

## THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN HEBREWS 12:23 CONTINUITY OR DISCONTINUITY?

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### Introduction

The Subject of Israel and the Church, as well as who constitutes the People of God, has been in the forefront of recent scholarly activity with the newly published Perspectives book by Broadman & Holman on *Israel and the Church* in 2015 as well as Sam Storms book, *Kingdom Come* in 2013. Even this year's Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics is focusing on the topic as well. One of the issues that must be addressed in a topic of this breadth is the issue of Hebrews 12:23 which provides commentators no small difficulty when it references the "Church" and the "righteousness men made perfect" as a potential distinction of those who constitute the people of God.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Hebrews 12:23 and to give an overview of how different theological camps have handled this verse and the interpretation of the key words which raises the question of the identity of the people of God. This author will seek to introduce a third possibility to this very interesting dilemma. Finally this author will offer a model that could provide a solution as a conclusion which may bring about further discussion on the importance of the identity of the people of God: continuity or discontinuity.

In Broadman & Holman's perspectives book on Israel and the Church four positions are examined the Traditional Covenantal, Traditional Dispensational, Progressive Covenantal and Progressive Dispensational points of view. Editor, Chad O. Brand begins the book with an

overall fair but short historical overview of each of the four positions. This discussion centers on only two groups; Israel and the Church. The development of this discussion goes back to Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* where he states:

What, then is the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism? The answer is threefold. (1) A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct... This is probably the most basic theological test... (2) This distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation... The word *literal* is perhaps not so good as either the word *normal* or *plain*... (3) A third aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism... concerns the underlying purpose of God in the world... To the dispensationalists the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center.<sup>1</sup>

This distinction of Israel and the Church is one of the main focuses in the book by Blaising and Bock in 1992 in which they functionally dismantle the *sine qua non* of Ryrie and maintain that in the new Kingdom fulfillment the, “final dispensation is one in which all things will be united in Christ. This is not a unity that obliterates all possible distinctions but one that harmonizes them in a way never before seen. The model as well as the principle of unity is Christ, in whom humanity and deity have not been rendered indistinct but have been harmonized in the oneness of his person in a way that challenges the limits of human language.”<sup>2</sup> They do advocate that there is some distinction between Israel and the Church in that there is still a future for Israel, but their explanation moves more closely to the Christocentrism of Augustine rather than the more Theocentrism of historical dispensationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1965. 44-46.

<sup>2</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock, Editors. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1992. 384.

This means that for present discussions as evidenced in both the Perspectives book and in Sam Storm's book the subject of the people of God has been limited to Israel and the Church rather than believers of all ages from Adam to the eternal state.

It is that historic debate which has provided the framework that affects commentators attempt to understand the writer of Hebrews 12:23. Five different Bible translations are identified below to demonstrate some of the complexity that even translation committees have with addressing this topic.

NIV <sup>23</sup> to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

NASB <sup>23</sup> to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of *the* righteous made perfect,

ESV <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly<sup>[a]</sup> of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

KJV <sup>23</sup> To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect,

NLT <sup>23</sup> You have come to the assembly of God's firstborn children, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God himself, who is the judge over all things. You have come to the spirits of the righteous ones in heaven who have now been made perfect.

It is with this in mind that this writer has chosen to analyze this verse using the different theological camps and their treatment of this passage as the means of identifying these two groups outlined in Hebrews 12:23.

