidence also refutes the teaching of Covenant Theology which claims that the Church began in the Old Testament.

In Ephesians 2:20, the apostle Paul tells us that the Church was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." This is a problem for Covenant Theology since there were

no apostles in the Old Testament. If the Church began in the Old Testament, it must have had a very poor support structure since half of its foundation was missing for thousands of years.

The apostle Paul described the Church as being “a mystery.” In the next lesson we will see how the word “mystery” shows that the Church could not be in the Old Testament.

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