

The Erroneous Concept of "Spiritual Israel"

Romans 2:28-29

By Ben Webb

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God." Romans 2:28-29

Recently, a very amiable Covenant Theologian sent me an e-mail concerning the above passage, claiming that it proves the church is "the Israel of God", because "a Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly". His e-mail, and my response, are chronicled below.

His e-mail opened as follows:

'I do nevertheless challenge your assertion that the church is not spiritual Israel. Notice from Scriptures how the apostles annihilates this dichotomy.

'The Dividing Wall Demolished (Ephesians 2:11-22)

'The movement of the history of redemption is on this order. The people of God were an international people from Adam to Noah to Moses. Under Moses, the people of God became temporarily a national people. God instituted special civil and ceremonial laws to separate his national people from the Gentile pagans. In Ephesians 2:14 the Apostle Paul describes these civil and ceremonial laws as a "dividing wall" between Jew and Gentile. Because of that dividing wall, the Gentiles, considered as a people, were "separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world" (2.12).

'Now, however, because of Christ's death, Paul assures Gentile Christians that "you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (v.13). How? Through his death, Christ has destroyed the dividing wall, torn the temple veil, destroyed the temple and restored it three days by his resurrection (John 2:19), by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross (Eph 2.15-16).'

My Response:

From my point of view, your above statement actually strengthens my position. To begin with, by destroying the "dividing wall", Christ has created "one new man" out of the two (Eph. 2:15). And the word "new" means just that - something totally new. Not Israel, not Gentile. One totally new man. Romans chapter 11 also shows that there is no longer an Israel which is God's people. Paul states in Ro. 11:11-13 that Gentiles are now saved through the "fall" of Israel (rather than through her exaltation, as was the case when the "dividing wall" was in existence). The context makes it clear that this passage is referring to the "fall" of "Israel", and not just unbelievers within the nation of Israel (as one Covenant Theologian has insisted), because verse 7 states that "Israel" has not obtained "that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded". So, when Paul states in Ro. 11:11-13 that through "their fall" salvation is come unto the Gentiles, he must be referring to the "fall" of the "Israel" he mentioned in verse 7. And because Israel is fallen, and God has created "one new man" that is neither Israel nor Gentile, this new man would be the church which is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, etc.) - never before mentioned while Israel was God's chosen people.

My friend then continued:

'Now, by virtue of our union with Christ, both Jewish and Gentile Christians are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph 2.19); "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil 3.3). Why? Because "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3.20). How is it that Premillennialism, by having two parallel peoples of God, does not rebuild that very dividing wall which Jesus destroyed by his death?'

My Response:

I will answer your last question first. Pre-millennialism does not rebuild the dividing wall, because Israel has already fallen (Ro. 11:7-13; see my earlier explanation). If there is a dividing wall at all, it is because of *Israel's* OWN unbelief, and not because of Pre-millennialism. John 14:6 makes it absolutely clear that no man comes to the Father, unless he comes through Christ. So, because Israel does not believe, they are not coming to the Father. Which means they are the ones putting up the wall. Not Pre-Millennialists.

Yes, the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile has been done away with through the blood of Christ. However, you seem to be implying a belief (and please correct me if I am wrong) that Eph. 2:19 means unbelieving Israel is still God's people, in spite of what Paul states in Romans 11:7-13. And that just cannot be the case, according to John 14:6.

And finally, you mentioned the fact that both Jew and Gentiles believers are now members of God's household, worship God in the spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, have no confidence in the

flesh, etc. That should be enough to show that Pre-millennialists are not building again the dividing wall, because we agree with that statement.

Next, my friend continued:

'Not All Israel is Israel.'

'One of the clearest places in Scripture on this question is Romans chapter 9. The context is the very question we are addressing now, what about Israel? Who is the Israel of God? Has God abandoned his promise to Abraham? Paul's answer is, a Jew is one who is a Jew inwardly, who loves the Savior of Abraham. Since Jesus was circumcised (Col. 2.11-12) for us on the cross, circumcision is morally and spiritually indifferent.'

