

Community Group Study Guide

For the Week of February 23rd - March 1st

Getting Started

1. One of the most ancient divides in the history of God's people is the question concerning the relationship of Israel to the church. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = what in the world are you talking about?, and 10 = what do you *mean* 'what in the world are you talking about?'), how important is this issue for you personally? Make sure everyone has an opportunity to answer.

Digging Deeper

2. There are indeed some biblical doctrines where thoughtful, godly believers of equal Christian commitment don't see eye to eye, and the matter of the church and Israel has certainly tended to be one of those doctrines. Sometimes it can be tempting to imagine that if two people with PhDs who love Jesus can't agree with one another on a certain matter, then there's no hope for folks like us. But we must never give in to such thinking. First of all, every one of us "normal" believers has the responsibility of being a good Berean. What critical role did the Berean Christians play in Acts 17:10-11? Isn't this our role still today? Secondly, no one needs a PhD in order to understand Holy Scripture. We simply need an H.C.T. Who is the one to whom God promises to look in Isaiah 66:2b? What three qualities of spirit (summarized by the letters H.C.T.) can each one of us seek to cultivate over the course of our Christian lives? What difference does this make as we seek to understand challenging teachings of the Bible like this one?

Open Your Bible to Matthew 21:33...

3. Matthew 21:33-46 contains Jesus's parable of the tenants. Read through it carefully. Bearing in mind that the tenants in the story represent the chief priests and Pharisees (see 21:45), what truths can we draw from these words of our Lord? While the vineyard (vv.41, 43) may simply be a reference to the Messiah's kingdom, it does raise the question of the land of Israel as well. Many interpreters down the through centuries have noted the utter New Testament silence regarding Abrahamic land promise, and have understood Jesus's summary in verses 42-44 to be referring to the nation of Israel as a whole, concluding that the predominantly Gentile church replaces or supersedes Israel as the people of God (consider also the way that Jesus speaks in Matthew 8:11-12). Do you agree or disagree? Whether you agree or disagree, can you see how a serious Bible reader might take the opposite view that you hold?

4. Another New Testament passage that some believe points to the eradication of the uniqueness of Israel as it relates to their corporate salvation is Galatians 3:26-29. Moreover, many take Paul's reference to "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 to be a description of Gentiles as well as Jews. What do you make of these claims? Are you persuaded by them? If so, why? If not, why not?

5. One of the most common portions of the New Testament that folks turn to in order to establish the ongoing uniqueness of Israel as it relates to salvation is Romans 9-11. It's a longer section, but it's incredibly important to this discussion. Though chapters 9 and 10 are crucial to his argument, it's a few particular statements in chapter 11 that have led many interpreters to conclude that God does indeed have a future for his ancient covenant people based on his Old Testament promises¹. Consider especially Romans 11:1-2, 11-24 and 25-27. What do you think? What is Paul saying? Bear in mind that the same Paul who wrote Romans also wrote Galatians.

6. Another class of passages that are frequently noted for their concern for the future salvation of Israel include Jesus's statements in Matthew 23:37-39; Luke 21:24-28; and 22:28-30. How ought we to understand these teachings? Are they to be taken literally as referring to a future salvation for Israel, or should we think of them as having a spiritual fulfillment in the church?

7. Yet a further set of passages in the New Testament seem to apply Old Testament categories and designations to Gentiles as God's new community in the church. Take a look at Romans 2:25-29; Ephesians 2:11-3:6; and 1 Peter 2:4-10. How do you understand these sections of Scripture? Do they indicate that the church has indeed become the new or true Israel of God? Why or why not?

¹ How do you interpret Old Testament promises to Israel such as these: Isaiah 2:2-4; 49:6; Jeremiah 16:15; 23:8; 31:27-34; Ezekiel 34-37; Amos 9:11-15; Luke 1:69-74; 2:25-38? Have they been fulfilled? If so, how? If not, when?

8. Read back through our sermon text from this past Sunday (Acts 28:11-28 alongside Acts 1:6-11). Do you see how these function as bookends to Luke's entire account of the Acts of the Apostles? Despite the importance of the apostles' question to Jesus in Acts 1:6 ("Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"), what evidence do we have in Acts 1:7-8 that well-meaning, Christ-exalting believers in this age who differ on the matter of the future of Israel can still enjoy profound fellowship, even linking arms within the same local church for the sake of the mission to be and make disciples of Jesus? As a result, should we regard the issue of the church's relationship to Israel as a matter of 1st order doctrine (essential for gospel proclamation), 2nd order doctrine (essential for gospel partnership) or 3rd order doctrine? Explain your answer, and make sure as you close your time in prayer together thanking the Lord that he has continued to grant us to "make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3) in our study through the book of Acts.