

Are Israel and the church the same group, with no lasting distinctions?

Respected theologian Wayne Grudem answers, “Yes” to this question. He defines the church as “the community of all true believers for all time.” This definition lumps the nation of Israel in the Old Testament (more precisely, the faithful within the nation) with the church in the New Testament as one entity.

Grudem explains, “Therefore, even though there are certainly new privileges and new blessing that are given to the people of God in the New Testament, both the usage of the term “church” in Scripture and the fact that throughout the Scripture God has always called his people to assemble to worship himself, indicate that it is appropriate to think of the church as constituting all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers.” Grudem, 854.

But Grudem’s view (a.k.a. “replacement theology”) fails to take into account the following points of discontinuity between Israel and the Church: (Many similarities do not prove identity; one dissimilarity disproves identity.)

- The term “ekklesia” used in the Old Testament does not refer to the people of God exclusively.
- The Church was yet future in the teaching of Christ (Matt. 16:18, 18:15-17), and initiation into the church is linked with Spirit baptism (1 Cor 12:13), which didn’t happen until Pentecost (Acts 1:5). (In the OT, the role of the Spirit was centered around the enablement for special service. Only at Pentecost and after does the Holy Spirit fill each believer and baptize him/her into the body of Christ.)
- The foundation of the church is the NT apostles and prophets (Eph 2:20).
- The church is the mystery of Christ – one body composed of both Jew and Gentile is something not formerly revealed, but is now revealed. (Col 1:26-27; Eph 3:5-10).
- Church and Israel never biblical interchanged, even though both concepts are discussed in same contexts. The two terms are never used interchangeably by the NT authors.
 - The New Testament speaks of Israel and the church distinctly and separately; the Jews, Gentiles, and the church are three separate groups according to 1 Cor. 10:32. The term “Israel” retains its reference in the New Testament to the physical descendants of Abraham. Saucy writes, “After the beginning of the church in Acts 2, Israel is still addressed as a national entity. . . demonstrating the fact the church had not taken this term for itself (Acts 3:2; 3:12; 4:10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28) Paul’s prayer for ‘Israel’ (Romans 10:1 cf. Rom 11:1) and his reference to Israel throughout . . . Romans 9-11 concern his ‘kinsmen according to the flesh’ (9:3). If Israel were a reference to the church, the reference to Israel’s ‘blindness in part. . .’ (11:25) would be meaningless.” Saucy, The Church in God’s Program, 71-72.
- Clear NT passages which teach either explicitly or implicitly of a future for the ethnic nation of Israel in fulfillment of OT prophecy (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; Rom 9-11; etc.). Acknowledging this reality undermines any attempt to assume that Christ or the apostles saw the church as a replacement to the nation of Israel. (c.f. Luke 21:24 which implies that there is coming a time in the future when the OT promises will be fulfilled to the nation of Israel – after the church age!).
- Interestingly, Luke doesn’t use the word *ekklesia* at all in the Gospel of Luke, and then uses the term over 20x in the book of Acts. This demonstrates that Luke understood the church as a NT entity that was not in existence during or prior to the ministry of Christ on this earth.
- Christ didn’t project the inauguration of the church until the kingdom of God was offered to the nation of Israel and rejected (Matt 12). Only then did Christ turn his attention to the Gentiles and begin to teach his disciples of his plan for His church.
- Christ is the head of the church (Col 1:18); so how could the church be alive and well in its existence before Christ had been revealed?
- The true church could not have existed prior to Christ’s death since she must be redeemed by His blood (Eph. 5:25-27).
- The church wasn’t formed until Christ ascended (Eph 4:8); and spiritual gifts (which are necessary for the existence of the church) were not given until after Christ ascended into heaven (Eph 4:8-12).

- The disciples clearly believed in a future for national Israel in fulfillment of the OT prophecies, even after a 40-day personal lesson from the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:3). It is also interesting to note that after this extensive post-resurrection lesson on “the kingdom of God,” when the disciples asked if it was at this time that God was restoring the kingdom to the nation of Israel, Christ didn’t rebuke them for asking such a question, but rather just refused to tell them the time. The assumption for the literal fulfillment of the OT prophecies remained stronger than ever after the Christ event!
- The doctrine of election supports the discontinuity perspective since God’s promises towards the nation of Israel must be fulfilled (Rom 11:29). The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.
- The completing event of the church (the rapture) does not correspond to the OT program for Israel. It is distinctly related to the mystery of the church. The rapture is described for those who have died “in Christ” (1 Thess:4-13-18), and occurs at Christ’s return (at the last trump) for the church at the end of God’s dealing with the Gentiles (1 Thess 4:16; 1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Of course the view that Israel and the church are distinct does not claim that there is no relationship. It takes into account the common purposes that God has for both Israel and the church. These common purposes bring Israel and the church together in the sharing of the blessings of the New Covenant, yet each retains its distinct identity.

The following points of continuity exist between Israel and the church:

- Metaphors and imagery for Israel are used of the church:
 - People of God (Rom. 9:24-26; 1 Pet 2:9-10)
 - Temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17)
 - Circumcision (Phil. 3:3)
- The church is related to the covenants of Israel
 - Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:8-9)
 - New Covenant (Heb. 8:7-13)
 - But, not all of the new covenant promises are being/have been fulfilled/applied in the church. In order for the OT prophecies to be fulfilled, the fulfillment of the OT promise has to be complete. Thus, it is best to see Hebrews 8:7-13 (and other similar passages, i.e. Acts 15, etc.) as expanding upon the OT prophecies... adding the church as a referent to the old promise, without nullifying or excluding the future literal fulfillment to the original recipient of the ethnic nation of Israel.
 - Ephesians 2:12-13 indicates that Gentile Christians are now near the promises and covenants given to Israel.
- Along with believing Jews, Gentile Christians now comprise the “one new man” (Eph. 2:15).
- Galatians 3:28 indicates there is a spiritual unity or continuity in the people of God ontologically (even though there is also a maintained discontinuity among the members of God’s people functionally in their various roles).
- There are certainly Jews which are redeemed spiritually (truly circumcised) and thus a part of the church, and yet apart from their mother nation (Gal. 6:16). But Paul’s reference to believing Jews as “the Israel of God” here in the context of a letter to the Jewish Judiaziers, does not equate the church of God with Israel as a nation.

So it seems best to maintain a biblical distinction between Israel and the Church, and answer our question, **“No. Israel and the Church are not the same group. There are lasting distinctions between these two groups in God’s kingdom program which are significant enough to maintain in our theological teaching and understandings.”**