My Response:

Actually, it is Romans chapter 2 where Paul discusses "he" who is a Jew inwardly. But neither chapter 2 nor most of chapter 9 concerns believers, even though chapter 9 is indeed an extension of Paul's explanation in chapters 2-3, where he addressed him that was "called" a Jew (an unbeliever), who rested in the law (2:17).

I can see why you might think Paul is referring to believers, if Ro. 2:28-29 is read by itself. But in the context of the previous verses, Paul is referring to someone who is not only resting on his ability to keep the law (verse 23; see also verses 17-18), but is also physically circumcised in observance of the law (verses 25-27), "called a Jew" (verse 17), etc. And in verse 24, Paul makes reference to Ezekiel's description of blaspheming Jews who are fallen (Ezek. 36:20-23), reprimanding them thus: "...the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written". So Paul is not referring to believers when he states that "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" in verse 29.

And prior to that, Paul speaks of those who will actually obtain eternal life through well doing (rather than by believing on Christ), in verses 6-11 -

"(God) will render to every man according to his deeds: To them who by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, eternal life: But unto them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, indignation and wrath, Tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: For there is no respect of persons with God."

In the above passage, Paul is referring to those who will receive either eternal life or wrath, depending on their works. The phrase "the Jew first, and also of the Gentile" (verses 9 and 10) is important, and also shows that Paul cannot be referring to believers, because the Jewish

believer does not receive "glory, honour, and peace" first, before the Gentile believer receives them. This only applied to those who never had a chance to believe on Christ.

Plus, we also know that Paul cannot be referring to believers in this passage, because God does not render eternal life to us according to our deeds, as he will for those in verses 6-7, who "by patient continuance in well doing seek for glory and honour".

In fact, the context of chapter 2 also goes all the way back to chapter 1, where Paul speaks of the fact that God gave men up to uncleanness (1:24), vile affections (verse 26), etc. These are those men who, if they "seek for glory and honour and immortality", will receive "eternal life" (2:7). These are also those who "do by nature the things contained in the law" that Paul mentions in verses 12-15 -

"For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)"

And again, Paul cannot be referring to believers in the above passage, because his focus is upon the law - and we are not under the law (Ro. 6:14; Gal. 5:18; etc.). So in verses 14-15 above, he is still speaking of those same people of verses 6-11 who will either receive eternal life or wrath, depending on their works. Those who will receive eternal life are those who "shew the work of the law written in their hearts" (verse 15).

Therefore, in Romans 2:28-29, when Paul refers to the circumcision of the heart, he is still referring to these same people of verses 6-15, who will receive eternal life, "of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile" (verses 9 and 10), who "shew the work of the law written in their hearts" (verse 15). These are the ones who Paul refers to as being a Jew "inwardly", in Ro. 2:28-29 -

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Plus, Paul's use of the phrase "of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile" in Ro. 2:9-10 also explains why the unbelieving Jew still had the advantage over Gentile unbelievers, in Ro. 3:1-4 -

"What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid..."

In the above passage, when Paul explains the advantage of "the Jew", the context of chapter 2 must again be carried over, concerning "he" that is a Jew "inwardly" (2:28-29). Paul never once refers to believers as being Jews inwardly. Quite the opposite. Concerning believers (those who are "in Christ"), he states in Gal. 3:28 that "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus". Even though we as individuals are male, female, Jew, Greek, etc., there is no difference in Christ, as he also states in Ro. 10:12 - "...there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him". He confirms this in Col. 3:11, when he states that "...there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all".

So, because there is neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ, we know that the Jewish believer does not have advantage over the Gentile believer, which would be the case if Romans 2:28-3:3 was referring to believers.

And now, I would also like to offer my own opinion on this (just an opinion). I think it is also significant that Paul does not say "you" are a Jew who is one inwardly, in Romans chapter 2. Rather, Paul says that "HE" (someone who is not being addressed) is a Jew, which is one inwardly, in Ro. 2:28-29 -

"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

Since Paul never says that that *you* are a Jew who is one inwardly, I do not see the context of the above passage as pertaining to believers in the church (which is more fully explained in chapter 9). Rather, Paul is referring to those who "do by nature the things contained in the law" in verses 12-15, who are not believers, who have never heard the gospel. Like I said, this last part about "he" who is a Jew is strictly my own opinion, but in light of everything else I wrote above, I think it makes sense.