### **A Reformed/Covenantal View of Hebrews 12:23**

Reformed theology has focused attention on the process of redemption as the chief model and consideration of God's program throughout the ages. This has caused them to see the saved as a unified people throughout history engaging the program of salvation based on the revelation

of God through the ages. In the book of Hebrews, and especially in verse 23, as we will see, the approach consistently seeks to show that the words used by the author of Hebrews that are found throughout Scripture and constitute the entire people of God. This is evidenced by the various translations inclusion or exclusion of the “general assembly” in verse 22 or 23. Many translations use the general assembly to be the angelic company others conclude it belongs with the “church of the firstborn.” Calvin specifically connects this phrase “general assembly” backwards to the reference found in the book of Daniel when he states, “The expression... is taken from the book of Daniel, though I have followed Erasmus, and render it *innumerable company of angels*.<sup>3</sup> Calvin goes on to clarify that the use of the phrase, *the first-born*, in verse 23 is used to identify the most prominent or eminent of the entire company of the saved.<sup>4</sup>

The second distinction in verse 23 involves the, *spirits of just men made perfect*. For Calvin they are those who have died and are, “no more subject to the infirmities of the flesh, having laid aside the flesh itself.”<sup>5</sup> Calvin concludes that these titles do not demonstrate distinct groups per se, but rather include all believers of all times and especially those who are worthy of great honor and those who are awaiting the resurrection in a perfected state removed from the stain of sin because of death. Calvin does not really interact with the nature of the New Testament use of these terms but rather folds these statements into those of the Old Testament to include all believers of all times.<sup>6</sup>

William S. Plumer, a Presbyterian from the 19<sup>th</sup> century holds that the reference to the *church of the firstborn* refers to all the firstborn referenced in the Scripture beginning with

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, Jean, and John Owen. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1979. 333.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 334 and see footnote 1 as well.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 333-335.

Exodus 22 and continuing throughout to include all true believers of all time.<sup>7</sup> He adds, “There is but one family of God in heaven and in earth...the Church is one church, as much so as he will be after the last day, though many of her members are not yet without spot or wrinkle.<sup>8</sup> Plumer’s view sees believers of all time collected in the terms *church* and *just men made perfect*, which is consistent with a traditional reformed view of the people of God.

Barnes seems to hold that these verses involve the New Testament saints and that the *Church of the firstborn* includes saints among the Hebrews who are distinguished because of their piety and may receive special honor in heaven.<sup>9</sup> Kistemaker sees the *Church of the firstborn to be* the readers of the book. He states,

They are the ones who belong to the new covenant, and their names already have been recorded in the Book of Life...That the believers belong to the church on earth is evident from the clause “the spirits of righteousness man made perfect.” They are still sinners, and their spirits have not yet been clarified to join the church in heaven. They are on earth; their names, however, are written in heaven.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Phillips limits his understanding of these two phrases to the present Church and the New Covenant making the case that the phrases, *Church of the firstborn*, and *the spirit of the righteous made perfect*, refer to the present participants in the New Covenant and the latter phrase is a statement of the position of present saints seen from God’s perspective.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Plumer, William S. *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul, the Apostle, to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1980. 525.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 526.

<sup>9</sup> Barnes, Albert. *Notes on the New Testament: Explanatory and Practical ; Hebrews*. Edited by Robert Frew. Enl. Type ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1951. 311.

<sup>10</sup> Kistemaker, Simon J. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984. 393-394.

<sup>11</sup> Phillips, Richard D. *Hebrews*. in *Reformed Expository Commentary*, Editors, Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2006. 569-573.

Luke Timothy Johnson sees the use of *ekkle/sia* in the context of Greek civic life for the gathering of citizens rather than a specialized usage for the assembly of believers.<sup>12</sup> In addition he sees the reference to the *firstborn* as being “all those ‘sons’ whom God is leading into glory together with Jesus (2:10).”<sup>13</sup> He goes on to say, “If this is the case, then the “spirits of righteous people brought to perfection” must be another way of characterizing the same participants in the true inheritance, which is a share in God’s holiness (12:10).”<sup>14</sup>

Peter T. O’Brien affirms what has already been a consistent theme throughout the reformed view when he says:

According to Hebrews 2:12, the ‘church’ in whose midst Christ leads the worship of God is none other than the assembly of ‘the brothers and sisters’ he came to sanctify (vv.11-13). Thus, although various attempts have been made to restrict the privileges to some special group, it is best to understand *the church of the firstborn* as referring to ‘the whole communion of saints’.<sup>15</sup>

