

## **Biblical Study that the Church as God's People and Its Significance for the Growth of the Church**

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### **Abstract**

Church growth is God's will. Church growth is often interpreted as an expansion of the body of Christ both in quantity and quality. However, in understanding church growth, of course, it is not only limited to understanding growth in terms of quality or quantity, but growth must be correct, namely in accordance with God's will, where the church must grow according to its identity. The Bible records that the identity of the church is the body of Christ, God's people who are built up in Christ and grow toward Christ (Bnd. 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 4:12-16). By understanding his identity as God's people (Bible Hub.) the church will have clear guidelines and indicators in viewing a growth, so that the church is not trapped in an understanding that limits the meaning of growth to only narrow terms of quantity or quality.

**Keywords:** The identity of the Church, the People of God, the growth of the Church.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Correct understanding of the concept of Church Identity is very important for believers, because it is often misunderstood between the Church and Israel, the Church has only existed since the New Testament while Israel is much older in the Old Testament, each has a clear and distinct identity in the Bible. The new church was founded in the Acts of the Apostles, after the ascension of the Lord Jesus to Heaven (Acts chapter 1). The church is a new community that was established after the ascension of the Lord Jesus to Heaven. The role of the disciples of the Lord Jesus was very important in the establishment of the church at that time.

The term church is not unfamiliar to everyone, especially to Christians. Meanwhile, the understanding of the identity of the church has not become the main focus in the life of the church. This can be seen from the lack of interest of believers in studying church history. Meanwhile, understanding the identity of the church will greatly affect the growth of the church. Whether the church will grow in the right or wrong direction, it is greatly influenced by understanding the identity of the church. Loss of identity will greatly endanger the growth of the church because it is very easily influenced by various teachings, the church will lose the straight line that distinguishes the value of right and wrong, the church will lose its characteristics and become the same as the world, the church will become blurred in understanding and carrying out its duties.

In connection with this, of course, we can see how important an understanding of the identity of the church is in the growth of the church. To understand the identity of the church of course we need to study the history of the church. Will Durant an American historian and philosopher stated that "*a person who loses his past is someone who has no identity*", as well as a church that does not understand its history will lose its identity. The identity of the Church is expressed in the truth of God's word (Bible) which is the body of Christ, God's people, belongs to God (cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10; Ephesians 4:12-16) (Tong, 2001).

Christian education is essentially based on the Bible which believers believe is the Word of God which is sourced from the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ through His Great Commission in Matthew 28: 19-20, namely "Go, make disciples of all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to do all things which I have commanded you."(Sihombing,2018).

The results of text analysis by Susanto who reviewed Paul's interactions with Roman officials. Based on the assumption of the unity of the text which is the characteristic of narrative analysis, it discusses the interactions that will be associated with the social dimension in Luke's overall writing. The results of the text analysis explained that the church is not an opposition to the state, but a partner who has a social responsibility to actualize shalom for church members, and the wider community (Susanto, 2019).

Therefore, the author is encouraged to discuss the identity of the Church as the People of God so that it can provide a correct description and understanding of the identity of the church as God's people, and through a correct understanding of the identity of the church will provide a broader understanding of the meaning of church growth and have significance for growth of the church.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research method that the author uses in writing this article is to use qualitative research methods and Bible studies to understand the identity of the Church as the People of God in accordance with the concept in the Bible regarding the word *Ekklesia* in relation to Israel as the People of God. The author did not conduct field research. This study uses a qualitative research methodology, by carrying out the method of interpretation and exegesis of important verses by using Biblical studies as the basis for qualitative research and supported by literature studies related to the discussion material. This program will use the basic principles of the truth of God's Word, to answer problems that arise in society. This research approach is a qualitative research approach to taxonomic analysis, using an inductive (exegetical) interpretation of the Bible. Biblical interpretation is a biblical study that aims to reveal the meaning of the text (Subagyo, 2004). To direct the design and implementation of this research, the research paradigm is the naturalistic paradigm. Naturalistic research methods because the research is carried out in natural conditions, the source of the data is a natural situation or "natural setting." Researchers collect data based on observations of natural situations, as they are, without being influenced intentionally. Researchers who enter the field are in direct contact with the situation and the people they are investigating. Naturalistic paradigm or natural paradigm is based on phenomenological philosophy. This phenomenological philosophy then developed and one of its developments was to become a method, namely the phenomenological method (Lumintang, 2012).

