

Sermon 129: Romans 11:17-24: One Olive Tree

OUTLINE

Visible vs. invisible

O.T. vs. N.T.

INTRODUCTION

'We believe in one holy; catholic and apostolic church.' Is a confession from the first council of Constantinople, one of the universal creeds of the Christian church. This statement says four things about the church that it is one, that it is holy, that it is universal/catholic and that it is apostolic. Today as we continue to reflect on Romans eleven we want to think with Paul about the oneness of the church. As Paul has been talking about the place of Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation he has been using the picture of a single olive tree to make his point. Paul is revealing to us his underlying convictions of the nature of the church. These are most important and we must dig into these. What is the church? Who are the people of God? Are denominations sinful? These and many other questions are answered from looking at Paul's understanding of the people of God as a single olive tree. Today we will be looking at things that are traditionally set as polar opposites: the visible vs. the invisible church; the O.T. vs. the N.T.

Visible vs. invisible

Answering the question 'what is the church?' answers another question, 'who is part of the church?' Your view of the church will determine your view of who is saved. 'There is no salvation outside of the church.' What do you think of this statement?

It all depends on what you mean by 'Church,' if you mean the visible church, that is the local and outward expression of the church, church from man's perspective, then we are saying that we cannot be Christians unless we go to church. If we mean the invisible church then it is true that no one can be a Christian unless one is united to Christ invisibly, that is by the Spirit. This is the church from God's perspective. It was this issue that was under dispute at the time of the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church made the assertion that there was no salvation outside of the church. They meant that you could not be saved unless you were linked with the visible organization of the Roman Catholic Church. In their minds the only church that existed was the visible church organization of the Roman Catholic Church. This view of church was influenced by their view of sacramental salvation, that you can only get grace for salvation from the sacraments that the church dispenses. If you do not have access to their sacraments, then you do not have access to salvation. Their view of church and salvation stood and fell together.

This is the error of the cults today. The cults always want you to join their particular organization or you cannot be saved. Believing in Jesus is not enough you need to have their apostle's lay hands, receive their baptism, attend their places of worship or the way is barred. A person cannot leave their church without leaving Christ. This is a denial of the fact that each one is joined to Christ and every other saint spiritually when they believe. Paul not only argues that the church is one olive tree but also one body and we are all joined to the single body of Christ by the Spirit, 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body---Jews or Greeks, slaves or free---and all were made to drink of one Spirit.'

Today we are facing the opposite error. In the emergent church movement, which for those of you who are not aware of it is a reaction to the megachurch Christianity of the 70s to 2000. It is the reaction of a generation who have been influenced by the philosophical pluralism of our age who are tolerant as a rule except against those who have strong doctrinal convictions, who value community over truth, experience over knowledge, and who despise glossy and slick advertising driven methods of the megachurch movement. They drive for authenticity and justice, unfortunately they have imbibed the basic tenets of liberalism and are merely a new liberalism with a similar view of church, truth, good works, and various other aspects of church life. Today they write books that trash the church and defend the unchurched or the dechurched. They say that church is Christianity's worst enemy and that a radical revamp is required. These revolutionaries claim that what we see as the visible church, the local church meetings on Sunday and throughout the week are optional at best and destructive at worst. For them Christianity can consist in downloading a podcast, visiting chat rooms that talk about stuff, sometimes spiritual, doing any form of activity with other disenfranchised Christians and this makes up church. They stress the invisible church, our connection to Christ at the expense of the visible church our belonging to a visible expression of that body in the local church. NZ has a high rate of Christians who think that belonging to the invisible church is the only church they need to belong to and have given up the visible church.

Which do you overemphasize? Do you sway towards the side of the invisible church and say that things like attending the visible church are not so important, or do you so overemphasize the visible church as to forget that salvation is by the Spiritual joining of ourselves to Christ and the invisible church? Do you forget the invisible church by thinking other churches can't have Christians but our own or our own denomination? Do you acknowledge that every person who trusts in Christ is joined to the olive tree? These Gentiles that Paul is dealing with seem to want to deny it.

Let me test your answer. Do you believe that someone who is a member of the Roman Catholic Church can come to faith in Christ and be saved though still in the Catholic church? This question tests to see whether you are thinking in terms of the visible or invisible church. I would say they can be but add these important qualifiers. The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is error, but God is sovereign and can save His elect in the midst of that corrupted organization as He has done over the millennia. I hope they would leave the church, and trust by virtue of their having the Spirit that they would certainly reject those doctrines which compromise the gospel. But we must affirm that they are part of the one holy catholic and apostolic church with us by the Spirit. Viewing other Christians in this way is important because we are prone to party spirits, we are suspicious of those who are not like us; we are self-centredly loyal to our own without investigation and so must balance all these biases with the truth of the invisible church. We with these Gentiles Paul is addressing the need of this reminder.

O.T. vs. N.T.

