

# One or Two Peoples of God? Reflections on the Mystery of Israel and the Church

by Reggie Kelly

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*The sermon explores the mystery of Israel and the church, highlighting the importance of understanding the dispensational view and its relation to the glory of God.*

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:9, Acts 3:21, Romans 11:25, Ephesians 1:9

**Topics:** "Israel And Church", "Dispensationalism Error"

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## Description

Reggie Kelly delves into the theological intricacies of dispensationalism, highlighting the false view of the mystery that underpins their unique interpretation of the church and the distinction between 'Israel after the flesh' and the church. He emphasizes the need to correct the perversion of Paul's teaching regarding the mystery to address the pre-tribulation error and the significant impact of dispensationalism on the modern church. Kelly discusses the importance of understanding the church's role towards Israel during the tribulation and the divine purpose behind the interaction between Israel and the church, stressing the need for the church to mature and engage with Jews to deepen its faith.

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## Transcript

he time of the rapture is really a secondary outgrowth of dispensationalism's distinctive doctrine of the church, which derives from their own peculiar and novel view of the mystery. It is a false view of the mystery that supports a false view of the nature of the church, which supports dispensationalism's unique duality between two eternally distinct peoples of God.

It is correct to distinguish between the 'Israel after the flesh' and the church. But dispensationalism incorrectly divides between the seed of Abraham after the Spirit, saying that saved Jews before Pentecost and saved Jews living in the millennium do not belong to the church. In this way, there are two distinct 'regenerate' peoples of God belonging to two eternally distinct entities with different destinies. This constitutes a false view of the nature of the church. Hence, they fail to see that those of the natural seed of Abraham that are predestined for national salvation at Christ's return will be as much a part of the body of Christ on earth as any living now before the Lord's return. It is a question of what defines the church.

So while the 'two peoples of God' theory is a distinguishing hallmark of dispensationalism, it is more particularly their distinctive interpretation of 'the mystery' as it pertains to the church that is the real bedrock of the whole edifice on which every other inference stands or falls. The whole system is of

comparatively recent origin. It is beyond dispute that the particular synthesis of doctrine that defines modern dispensationalism began with John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren movement in the late 1830's.

I hope sometime to make the case that it is precisely this perversion of Paul's teaching concerning the mystery that needs most to be corrected if the pre trib error is ever to be adequately answered, particularly at the academic level. Dispensationalism is much more than the pre trib rapture. It is a tightly integrated system that is not the 'easy knock off' that many tend to think. As fantastic as it may seem to some, it is nonetheless a formidable heresy that has appeared at this time for a diabolical purpose. I believe it is a judgment on the Laodicean condition of much of the modern church. I see it as a 'trojan horse' in the evangelical camp, by which the church's corporate vigilance is compromised, and timely calls to preparation, both spiritual and physical, go comfortably unheeded.

Worst of all, it completely removes from the church any consideration of its role towards Israel during the tribulation as a divinely ordained support and witness. It misses the genius of God that has ordained the wilderness meeting of Israel and the church through their common experience of flight from Antichrist persecution. God has ordained this 'conversation in the wilderness' between Israel and a largely gentile church that God has ordained should move some to envy.

Unless the church is 'defined' out of the tribulation on pre trib terms, it is apparent that the church will be instructing many (Dan 11:33). The church will hold the key of prophetic interpretation that will be a powerful testimony to Israel. God will appeal to the Jewish conscience through the apocalyptic events as the church presses on Jewish consideration the relationship between covenant responsibility and the gospel as its only fulfillment.

The pre tribulational view of the rapture prevents the church from anticipating any such divinely ordained encounter with Israel. But if the church can expect such an encounter in the near future, what should be the wisdom appropriate to such an expectation? I believe the call to the Jew forces the church to do its homework. Engagement with Jews, particularly the orthodox, does more than anything I know to intensify and deepen the church concerning its own faith. If this is true now, it will be even more so at that time.

The crisis of Israel, and the urgency of the church's role towards the Jew, is perfectly designed to provoke the church to maturity. Although Israel does not exercise corporate faith until "the Deliverer comes out of Zion to turn ungodliness from Jacob," (a reference to Christ's return), Israel's national return to the covenant does not happen apart from the preparatory witness of the church (Dan 11:32-33; 12:3).

The toll that that the pretribulational view of the rapture has taken on the church and threatens to take in the future is beyond human calculation. But because God is faithful to save His elect from being deceived ultimately, we may be sure that a time of correction and adjustment is coming to the church ('judgment must begin at the house of God'). But the cost of delay will be immense. Especially painful will be the regret of precious time and opportunity wasted on a lie.