## DISCUSSION

### 1. Definition of Church

The term church is a term that has the same meaning as the Portuguese term "*igreja*", Spanish '*Iglesia*', Greek "*ekklesia*" (O'Donnel, 1996). The word church itself in the New Testament uses the word *ekklesia* which comes from Greek, which consists of two words, namely *ek* (which means to *come out*) and *kaleo* (which means to *call*) which literally means those who are called out. So *ekklesia* can be interpreted as people who are called out of the old life from the oppression of sin and the power of darkness to enter the kingdom of God ([www.gotquestions.org/indonesia/definisi-church.html](http://www.gotquestions.org/indonesia/definisi-church.html)). In other words, the church is the people called by God to be the people of the kingdom of God, belonging to God, known as the people of God. The term *ekklesia* also means that everyone who is called from darkness into the light of the kingdom of God is a call to fellowship and unite in a

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divine community, just as Christ, the Father, and the Spirit are one. So the term ekklesia is a noble calling, where the children of God represent the Creator of the universe and are enabled to live free from the pollution of the world (Heath, 1990).

In the New Testament the community of believers is not called a church but a congregation or congregation. The Greek equivalent of the word congregation is ekklesia, which means gathering of people (cf. Acts 5:11) (Dainton, 2002). Starting from this understanding, we can understand the use of the term ekklesia in the Old Testament which we can find in the Septuagint (the OT and NT Bibles are written in Greek) which refers to the congregation of Israel or the people of God (cf. Joshua 8:35, Ezra 2:65, Joel 2:16) in the Septuagint the term ekklesia is used as a translation of the term Qahal which means congregation / people, this word Qahal also means to call to gather or gather, which refers to the gathering of people who are called to be in a gathering. the community known as God's people (cf. Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:14) (<https://biblehub.com/> Qahal in septuagint) This is in line with what was conveyed by Luis Berkof:

*“We must not close our eyes to the clear fact that the term Church (Hebrew: qahal, translated ekklesia in the Septuagint) is applied to Israel in the Old Testament over and over again (Joshua 8:35, Ezra 2:65, Joel 2: 16). In English Bible translations, the Old Testament term for that word is gathering, assembly, or congregation, while in the New Testament the word church is used, so the fact that there is a distinction between these terms may be confusing, but the original word, both in the Old Testament and in The New Testament both refers to a congregation of God's people, thereby showing the essence of a church...Paul clearly acknowledges the spiritual unity between Israel and the church in Romans 11:17-21, and in Ephesians 2:11-16. ” (Berkhof, 2001)*

Thus, this tells us that the People of God in the Old Testament and the Church as the people of God that we know in the new covenant are not without connection or relationship but in fact have the same content of understanding and that has been initiated from the Old Testament, where God in his work to declare His kingdom on this earth has started everything since the world was created even before the world was created (cf. Ephesians 1:3-4) and in the old covenant we can see God's work through his chosen people, Israel, to be a witness to the nations, later in the Covenant Only through the work of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ came into the world to declare the kingdom of God, then God established His people, namely the Church, which is a community of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, to be an instrument of revelation of God's kingdom on earth according to His plan and will in eternity.

The foundation of the Church's duties and vocation is God's covenant with His people who were called out by His grace in Jesus Christ, giving us an understanding of the fulfillment of God's promises to His people through His work which He began from the beginning of creation, even before the creation of the world (Genesis 1-3; Ephesians). 1:4). This fact states a picture that the history of the church was not built or started from the birth and ministry of the Lord Jesus, His death and resurrection, not even from the day of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, but this has been revealed by God in His word since the covenant was declared. by God to Abraham and Moses (Minear, 2004).

It is important to realize that the concept of the church in both the Old and New Testaments is God's initiative calling people to come to Him, this shows that there is no initiative from humans to come to God because of their sinfulness and of course this strengthens the concept of God's grace. in the lives of God's people. With this understanding, in the New Testament it can be seen how Paul equates Gentiles with Jews, namely they both need God's action to include them as His people,

because for Paul, Israel has been equal to the Gentiles by because of their disobedience in a life pleasing to God.

