

The Church

(the Body of Christ)

Introduction

What is the Church? When did it begin? The answer to the second question is dependent on how one answers the first question. Seven key passages in the New Testament describe the Church. They are the following: Ephesians 1.22-23; 2.11-22; 3.3-9; Colossians 1.24-27; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Galatians 3.26-28, and Romans 16.25-27. These passages provide the information to answer these questions.

The Traditional View

The traditional and majority view of Christendom is that the Church, the Body of Christ, begin on Pentecost. This study rejects this view. Below is the argument for the traditional view.¹

1. The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Colossians 1.24).
2. Membership into the Body of Christ is by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27).
3. The Church was future from Christ's pre-cross ministry (Matthew 16.18).
4. The Church was future from Christ pre-ascension ministry (Acts 1.4-5).
5. The Church was born on the day of Pentecost with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.1-4 cf. Acts 11.16-17).
6. After Pentecost, the term ἐκκλησία (ekklesia), which had occurred previously only in Matthew 16.18 and 18.17, becomes common, e.g. Acts 5.11, 7.8, 8.1, 8.3, 9.31, etc.—23 times in Acts and 115 times outside of the Matthew passages.

The logic for the traditional view is the following: The Church is the Body of Christ. Membership into the Body of Christ is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost. Therefore, the Church began at Pentecost. The logic of this argument is well reasoned and appears strong. However, when we consider other Scriptural data the traditional view collapses.

Problems for the Traditional View

Two major problems exist for the traditional view. The first is that God explicitly states through the apostle Paul that the Church, the Body of Christ, was a mystery, i.e. a "secret". This is a serious problem because Paul made this declaration long after Pentecost.

The second problem is that there is no biblical evidence exists to support the view that anyone at Pentecost recognized that the Church, i.e. the Body of Christ, had come into existence. On the contrary, the biblical evidence indicates that at Pentecost the Twelve knew nothing about the Body of Christ. The apostle Paul is the only biblical writer who reveals the Church as the Body of Christ. No other writer mentions it.

The logical argument for rejecting the traditional view that the Church began on Pentecost is the following: Paul stated the Church, the Body of Christ, was a mystery, i.e. a secret. This means that the Church as the Body of Christ was an unknown entity. Paul declared this long after Pentecost. Nothing from the record at Pentecost indicates that the Twelve knew anything about the Body of Christ.

Therefore, it is not possible for the Body of Christ to have begun at Pentecost.

The Meaning of ἐκκλησία (Ekklesia)

Before proceeding further we should examine the Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia). Whenever a word is used in the Scriptures we need to examine its use in its context. Just because the same word is used does not insure that it always has the same meaning. When we make a careful examination of the Scriptures we discover that when Jesus and the Twelve used the word ἐκκλησία it referred to a group of Jews who believed Jesus was the promised Messiah. When Paul used the term, however, it meant the Body of Christ, i.e. Jews and Gentiles.

We note that ἐκκλησία is usually translated “church”. But it is also translated as “assembly” or “congregation”. These are the common translations in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word most often translated into ἐκκλησία is לְקָהָל (qahal) which is usually rendered as “assembly” or “congregation”.

A good example of this sense is found in Acts 19.32, 39, 41. When Paul went to Ephesus, he aroused the anger of the silversmiths and other tradesmen whose were in the idol business. One of the silversmiths named Demetrius stirred up a riot against Paul. Each of the verses below contains the Greek word ἐκκλησία. Nowhere do we find the word translated as “church.” In each case the word is translated “assembly”.

- “So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion, and the majority did not know for what cause they had come together” (v. 32).
- “But if you want anything beyond this, it shall be settled in the lawful assembly” (v. 39).
- “And after saying this he dismissed the assembly” (v. 41).

From the context, we can see that in verses 32 and 41, “crowd” or “mob” would serve as a better translation of ἐκκλησία. In verse 39, “court” would be a better translation. Therefore, while ἐκκλησία is usually translated “church” in the New Testament, it need not be. The most basic sense of ἐκκλησία is an assembled group.

The Mystery, The Body of Christ

The Church, the Body of Christ, was a new creation, a “mystery” that God revealed to Paul. As such, it did not exist before Paul (Ephesians 3.3-9; Colossians 1.26-27; Romans 16.25-27). Paul wrote to the Ephesians about the Body of Christ. He declared that it was a mystery God had revealed to him alone. Paul wrote:

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit; to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, of which I was made a minister, according to the gift of God’s grace which was given to me according to the working of His power. To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 3:1-10).

