

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

D M HERRING
45 LUXBOROUGH ROAD
BRIDGWATER
TA6 7JN

01278 451297
qmins@aol.com

THE REFORMATION OF THE CHURCH

The five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his document to the door of Wittenberg castle church occurred at the end of October 2017. Known as his “95 Theses”, the document criticised the Roman church’s vastly lucrative sale of indulgences – “remissions from punishment in purgatory”. However, to understand the bigger issues behind Luther’s anger we must ask how the whole idea of indulgences came into the New Testament Church in the first place. What had happened to that wonderful, free and simple body set up at Pentecost by the Holy Spirit, and developed through the apostles, to turn it into such a gross caricature of a church for over one thousand years? What powers were at work that swept away the primitive, biblical and evangelical Celtic church that had existed in these islands from the first century until Augustine arrived to bring it all under Rome? The root problem which gave rise to the many unbiblical practices still exists and put simply, it is the Church’s relationship with Israel, as this study seeks to show. The reformation of the Church is a process, not an event; a re-formation process which is ongoing today.

Central to God’s dealings with humanity is His covenant with Israel on one hand and His covenant with each individual person who trusts in Jesus Christ as Saviour, collectively the Church, on the other. The unconditional covenant with Israel, the Jewish people (Deuteronomy 7 v 7 – 9), included the promises made by God to Abraham, repeated to Isaac and Jacob, and was brought fully into effect with their physical descendants as a nation at Sinai (Exodus 24 v 1 – 8). God promised that His covenant with them was eternal, relating to them as a people, with a promised land where they were to live. God would reveal Himself to all peoples through the Jews and from them the Messiah would come, the One who through the process of redemption would restore God’s perfect purposes for humanity, the world and, indeed, the whole creation (Matthew 19 v 28, Acts 3 v 21). The Messiah did come, but the Jewish leadership of the day rejected Him (John 1 v 11), accepting the consequences of their rejection (Matthew 27 v 25). Those consequences led to the loss of their land, their capital city and their temple. However, the ground of all God’s eternal promises is His faithfulness, *not the disobedient and ungrateful responses of humans* (Hebrews 6 v 13 – 18) and because of this the prophets foretold the certainty that whenever dispersed, the Jewish people would eventually be gathered back to the land (e.g., Jeremiah chapters 30 – 33, Ezekiel chapters 36 – 38, and many others). Near the end of their earlier Babylonian captivity Daniel was given the details of God’s future purposes for Israel (Daniel 9 v 25 – 27) and through this prophecy they were told that when the Anointed One was cut off [crucified] their land would be taken away again. After an indeterminate period, there would be another seven years when Israel would once more be in the spotlight as the centre of God’s dealings with the world. In Romans chapter 11 Paul explains that Israel’s rejection was for the benefit of the Gentiles, and that Israel’s eventual restoration will be for an even greater blessing (11 v 15). The prophets made it plain that after that Jewish restoration the Messiah will return as their King (e.g., Isaiah 9 v 7), fulfilling the prophetic promises of worldwide blessings under the Messiah’s reign.

The Church, inaugurated at Pentecost, arises from God’s gracious covenant promise to each individual from anywhere in the world, and at any time throughout the Church age, Jew or Gentile, who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3 v 16). The basis of this covenant is not physical descendants or a given area of land, but the promise of the forgiveness of sins, an absence of condemnation, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and an eternal relationship with Jesus as part of His bride. In short, the Church has Christ as a bridegroom and will forever abide with Him. There is no indication in scripture that this covenant replaced God’s covenant with Abraham, *nor could it do so if God is true to His faithful nature*. Rather it opens up a new phase in His dealings with humanity, leading to the creation of an eternal bridal companion for God the Son (Romans 8 v 17). This bride, the Church, is to be removed from the scene (1 Thessalonians 4 v 13 – 18) just prior to Israel coming back into the world spotlight for that final seven years. (Daniel 9 v 27, referred to by the Lord in Matthew 24 v 15, shows that the seven years commence with a peace treaty with the antichrist which will allow the Jews to rebuild the temple. 2 Thessalonians 2 v 7 – 8 shows that the antichrist cannot be revealed until the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit, through the Church, has been removed.) Then Israel will again be the means of God’s revelation, this time for judgement, before this present age concludes with the arrival of the King with His bride (Zechariah 8 v 1 – 3 & 14 – 23, 14 v 3 – 9, Matthew 24 v 29 – 35, Revelation 19 v 11 – 21).

Since the day of Pentecost, the Church has been very ambivalent about Israel, and this is the problem that many Christians have still not resolved, hence the continuing need for reformation. (It also has to be said that many in Israel are very ambivalent about Jesus and the Church, but their eyes will be opened (Zechariah 12 v 10 – 13 v 1) and in many cases have already been so.) The problems started right at the beginning of the Church age and the fact that they continue to this day indicates, to this writer, the malevolent work of Satan. In Old Testament times Satan did everything he could to destroy the line of descent from Adam so that Jesus could not come as the second Adam. He also sought time and again to corrupt human nature as God had created it so that Jesus could not come with a true human nature and thereby redeem us. Now, since Jesus returned to His Father, Satan has sought to destroy the Jewish nation so that the promised Messiah cannot return as King of the Jews on the throne of David. But then, Jesus Himself promised that despite Satan the Jewish race would not pass away before God’s purposes had been fully achieved (Matthew 24 v 34 and others, where the word *gennēma* means race or offspring, not just one single generation). So, we need to consider the manner in which Satan has sought to mislead and corrupt the Church in its relationship with Israel.

