

A wooden spiral staircase with a dark wood railing and balusters, ascending from the bottom right towards the top left. The staircase is set against a dramatic sky with dark, heavy clouds and a bright, glowing light source at the top left, creating a strong contrast and a sense of upward movement. The overall mood is one of hope and transcendence.

Salvation

*Through
The
Ages*

Paula Fether

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©April 2014 Edition

Contents

Preface	1
The Age of Innocence	3
The Age of Conscience	5
The Age of Authority	7
The Age of Promise	9
The Age of Law	11
The Age of Grace	13
The Age of Christ as Ruler	17
Conclusion	19
Appendix	21

Preface

Christianity has naturally focused on the matter of salvation as it pertains to the 'church', the followers of Jesus. But how salvation is defined and obtained for this age is not necessarily how it has always been or will always be. Some hold that this cannot be so, as it would divide the kingdom of God. But in my opinion this greatly oversimplifies the character of that one unified kingdom, erroneously presuming that a kingdom cannot have provinces or differentiation of any kind. Difference is not necessarily division, or we would have to conclude that the Persons of the Trinity constitute a divided God.

Yet if there are differences in the meaning and method of salvation at various stages, eras, epochs, or ages in history, a failure to recognize this fact will put us in danger of misinterpreting many passages of scripture. This hardly means that there are many Gods or that God changes character. Instead, it simply means that the plan of God to redeem mankind from sin and death has more than one stage, and that the characteristics or parameters of each stage change in order to achieve the overarching goal. Conversely, if no such stages ever existed, there was no need or "fullness of time" for the Savior to appear. Yet since this timing is clear and indisputable in scripture, (Gal. 4:4-5) we must at least examine how timing affects the "house rules"¹ for each age.

Overview of the Ages

Among those who recognize steps or ages in the plan of salvation through the ages, it is generally agreed that there are a total of seven. This chart describes the ages in terms of both their primary characteristics and their end results:

¹**Dispensations** literally means 'house rules'. The Greek word (see Eph. 3:2) is where we get our word 'economy' and is sometimes rendered 'stewardship' or 'administration'. The Scofield reference is from biblelife.org/dispensations.htm as of January 2013.

Character of age (Scofield)	Consequence of age (Fether)
1. Innocence	1. Death
2. Conscience	2. Deluge
3. Authority	3. Dispersion
4. Promise	4. Desertion
5. Law	5. Delay
6. Grace	6. Devastation
7. Christ's Rule	7. Defeat

Each age will now be examined in more detail. Keep in mind as you read that the focus is on salvation.

The Age of Innocence

From Creation to the Fall

This age is characterized by the creation of Adam and Eve as innocents. They had not yet disobeyed God and everything God created was “very good”. But mankind, a sentient being, had the capacity to either obey God or defy him. Some will say that God put the one restriction against eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to tempt them, but the scriptures clearly say that God tempts no one. Our potential for sin comes from our sentience, our free will. So in theory Adam and Eve could have sinned by disobeying *any* of God’s commands, which included managing the earth and “multiplying”. But they failed to obey God in everything, and at the moment of that first sin innocence was lost. They could no longer enjoy direct communion with God, and physical death would be the fate of the first humans and all their offspring.

So what meaning did salvation have in this age, before sin had entered the world? There was nothing to be saved from, no one needing rescue or redemption; nothing was wrong. So before sin there was no concept of salvation. However, as other scriptures make clear, God had already made a plan to take effect at the end of this age. He confronted the serpent and told of its eventual demise at the hands of “the seed of the woman”, the one the serpent had targeted directly with malicious trickery. Yet this was to come only after thousands of years.

Did Adam and Eve go to heaven? We are not told; we can only make arguments from silence. Yet clearly any means of salvation for them could not involve believing specifics about Jesus coming as a sacrificial Lamb, or obeying the yet-unknown laws of Moses. Adam and Eve had one command to obey, were told ahead of time what the penalty was, and were separated from direct communion with God as a result. There was nothing said about how this might be remedied at that time.