Paul wrote the Ephesians that “by revelation” the “mystery” was revealed to him (v. 3) and that this mystery had not been made known to “other generations” or to the “sons of men” (v. 5). What was this mystery? The mystery was that “Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body” (v. 6). What body did Paul mean? The Body of Christ.

One might be tempted to conclude that when Paul wrote “it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets” that God had revealed this mystery to the other apostles, the Twelve. But when we read further into this passage it is clear that this was not the case. Paul declared that it was to him (v. 2-3) that God gave the grace to preach to the Gentiles the “unfathomable riches of Christ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God” (v.8-9). The Twelve learned about “the mystery” through Paul. There is not a shred of biblical evidence to support the view that they knew of it before Paul. The teaching about the Body of Christ is unique to Paul. No other biblical writer mentions it. We will discover more evidence to support this fact as we examine the passages in Acts which recorded the events surrounding Pentecost. These passages show that the Twelve knew nothing of the Body of Christ. God did not reveal this “mystery” to them. Consider Paul’s words to the Colossians:

“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I do my share on behalf of His body (which is the church) in filling up that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. Of this church I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God, that is, the mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1.24-27).

We need to notice carefully Paul's words. Paul wrote, "of this church I was made a minister" (v. 25). Which church did Paul mean? Did he mean the Jewish church to which the Twelve had been ministering? No, he meant the Body of Christ. Notice the personal pronoun "I". Were Peter and the Eleven ministers of the Body of Christ? They were not if we are to believe Paul. This was a ministry the ascended Lord gave to Paul, not the Twelve. More evidence of this fact is in the Galatian epistle. Paul wrote the Galatians:

"But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised" (Galatians 2:6-9).

Paul met with the Twelve and declared his commission and gospel to them. He revealed that God had commissioned him as "apostle to the Gentiles" and that his gospel was the "gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24). The Twelve had not been commissioned as apostles to the Gentiles and had not been ministering to Gentiles. No scripture indicates that the Twelve ever ministered to Gentiles. They did not preach the "gospel of the grace of God". They preached "the gospel of the kingdom". In their meeting with Paul, the Twelve officially recognized and set as policy that Paul would go to the Gentiles and that they would go to the Jews. It is helpful to pause and consider when this occurred. Paul was probably converted about 37 A.D. He spent three years in the desert in Arabia. In about 50 A.D. the counsel in Jerusalem met (Acts 15). After this Paul most likely wrote Galatians—perhaps in about 54 A.D. Therefore, a considerable amount of time had passed when Paul met with the leaders of the Twelve. During all this time the Twelve had never evangelized Gentiles (with the exception of Peter's meeting with Cornelius—Acts 10). The reason they had not done so is because they had not been told to. Jesus had commanded them to go to Jews. Matthew recorded:

"These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them, saying, "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. "And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 10:5-7).

The Twelve ministered to Israel preaching the gospel of the kingdom. They knew nothing about "the Body of Christ" even after Pentecost. Outside of Peter's going to the house of Cornelius in Acts 10, no Scripture supports the view that the Twelve ever evangelized Gentiles. Reading the account of Peter's visit to Cornelius reveals that Peter did not initiate this action and that the Twelve were upset when they learned he had gone to a Gentile. Only when Peter recounted the entire story of how he came to go to the house of Cornelius were they silenced. Furthermore, even after Peter's defense before his fellow apostles we read,

“So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone” (Acts 11.19).

Could words be more clear?

What Was Pentecost?

The baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a key element of God’s prophetic program to Israel. It was not the birth to the Church, the Body of Christ. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was an essential part of the fulfillment of the New Covenant which Jesus had initiated at the Last Supper (Matthew 26.27-28). By the prophets, God had promised the Jews that he would make a new covenant with them that was different than the old or Mosaic covenant. Jeremiah had written:

“But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jeremiah 31.33 cf. Ezekiel 16; 37).

Jesus had initiated the new covenant at the Last Supper. During the three years prior to this event he had preached that the kingdom of God was near. His death and resurrection had fulfilled all that was required to atone for sin. He had risen from the dead. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended and Jewish believers were baptized. Israel was at the threshold of achieving all that the prophets had foretold. Only one thing was required: the nation had to repent (Acts 2.38; 3.19a). If they would, God would establish his kingdom (Acts 3.19b-21).

Peter and the apostles understood that the great prophetic plan was unfolding according to the Scriptures. The great theme of the prophets besides the prophesied Messiah was the kingdom. Jesus had preached about that kingdom for three years. He had declared that the kingdom of God was near. It is highly significant that the last question the disciples asked Jesus before he ascended was about the kingdom. In Acts 1.7 they asked, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” And why not? Jesus had promised they would rule over the twelve tribes of Israel in this kingdom (Matthew 19.28; Luke 22.30).