O’Brien citing Jewish apocalyptic literature he states, “‘the spirits [or souls] of the righteous’ describes the godly who have already died.”<sup>16</sup> He goes on to state

What, then, is the relationship between the vast multitude of vs.22, *the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven*, and this company of *the spirits of the righteous made perfect* in v. 23? The first designation alludes to the whole people of God gathered in the ultimate encounter with him... The second description speaks of all faithful men and women who have died and faced the judgment (9:27), having been ‘perfected’ on the basis of Jesus’ sacrificial death (10:14).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Hebrews: A Commentary*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006. 323.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>15</sup> Brien, Peter Thomas. *The Letter to the Hebrews*, in the Pillar New Testament Commentary, general editor, D. A. Carson. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. ;, 2010. 485.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 487-488.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 487-488

While the voices of Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, William L. Lane, and Leon Morris could be quoted at this point as well they, like many already cited, accept the general reformed view that the references are to the entire people of God but it is Morris that adds a slightly different twist to the concept of the *spirits of the righteous made perfect* when he concludes that “the expression is probably used to give emphasis to the spiritual nature of the new order the ‘righteous men’ find themselves in.”<sup>18</sup>

What is evident to this writer is that the theological commitment to redemptive history affects one’s view of critical passages requiring connections to be made which sometimes seem to go beyond a simple grammatical-historical contextual analysis of the text. This overview indicates that for those who take a more reformed or covenantal approach there is an emphasis on the singular nature of God’s people beginning with Adam and continuing to the Eternal State. So when passages such as Hebrews 12:23 seem to suggest some distinction the normal consideration is to see that distinction as a matter of explanation for the continuity of the People of God rather than an actual distinction of identity. There are some exceptions where the explanation moves in uncharted territory like Leon Morris but generally this theological persuasion will not find true distinction in the People of God but combine all under one umbrella.

### **A Catholic View of Hebrews 12:23**

Some of the commentators who will be reviewed in this section may align themselves with the Anglican confession but appear from the perspective of this writer to be more focused

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<sup>18</sup>Morris, Leon. “Hebrews”, in *Hebrews-Revelation. Vol. 12 of The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible*. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981. 142.

on Roman Catholic tradition rather than Reformed theology. In addition the Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski will be included in this overview.

Alan Mitchell, writing in a Roman Catholic commentary set, believes that *the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*, should be understood in an eschatological sense and, “refers to those whose names are written in a heavenly registry...as a reference to the righteous living, who await the vindication of God’s judgment.”<sup>19</sup> He then dealing with the phrase *spirits of the righteous made perfect* states, “At the beginning of this verse part of the citizenry of the heavenly Jerusalem were described...Here the dead are included as well...Here it means that the spirits are brought to completion...which means they are eternally with God and have entered into God’s rest.”<sup>20</sup>

Harold Attridge concludes that “the spirits of the perfected just properly stand in parallel with the church of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, for in Hebrews’ understanding human hearts, minds, and spirits have been ‘perfected’ and granted access to God’s own realm by the cleansing sacrifice of Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

R. C. H. Lenski sees that the phrase to the *church of the firstborn enrolled in (the) heavens* refers to the Church on earth because they are enrolled in heaven but are not there yet.<sup>22</sup> He believes that the reference to “‘firstborn’ denotes rank and not precedence in time.”<sup>23</sup> In addition he sees the phrase *spirits of righteous ones who have been brought to completion* as “all

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, Alan C. *Hebrews. Vol. 13 of the Sacra Pagina Series*. Edited by Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007. 283.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-284.

<sup>21</sup> Attridge, Harold W. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, in Hermeneia A Critical and Historical Commentary of the Bible*. Edited by Helmut Koester. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989. 375-376.