The Age of Conscience

From the Fall to the Flood

Human beings had now acquired a conscience, an inner moral code showing the difference between good and evil. With the very first children we see the divide between them, and that individuals were held to account by God for their actions. We have only a mention of sacrifices, and by the fact that Cain and Abel were treated differently due to the nature of those sacrifices, we can deduce that it involved the death of an innocent animal— an unmistakable foreshadowing of the eventual sacrifice Jesus would willingly make.²

In the generations following, there was as yet no formal government. So each individual did whatever they chose, though we are given the cryptic clue “In those days people began to call on the name of the Lord.”³ But as time progressed, people regressed— to the point that the Bible says “But the Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind had become great on the earth. Every inclination of the thoughts of their minds was only evil all the time.”⁴ This brought on the Flood, which destroyed all but eight people, the only ones on the planet who found favor with God.⁵

Between the beginning and end of this age, something else was happening. As explained in Gen. 6, the “sons of God” mated with human women to produce very remarkable offspring. They are described as “Nephilim” who were “renown, the heroes of old”. Surely there is more here than mere tales of adventurous humans. If we remember that scripture was not written in a vacuum, and that scripture is marking this as what led to a completely evil and corrupt world, we can deduce that these were hybrids, the mixture of fallen angels and humans. Such beings would be a very plausible source for the many myths of gods. There is also the possibility that genetic tampering went on between these hybrids

²This is **not** a *human* sacrifice but a *self*-sacrifice. We think it noble for someone to die to save another, and this is exactly what Jesus did. He was not forced or ordered to do so, and in fact scripture says that Jesus gave up his spirit rather than having it taken from him by another; see Mt. 27:50.

³Gen. 4:26

⁴Genesis 6:5

⁵Gen. 6:8

and animals, giving rise to the stories of beings such as the minotaur.

Salvation as promised at the Fall in the Garden of Eden was for humans only. We have nothing in scripture to go on to say it was offered for any other types of sentient beings, good or bad. The Hebrew terminology describing Noah is more literally rendered as “perfect in all his generations”, which takes on new meaning in light of the hybridization of the human genome. It may well be that only Noah was purely human by then, which in turn explains why God would wipe out billions of others. Perhaps Satan’s intent was to prevent the promised Seed from coming.

So salvation in this age involved calling out to God in some way and bringing sacrifices. I think it is safe to assume that they knew more about this that was recorded in the scriptures. People still knew of the existence of God and did not doubt it at all, but of course this doesn’t mean they all obeyed God. If Adam and Cain could talk directly to God yet take adversarial positions against him, the mere acknowledgement of God is no guarantee of salvation or righteousness. It was a matter of choosing sides, between God and Satan, good and evil. Even after much time had passed and knowledge of God grew dimmer, some people such as Enoch were pure and righteous in God’s eyes. In his case in particular, we are told expressly that he was taken up to God and thus “saved”.

The Age of Authority

From the Flood to Abraham

After the Flood, God set up a rudimentary concept of government, to slow down the spread of evil and punish it. God gave humans as a group the right and responsibility of capital punishment— a right which was not granted to the individual. Yet even then people found a way to corrupt this institution and use its corporate power to defy God again. The Tower of Babel was to be mankind's triumph over God's authority, so God scrambled their language in judgment.

Little is said to be different in this age concerning salvation. This right of capital punishment was a matter of people killing other people, rather than failing to bring the right sacrifice to God. Murder was always wrong, but in this age it became the responsibility of people rather than God to take human life. God would of course make exceptions at times, but the norm was for people to govern themselves.

Keep in mind that this was about what God officially sanctioned, not what people might have been doing anyway before this time. There is evidence of civilizations before the Flood, of cities and great populations, and no one thinks they didn't have any group rules or punishments— which may well have been based upon oral histories passed down from Adam and Eve. The Bible is focused on history as it pertains to sin and salvation, through a line from Eve to Noah to Abraham to David to Mary to Jesus. So the absence of information about other civilizations or continents is not any attempt to hide things from us, as some may allege. Nor is it proof that the Bible only got its content by borrowing or plagiarizing the writings of other religions.

The Age of Promise

From Abraham to Israel

People who can't communicate can't work or live together, so after Babel people were forced to carry out God's command to spread out over all the earth. This resulted in the specialization of ethnic groups globally. God then chose one man, Abram (later to be called Abraham), to establish a unique people group that would eventually produce the promised Savior.

Recalling our earlier look at the problem of the purity of the human genome, we can see more significance in the need for a certain genetic line to accomplish what God promised. This is the first explicit step in fulfillment of that promise since it was made.