Who was Peter’s audience at Pentecost? Pentecost was a Jewish feast day. The nation of Israel had assembled for Pentecost. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them as John and Jesus had prophesied. The result was that they spoke in unlearned, foreign languages. What also happened? They received power as Jesus had told them in Acts 1.8. What was this power? They were able to perform the same kind of miracles Jesus had performed in his earthly ministry to authenticate his messiahship. These miraculous powers confirmed their ongoing divine message and program that Jesus was the prophesied Messiah and that the kingdom was near if the nation would repent. What was Peter’s message to the Jews? He said,

“Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time” (Acts 3.19-21).

He told the Jews that if they would repent God would send the “times of refreshing”. What is the “times of refreshing” but the prophetic and covenanted promise of the kingdom of God on earth. This was the first clear offer of the establishment of kingdom of God to Israel. Prior to this time, the kingdom had been “near”. This message was still “all Jew”. No Gentiles were in view. Therefore, it makes no sense for the Church, the Body of Christ to have begun at Pentecost when Peter continued to preach the prophesied “kingdom of God” to Jews following Pentecost.

Had Israel repented and accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the apostles would have begun to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28.28). Gentiles would have found salvation and blessing through Israel in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and the other prophetic scriptures. This was the whole point behind the Great Commission. Israel failed to repent, however. But the plan and will of God cannot be thwarted. One day Israel will repent. The prophesied kingdom the prophets, John, and Jesus proclaimed will be established. But for now, in this present time, according to Paul, Israel’s transgression has resulted in salvation to the Gentiles (Romans 11.11-12) and brought reconciliation to the whole world (Romans 11.15). Had Israel been obedience to God, the Gentiles would have been blessed through the success of Israel. But in grace, as a result of the failure of Israel, Gentiles are being blessed. Men fail but God is gracious. Our God is indeed awesome.

Removal of Jewish and Gentiles distinctions that characterized the Jewish program clearly did not occur at Pentecost. Peter addressed only Jews in Acts: “men of Judea”, Acts 2.14; “men of Israel”, Acts 2.22; “brethren”, Acts 2.29; “all the house of Israel”, Acts 2.36; “men of Israel”, Acts 3.12; “brethren”, Acts 3.17; “you who are the sons of the prophets and the covenant which God made with your fathers”, Acts 3.25. We have no hint that Gentiles were to be included in the gospel message. The apostolic focus was to continue the prophetic plan, i.e. repentance and preaching the kingdom of God that had begun under John the Baptizer and Jesus.

The Jewish or Prophetic Program

All of the attention of the gospels and the first half of the book of Acts (including Pentecost) is upon Jews. Gentiles are hardly in view. Matthew 18 provides a good example of how the word ἐκκλησία should be interpreted prior to Paul. Jesus said,

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE

MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18.15-17).

In this passage, Jesus gave his disciples instructions on how to deal with a sinning brother. He enumerated a series of procedural steps to follow. One of these restorative steps for the sinning brother who continued to be recalcitrant and unrepentant was to take the problem to the church, (Gk. ἐκκλησία). If the sinning brother refused to listen to the church, then he was to be regarded as a “Gentile and a tax collector”. This statement only makes sense in a Jewish context. It makes no sense whatever in the existing Body of Christ. Jesus clearly maintained the distinction between Jew and Gentile. Such a distinction is now over. How do we know? Paul explains that the Church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles and that they are equal.

Some may be troubled by the fact that Jesus made a distinction between Jew and Gentile and that under his teaching the Jew had priority. This priority had been God’s plan ever since God chose Abraham from among the Gentiles to be the father of a new race through whom he would reveal himself and establish covenants. By means of this calling, God chose to reveal himself through the Jewish race and nation to the Gentiles. When Jesus came he preached repentance to Israel and presented himself to the nation as her Messiah. Establishment of his kingdom was contingent upon Israel’s repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Messiah.

Failure to recognize the nature of Jesus’ mission has led to grave interpretive misconceptions. Tragically, most people have been taught to believe that Jesus came to found the Church. Even a cursory reading of the gospels reveals this is false. Jesus did not come to found the Church but to present himself to Israel as their Messiah-King. His message to the nation was one of repentance and that the kingdom of heaven was near. Repentance was the basis on which the Messianic kingdom prophesied by the Jewish prophets for hundreds of years was to be established. God’s prophetic program was “Jew first”. Once the Jewish nation repented and turned to Christ God would establish his earthly kingdom. Israel would then fulfill its destiny to be a source of blessing to the Gentiles (cf. Zechariah 8.20-23; Isaiah 42.6-7; Luke 2.32; Acts 13.44-48). Because of this prophetic plan, Jesus ordered his disciples not to go to the Gentiles (Matthew 10.5-7).

