

The Church

Module 3.6

Across the landscape of Evangelical theology there exists wide and differing convictions about the Church and its place within eschatology. Questions such as, “will the Church be present during the great tribulation?”, “has the Church replaced Israel as the people of God?”, and “will Jesus literally reign for 1,000 years on the earth?” are answered in very different ways.

For example, some churches teach that when Jesus comes again he will set up a literal Kingdom and will reign for 1,000 years¹, while others disagree and teach that the Kingdom of God is increasingly coming, stressing that it is the job of Christians to hasten its coming². Some teach that Jesus will rapture his Church before the Great Tribulation begins³ while others teach that the Church will experience half or all of the Great Tribulation⁴.

Perhaps even more foundational are the differences of belief regarding the Church and Israel. Some believe that the Church has replaced Israel as God’s chosen people⁵, while others believe the Church is simply a mere parenthesis in God’s plan of redeeming a people to himself.⁶

Navigating these eschatological differences, and interpreting what God has revealed in his Word, takes time, patience, hard work, and humility. Furthermore, it is important that we recognize three very important aspects while seeking to do so.

- 1) Determining the details of Christ’s return is not a salvation issue and those whom we disagree with are brothers and sisters.⁷ We must first and foremost stress what unites us, rather than stress what distinguishes us.⁸
- 2) It is not wrong for our Fellowship to have shared convictions regarding eschatological issues. In fact, our beliefs regarding God’s Word demand that we do the hard work necessary in seeking clarity in these matters.

¹ Pre-Millennialism

² Amillennialism

³ Pre-Tribulational Rapture

⁴ Mid or Post Tribulational Rapture

⁵ Replacement Theology

⁶ Classic Dispensationalism

⁷ Within a theologically orthodox, evangelical, arena.

⁸ See Module 1.1 “*The Center*”. This line of thought must also be applied to our convictions regarding Baptism and Communion.

- 3) Tone matters greatly; for both believers inside the church and unbelievers outside the church. In this regard, we must take a posture of humility regarding eschatological issues.

While there are many issues within the field of eschatology to navigate and consider, the Charis Fellowship has chosen to be clear on three main points. The first is in regards to the inauguration of the Church. The second deals with the rapture of the Church. And the third addresses our beliefs regarding the return of Christ and his subsequent reign before instituting his eternal Kingdom.⁹

Regarding the inauguration of the Church, “*we affirm that the Church began on a particular day of Pentecost when our ascended Lord sent His Spirit to the waiting disciples.*” This means that we believe the Church did not exist before Pentecost and was inaugurated on Pentecost with about 3,000 Jewish persons placing their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, bringing the total size of the Church that first day to roughly 3,120.

In stating this, we are stating two very important things. The first is that the Church has not simply taken the place of, or replaced, ethnic Israel. The Apostle Paul makes this very clear in Ephesians 2:16 by stating that in Christ “one new man” (the Church) has been created in place of two, Jews and Gentiles. Hermeneutically speaking, this means that we do not approach the Old Testament and immediately conclude that every promise given to Israel has now been transferred to the Church. Rather, we interpret the Old Testament using grammatical, historical, and contextual principles of interpretation.¹⁰

Second, we believe that the Church is composed of both ethnically Jewish and ethnically non-Jewish persons. One’s ethnicity no longer matters in Christ!¹¹

Luke puts this truth on display throughout the beginning pages of Acts where the vast majority of the early church believers were ethnically Jewish. In fact, the invitation given by Peter in Acts 3 and 5 to Jewish “brothers” (Acts 3:17) was not an invitation to immediate Kingdom restoration, but rather an invitation to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation; following him in obedience as his witnesses to those who were not ethnically Jewish.¹²

⁹ It is not within the scope of this Module Paper to explore all of the relevant biblical material or fully consider all assenting and contrary positions.

¹⁰ See Module 3.2

¹¹ Colossians 3:11, Ephesians 2:18

¹² Acts 1:8

To this last point it is also important for us to note that, according to Paul in Romans 15:8-13, the inclusion of non-ethnic Jews (i.e. Gentiles) in salvation had been promised to “the patriarchs” and the inclusion of Gentiles was actually a confirmation of God’s promises to the Jewish patriarchs.

To be sure there are lines of continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Covenant; between Israel and the Church. Unfortunately, space within this module paper will not allow us to fully explore every aspect of the relationship between Israel and the Church. However, we do believe that the Scriptures are clear that the Church began on a particular day, and began with Jewish persons placing their faith and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

The second main point we are aiming to make clear about our beliefs regarding the Church is that *“the present Church age will come to an end when our Lord comes in the air to remove His Church from the earth and fulfill His promises to Israel.”* We believe this event, commonly referred to as “The Rapture”, is not the Second Coming of Christ, but rather a removal of the Church from the earth and is the next major eschatological event to take place.

Thirdly, we believe *“the second coming of Christ is the personal, physical, and visible return from heaven of Christ to earth with His Church, to establish His thousand-year reign before instituting His eternal kingdom.”*

In Revelation 19:11-16 the apostle John writes,

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

The first Advent of Christ was one of humility as “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he

humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”¹³
The second Advent of Christ will be one of wrath, terror, judgement, and victory over those who have not trusted in him for salvation.

John continues in Revelation 19:17-21,

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, “Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave, both small and great.” And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Christ’s victory, at his Second Coming, is decisive, bloody, complete, and a vivid reminder of the reality of sin. God is just and therefore must punish sinners for their sin. Yet, God is also gracious and loving, and he sent his Son to die on the cross as the perfect, spotless, substitute for sinners.

For unbelievers, the Second Coming of Christ will be a moment of dread and terror. For all living today, it is a poignant reminder of the penalty of sin and the free gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. The Second Coming, however, is not so much “the end” as it is “the beginning.”

Lastly, we believe Christ will next establish his thousand-year reign after he returns in victory and will reign for one thousand years on earth while Satan and his demonic host are bound so that “he might not deceive the nations any longer (Revelation 20:3).”

Six different times in Revelation 20:1-7 the Apostle John uses the words “thousand years”¹⁴ to describe the reign of Christ. We understand these verses in Revelation to be speaking of a literal thousand-year reign in which Christ will be on the earth, with His Church and those believers who survived the Great Tribulation. After the one thousand years have passed Satan will be fully conquered and thrown into the Lake of Fire.

¹³ Philippians 2:6-8

¹⁴ Revelation 21:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7

For all humanity there will then be a final judgement which John describes as happening at a Great White Throne. There, those whose names are not written in the Book of Life will be thrown into the lake of fire and experience the “second death” for all eternity. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life will forever be with the Lord as he establishes his eternal kingdom, the New Heavens and New Earth.

As was stated in the beginning of this module paper there are godly men and women across the world who disagree with these convictions. They believe the events of the future will look quite different than we do. However, we are brothers and sisters in Christ and we must never forget that what unites us is greater than what distinguishes us. The gospel of Jesus Christ is what unites us and there is salvation in no other name.