The greatest and most tragic loss of all is the loss of the divinely chosen context of the glory that is never so gloriously revealed in any other context (Ro 11:33-36). The loss of 'this mystery', so central to the eternal purpose, has put most of historical 'Christendom' out of touch with the cost of divine suffering in its accomplishment. Every Christian acknowledges that it cost God the sacrifice of His own dear Son, but few consider that it also cost Him the temporary setting aside of His beloved elect nation ("enemies for your sakes").

Paul presents God's eternal purpose in terms of a gloriously wise strategy designed to accomplish the overthrow of the demonic powers that rule this age through "this mystery" (i.e., the secret of the cross; 1Cor 1:27; also compare Ro 16:25; Eph 6:19; 1Pet 1:11; Rev 10:7). The hidden purpose meant that the elect nation would be left for now in its rebellion, not only as judgment for its own sin, but also for the sake of a greater glory than could be conceived in times past, namely, the inclusion of the gentiles into full covenant privilege through the mystery of the indwelling Christ.

Thus, through Israel's fall, the blinded nation becomes the unknowing servant ("who is blind as my servant?") of an eternal purpose now revealed to the church of the eschatological interim, and one day to be revealed to 'all Israel' at Christ's return, when "they shall look upon the One they pierced." This does not mean that the church did not exist before Pentecost. It means rather that the church could not be revealed as "the body of Christ," until after the "mystery of Christ" had come to full light in the revelation of the gospel.

With the descent of the Spirit at Pentecost, it was understood and preached for the first time that Christ should come twice (Acts 3:18-21; 1Pet 1:12). Until then, the mystery was concealed from the prophets and even from the Lord's disciples until the set time of revelation (Mt 16:22; Mk 9:9-10; Lk 18:34; Jn 16:25).

It is important to distinguish between something that is newly revealed and something that is newly existent. Take the revelation of Christ for example. Certainly Christ is without origin, but the revelation of Christ and the gospel came by the Spirit only after the cross. It is the same with the church. The church as the regenerate people of God, though called by different names (e.g., "the remnant according to the election of grace") had an essential existence even before the gospel was revealed and proclaimed, but could not be revealed as the 'body of Christ' until after the 'mystery of the gospel' had been revealed.

The basic revelation of Jesus as Israel's twice coming Messiah (declared first at Pentecost) formed the basis of Paul's further revelation concerning the nature of the church as the "body of Christ." The revelation of the one had to precede the revelation of the other. But both existed before the first century.

So the concealment of the prophetic plan of God in a mystery was part of a divine strategy to expose and defeat the powers, and also the means whereby atonement would be accomplished as the essential ground of salvation for all time, whether before and after the cross. But also to show that it is impossible for the everlasting covenant to fail of its predestined goal. This is why the scripture says, ""Unto Him be glory in the church ..." Because when 'all Israel' will come to see the mystery of the gospel, it will then be no less the 'body of Christ' than any now living on this side of the Lord's return.

At that time, the same people that endured the exiles, crusades, inquisitions, pogroms, and holocausts of continual recurrence, will exist as a completely regenerate nation (Jer 31:34), all returned to the Land (Ezek 39:28). Then will 'all Israel' also be part of the church on the earth during the millennium, which will continue to expand to include as many as the Lord shall call from among the nations. It will not be a strictly "Jewish church," but a completely regenerate Jewish nation will indeed be a chosen witness in the service of the eternal church of God, composed of every tribe and nation, whether in heaven or on the earth.

So after the rapture, the church does not cease to exist on earth. How could it? The church will be comprised of both the glorified redeemed ruling and reigning with Christ, and also the saved of Israel and the nations. Israel and the nations are depicted as dwelling on the earth in their natural bodies throughout the millennium. Since none can enter the kingdom in its final fullness apart from the required 'change' (1Cor 15:50-53), it seems necessary to infer that millennial saints will be glorified at the second

resurrection. Then will a fully gathered church inherit the new heaven and earth at the end of Christ's mediatorial reign when God will be all in all (1Cor 15:24-28).

The church is the revelation of God's eternal purpose to gather all things together in Christ. It is not a 'speed bump' on the way to the millennium. It is the eternal and indivisibly one people of God in Christ, whose unity is based on a new creation of shared divine nature through the indwelling Spirit of Christ. But Israel will have a special mediatorial role in the further calling out of the church throughout the time of the millennium. "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness? ... For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?"