Yet we still are not given a lot of official divine instruction about salvation in this age. Abraham simply believed what God promised him, and this was all it took to have him declared righteous. He certainly had his faults, but he was no rebel against God. Neither do we get the sense that Abraham was a gambler who decided to take a chance on God, but rather that he trusted God because he knew him. This reminds us of Enoch who "walked with God".

This is a relationship built upon trust, and in that respect it is very much like salvation today. So as with the previous age, salvation was no more specific or detailed than trusting God and his promises, and living in peace with other people. Yet this still predates the giving of the Mosaic law by 430 years. And since the line of promise was through Isaac and Jacob but not Ishmael, not all who descend from Abraham physically or spiritually are Israel. What Paul said about "spiritual Israel" was said about Jews who accepted their Messiah, not Gentiles who did so. Otherwise the church would need to accept Israel's curses along with its blessings, which those teaching they are the same entity never seems to do.

The Age of Law

From Israel to Jesus

God allowed Israel to be enslaved in Egypt for 400 years before giving them a written Law to obey. No more were people left to be on their honor to obey God, no more would there be any excuses. They would now have specific written regulations to abide by. Predictably, though, Israel repeatedly strayed from God and suffered repeated judgments, until finally God had to drive them out of their land. Only after several centuries were they allowed to return, and then only in very small numbers, a mere remnant. It was to this remnant that Jesus came, only to be conspired against and crucified.

This age is without doubt the one most cited as the foundation and basis of Christianity. Yet it is all about Israel as a nation, very sharply defined and limited. As noted already, the Promise was never affected nor superseded by the Law; they are two separate entities.

This point is magnified by the apostle Paul in several passages, most notably Galatians 3. In that passage he states that the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice was that "the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus." The law had nothing to do with it. Like a formal "last will and testament", the death of the testator (God incarnate) released the Jews from it, and the dead are not liable for any contracts. And of course the Gentiles were never under it at all.⁶ In fact, in Rom. 2:14 Paul said that the Gentiles only were responsible for obeying their consciences, "the law within."

The natural question then arises, of what purpose was the law? Paul answers, to bring the people of Israel safely to the timely arrival of the promised Seed, like a custodian or guardian seeing to the proper raising of a child. It was never supposed to be a permanent "nanny", nor to keep the "child" from coming of age. The law served the Promise, not the other way around.

⁶Eph. 2:12

The Age of Grace

From Jesus to Judgment

The Bible holds Law and Grace in opposition, meaning Grace is the absence of Law.⁷ Jesus took away “the list of violations against us, and nailed it to the cross”;⁸ at the moment of his death the curtain in the temple was torn in two.⁹ This was the way out of our hopeless condition: to trust in **Jesus’** ability to keep the Law, **not our own** ability. For Jews this means that Jesus did what they clearly could not,¹⁰ and for Gentiles it means the strict and exclusive Law could no longer stand in the way of their being reconciled to God and being called his people.

The theme of the entire New Testament is salvation by the grace¹¹ of God through faith alone in Jesus alone.¹² We who are in Christ are saved not *by* what we do, but *so that* we can do what God has planned for us. Now the verses following are taken by some to mean the exact opposite of freedom from the Mosaic law. They reason that since Jew and Gentile are reconciled and united in Christ, then either Israel is finished or Christians must live like Jews. But not only doesn't this follow logically, it actually nullifies Jesus' sacrifice; if we are all under Jewish law, then not only did practically nothing change, “Christ died for nothing!”¹³

Jesus did not “upgrade” Judaism, yet neither did he forget Israel, as Paul states in Rom. 11:1-2. That chapter is perhaps the most often-cited proof text for the belief that the church was “grafted into Israel.” But it is not the wild branches being grafted into the natural; the wild is grafted into the Vine, which is Christ. Jesus said he would (future) build his church, and Paul is using the same analogy as Jesus used which has Jesus and not Israel as the Vine. So while Israel had been the first or “natural” choice, now the Gentile or “wild” branches were to be added to that Vine. To emphasize, Israel is *not* the vine.

