



Does Your Church have the Correct Name?

by Tim Kelley

I spent my early childhood in Madison, Tennessee, a suburb of Nashville. One of my many memories of that time was getting all dressed up for church on Sunday morning. We went to the Madison Church of Christ, a rather large church for that day. In fact, I remember the day the church opened its 1,000 seat worship center. It was really exciting. It would seem that God was blessing the church, or was it Christ blessing the church. After all, it was the “Church of Christ”.

Years later we had moved to Cleveland in southeastern Tennessee, which, by the way, was (and is) the headquarters of the “Church of God”, which I understand is a somewhat “Pentecostal” organization. On its website’s home page it says that “*First and foremost, the Church of God is a determinedly Christian church. It is built upon the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The doctrines and practices of the church are based upon His teachings.*”¹ That being the case, why isn’t it called “The Church of Christ”? Searching their web site a little deeper I found that their Bylaws hint at why they chose that name. In their bylaws under Article 1: “Name” it says “*The official name shall be Church of God (1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1: 1).*”² Reading those two scriptures I found that there is no mandate to call the church “the Church of God”. Instead, the writer, Paul, simply refers to the church as the Church of God.

I really didn’t pay much attention to the Church of God while living in Cleveland. If not for riding my bicycle past its headquarters back in the late 60’s, I probably would not have known that it existed. After all, my family had just begun attending the “Church of God” ourselves, but not in Cleveland. We attended a group that met in nearby Chattanooga that was a part of the much larger “Church of God” headquartered in Pasadena, California. That church basically disbanded a number of years ago, but it’s various offshoots continue on under the names “ *** Church of God”, or “Church of God ***”. It seems that even though the various offshoots don’t want to join together, they do at least have one thing in common . . . the name. One of the larger offshoots did explain on their web site why they call themselves “the Church of God . . .”, but because they apparently found no Biblical mandate to do so, they admitted that they did so because “. . . ‘the church of God’ is the common name”.³

Our fellowship (the Ami Yisrael Fellowship) has been meeting for a number of years and we occasionally discuss trying to find a larger place to meet. A few years ago I mentioned that thought to the pastor of one of the local “Church of God” offshoots and his response was something like this “I hope not in this town. We’ve already got too many Church of God groups”. Being quite satisfied with the name we call ourselves, I responded “Oh, you don’t have to worry about that!”

How is it that churches with differing beliefs have the same name. Does it really matter what a church calls itself? What did God call HIS people? Answering these questions will help clear up the church name question.

You might be surprised to find out that YHVH, the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of most Christians and Jews, never calls his people “the church of God”. Of the eight places the term “church of God” is used in the King James Bible, they are all in the New Testament, and the phrase was always uttered by Paul . . . never James, Peter, John, or even Yeshua (Jesus) Himself. In fact Yeshua says “. . . I will build My church . . .”⁴, so if you believe He is starting something new, it would stand to reason that His church would be called “The Church of Jesus”.

¹ <http://www.churchofgod.org/index.php/pages/church-of-god-is> under the heading “Christian”

² <http://www.churchofgod.org/index.php/pages/bylaws> top of page

³ <http://www.ucg.org/booklet/fundamental-beliefs/church/> paragraph 12 from top

⁴ Matthew 16:18

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In the Tnakh⁵ (the Old Testament), the phrase “of God” is used of a mountain, angels, spirit, laws, the Temple, words, and various other things. It is also used in the term “man of God” to refer to a number of individuals – especially Moses, but is only used twice to refer to a group of people. In Judges 20:2 it refers to a group of Israelites who had banded together to fight against the tribe of Benjamin. The other place is Nehemiah 13:1. In this passage, the phrase *congregation of God* is used. It’s basically restating the Deuteronomy 23:3 passage which says that a Moabite may not enter the assembly of YHVH until the tenth generation. In both these cases, the “of God” was Israel and in each case Israel was called either the *assembly* or the *congregation*, each of which is translated from the Hebrew word *kahal* (Strong’s 6951).

In a previous article⁶ I showed that the English word *church* is a rather poor translation for the Greek word *ekklesia*. A better and more consistent translation would be the word *assembly*. I also pointed out that the Greek word *ekklesia* is the most common translation of the Hebrew word *kahal*. Thus, to translate the above mentioned passages, “assembly of God” would be more correct; but if one were to stay consistent with the way Paul’s words were translated into English, they would have to use the less accurate translation “church of God”. Thus we have only two places in the entire Tnakh where we could possibly find God’s people being called the “church of God”. Combine that the eight times Paul’s words are translated such and you have only ten times the phrase “church of God” is used in the entire Bible, and at least two of those times, it refers to Israel.

So what did God call His people? The most common term in the Tnakh for God’s people (other than the simple term “Israel” itself) is the term “My people Israel” (Hebrew – עַמִּי אֵת־יִשְׂרָאֵל – *ami Yisrael*). It is used at least 27 times, and in each case clearly refers to the nation of Israel⁷. Here are a few examples –

^{KJV} **2 Samuel 3:18** Now then do it: for the LORD hath spoken of David, saying, By the hand of my servant David I will save my people Israel out of the hand of the Philistines, and out of the hand of all their enemies.