Jesus rarely interacted with Gentiles. There were a couple of exceptions, however. One was the centurion Matthew recorded in his gospel in chapter 8. Another was with a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15.21-28. Jesus told this woman when she confronted him, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Can words be more clear? If Jesus commanded his disciples not to go to the Gentiles he was not forming the Church defined as the Body of Christ in which Jew and Gentile are equal. Jesus made an exception with the Canaanite woman and yielded to her plea to heal her demon-possessed daughter. In the midst of an unbelieving and obstinate Israel, a Gentile woman responded in faith to Jesus. She followed the pattern of Jacob, who refused to turn loose of the God-man he wrestled at Peniel until he was blessed, and Ruth, who refused to turn loose of Naomi. Even though the woman wasn’t Jewish, even though she didn’t fit into Jesus’ immediate mission, Jesus made an exception to the divine plan of “Jew first” and responded to her because of her great faith. Jesus said to her,

“‘O woman your faith is great; be it done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once” (Matthew 15.28).

After Pentecost, as late as Acts 10, Peter and the apostles had not gone to the Gentiles. In Acts 10, God gave Peter a vision and a specific command to go to the the Gentile Cornelius’ house. Peter obeyed, but not joyfully. Luke recorded,

“And a voice came to him, ‘Arise, Peter, kill and eat!’ But Peter said, ‘By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.’ And again a voice came to him a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’ And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky (Acts 10.14-16).

“And as he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. And he said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean’” (Acts. 10.27-28).

How did Peter’s fellow apostles respond to Peter’s action? Did they say, “Wonderful! God has sent you to the Gentiles to preach the gospel!” Luke recorded a different reaction:

“Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them’” (Acts 11.1-3).

They “took issue with him”. In their view, Peter had abandoned the divine program. Only after Peter related the entire episode did his fellows quiet down and accept him. Peter concluded:

“If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life’” (Acts 11.17-18).

Jesus proclaimed the prophetic plan of God. This plan had been manifested and prophesied throughout the Old Testament by the prophets. God further revealed the plan through his covenants with Israel. But God also had a “mystery” plan unknown and unrevealed until he disclosed it to Paul. God revealed his “mystery” plan following Israel’s rejection of the Messiah. Paul wrote about this in Romans 11.25-27:

“For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB. THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS.”

The Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation of the Church but his earthly ministry was to Israel, not the Church. Paul may be regarded as the founder of the Church, the Body of Christ, because God revealed this new program through him.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

We have noted that the baptism of the Holy Spirit occurred at Pentecost. Was this the same baptism that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 12? According to what Paul wrote the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit is the baptizer of the Church:

“For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12.12-13).

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Godhead who baptizes us into Christ as the Body of Christ. In the Jewish program for the Jewish Church present at Pentecost, Jesus is the baptizing agent, however. He is the baptizer of Israel (Matthew 3.11; Mk. 1.8; Luke 3.16; Jn. 1.33 cf. Acts 1.4-5; 11.15-16). John the Baptist prophesied saying,

“As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I, and am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3.11).

According to John the Baptist’s testimony, Jesus was the one who was the baptizer of believers at Pentecost. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit before his crucifixion (Jn. 14.16-17, 25-26; 15.26-27; 16.5-15). After his resurrection he told his disciples:

“for John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1.5).

Christ’s Death as Good News

Peter’s message in Acts was a message of repentance. His message echoed the message of John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Twelve except that it followed Jesus’ resurrection. Peter did not preach the death and resurrection of Christ as a glorious victory over sin and death but as a cause of condemnation for Israel. Not until Paul was Christ’s death and resurrection preached as good news and the message of reconciliation declared (2 Corinthians 5.18-21). For Peter, the kingdom

of God, proclaimed throughout the gospels, was still the plan of God. He called upon the nation to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2.38). Did Paul ever preach repentance and baptism for salvation? You won't find it in the Bible. Paul's message is "believe and be saved". This is the message for the Church today.

All Goods Common

Notice also in Acts 2 that the believers in Jerusalem sold their possessions and held them in common. Such was the character of the Jerusalem church. Jesus required this for citizens of the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 19.21; Mk. 10.21; Luke 12.33, 18.22). The disciples, obedient to Jesus, left everything to follow him (cf. Matthew 19.27; Mk. 10.28; Luke 5.11, 28). How many sermons have you heard the preacher tell his congregation to sell their possessions and give the money to the church? Paul never told believers to leave everything, sell their possessions, and give them to the Church. A new and different order began with Paul—the Church, the Body of Christ.