⁷Rom. 6:14, 11:6, Gal. 3:18

⁸Colossians 2:14

⁹Mk. 15:38

¹⁰Acts 15:10

¹¹**Grace** means favor from the greater to the lesser

¹²Eph. 2:8-9

¹³Gal. 2:21

In Galatians 2 we find the famous public rebuke Paul gave to Peter about his fear of the Jews. In no uncertain terms, Paul states that not even Jews are to practice separateness when they become Christians, clearly indicating once again that the church and Israel are not the same entity. In fact, Paul was never free from this battle for the rest of his life; he wrote and suffered much for drawing a sharp line between the Christian and all other 'churches'.¹⁴

But somehow, when arriving at ch. 3, many forget all of this and see Paul's statement about "the children of Abraham" as confirmation that the two are indeed the same. Yet though Abraham was deemed righteous by his faith, the laws of Moses did not replace this salvation, as we have already seen. So in this context, Paul's teaching is that while salvation is by faith, this does not mean there was never a Law or that the Law would nullify the Promise. And when we remember what Peter said to the Jews, we see that the Law alone could not save.

It seems clear from all this that salvation for the current age is purely by faith and not at all connected to the Jewish law. Yet it is a specific faith; not just that God exists, but that Jesus rose from the dead. As Paul explained to the Greeks at Mars Hill¹⁵ and Peter to the Jews at Pentecost,¹⁶ everyone was now required to accept this. The Jews had to accept Jesus as their Messiah, and the Gentiles had no more leeway given to their ignorance. Yet he never told the Gentiles that they would become Jews as a result. In fact, there was a meeting in Jerusalem over this very issue.¹⁷ Peter stated there that they must not "try to put a yoke on the necks of Gentiles that neither we nor our ancestors could bear." James then quoted the prophet Amos in stating that there had to be people called of God from among the Gentiles— who by definition are not Jews. All he asked of them was to be sensitive to the Jews in a few basic ways.

There is something else unique about this age: each and every individual believer receives the Holy Spirit within them "as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance",¹⁸ which is our adoption as the children of God.¹⁹

¹⁴see the Appendix for a word study on "church"

¹⁵Acts 17:30

¹⁶Acts 2

¹⁷Acts 15

¹⁸2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5, Eph. 1:14

¹⁹Rom. 8:15,23, 9:4, Gal. 4:5, Eph. 1:5

This was never seen in any time of history before for individuals, even in Israel. A few people had the Spirit of God come upon them on occasion, but never was it permanent or guaranteed. Neither were they described as adopted children or heirs. The phrase “children of Israel” simply means Israelites. Yet they were and are, as a nation, the chosen people of God.²⁰

Of course we know that the nature and identity of God never changes. But since we have seen that the parameters and conditions of salvation have changed up to this point, we cannot presume that they will never change again. Though the current age did begin the fulfillment of that ancient promise to Eve, there is more to be done than simply building up the church with both Jews and Gentiles.

There are prophecies for the people and nation of Israel yet to be fulfilled. The primary one is found in Daniel 9:20-27, the Seventy Weeks prophecy. The stated purpose is to “finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place.” The final seven years are what the book of Revelation covers. Although some authors treat the seven-year Tribulation as a separate age, it is really a return to the age of Law. Israel had rejected the Messiah with one prophetic week to go²¹ and “their house was left desolate”.²²

Those who come to faith during that time are never referred to as the church but only as “saints”— a term used also for the righteous before the church existed.²³ The Revelation begins with letters sent to seven churches, but they are never mentioned again in the entire prophecy. Most significantly, the means of salvation during that entire time is simply to endure, to give glory to God. Nothing is said about the Holy Spirit indwelling people, adoption, inheritance, or “that blessed hope” of being taken alive to heaven.²⁴

Yet another unique characteristic of the church age is that believers are called both the Body and the Bride of Christ.²⁵ Note that it is specifically *of Christ*, not of the Father or Israel or anyone else. And we

²⁰Deut. 7:6-9, 14:2, 1 Kings 3:8, Isaiah 65:9

²¹Dan. 9:26

²²Mat. 23:38

²³see the Appendix

²⁴Titus 2:13

²⁵2 Cor. 11:2, Eph. 4:15, 5:23, Col. 1:18, 2:19, Rev. 19:7

are called his brothers and sisters as well.²⁶ Thus Christians alone are more than children of God in significant ways, ways which are not applied either before or after the age of grace.