## 2. Views on the Relationship between Israel and the Church

To understand more clearly about the relationship between Israel as the chosen people and the Church as God's people, it helps us to look at the views that discuss the relationship between Israel and the Church.

### a. Parentesys View

In this view, the church is a distraction from God's plan for Israel. They use the terms intercalation or parenthesis to describe the peculiarities of the church. Intercalation is an insertion of a period of time in the calendar, and parenthesis is defined as an interlude or interval. Thus, God had a different plan for Israel and for the church. Charles R. Ryrie wrote,

*“There is nothing wrong with God having a purpose for Israel and a separate purpose for the church and letting these two goals stand together in His whole plan. However, God has other purposes for the angels, for those who are not saved, and for the Gentiles, all of which differ from His purposes for Israel and His purposes for the church.”* (Ryrie, 1995)

Then, for this view, Israel must be seen as a nation. Because the terms kingdom and nation in the Old Testament both have a clear and political meaning, according to what was promised to Abraham (Genesis 12:7, 17:5). Thus, if Israel is equated with the church, then the national element will not be possible in the sense of the church. It is based on the teaching of this Parentesys view of God's promise to Israel. These promises are understood literally, unconditionally, and eternally. The promises are: 1) The promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), which contains the promise of a land, very many descendants that produce a nation, kingdom and throne, as well as the promise of redemption. 2) Palestine's Promise (Deuteronomy 30:1-10), a promise that guarantees Israel's permanent right to the land, this promise will be fulfilled in the millennium. 3) The promise to David (2 Samuel 7:12-16), a royal promise to David's descendants, a kingdom ruled by a king, and this promise will be fulfilled at the return of Christ to rule over the believing Israelites. 4) The new promise (Jeremiah 31:31-34), the promise that God will bless Israel in the future, namely Israel will enjoy forgiveness of sins through Christ's death, the fulfillment of this promise in the millennium.

This is what drives the belief of this group so that it strongly supports the existence of Israel as a nation, the claim of the land of Palestine as the promised land, and the peak is the political government of Israel on earth in the next thousand years. The church, according to them, was born on the day of Pentecost. According to groups with such views, the Church was not designed for national and governmental purposes, this is what distinguishes it from Israel. The church has its own character. The first is uniqueness in its relationship with Christ, where Christ is the head and the church or church is His body (1 Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22-23, Colossians 1:18). Second, a separate church age. The church is not in the Old Testament, the church was founded on the resurrection of Christ (Ephesians 1:20, 22-23), and began at Pentecost which was marked by the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-16).

Thus, for this group the future of the church is very different from the future of Israel. In the end, the church consisting of non-Israelites will be saved based on faith in Christ (in part), while Israel as a nation (as a whole) will repent and be saved (based on Romans 11:25-26), in that state God blesses the nation. -nation through Israel (Enns, 2003).

So according to this parental view the Church has nothing to do with the Old Testament. According to the author, this is a mistake because without the church's connection with the Old Testament, the church should not use doctrinal teachings from the Old Testament and apply them to church life. Then the church will also lose the full picture of the history of redemption and the meaning of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ which is the core of the gospel message and becomes the basis and identity of the church which is the body of Christ. This is because the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promise to His people that we meet in the people of Israel. This view also argues that the church is only an insert in the failure of Israel as God's people to obey God's plan. This is certainly contrary to what is written in Ephesians 1:4, where believers have been chosen from the beginning. Thus, according to the author, this view has a major weakness and is irresponsible.

#### **b. Covenantist view**

According to this view, covenant or promise is an important concept. This view holds that God's promise to Israel has continuity with the church in the New Testament. That is why the church is called the New Testament Israel or the new Israel. According to Wayne Grudem, *"The church has now become the true Israel of God and will receive all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament."* Thus they did not believe in God's different plans for Israel or for the church. According to this group, there are two promises of God given to the Israelites, namely, national promises and spiritual promises. The national promise was fulfilled through Joshua taking the entire promised land (Joshua 11:23). However, because of their disobedience to God, God finally gave them into the hands of their enemies (Nehemiah 9:26-27), and the fulfillment of this promise turned into a conditional agreement because they failed to protect the land (Nehemiah 9:28).