<sup>22</sup> Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James*. Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1946. 456-459.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.



believers in both Testaments found in Christ. Study the nouns...The spirits of the blessed are now complete, their bodies will soon follow.”<sup>24</sup>

For those Roman Catholic scholars above there is a need to insure that what is spoken of is consistent with a view of the Church which supersedes all other distinctions and combines believers of all time into one body before Christ. The distinction seems to focus on the issue of living and dead rather than New and Old Testament saints. The Anglican/Reformed emphasis follows the Reformed views stated above and continues to see one progressive people who are redeemed from Adam on.

### **A Dispensational View of Hebrews 12:23**

Dispensational writers, as we will see, fall into one of two interpretative solutions for Hebrews 12:23. First there are those who hold that the use of the term *church of the firstborn* refers to the Body of Christ, the Church, from Acts to the Rapture and the *spirits of the righteous made perfect* refers to the spirits of the Old Testament saints. Second, there are those who see the *church of the firstborn* being believers of all time and the *spirits of the righteous made perfect* referring to the Old Testament saints.

From this writers perspective this is an interesting dilemma. For the battle ground theologically is usually framed as Israel and the Church, not the Old Testament saints and the Church. One must in some measure deal with the apparent division of the Old Testament in the pre-Israel saints and the Nation of Israel as an entity and then include in this division those who are Gentiles during the time the Nation of Israel is described as the *wife of Jehovah* in Jeremiah 3:14 and Isaiah 54:5. With that in mind it is necessary to look at how those who identify with Dispensationalism handle Hebrews 12:23.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 458-459.

Arthur Pink provides a wonderful description and explanation of the phrase *church of the firstborn* when he says,

“And Church of the firstborn, which is written in heaven”: that is, to the entire company of God’s redeemed. “This is that church whereunto all the promises do belong; the church built on the rock, against which the gates of hell shall not prevail; the spouse, the body of Christ, the temple of God, His habitation forever. This is the church which Christ loved and gave Himself for, which he washed in His own blood, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27). This is the church out of which none can be saved, and whereof no one can member shall be lost” (J. Owen).<sup>25</sup>

Recognizing that the *church of the firstborn* is the present Body of Christ, beginning at Acts 2 and present at the time of the writing of the book of Hebrews explains the careful observation that the *spirits of the just men made perfect* are a reference, “to the O.T. believers, who have passed through death: that N.T. saints are ‘come’ to *them* (italics his) is clear from Eph. 2:19. Of course that ‘made perfect’ is relative and not absolute, for their resurrection and full glorification is yet future.”<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Schreiner seems to follow Hughes and O’Brien when he concludes concerning the reference to the *church of the firstborn*, “believers have come to a heavenly assembly, to the place where the names of those who belong to God are inscribed in heaven...so believers are God’s children....they have also come ‘to the spirits of righteous people made perfect.’ The use of the word ‘spirits’ indicates that those described here are no longer in their mortal bodies...the writer speaks here of all believers throughout all ages.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Pink, Arthur W. *An Exposition of Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1954. 1052.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1054.

<sup>27</sup> Schreiner, Thomas R. *Commentary on Hebrews*, in *Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation*, General Editors, T. Desmond Alexander, Andreas J. Kostenberger, and Thomas R. Schreiner. Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group. 2015. 400-401.

David Allen sees the *church of the firstborn* as indicating “all believers, living or dead. This reference harks back to Heb. 2:12 where the author quoted Psalm 21:23 (LXX).”<sup>28</sup> He continues by saying, “The word ‘spirits’ here probably refers to the spirit apart from the body awaiting the final resurrection. That they have been ‘made perfect’ means they have died and reached a state of having been perfected by Christ’s atonement. The reference is to both Old Testament and New Testament saints.”<sup>29</sup>

F. F. Bruce sees the context as refereeing to the conflict described in the *Hymn of the Initiants* from the Qumran community and thus, “all the people of Christ are the ‘firstborn’ children of God, through their union with him who is the Firstborn *par excellence* (italics his); their birthright is not to be bartered away, as was Esau’s.”<sup>30</sup> He goes on to add that, “as for ‘the spirits of the righteous who have attained perfection,’ they are most probably believers of the pre-Christian days, like those mentioned in 11:40 who could not attain perfection until Christ came in the fullness of time, and ‘by one offering...brought those who are sanctified to perfection’ (10:14; 11:30).”<sup>31</sup>