^{NKJ} **1 Kings 6:13** "And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake My people Israel."

^{NKJ} **2 Chronicles 6:6** 'Yet I have chosen Jerusalem, that My name may be there; and I have chosen David to be over My people Israel.'

This is just a few of the many examples where YHVH calls Israel “my people”. But what’s interesting is that He continues to call them “my people” even when they are rebelling against Him. For instance –

^{NKJ} **1 Kings 16:2** "Inasmuch as I lifted you out of the dust and made you ruler over My people Israel, and you have walked in the way of Jeroboam, and have made My people Israel sin, to provoke Me to anger with their sins . . .

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 7:12** " But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel.

^{NKJ} **Amos 7:8** And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said: "Behold, I am setting a plumb line In the midst of My people Israel; I will not pass by them anymore.

In many cases, God continued to call Israel “My people” even after the northern tribes had been sent into captivity and after Judah had returned from Babylon. In fact He continues to refer to Israel as “My people

⁵ The term used for the “Old Testament” in the Jewish Bible. The term is an acronym for the three divisions of the Masoretic Text – the Torah (Law), the Nevi’im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings).

⁶ <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/What%20is%20the%20Church.htm>

⁷ Even though Israel is the name of the people who are direct descendants of Jacob, God has always made it possible for non-Israelites to join in with Israel and be a part of God’s people. Once they join in, they are considered to be Israelites just as much as native-born Israelites, are subject to the same laws as native born Israelites, and are recipients of the same blessings. See our series entitled “Understanding Israel” - <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles.html>

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up into the first century when He announces the coming of The Messiah. Notice this passage in the New Testament in regards to the role of the Messiah –

^{KJV} **Matthew 2:6** And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

So God's people, even into the New Testament, are still called "My people Israel".

A variation of "My people Israel" is found in 1 Samuel 2:29 where the words are reversed and it's read "Israel, My people.

^{NKJ} 1 Samuel 2:29 'Why do you kick at My sacrifice and My offering which I have commanded *in My dwelling place*, and honor your sons more than Me, to make yourselves fat with the best of all the offerings of Israel My people?'

But, you say, didn't Hosea prophecy that Israel would no longer be called "my people"? Yes, that's true. In the prophecy of Hosea, God said that the northern tribes of Israel (who collectively went by the name of the largest tribe – Ephraim) would for a period of time be called "Lo-Ammi" or "not My people" (Hosea 1:9), but in the very next verse God shows that when Israel begins to repent, they will be called "the sons of the Living God". Further on in the prophecy, He shows that He will grant them mercy, and when He does, they are once again "My people".

^{NKJ} **Hosea 2:23** Then I will sow her for Myself in the earth, And I will have mercy on her who had not obtained mercy; Then I will say to those who were not My people, 'You are My people!' And they shall say, 'You are my God!' "

A close look at the book of Romans, especially chapters 9, 10, and 11 will show that in a partial fulfillment of the Hosea prophecy, this is precisely what happened shortly after the death of Messiah Yeshua.

Even though, if you're looking strictly at numbers, "My people Israel" is the more common term applied to the people of God, it's important to realize that the word "god" is not a name, but merely a title. It's sort of like the word "president". A person can be the president of the Rotary Club, the president of General Motors, or the president of the United States of America. If I were to say "the president said 'ask not what your country can do for you . . .'", you may not know which president said it. But if I said "President Kennedy said . . .", then you would know specifically who I'm talking about because Kennedy is not a title, it's a name.

This is important to understand, because the rules of translation say that titles are to be translated, but names are to be transliterated. For instance, the title *god* in English is roughly equivalent to the Greek word *kurios* and the Hebrew word *el*. Not so with names. The Hebrew name "Moshe" is pronounced "Moosace" in Greek, and "Moses" in English. The meaning of the name is not relevant to the transliteration of the name.

Most Bible students know that "God" is a title, not a name, but the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does have a name. It's represented in the Hebrew language scriptures as *YHVH*, and is oftentimes pronounced *Yahveh* or *Yahweh*.⁸ Following the rules of translation, YHVH's name in the Tnakh should be nearly the same in the Greek New Testament, which it would be if there were ever a case where the name was recorded. Unfortunately, none of the New Testament writers appear to have used His name. If they had, and if they had used it to define a group of believers, they would have probably used the term *Assembly of YHVH*. Of course, this is purely hypothetical.

God, or better yet – YHVH, has another term that He applied to His special people, those who are willing to "cross over" into the promised land. Just before Moses died, he repeated to Israel all the events that had happened since Moses was sent to deliver them from Egypt. He restated the law of God (the Torah) and then told the generation that was to cross the Jordan and inherited the land –

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 27:9** . . . "Take heed and listen, O Israel: This day you have become the people of the LORD (YHVH) your God.