Likewise, various other promises promised by God in exile have been fulfilled, according to the conditions that God set for them. For example returning from exile, rebuilding the temple of God, making sacrifices again and so on. Anthony A. Hoekema (2004) stated that: *"All prophecies of the restoration of Israel [national] have literally been fulfilled. So, we no longer need to wait for the fulfillment of these promises in the distant future."* The same thing was also conveyed by John Frame, namely "The Bible applies the Old Testament into the New Testament"(Frame, 2013) thus this implies that understanding the Church apart from the Old Testament or without looking at the history of the People of God in the Old Testament is something wrong and very wrong.

Another thing about all promises spiritually. This view holds that all spiritual promises will be directly fulfilled through the church. The spiritual promise in question is Israel which is a blessing to the nations and how non-Israelites believe and worship God (Genesis 12:3, 22:18, Psalm 22:28, Isaiah 60:1-3, 45:22, Malachi 1:11).

According to the Covenantist view, all these promises have been fulfilled through the church, namely by the entry of the Gentiles into the church. So, the church is not an insert or a temporary substitute (parentesys church), because the church is central in God's redemptive plan, the church was planned by God long before the creation of the world, with a purpose and plan no different from Israel's (Matthew 16:18-19, Ephesians 1 :22-23, 3:8-11, 5:25-27). Even according to this view, the church is not only found in the New Testament, but can also be found in the Old Testament, as the people of God.

According to this group's view there are even things that strongly support that the church in terms of its identity is Israel as the People of God in the New Testament because of the use of the same terms with the same meaning in the Bible used for Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the Testament. new to describe his relationship with God. Some of the terms we can meet include, the flock of sheep (Isaiah 40:11; Psalm 77:21, 78:52, 80:2; Matthew 26:31; 1 Peter 5:2), God's people (Isaiah 1:3, 3:12, Jeremiah 2:11, 13; Hosea 2:22, 4:6; Acts 17:30; 1 Peter 2:9-10). The Bride

(Hosea 1 and 2; Revelation 21:2), the Temple (Old Testament, the temple is where God is present, God dwells, where His name dwells, His Presence and His glory. The New Testament church and believers are called the temple of God where the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16), and Ephesians 2:21-22 states that believers are the holy temple where God dwells in the Spirit) ((Woudstra, 2003) in Feinberg, 2003).

Through the discussion of the covenantal view, the author sees that this view has a strong and responsible basis, and is in accordance with the truth of God's word in his discussion of the relationship between Israel and the Church as the People of God, so that the author also has the same view that the church is the Israel of the New Testament.

### **Its Significance for Church Growth**

Through all the above discussion we can see that there is very accurate evidence of the identity of the church as God's people. This, of course, must be the most basic indicator of church growth. The growth of the church in quality and quantity will end in a mistake if it throws away its identity or identity as God's people who must be led by the Holy Spirit to walk in the truth and God's will and replace it with certain personal or individual wills and certain foundations and organizations. The church must understand and realize that the church is a manifestation of God's Kingdom in the world, God's people who are called and chosen by God in Jesus Christ the Lord (Tong, 2001;56).

The growth of the Church is often seen as a growth in quality and quantity, but all of that must be tested with this awareness, whether the growth in quality shows a quality that is in accordance with the identity of the church as God's people or the church is growing in quality and quantity that resembles this world. A church that realizes its identity as God's people will grow in God's will and become more and more like Christ. Because there is no growth of the Church that can be said to be a growth if it is separated or separated and occurs outside of Christ, because the true growth of the church must be growth that is in accordance with the identity of the church itself as the People of God which should become more and more like Christ and remain in Christ, carry out ministry duties, namely serving God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:9; Ephesians 1:3-5, 3:1-21; Philippians 3:10)

### **CONCLUSION**

From the above discussion it can be found that Israel is God's chosen people who were chosen to carry out the mandate from God, to be a blessing to the nations, to raise the banner of God. The nation of Israel was chosen for the Great plan of saving the nations that did not yet believe in the God of Israel. However, when that task has not been achieved, God carries out the next plan, which is to choose the church as an institution that is trusted to carry out the divine mandate, Matthew 28 verses 18-20, which is to reach all people to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The church differs from Israel as a community and a task from God, but both are God's chosen people.

The church will experience growth if the church realizes its function and duty as God's chosen people. The church has the task of development and the church is a reflection of God's own image in the world. The church is a living unit that continues to grow as a task given by God.

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