Donald Hagner sees the identity of the *assembly of the firstborn* as difficult to interpret offering three possibilities; the Angels referenced in vs. 22, the Old Testament saints or “more likely the author has Christians (perhaps Christian martyrs) in mind...the readers not only have

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<sup>28</sup> Allen, David Lewis. *Hebrews*, Vol. 35 of The New American Commentary, edited by E. Ray Clendenen. Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Publishing Group, 2010. 592.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 592.

<sup>30</sup> Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews, Revised Edition*, in the New International Commentary on the New Testament, edited by Gordon D. Fee. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans., 1990. 358-359.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 359-360.

come to this assembly, the church, but also have become part of it.”<sup>32</sup> For Hagner the *spirits of the righteous made perfect* are the Old Testament saints awaiting the resurrection.<sup>33</sup>

For William R. Newell the *church* is the Body of Christ the Bride of the Lamb and the *spirits* are the Old Testament saints awaiting the resurrection.<sup>34</sup> Franz Delitzsch provides us with a well-reasoned explanation why *church of the firstborn* should be understood to be as the “present living church”<sup>35</sup> He gives five reasons which will be summarized for space consideration:

- 1) It accounts for the use of the term *evklhsiva*, which is always applied in Scripture to the religious community here on earth.
- 2) It accounts for the use of the epithet *avpogegrammevwn evn ouvranoi/j*, designating that which is here the chief point, the invisible, heavenly character of the true church of the New Testament.
- 3) It accounts, further, for the use of the term *prwtoto,kwvvn*, to designate Christians, a term suggested by the previous warning not to be like Esau
- 4) This interpretation will also account for the myriads of angels and the myriads of the first-born being thus classed together
- 5) Finally, this interpretation will account for the subsequent clause...the just Judge, who is God of all things and all creatures...to whom she may confidently commit here cause.<sup>36</sup>

His view of the *spirits of the just men made perfect* includes “all the righteous, accounted such before God, from Abel onwards, but persecuted and treated as criminals by the world.”<sup>37</sup> This position is supported by Brooke F. Westcott in his commentary as well.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Hagner, Donald Alfred. *Encountering the Book of Hebrews: An Exposition*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2002. 163.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>34</sup> Newell, William R. *Hebrews, Verse by Verse*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1987. 427-432.

<sup>35</sup> Delitzsch, Franz. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*. Translated and edited by John Owen. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979. 351.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 351-352.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 352.

Homer A. Kent, Jr. states, “The church appears to be a reference to living New Testament believers. They are viewed as still on earth, but their names are registered in heaven (cf. Luke 10:20); and thus they will also inhabit the heavenly Jerusalem.”<sup>39</sup> “The *spirits of righteous men made perfect* is a reference to Old Testament saints with whom we share salvation. They are called spirits because they have not been united with their bodies in resurrection.”<sup>40</sup> John MacArthur agrees and concludes the same.<sup>41</sup>

It should be observed that the writers cited above consistently attempt to provide an explanation that allows for an historical-grammatical contextual understanding of the passage even when it may seem to interfere with long held theological distinctions. For Dispensationalists, especially those who are more traditional and revised, Hebrews 12:23 generally identifies the *church of the firstborn* as being New Testament believers who are part of the bride of Christ and identifies the *spirits of the righteous men made perfect* as, Old Testament Saints, which includes Israel but is not in this context limited to Israel. Interestingly, as has already been pointed out, the distinction is not Israel and the Church in this passage but the Church and the Old Testament saints, as a collective whole. This realization should cause some to question and examine the entire trajectory of this discussion. Not that we should not advance and hold to the future for Israel as a nation and the promises of God to her as being literally

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<sup>38</sup> Westcott, Brooke Foss. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Kent, Homer A. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972. 273.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>41</sup> MacArthur, John F. Jr. *Hebrews: An Expository Commentary*. Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1983. 415-416.

fulfilled in the future. But we need to consider that the model and explanation does not limit this discussion to two groups of people only, rather the emphasis should be on the faithfulness of God's word and promises to His chosen people.