²⁶Heb. 2:10-17

The Age of Christ as Ruler

From Judgment to Eternity

The last age is known as The Millennium, meaning a thousand years. Mortal man is once again in direct communication with God, and the world is ruled personally by Jesus. People will again live many centuries with only “sinners” dying at younger than 100 years of age.²⁷ The judgment-mangled earth will be restored and repopulated, and there will at last be real peace. But at the end of it people are tested one last time. Rebellion in the midst of Eden brings us full circle through human history, and God must again destroy the wicked.

There can be no denying that salvation in this final age is not by faith in the unseen. The kingdom of God is literally there and everything is seen clearly; the time of faith and hope has passed into reality. Salvation must therefore be equally clear and simple: allegiance to God. The time many have longed for, where only sinners die young or suffer injury or disease, will be a reality then. Yet these mortals who survived the judgments and are not sinning are not any part of the church, the Body or Bride of Christ. So even if one insists that the Tribulation believers are part of the church, they must admit that there is at least a precedent for post-church believers.

²⁷Isaiah 65:17-25

Conclusion

Salvation through the ages has always had at its core the restoration of the relationship between people and their Creator. This restoration is necessary if one wishes to spend eternity with God, of course. But the conditions under which this happens has changed in the past and will change again. We need to guard against applying the parameters for one age onto another, so that we don't misapply teachings or prophecies. Failure to recognize these differences has led to many needless and heated divisions among believers.

Appendix

A word study on 'church'

The word 'church'

The Greek word typically rendered 'church' is 'ekklesia'. It was used commonly in the first century to refer to "any duly summoned assembly".²⁸ It was used in scripture for the 'congregation' or gathering of worshipers of Diana of the Ephesians in Acts 19:32. It was also used to refer to Israel in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT that Jesus and the NT writers used. It is essentially equivalent to the word 'synagogue' as well, though by the first century 'synagogue' had come to also mean the place where the assembly was held.

So the word is not used exclusively for Christians and can in fact refer to Israel. Now whenever this word appears in the Gospels, we need to verify from context whether it refers to Israel or some future and yet-unknown entity. We must keep in mind that context includes whether the words were spoken before or after the cross, especially after Pentecost.

Mat. 16:18 is the first mention of the 'church'. Jesus was not making up a new word or giving it a new meaning, since the Jews were already familiar with it as applicable not only to themselves but to any assembly for a purpose. Yet he specified that a new, future such assembly was to be built, meaning something that did not already exist.

The 'church' must also not be confused with the 'kingdom'. The kingdom of heaven encompasses all its citizens regardless of where they may 'assemble', and in fact may contain many 'assemblies' or 'churches' if you will. This is the most likely cause of confusion over various groups, ages, or congregations; they are simply various entities within the one kingdom.

Now Jesus said hell itself would never prevail over this future 'church', yet in Rev. 13:7 the beast wages war against the 'saints' and conquers them. Clearly these two verses are in contradiction unless they refer to two separate groups of Jesus' followers.

²⁸ref. hallmarkbaptist.com Disclaimer: I do not agree with everything there

The birth of the church

In Acts 2 Peter addresses the Jews at Pentecost, telling them to “save yourselves from this corrupt generation” by repenting of having crucified their Messiah, and that those who did this would “receive the Holy Spirit”. If the Jews were the same entity as the new church, then why did Peter say this to the Jews at all? Were they not already saved; since they worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Clearly not.

Jesus had even told Nicodemus much earlier that he, a Jew before the cross, needed to be “born again”, so we can’t say that these Jews were only confronted by Peter due to the crucifixion; they too needed to be born again. This is a clear indication that the new church had begun, a group or entity separate from the ‘church’ of Israel. And never before had the Holy Spirit been promised to all members of any group. Any OT examples were individuals, and as the case with Saul, this was not guaranteed to be permanent.

So we have seen in these passages that the new, future church Jesus promised was born on Pentecost as a separate entity from Israel. Now we will see whether they remain separate in the Letters.