Another truth that Paul holds about the church which we need to believe is that both O.T. and N.T. believers are part of one body, one olive tree by faith. In Paul's illustration we see that Gentiles do not start their own new olive tree but are grafted into the already planted tree of the O.T. people of God. We see some Jewish branches through unbelief being removed as we move from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, but we also see Jews remaining in who believe upon Jesus. There are not two trees one for the OT and one for the NT, but one continuous tree. Paul teaches this way because he believes that every person who ever got saved in the OT was saved by faith in Christ. This is the point of

Romans 4. Paul uses the example of Abraham, to the Jews the father of the faithful and the highest example to prove that Abraham was not saved by works but by faith. Romans 4:3-4, 'For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." 4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. 5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.' Jesus said that Abraham saw His day and rejoiced. By the Spirit the OT saints were pointed not to someone with the name Jesus but to the one who would fulfil all the promises from the promised seed of the woman. Their confidence was in a merciful God who would provide a saviour. They looked forward to that provision, and we look back to that provision. By the Spirit drawing our faith to God's provision we are incorporated by that Spirit into the body of Christ, the Olive tree. Sinful hearts could only believe with the help of the Spirit in the OT as well as the NT. There has only always been one way for sinners to be saved, by grace through faith in Christ, either looking forward to God's provision or back. Heb. 12:22-23, 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.' These verses remind us that when we believed we joined with all those saints who are believers, not only those alive but all those even now dead who exist as perfected spirits in the intermediate state awaiting Christ's return for the resurrection of the bodies. For this reason Paul stresses to the Gentiles that the root supports the branch and we are grafted not into a Gentile church but a Jewish one. There is one people of God and not two.

In our age where most people think that all religions are one we must stress that it is true that there is only one olive tree, but that there is also only one way to be grafted into that olive tree. You must believe upon Christ, we stand or fall by faith. Believers in another religion is a way to hell not heaven. One is only joined to the olive tree through believing in Christ alone. He is the way the truth and the life and no one comes to the Father but through Him.

This leads us to touch upon some controversial matters that are bound up with this section. Are there two peoples of God or one? Our Dispensationalist brothers believe that certain promises to Abraham must be fulfilled literally. The promises of land, blessing and offspring. ¹On account of the fact that Israel never enjoyed the full literal fulfilment of the various promises it is expected that a full literal fulfilment must still be coming for Israel. Josh. 21:43-45 seems to be ignored, 'Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. And they took possession of it, and they settled there. 44 And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. 45 Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.'

It is this still to be completed view of the promises that gives a foundation to the views of Christian Zionism, that Israel must still see the promise fulfilled. The various prophetic promises made of Israel inheriting the land in fullness come after Solomon's era (Is. 11:1-11; Jer. 16:14-16; 30:10-11; Ezek. 34:11; Joel 3:17-21; Amos 9:11-15; Mic. 4:4-7; Zeph. 3:14-20; Zech. 8:4-8). The Dispensationalists see Jesus coming and offering the Jews the Kingdom and the fulfilment of all the promises, but they reject them, so the promises must be postponed and Romans 11:25-27 is seen as pointing to the time when Israel will receive

1 Sam Storms, Kingdom come, p52-55.

the Kingdom. (I wonder how the Dispensationalists can know that the Jews won't reject it again!) God will remove the church to heaven in the Pretrib rapture and deal with Israel by the Great Tribulation to prepare Israel for the promises in the Millennium. The church is seen merely as a time killer, a parenthesis until God can recommence His main purpose, the promises to Israel. Lewis Sperry Chafer sees the notion of a parenthesis as too weak and opts for the word 'intercalation' like intruding a period of time into a calendar and the nature of this intrusion is for him has no direct relation to what preceded it and what follows it, the church is seen an alien implant that disrupts the main plot of the Bible. The Millennium is the dustbin of all of these promises to Israel. After the rapture and the Great Tribulation and before the judgement and eternal states is when the Millennium will happen. One cannot reject the Israel/Church distinction and be a dispensationalist this is one of the non-negotiable principles that drive the hermeneutical endeavour. Chafer writes, 'The Dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved with Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.' Since this distinction is vital to their view the reviewed view of Progressive Dispensationalism is seen by a threat by the older view. 'Progressive Dispensationalism's proposal that there is a measure of continuity between Israel and the Church and that the latter shares, in part, in the Old Testament promises given to the former, is viewed as a departure from that one feature that sets dispensationalism apart from all other eschatological systems.'

Modern day theologians have divided what Paul put together; they create two separate people when Paul shows them to be one. Eph. 2:11-22, 'Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called "the uncircumcision" by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands--- 12 remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.'