1. There was a strong legalistic tendency among some of the very earliest Christians (including, for a while, Peter himself) to see the Church as a development of Judaism. Had this satanic idea succeeded then, the Church would never have been a separate entity under God's amazing plan; neither would the world have known the glorious freedom that we can have in Christ. The Jewish faith was bound up in the Law and these people wanted Gentile converts to submit to the Law. Paul had a definite understanding that the Church was a completely new administration, as he explains in Ephesians 3 v 1 - 13 and especially in the letter to the Galatians. James also saw the issue clearly at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. The genius of the Gospel and the true character of the Church mean a relationship with God through faith in Jesus is available to anyone in any culture without the bondage of the Law. As Jesus makes clear (John 8 v 31 - 36) each of us can be free of legalistic bondage – not free to be sinful but free to live in a personal and victorious relationship with Him (Romans 6 v 1 - 14).
2. The apostles accepted the full Old Testament messianic prophecies literally and were looking for the return of Jesus as the reigning King of Israel. Jesus didn't tell the disciples that this view was wrong, just that they were not to know God's timing (Acts 1 v 6 - 7). They argued strenuously that Jesus was the expected Christ who had started, and would continue, to completely fulfil all those messianic prophecies. This is exactly why the disciples in Antioch referred to themselves as Christians (Acts 11 v 26) – they were believers in Jesus as the Christ and not just as Lord (God) and Saviour (man). Logically, therefore, by calling ourselves Christians, we show that we also believe, as they did, that Jesus will be the fulfilment of all the literal messianic scriptures, including His messianic reign. By definition Christians are a messianic people. In the second and third centuries Satan attacked again when some church fathers began to allegorise the Old Testament scriptures, suggesting that God's promises to Israel had been transferred to the Church. This replacement movement grew and became embodied in both western and eastern churches after the conversion of the Roman Empire in AD 313. *Both groups of churches therefore assimilated Old Testament features of Israel*, including a separate priesthood, vestments, legalism, altars (with the sacrifice of transubstantiation), infant baptism (in lieu of circumcision), and the amalgamation of the state and the church resulting in the concept of Christendom. None of these features is in the New Testament. The church became worldly and all-powerful, and freedom was lost. These structures brought in a very heavy ecclesiastical authority, even over kings and princes. This unbiblical authority was reinforced within by the sale of indulgences, and without by crusading and armed warfare, completely contradicting the teaching of the New Testament.
3. What we normally refer to as Luther's Reformation was already under way, especially in England with John Wycliffe - "The Morning Star of the Reformation". Wycliffe saw that the key to New Testament Christianity was to make the Bible available in everyone's own language and that process continued under Luther, Tyndale and many others. However, there was fierce opposition from inside the official church to this glorious renaissance and many great men and women were martyred for their efforts. Yet again, satanic forces were at work within the so-called church, blinding the multitudes to the truth.
4. The earliest reformation churches merely started the process of reform, often under political pressures such as applied here by King Henry VIII. Since then, other reforms have gradually emerged that restored, for example, teaching regarding the priesthood of all believers, believers' baptism, the gifting and anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is sadly the case that the one main area remaining unreformed is the unbiblical replacement teaching that caused all the trouble in the first place. Despite this ongoing process of reform, the replacement view has stubbornly persisted to this day, known now as either amillennialism or postmillennialism. Satan has used this weapon to undermine God's truth concerning His future plans for and through Israel, and to sow discord and even hostility between Israel and the Church. There is a view that the Church is building God's Kingdom on earth here and now, not just a spiritual kingdom (Luke 17 v 20 - 21). But scripture shows that the true Kingdom will only come about by the intervention and rule of the Messiah Himself, and that His seat of authority will be David's throne. The claim that the great Kingdom prophecies are being fulfilled by the Church completely lacks biblical integrity and accuracy. To fit that position, the prophecies have to be allegorised out of any worthwhile meaning.
5. It is sadly the case that this view that Israel has been replaced in God's prophetic purposes has often led the Church to take a strongly anti-Semitic line. This position is still found among some evangelical churches today, where there is more common cause with an Islamic political position than with a biblical view. Even Luther developed a hatred of the Jews which some believe laid the foundation in the German soul for an attitude that led to the holocaust.
6. Biblical prophecy suggests that after the rapture of the true Church the nominal religious authorities left behind will side with the political leadership of the antichrist to persecute the Jewish people once more. This will be a final desperate effort by Satan to destroy any possibility of Jesus returning to claim His throne.

The Church cannot and must not just wish Israel away, and the matter certainly is not settled by the Church calling itself 'Israel'. To do so does not remove God's promises to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; it is nowhere found in scripture as a doctrine; and as the history of the Church powerfully demonstrates, it is a man-made and satanically-inspired construct. No, the real Israel is the apple of God's eye (Deuteronomy 32 v 9 - 10, Zechariah 2 v 7 - 8); the wife of Yahweh (Isaiah 54 v 5, Jeremiah 3 v 14); and Jerusalem is a cup of reeling to all its enemies (Zechariah 12 v 1 - 3). God has an eternal covenant with Israel and denying that is to deny God's faithful nature, because He will not change His mind on Israel (Jeremiah 33 v 23 - 26). God has a huge issue with those who question His faithfulness, and this is a very serious matter for the Church today. For anyone willing to listen, over the past two hundred years God has been progressively revealing the great truths of His future plans: restoring Israel to the promised land; drawing the Church age to a close; and warning that the judgement at the end of the age is very close (Luke 21 v 28). In these last days of this present age the final step in the reformation of the Church is vitally necessary; as Christians we need to weep for Israel and repent because of our arrogant usurping of Israel's rightful place in God's eternal purposes. The younger prodigal son may be enjoying the feast, and outside the sulking older brother might not endear himself to many, but both have the same gracious Heavenly Father, who assures the older brother "you are always with me and everything I have is yours".