The identity of the church

In 1 Cor. 2 Paul mentions a “secret” he made known to the church there, one which had been “hidden” since the world began but was now being revealed. Certainly this excludes Israel by definition; in fact, Paul states explicitly that it had to be kept hidden or else the “rulers of this age” would not have crucified Jesus. He explains it for us in Rom. 11: that Israel has been “hardened until the full number of Gentiles has come in”. Again, this is something never known about or seen before, something new, and something hidden from the Jews. Paul says it even more clearly in ch. 16 starting with v. 24.

There is another secret as well. In 1 Cor. 15:50-58 Paul reveals that at some future time, “We will not all die but we will all be transformed—in an instant, at the last trumpet.” As a newly-revealed secret like the church itself, this is something never revealed before, something different and unforeseen by anyone, and thus not known to the Jews. It marks the end of the church age because of its finality, with death itself being ended at that moment.

This other secret has tremendous impact on the question of “the Rapture”. If in fact there is no more death after this, and if it applies to

all believers of all ages, then no one can account for the deaths spoken of even during and after the Millennium. The only Rapture view that would escape this is one that occurs at the end of the Millennium, which is an extreme minority view that creates more problems than it solves. So it seems most reasonable that Paul's statement about death is only made with reference to the church. And it logically follows from there that those who come to faith afterwards are not part of the church.

But Paul explains the implication of this 'secret' church in Gal. 3:26-29: in Christ there are no more distinctions, not even between Jew and Gentile. So to be in Christ is to be neither, yet still "heirs of the promise" to Abraham. And it is only after this that Paul goes back to lament the Galatians' return to Judaism— a very strange thing to say if instead we are all absorbed into Israel. In ch. 4 he elaborates on things the people had overlooked concerning the two lines of descendants from Abraham. Then in 5:18 he states in unmistakable terms that to be led by the Spirit is to be not under law; they are mutually exclusive. This point is given in different terms in 6:15 as well.

In Eph. 2:11-18 Paul says that through Jesus the two groups— Jew and Gentile— were made one when Jesus tore down the wall between them. Yet this no more makes Gentiles into Jews than it does Jews into Gentiles. And again Paul speaks of the 'secret' in ch. 3, one which was never revealed before: that Gentiles would be joint heirs of the Promise. He continues on to emphasize the unity of the two, yet it is only in Christ, not in Abraham.

And yet again in ch. 5, Paul says that the relationship between Christ and the church is the 'secret' revealed to him, showing once more that there is something unique about this unified Jew/Gentile entity that is not what either of them were before. As he put it in 2 Cor. 5:17, we are "a new creation".

In Colossians we see where the church is also called Jesus' "body".²⁹ This is another unique term not applied to Israel. So also Jesus is the "head" of this "body", whereas the head or source of Israel is clearly Abraham. In ch. 2 Paul pointedly states that we are not to be bullied by those who try to enforce our compliance with "sabbaths" and festivals, which are integral parts of the practice of Judaism.

In 1 Thessalonians Paul reiterates what he told the Corinthians about

²⁹Col 1:24

our future transformation. Ch. 4 vs. 13-18 is in the context of encouragement about deliverance, not steeling themselves for suffering, as would be the case if Paul were teaching that the church must suffer through what Jesus had called “a time of trouble never seen before and never to be seen again”. He continues into ch. 5 with more detail about “the Day of the Master” coming suddenly, but that the church is not to be caught off-guard. Paul states explicitly that we, the church, are not to endure that time of God’s wrath. This once again distinguishes the church from Israel; Daniel’s ‘seventy weeks’ prophecy states that one of the purposes of the judgment is to purify the nation of Israel. It is impossible for a single entity to be both appointed and not appointed to suffer the wrath of God. Paul gives more detail about this time of wrath in 2 Thes.

In 2nd Timothy 4:8 Paul talks about a “crown of righteousness. . . to all who have longed for His appearing.” Since the church of Paul’s day could hope for this crown, and since Paul himself was absolutely sure that he had earned it, and since the Tribulation clearly was not in progress even though Christians were suffering persecution, then the only logical conclusion to draw is that they were hoping for the Departure (a direct translation from the Greek, while Rapture is from the Latin) even then. Nobody is told to look for the Antichrist or Beast or “son of perdition”. Nobody is promised a crown for looking for the impostor. Why else would Paul “long for His return”, unless he believed it could happen in his lifetime? When he wrote to Timothy he was well along in years and expected to be “poured out” soon, one way or another. Yet death is not Jesus’ ‘appearing’ in any sense of the word.