### **Additional Considerations and Conclusion**

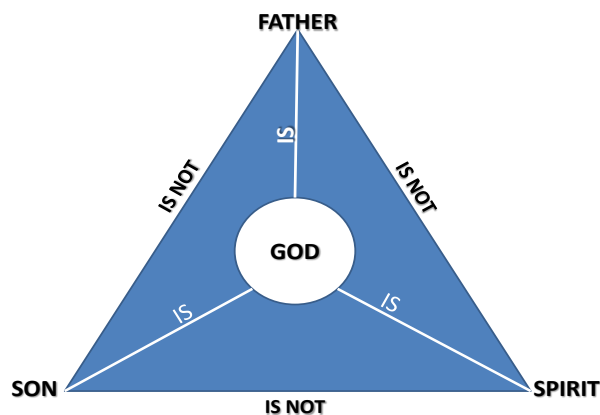
The context of Hebrews 12:18-29 seems to fit within a conversation of warning by the author of the book of Hebrews. He clearly expresses this warning about the former relationship with God at Mt. Sinai with the new relationship found in Christ at Mt. Zion. Numerous items connect these two; fire, trembling, God, the judge, and it seems that in addition one should also focus attention on the intended comparison of the blood of Christ with the blood of Abel found in Hebrews 12:24. These differing issues certainly provide experts in the language sufficient grounds to wrestle with what the author is seeking to express to those Hebrews who are the recipients of this letter. While arguments can be made about the identity of the different phrases within Hebrews 12:23, one difficulty remains, we are not the recipients and as such we must be careful not to allow our theological commitments to color and affect our interpretation.

The solution which seems consistent throughout the limited examination of this paper is that for both Covenantal and Dispensational camps the focus is Israel and the Church. The model used is maybe best articulated by Blaising and Bock which seems to be consistent with both groups. Admittedly Blaising and Bock are identified with the progressive dispensational camp but their way of thinking about this problem and their proposed solution indicates a perspective that may not be sufficient to account for what is observed in the passage under consideration. They assert; "the final dispensation is one in which all things will be united in Christ. This is not a unity that obliterates all possible distinctions but one that harmonizes them in a way never before seen. The model as well as the principle of unity is Christ, in whom humanity and deity

have not been rendered indistinct but have been harmonized in the oneness of his person in a way that challenges the limits of human language.”<sup>42</sup>

This Christocentric view of how the people of God are to be understood, taken from their stated understanding of Ephesian theology, requires either a distinction of two people or a new way to harmonize the two into one while continuing to allow the possibility of distinction to remain. This writer would suggest that there is a better way to address this dilemma and that is rather than focusing on how Christ is both human and divine as the model for this discussion, the focus should be a new model focused on the theocentric nature of the Trinity.

Admittedly it is impossible for us to wrap our heads around the complexity of the Trinity and most, if not all, of our illustrations fall sort of the reality of who God is, Augustine provided for us a diagram of how to try to understand the Trinity. It is rather simple but remains to this day profound in its clarity.



It is this diagram which constitutes the glory of the Godhead. Each person is distinct and remains uniquely so, however they are God and it is the unity of their deity that is the focus of their worth and the revelation of their work throughout Scripture. We see this even in the very

<sup>42</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock, Editors. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 1992. 384.

creation of man in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘let us make man in our image, after our likeness...’”<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on the very nature of the Godhead as the means of creating man has been wrestled with for ages in theology but it is the Godhead that is the focus of the work of God not just the physical representation which may be limited to Christ as seen in Colossians 1:15. The glory of creation is the Godhead not just Christ. It is this concept of glory that this writer would suggest is was the focus of the *sine qua non* found in Charles Ryrie’s *Dispensational Today* from 1965 when he writes, “Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center.”<sup>44</sup>

Salvation has been the main theme in the redemptive history model which has dominated the discussion for too long. Rather as Ryrie suggests it is time to move the discussion to seek the glory of the Godhead as the model and basis for our understanding not only of this critical discussion concerning Israel and the Church, but as a means of explanation for all that we hold theologically as the essential revelation from God to us.