So why was the distinction originally made between Jew and gentile? Why is this divinely ordained distinction visibly preserved now and throughout the balance of the millennium? Why not pass immediately into the eternal state at Christ's return? That is the question that theologians have struggled to answer. It is indeed a mystery requiring a precious grace for its knowledge and apprehension, but the glory of God is bound up with it. The everlasting covenant cannot be entirely fulfilled and visibly vindicated apart from Israel's total redemption. The age does not end 'till they (the 'generation' of perpetual defiance) shall say with one voice, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Mt 23:39). Christ's return will mean "the restitution of all things spoken by the prophets" (Acts 3:21), which Paul cannot conceive apart from the salvation of 'all Israel'.

One final note. I would want to offer an important caveat on the way that many replacement minded theologians are prone to exploit dispensationalism's theory of two peoples of God in a way that obfuscates the mystery of Israel and the church. Many protest the propriety of referring to unsaved Jews as the "people of God." Here's why I have a huge problem with their objection:

Certainly there is no hope of eternal life for any Jewish person that dies outside of Christ, and certainly there is only 'one people of God' in Christ (in that sense). We know that every truly regenerate person or nation is incorporated into the one body of Christ in heaven and on earth. That is the point of Eph 1:9-10. However, and this is a big 'however', from the standpoint of an abiding 'corporate solidarity', individual Jews continue to belong to an elect race that is predestined for future salvation. Therefore, as 'a people', they retain their distinct national identity for the sake of a millennial calling and stewardship towards the nations. This is the goal of the everlasting covenant that is still outstanding "WITH THEM" when their national sin will be taken away. In that sense, they are a "people of God," despite their present enmity, not in the sense of 'present regeneration', but of corporate election and predestination.

This abiding distinction between Israel and the church is vital to the intention of God to make a visible display and open demonstration of His witness nation, as essential to the demonstration of the glory that He will get for His name through them (Ezek 36:32). God promised Moses that He would not be defeated in His purpose to finally bring into the Land the very nation that He first brought out. He will yet prove that they are not too much for Him! I always like to say that as God got His man on the road to Damascus, He is able to get His nation at the time appointed (Ps 102:13; Gal 1:15). We know that this comes at the end of Jacob's trouble, when He sees that their power is gone" (Deut 32:36 with Dan 12:7). "Your people shall be willing in the day of your power" (Ps 110:3).

Through this mighty act of divine power the whole earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord. To this end, and for the sake of this glory, Jewish racial identity has been sufficiently preserved. There is something

deep in God's heart and intention that will not be satisfied until "all that 'see' them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed" (Isa 61:9). In this, God is making a very public statement and demonstration concerning His sovereign prerogative to "have mercy on whom He will have mercy."

Furthermore, to say that the Jews are not 'the chosen people' is to empty Jewish suffering of its awesome significance. To deny to the Jewish people their special identity as "the people of God," despite their momentary estrangement, is to rob God of the glory of His own self-appointed challenge to bring this people (and not another) back into the bond of the covenant, and hence back into the Land as a holy seed never to be removed again.

And finally, to denude this people of their high and privileged calling, though momentarily suspended through unbelief, robs the Christian of the fellowship of the divine suffering in Israel's judgment. Jesus wept! In order to accomplish the salvation of the world, it was necessary to postpone the day of Israel's national salvation "for your sakes!" Do we grasp this? Do we dare? Can it be that for my sake, God surrendered His beloved nation, with whom He had bound His very name and glory, to exile and the sword?

This is why I stop short of agreeing with those that insist that there is only "one people of God" when it is invoked to deny that the Jews belong to a chosen race of abiding national destiny. This is the trap that some of our post tribulational brethren are falling into, and for the same reason, namely, ignorance of the mystery, since both replacement and dispensationalism misinterpret the mystery.

In their zeal to distance themselves from some of the untenable aspects of pretribulational dispensationalism, some historic premillennialists tend to side with replacement's tendency to strip Israel of significant national identity, and thus miss the whole point in what is at stake in the current trend of prophetic fulfillment that is moving the age ever closer to an ultimate showdown over the issue of the covenant, particularly as it pertains to the Land. What an awesome test this is shaping up to be!

This is why the issue of Israel's election and irrevocable relationship to the everlasting covenant is so bound up with the gospel and the mystery of Christ's twofold advent. That crucial and indivisible relationship is what the theology of Ro 9-11 is all about. The covenant issue of Israel is the divinely ordained context in which we are meant to understand the true nature of the gospel of grace. Can't dwell on this now, but that is some food for thought till next opportunity.

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Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/reggie-kelly/one-or-two-peoples-of-god-reflections-on-the-mystery-of-israel-and-the-church/>

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