Paul’s letter to the Romans is where he elaborates on many technical issues, and in ch. 7 the topic is our relationship to the law. Since Gentiles were never under it, this applies only to Jews who become Christians. Yet they “died to the law. . . that they might belong to another”, which relates to what was discussed earlier about the difference between the Law and the Promise. A dead person is no longer under any law, such that those who are in Christ are released from its obligations completely and permanently. No one can have half-died to the law; it’s an all-or-nothing situation. Dead is dead, and Jews in Christ are dead to the law but alive to God.

The letter to the Hebrews cannot be read at all without seeing from start to finish how much was radically changed with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Chapter after chapter explains the finality and com-

pleteness of what Jesus accomplished. Above all, it shows that there is no more need for the earthly temple, no more need for sacrifices, and no more need for the Levitical priesthood. Chapter 7 in particular explains that “with a change of priesthood comes a change of law”. So since Jesus is not in the old order of Levi or Aaron but Melchizedek, no part of the old law can apply to him or his church. Just as there is no such thing as being “sort of” dead, there is also no such thing as practicing “sort of” Judaism.

Beyond the church

As noted earlier, death itself is ended for the church at the moment of our transformation and “snatching up” to heaven, yet continues in the extreme for those who come to faith after this. The book of Revelation guarantees severe persecution for every Gentile believer, and death for most. Covering it in detail is beyond the scope of this writing, but for our purposes here we must note the fact that these are called ‘saints’, just as believers before the church were called ‘saints’.

But the mere use of this word, much like ‘church’, does not in itself prove that the church of Spirit-indwelled believers is still on the earth during that time. In fact, not once after the 7 letters is the church mentioned at all. There are no instances of ‘ekklesia’ between 3:22 and 22:16, and no contextual equivalents to identify any group of believers as such. We see the nation of Israel, the 144 thousand, the nations all hating and abusing Israel, the physical Temple violated, and the Jews who see “the abomination” running to safety in the mountains to ride out the last 3-1/2 years of judgments. It’s all Jews and Gentiles but no church.

Speaking of those letters to seven churches, one of them is told they would be “kept out of the time of testing coming upon the whole world”. If the major criticism of the pre-tribulation Rapture view is the idea of escape or protection from the wrath of God, Jesus Himself must be all the things Rapture-believers are called, such as fearful, unprepared, and gullible. This is told by Jesus to the second-to-last church of the seven, with the final one being the “lukewarm”, complacent, blind church. Perhaps this will be the one for all those who take pride in the thought of seeing the Antichrist and suffering terribly—the church that is not watching and says “My master is away for a long time”. Perhaps Jesus will let them stay, if they insist.

After the Tribulation, the world will be repopulated. We are told in Isaiah 65:17-25 that people will live very long lives, such that one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child. Since no one believes the church will not have received their new, immortal bodies by then, who are these that are still physical and mortal? They cannot be the church by any stretch of the imagination, yet they are “a people blessed by the Lord”. So even if all other scripture and evidence is discarded, we have this indisputable proof of ‘saints’ outside of the church.

Conclusion

The ‘church’ as commonly used is a word describing a unique entity composed of people who were born Jews or Gentiles but are now “a new creation”, with a new High Priest of a new order and thus a new law. Looking over the entirety of scripture on this topic, it seems clear that though there is much unity spoken of between the groups, there is also much distinction and differentiation. All are part of the one kingdom of God, yet that kingdom has various ‘communities’. All the righteous are ‘saints’, but not all are “adopted children of God” as John put it. There is the Bride, but also the “friends” and the “servants”; there have been the righteous before the cross and the righteous after, and then the righteous by perseverance during the judgments, as well as the survivors and their descendants.

Of course God will make it all clear when the time comes, but the point I hope to have made in this document is that words such as ‘church’ or ‘saints’ need to be seen in context. If we aren’t careful we can come to erroneous conclusions; if the foundation is not right, nothing we build on it will be right. Perhaps I’m wrong too— but perhaps not. In the meantime, let us all be eager to see our Savior and willing to suffer persecution until that glorious Day. Let us throw off the “burden” of the law and instead cling to “that blessed hope”, that glorious moment when the Groom arrives to “meet us in the air”.