It is this divine theocentric Trinitarian glory that is the ultimate resolution of this debate where we find in Revelation 21 and 22 not two distinct groups identified but three. Revelation 21:9 we see identified the *bride, the wife of the Lamb*, which is the Church.<sup>45</sup> Now some may argue that the reference in Revelation 21:2 makes the New Jerusalem the bride but the simile construction uses bride there to be the comparative of the beauty and splendor of the New Jerusalem not the identity. It is actually Revelation 19:7 which uses this word *nu,mfh* to represent the Church and Christ as the bridegroom and as John uses these terms one must go

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<sup>43</sup> Genesis 1:26 (ESV, 2002) Crossway Bibles.

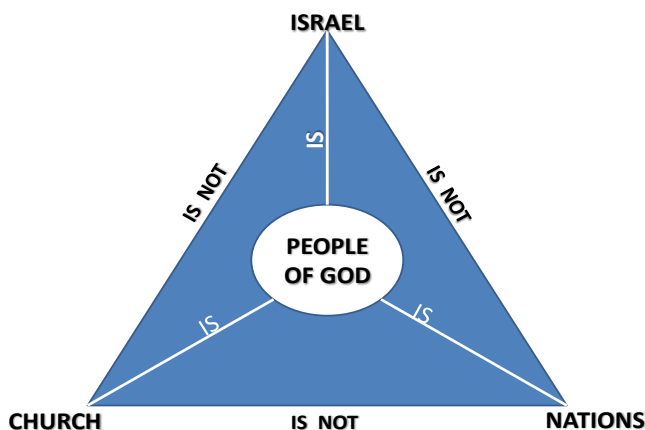
<sup>44</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1965. 46.

<sup>45</sup> For a full discussion of the identity of the bride in Revelation 21:9 see Soto, Mark H. *The Identity of the Eschatological nu,mfh* in Revelation 21:9. (Th.M. Thesis) Winona Lake, IN: Grace Theological Seminary. 1993.



back to John 3:29 to see their importance. It seems that for John in this pericope Israel is called the *friend of the bridegroom* not the bride.

A simple understanding of the language of Revelation 21 and 22 seems to allow for the following identities in the eternal state: First, The Church in Revelation 21:9 and represented in Revelation 21:14; Second, Israel represented in Revelation 21: 12-13; and Third, the Nations in Revelation 21:26 and 22:2. These three separate, distinct, and unified groups constitute the unity of the eternal people of God. What greater way to bring the Eternal Godhead glory than to create of His people the unity and distinction which is His very being. Were we to be able to represent this as Augustine did the Trinity it would look like this.



One need only focus the discussion away from the traditional battle ground of the Covenantal – Dispensational unity or distinction to include all of those who have by faith become part of the people of God. Transferring the Christocentric model of Blaising and Bock and moving to a more Trinitarian model of God’s work among humanity throughout the ages yields a conclusion which allows for both the distinction; desired by those who find clear indication for the future for Israel, and who see the Church as a unique entity in the plan and work of God, and the unity; for those who seek all of God’s people in one unified body for all eternity. The answer for this writer is therefore, not either/or but both/and!

May the nation of Israel, the unique apple of the eye of God; the Church, the bride of Christ and the Nations, those who worship the Lamb, live together in perfect unity as they serve, worship, and praise the King of Kings and Lord of Lords forever and ever...Amen!

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come"

And let the one who hears say, "Come"

And let the one who is thirsty come!<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Revelation 22:17 (NASB, 1995) The Lockman Foundation.

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