Anyway, back to what the scriptures themselves say:

In order to show in Ro. 10:12 that there is no Jew or Gentile "in Christ", Paul must first explain in Ro. 9:6 that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel". Not all of Abraham's seed are counted for his children, and not all Israelites have fallen (compare Ro. 11:7-11). Or, to put it another way, some of Abraham's seed (those that believe) are still counted for his children.

Compare Gal. 3:7, where Paul also states that "they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham". Some Israelites, such as Paul, have not fallen, because they are now members of the body of Christ, and are therefore children of Abraham.

So, when Paul states in Ro. 9:6 that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel", he is showing why he is not referring to all Israelites as being fallen in Ro. 11:7-11. Those Israelites who are not fallen are believers, and members of the body of Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile. Physically, they are still Israelites, as Paul is, "of the seed of Abraham" (Ro. 11:1). But they are not Israel, which is fallen.

As I started explaining before I was sidetracked, it is also clear from reading Romans 2:26-3:2 and 9:1-8 that neither passage has anything to do with believing the gospel, or salvation. Instead, Paul is giving a further explanation in Ro. 9:3-5 of his earlier statement in chapters 2-3 that these kinsmen of his still had the advantage over unbelieving Gentiles - the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises all pertained to the Jews, not us. This book of Romans was written during the book of Acts, probably during the time in Acts 20:3 when he abode in Greece for 3 months. And we know from Acts 17:1-2 that when Paul came to a city, it was his "manner" to preach in the Jewish synagogues -

"Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures,"

This further explains why Paul made the statement in Ro. 3:1-3 that the Jewish unbelievers had the "advantage" over unbelieving Gentiles - the Jews also had the "advantage" of hearing the gospel preached in their own synagogues, in addition to having the promises, covenants, etc. apply to them. Remember, Paul opens Romans 9 by stating that he could wish himself accursed for the sake of his kinsmen "according to the flesh" (verse 3), "of whom concerning the flesh Christ came" (verse 5). It is obvious that Christ's earthly ministry was to the Jews, not Gentiles (Mt. 10:5-7; Ro. 9:5; Ro. 15:8); and Paul is simply following this example by first preaching in the Jewish synagogues, when he comes to a new town in the book of Acts. There are exceptions, of course, but Acts 17:1-2 says that this was his "manner"; and he generally followed this pattern throughout the book of Acts, when he had the chance.

Nor does Paul say that one who is a Jew inwardly is one who loves the Saviour of Abraham, as you had previously stated. Please forgive me for being blunt here - I think that is your opinion, and you are certainly entitled to it; but I don't see where scripture ever makes this statement.

I do, however, agree with most of your next thoughts, when you wrote:

"It is not as though God's Word has failed" (Romans 9:6). The reason that only some Jews have trusted Jesus as Messiah is because not "all Israel are is Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children." Rather, Abraham's children are reckoned "through Isaac" (9:7) What this means is that "it is not the natural children who are God's, but children of the promise" (v.8). How was Isaac born? By the sovereign power of God. How are Christians born? By the sovereign power of God. Every Christian is an "Isaac" in his own way. Why is this so? Because before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad--in order that God's purpose in election might stand: 12 not by works but by him who calls--she was told, "The older will serve the younger." 13 Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated (Mal 1.2; 9.11-13).

'How can this be? It is because God "says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion'" (9.15).

'It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. 17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.'

Editor's Note: Like I said, I pretty much agree with most (but not all) of what my friend said here; and his statements with which I disagree are irrelevant to this discussion - for example, I do not agree that every Christian is an "Isaac" in his own way; but this has more to do with the predestination issue, than with the topic of whether or not we are "Spiritual Israel."