Please notice in verses 11-12 how Paul paints the pre-Christ position of unbelieving Gentiles. They were 'separated from Christ', alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers to the covenants of promise, no hope, and without God in the world. But then notice how in v13-18 Christ reverses this. Notice the typical 'but now' words of Paul as he indicates that we who were far off have been brought near by His blood. He has become our peace. He has broken down the hostilities between Jews and Gentiles that were held in place by the law and He has made one new man, one tree, one body made up of both. So now both Jews and Gentiles both have access as one man, by one Spirit, in one Christ, and Gentiles are now fellow heirs with Jews. Every promise that is theirs is now ours. We are together not apart a dwelling place for God by His Spirit.

I am in earnest that you see this point, there is only one people of God because you are not to see yourselves as second class citizens in God's kingdom. We inherit every promise they inherit, we are co-heirs and co-citizens with them because we are all one in Christ. This flies in the face of modern theology but we are merely trying to keep the unity of God's people that Paul is teaching by the one olive tree. By dividing the people of God we obscure God as the keeper of OT promises. By insisting that there has to be a certain type of fulfilment reserved for some future period we deny how the bible says we should be understanding God's working. They are obscuring what Paul says is a mystery revealed in Eph. 3:6, 'This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.'

The whole of the NT speaks in this way:

Matthew 8:10-12, when Jesus healed the Gentile Centurion's servant, 'When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, "Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11 I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, 12 while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Abraham having table fellowship with unclean Gentiles. This is a fulfilment of various OT prophecies such as Is. 45:6; 59:19 and Mal. 1:11.

Acts 15:13-18, 'After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. 14 Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. 15 And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, "'After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things 18 known from of old.' James is quoting Amos 9:8-12 which is God's judgement upon a prosperous 10 northern tribes in the OT. God promises judgement but also to spare a remnant. He promised a 3fold restoration of the house of David by repairing its breaches, that is its divisions; of raising its ruins and restoring it to former glory. We learn from James how to read this OT passage and to see in the salvation of Gentiles what the fulfilment of these OT promises looks like.

Romans 9:25-26, 'As indeed he says in Hosea, "Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'" "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'" You will notice that v25 is speaking about the salvation of elect Gentiles and they are seen as fulfilling Hos. 2:23, 1:10. Promises originally intended for Israel but applied to Gentiles by Paul.

The promise of Israel receiving a new name is applied to Gentile believers in Rev. 2:17.

The promise of others coming to bow at the people of God's feet from Is. 60:4, 45:14 and 49:23 are fulfilled by the synagogue of satan bowing before Gentiles Rev. 3:9.

The promise of being called the city of God in Is. 60:14 is fulfilled in Gentiles Rev. 3:12.

There is more that needs to be said about the land and the temple, and we will pick up some of these topics at a later point. But can you see Paul's point, all believers are one people of God in Christ. These notions of God having two people distort the scriptures, they make Christians feel like second rate citizens instead of realizing the fullness of God's grace towards them. We are with believing Jews a royal priesthood. We have all the benefits of being fully adopted by God. His salvation towards us is not inferior to any other believer of any other race. We stand by grace, we do not deserve to be so rich because of Christ, but in Him we are all co-heirs of His bounty.

My concern over this goes further. I am deeply disturbed by the growing popularity of the Seventh Day Adventists who are still living in the OT and not recognizing that salvation is by grace alone, not grace and Sabbath keeping and food laws. I am disturbed by new

obsessions with Jewish holy days and reenactments of the Passover and other feasts. I am disturbed by race based theology like the British Israelites who try to trace out a direct bloodline to Israel. They believe that the Jewish nation are of blood descent from Israel and therefore blessed by God. Paul is saying that we are God's people by faith not blood. Other groups like the black Hebrew Israelites who believe that they are descendants of Jews who went to Africa are reverse racists because of a faulty view of being Israel. I am disturbed by the Dispensationalists past tendency to be like Marcion and make only certain parts of the NT for Christians and other parts like the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the mount for Jews in the Millennium. I am annoyed by Dispensationalist Christians judging the salvation of other Christians on the basis of their view of Israel. I am annoyed by the stupid politics of some Christians. Just on my last visit to South Africa I was told of a Christian political party that was telling Christians to vote for them because they were pro-Israel. In other words, they were saying that their political party would be best for the future of South Africa because they blessed Israel and would in turn be favoured by God. I am dismayed by Christians who today are saying that the three monotheistic religions of Islam, Judaism and Christianity are all worshipping the same God when Paul tells us that only those who trust in and confess Christ as Lord are saved. On and on I could go showing how a failure to recognise the underlying view of Paul on the people of God results in absurd unbiblical notions and practices.

We are one people of God by faith in Christ. This must result in racial harmony, in us loving one another with a family love, in a way of receiving each other that smells of the grace God accepted us with, in a generosity that reminds others of the generosity that God has shown to us in Christ, of a holiness that is in keeping with the holiness of the Head it is joined to, in an activity that represents the Head's wishes in the word, doing the actions of Christ on earth and speaking His words.