⁸ Exodus 6:3 – following Jewish tradition, the four letter name is usually substituted with the words "the LORD"

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This term “people of the LORD” is used 8 times in the Tnakh, and in every case, it applies to Israel. In fact, God actually placed His name (YHVH) on the children of Israel as is clearly shown in the Aaronic Blessing –

^{ESV} **Numbers 6:22-27** The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, ²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. ²⁷ "So shall they put My name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

God continues to call this same people (Israel), this same *church* (you might say), by His name long after they had rebelled against Him and He had driven them to the four corners of the earth . . . even to the end time. It seems that in God’s mind, His people are always his people. Notice this prophecy –

^{ESV} **Isaiah 43:1** But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

“But what about Amos 9:11 & 12? Doesn’t that indicate that God placed His name on the Gentiles? Not necessarily, at least if you use the church’s definition of gentile, i.e., “non-Israelite”. But the Biblical definition of gentile is more in tune to being a person who does not revere the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The book of Amos is about such a people – Israel. If you read Amos 9 beginning at the beginning of the chapter, that fact is clearly obvious. Thus the people in this passage, and specifically in verse 7, is again – Israel.

Could it be that these passages could be referring to *Spiritual Israel*? I guess that could be possible, that is, if there actually was a people called Spiritual Israel in the Bible. The fact is, there is not. The term is just not there . . . nowhere! Instead, *Spiritual Israel* is a term that was invented by the church. It’s as if they knew that all those prophecies of return pertained to Israel, so they had to come up with a way to be “Israel”. Of course, it was also important to somehow be Israel if you were going to claim some of the laws that pertained only to Israel, laws like . . . tithing.⁹ A friend of mine once said “There is a Spiritual Israel when Israel is spiritual”. I think that says it all.

So the Tnakh clearly shows that if you had to give a name to God’s people, it would have to include the name *Israel*. You could call them “The Lord’s People – Israel” or “Israel – YHVH’s People” or “The Assembly of YHVH”. Of course, the most common name would be “My People Israel”.

“But we’re a ‘New Covenant’ church, so we need a New Covenant name”, you might say. OK, let’s look at what the Bible has to say in regards to the names of those who are a part of the New Covenant.

^{ESV} **Jeremiah 31:31** "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah . . .

So here’s your New Covenant name options - House of Israel or House of Judah. “House of Gentiles” doesn’t seem to be here. Neither is the term “Spiritual Israel”. If you want to have a New Covenant *Biblical* name you should include one of those names- Israel or Judah. Then you could call yourself

⁹ The term *Spiritual Levite* is also used by some churches to justify receiving the tithes that the Torah clearly states could only be given to the Levites. Yet, in most cases, these same churches abhor the primary function of the Levites which was to accommodate the priests when performing their sacrificial duties.

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something like “Assembly of New Covenant Israel” or “Church of Judah”. OK . . . I’m being facetious. I could go on and show that the *church* of James 5:14 as well as in 1 Peter 5:13 is also Israel and Judah (inheritors of the New Covenant) but I think you see my point.

So is it really important what we call ourselves? Is God as concerned about this as much as we are? I think that instead of getting all concerned about the name of the denomination or corporation a person belongs to, we should be more concerned about how that group, or individuals in that group, behave. After all, a group can call itself anything they want; maybe even the “Universal Church . . . of God” (just got to get that ‘of God’ in there to eliminate any confusion), but it really means nothing about what they teach or how they conduct their lives.

Instead of a name, Yeshua said that we will know His people by their fruits –

^{ESV} **Matthew 7:15-23** "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. ²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Is your group, church, or denomination walking in the ways of God as He leads you? Are you excited about learning more of His instructions – the word’s of life? Do you truly want to walk like Yeshua walked and understand His words like His disciples did? Are you excited every time God reveals a portion of His written word? If not, what you call yourself doesn’t really matter – does it?

Or does your group, church, or denomination teach and discuss God’s instructions every week – leaving room to admit that you may be wrong? Do you proclaim that “God does not change” and thus can be counted on to fulfill the prophecies of old and to never leave or forsake us? Does your group search diligently into the culture of the writers of the ‘New Testament’ to see what theirs and Yeshua’s words meant to them, not to us who have come 2000 years later. If so, I think God would call you “My People”.

Finally, the people, the assembly, the ‘church’ of YHVH are what God calls them. It’s really not for us to decide. We can come up with a name, but if we’re not living the way of life that YHVH assigns to that name, we’re no better than any other church, synagogue, or fellowship. The children of God must be willing to take an honest look at themselves and be willing to say “I’ve been wrong”. They must seek to know God’s ways more clearly. They must practice repentance – changing their way of life, and then pray for forgiveness. Only then will the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel be able to proudly call them “My people who are called by My name.”

^{ESV} **2 Chronicles 7:14** . . . if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Shalom Alecheim