The Church and Israel

The Church is composed of all believers who have put their trust for salvation in the death and resurrection of Christ (1 Corinthians 15.1-4). Unlike Israel, the Church is under no divine covenantal relationship. Prior to the calling of Abraham, God made a covenant with mankind through Noah in which he promised never again to destroy the world with a flood cf. Gen. 9.9-17. After God created the Hebrew race he made covenants with them (see the Covenants of Israel). God never made a covenant with the Church. The Church is a creation of pure grace. The Church is not under the Law of Moses nor even under the New Covenant (although it does share in the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant due to the death and resurrection of Christ).

The Church is separate and distinct from Israel. The below chart outlines the key differences.

Israel	Church
Established by and under covenants	Established by grace alone (a "mystery")
Has earthly promises	Has heavenly promises

Operates under Law

Is a Kingdom

Has a King

Operates under Grace

Is a Body

Has a Head

Israel was established by a covenant God made with Abraham who became the father of the Jewish race. Subsequent covenants followed. The final covenant was the New Covenant. The Church's life is Christ as his Body. The Church was a "mystery" creation secretly held in the mind of God until Paul (Ephesians 2.11-22; 3.3-9; Colossians 1.26-27). Both Israel and the Church are beneficiaries in God's plan under the "eternal covenant" (Hebrews 13.20-21). This covenant was not made with either Israel or the Church. The Eternal Covenant was sovereignly made by God the Father and God the Son in eternity past as the means of redeeming fallen mankind, solving the problem of evil, and bringing glory to God. The Church's domain and destiny is heaven (Philippians 3.20). Israel's promised realm is earth (Matthew 6.9-10). God promised Israel an earthly kingdom (Acts 1.6). The Church has no earthly kingdom. The operative means of life for the Church is grace (Romans 6.12). Throughout most its history the nation of Israel operated under the Law of Moses. Jesus operated under the Law (Matthew 8.4) during his ministry. In a future day, under the New Covenant, Israel will have the Law written on their hearts (Jeremiah 31.33). The Church is described as the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12.12-13, 27). Israel is described as a kingdom. Jesus is the Head of the Church, i.e. the Body of Christ, (Ephesians 1.22). He is never called the king of the Church. Jesus is the King of Israel (Luke 1.31-33). Ironically, the Roman governor Pilate, a Gentile, noted Jesus' Jewish kingship (Matthew 27.37; Mark 15.26; Luke 23.38; John 19.17-22 cf. John 18.33-39) while the Jews rejected this title (Matthew 27.29-31; Mark 15.17-20; Luke 23.35). In the Messianic kingdom, Jesus will reign as Israel's King in his role as David's greater Son. In this role he will fulfill the Davidic, Palestinian, and Abrahamic covenants.

Conclusion

God established the Church, the Body of Christ, with the conversion and commission of Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. It has the following characteristics.

- The Church is the Body of Christ (Ephesians 1.22-23; 1 Corinthians 12.12-13; Colossians 1.24).
- All who put their trust in Christ in this age are members of the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church (1 Corinthians 12.12-13).
- Membership into the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church, is through the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12.13; Galatians 3.27).
- One is baptized by the Holy Spirit when one exercises faith in Christ (Galatians 3.26-27).
- Members of Christ's body, i.e. the Church, are indwelt by Christ (Colossians 1.27).

In order to understand what "church" means one must make Scriptural distinctions and understand where one falls in God's plan. A "church", an ἐκκλησία, in the broad sense of an assembly of those who have put their trust in YHVH or Jesus. In Jesus' day, the "church" was composed of those who had repented, were baptized, and believed that he was the promised Messiah. This was the Messianic, Kingdom, or prophetic church. After Paul, however, God created a new entity, the Church, the body of Christ, in which there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile. This was a "mystery" that God revealed to Paul alone. Paul was commissioned as the "apostle to the Gentiles" and the revealer of this new Church. This Church, the Body of Christ, began with Paul, not Pentecost.

The following key verses describe the Church and its character: Galatians 3. 26-29, 1 Corinthians 12.12-13, Ephesians 1.22-23, Ephesians 2.11-22, Ephesians 3.1-10, Colossians 1.24-27, Romans 16.25-27.

¹ S. Lewis Johnson, "The Birth of the Church". Dr. Johnson's excellent lecture is online. The text above is a slightly abbreviated rendition of Johnson's argument. Dr. Johnson went to be face to face with the Lord, January 28, 2004. He now knows the Church, the Body of Christ, began with Paul, not Pentecost. Given his wit and sense of humor this revelation must be a source of mirth to him.

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