However, my friend then wrote something that I strongly disagree with:

'Is God unfair? According to the Apostle Paul, as creatures, we have no "rights" before God. God is the potter, we are the clay, but Christians are redeemed clay, objects of mercy, prepared in advance for glory. We must evaluate our condition against the backdrop of God's patience with those objects of wrath prepared for destruction (Romans 9.22-3). These vessels prepared for glory are taken from Jews and Gentiles alike (Romans 9.24). This is what he promised in Hosea, he has made those who were once "Lo Ammi," "Not my people," i.e., Gentiles, to be "sons of the living God" (Hosea 2:23; 1:10; Romans 9.25-6).'

My Response:

My disagreement here concerns the fact that you are applying Hosea 2:23 to believers in the church today, even though the context of the passage concerns the future millennium. It is obvious that Hosea 2:23 pertains to the future, because the previous verses state that when this passage is fulfilled, the LORD will make a covenant with the beasts of the field, the fowls of

heaven, and the creeping things of the ground. And this is certainly not the case today. Hosea 2:18-23 -

"And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD. And it shall come to pass in that day, I will hear, saith the LORD, I will hear the heavens, and they shall hear the earth; And the earth shall hear the corn, and the wine, and the oil; and they shall hear Jezreel. And I will sow her unto me in the earth; and I will have mercy upon her that had not obtained mercy; and I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God."

Verse 18 above can be compared to passages such as Isaiah 11:6-8, which speaks of a future time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the lion shall eat straw, the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den, etc. So, because verse 18 above has not yet taken place, it is obvious that verse 23 has not taken place, either. Instead, the passage speaks of a future time when God will have mercy on Israel, after having endured with much longsuffering her previous idolatries (see verses 1-6 and 9-13).

What, then, is Paul's point in Romans 9:25, if he is quoting a passage that has not yet been fulfilled? Again, context is important. In Romans chapter 9, Paul is giving an example of God's willingness to make His power known by enduring with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction, so that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy (Ro. 9:22-25). Because it is written in Hosea 2:23 that He will do this with Israel in the future, then He can also do so today with those who are physically Israelites. This is the meaning of Ro. 9:22-25 -

"What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved."

So, if I may give my own paraphrase of the passage here, God is willing to make His power known by enduring with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction (unbelieving Israel), so that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy (the church, which is the body of Christ), even us, whom He has called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles (members of the church), as He said also in Hosea concerning

unbelieving Israel, "I will call them my people, which were not my people" (He had previously called them Lo-ammi - "not my people", according to Hosea 1:9).

This also explains Hosea 1:10, when the LORD says that "the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God". This speaks of the same time that Hosea 2:25 is fulfilled.

Can you see what I am saying here? I sure hope so.

My friend then continued:

'The reason that lawless Gentiles have "obtained righteousness," and that Israel who pursued it by law has not, is because justification is not by works, but by grace (Romans 9.32). They stumbled over Jesus, the rock of offense. He did not fit their nationalist plans and I submit neither does he fit the nationalist/Zionist plans of Premillennialism.'

My Response:

I'm not sure what you mean here. Please explain what you mean by the "nationalist/Zionist plans of Premillennialism". I do agree with the rest of your statement, but I am ignorant of these Zionist plans you are referring to.

My friend then continued:

'It is not that Paul does not want Jews to be saved, but rather he says them because he wants Jews to be saved, and the only way for a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to become a true Israelite, is to be joined to the true Israel of God, Jesus, by faith. "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10.12). "Not all of the Israelites have accepted the Gospel."

My Response:

Again, I agree with much of what you have said, but I strongly disagree with your statement that the only way for a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to become a true Israelite is to join the true Israel of God, Jesus, by faith. Your very next sentence disproves that statement: "For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Romans 10.12).

So, because Ro. 10:12 states that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, Israel has not attained to "the law of righteousness" (Ro. 9:31). Thus, Paul also states in Ro. 11:7 that "Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for"; he states in Ro. 11:25 that "blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles be come in"; etc. Therefore, physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob do not need to become "true" Israelites at all, because Israel has fallen. Remember - when Paul states in Ro. 9:6 that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel", he is showing why not all Israelites are among the fallen of Ro. 11:7-11, since those who are not fallen are members of the body of Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile.