

Chapter 13

THE ETHNIC DIVISION PRINCIPLE

I. DEFINITION

That principle by which the interpretation of any verse or passage of Scripture is determined upon a consideration of God's appointed ethnic divisions.

II. AMPLIFICATION

A. **Definition:** The word "ethnic" has to do with the basic divisions of mankind distinguished by culture. The following are the main words used in Scripture relative to the ethnic divisions of mankind:

Old Testament Hebrew:

UMMAH

= "a collection; i.e., community of persons"

Translated:

nations Ezra 4:10; Daniel 3:4, 7, 29.

people Numbers 25:15; Psalms 117:1.

GOY

= "A massing; a foreign nation; hence a Gentile"

Translated:

Gentiles Genesis 10:5; Isaiah 11:10; 42:1, 6; 49:22; 54:3; 60:3, 5, 11, 16.

heathen Psalms 2:1, 8; 102:15; Jeremiah 10:2; Ezekiel 11:12, 16; 39:21; Malachi 1:11.

nation(s) Genesis 10:31, 32; Deuteronomy 9:1, 4, 5; I Chronicles 16:20; Psalms 22:27, 28; Isaiah 2:2, 4; 52:15; Malachi 3:12.

people Joshua 10:13; II Kings 6:18; Daniel 11:23.

LEOM

= "to gather; a community"

Translated:

nation Genesis 27:29; Psalms 47:3; 57:9.

people Genesis 25:23; Psalms 148:11; Isaiah 55:4

folk Jeremiah 51:58.

AM

= "a people (as a congregated unit); specially, a tribe"

Translated:

folk Genesis 33:15; Proverbs 30:26.

nation(s) Exodus 21:8; Deuteronomy 30:3; I Chronicles 16:24; Psalms 108:3.

people Psalms 29:11; 102:18, 22; Habakuk 3:13; Zechariah 8:22; Malachi 1:4.

New Testament Greek:

ETHNOS

= "a race (as of the same habit); i.e., a tribe; specially a foreign (non-Jewish) one"

Translated:

Gentile Matthew 10:5, 18; Mark 10:42; Acts 4:27; Romans 9:24, 30.

heathen II Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 1:16; 3:8.

nation(s) Mark 11:17; John 11:50-52; Acts 14:16; Romans 4:17, 18.

people Romans 10:19.

GENOS

= "offspring, family, nation, the aggregate of many individuals of the same nature, kind, sort, species"

Translated:

born	Acts 18:2, 24
country (man)	Acts 4:36; II Corinthians 11:26.
diversity	I Corinthians 12:28
generation	I Peter 2:9
kind (red)	Matthew 13:47; Acts 7:13, 19
nation	Mark 7:26
offspring	Acts 17:28, 29; Revelation 22:16
stock	Acts 13:26; Philippians 3:5.

The above words indicate that an ethnic group is to be viewed as a community of persons sharing the same ancestry and participating in the culture. These words are applied to Israel/Judah, Gentile nations, and the Church.

B. Classification: The apostle Paul recognized that while God is no respecter of persons, He has instituted certain ethnic distinctions. Paul noted the three basic ethnic divisions in the human race in I Corinthians 10:32: "Give none offence,

neither to the *Jews*,
nor to the *Gentiles*,
nor to the *church* of God:"

Thus, in God's mind, the three main divisions of the human race are the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church. The Word of God must be rightly divided in relation to these three classes of people.

C. Origination: From the creation of Adam to the tower of Babel (Genesis 1:1; 11:9), mankind was one race, speaking one language. The event recorded in Genesis 11 gives us the background of the reason for the division of mankind into diverse nations. The origin of the nations is described in this chapter. Out of these nations God chose a nation for Himself and for His own purposes. In the Old Testament there are two major ethnic divisions: the chosen nation (Israel), and the Gentile nations. The New Testament introduces the third major ethnic division, which is the Church, composed of both Jew and Gentile.

1. The Chosen Nation

- a. **The Choice** — Scripture reveals that Israel was the nation which God chose to fulfil His own purposes. God took Israel as a nation from the midst of the nations and made a great nation out of them by His statutes, laws, and judgments (Deuteronomy 4:6-8, 34). In the covenant with Abraham God said that He would make of him a great nation (Genesis 12:2, 3). God also promised Abraham that He would make him the father of many nations (Genesis 17:1-7).
- b. **The Reason** — God chose Israel to be a special people to Himself above all the people on the earth because of His love and the covenant He made with Israel's fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deuteronomy 7:6-9; 9:1-6). There were a number of things involved in the purpose for this Divine choice:
 - (1) Chosen to *ble*ss all nations (Genesis 9:27; 12:2, 3; 17:4-7; 18:18; 22:16-18).
 - (2) Chosen to receive the *oracles* of God (Romans 3:2).
 - (3) Chosen to receive the *blessings* of God (Romans 9:4, 5).

- **The Adoption** — Adopted as God's son from among the nations (Exodus 4:22-23).
- **The Shekinah Glory of God** — The visible manifestation of the presence of God in the glory-cloud.
- **The Covenants** — The Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Palestinian, the David and the New Covenants.
- **The Giving of the Law** — The moral, civil and ceremonial laws.
- **The Service of God** — The Tabernacle of Moses, the Tabernacle of David and the Temple of Solomon with their respective orders of worship.
- **The Promises** — Particularly as they relate to the seed (as the sand and as the stars) and the land.
- **The Fathers** — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob being particularly the three fathers of Israel (Exodus 3:6; Genesis 48:15, 16).
- **The Messiah** — As pertaining to His human nature (Romans 1:3).

The summation of these shows the choice of Israel as a nation to receive and be the guardians of the written Word; and to be the progenitors of the Living Word through which all nations would be blessed.

- c. **The Division** — Israel was a united nation from the time of the exodus under Moses through the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon — under whom the nation reached its highest glory. After the death of Solomon the nation was divided into two houses; two kingdoms; two nations; known as Israel and Judah (I Kings 11, 12). God permitted this division in order to fulfil His distinctive purpose for each nation. It must be recognized that from that time on there were two dynasties, two kingdoms and two destinies. These two nations went into two different captivities, to two different places, at two different times, under two different world kingdoms. Israel went into captivity to Assyria and Judah to Babylon. This the prophets of each nation clearly foretold beforehand.

Therefore, in interpreting the prophets, the distinction between these kingdoms to which they were prophesying must constantly be kept in mind. Some prophecies were distinctly given to Israel and others to Judah; these should not be confused. The Lord foretold through the prophet Jeremiah that He would make a New Covenant with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-13). The prophet Ezekiel foretold that God would make Israel and Judah (two sticks) one in the hand of the Son of man (Ezekiel 37:15-19). "And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all:" (Ezekiel 37:22). This union can come about only through the New Covenant in the Lord Jesus Christ.

2. **The Gentile Nations**

- a. **Their Condition** — In Scripture the term "Gentiles" is used to refer

to all nations besides Israel/Judah. It denotes all peoples not in Covenant relationship with God, as was Israel. Paul aptly describes the condition of the Gentiles in Ephesians 2:11, 12:

- Gentiles in the flesh — as to natural and national birth.
- Uncircumcision in the flesh — not in Abrahamic Covenant relationship to God.
- Without Christ — having no Saviour; no anointed one.
- Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel — estranged and outlawed from the rights of Israel as a nation.
- Strangers from the Covenants of promise — the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, and Davidic Covenants and the promises, privileges, and blessings therein.
- Having no hope — no Messianic expectation.
- Without God in the world — having general, but no special revelation of God.
- Afar off — no nearness of relationship to God.

Paul, later on in the same epistle, summarized the spiritual condition of the Gentiles as “having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness that is in their heart” (Ephesians 4:18) (Read also Romans 1:18-32).

- b. **Their Salvation** — The writers of the Old Testament Scriptures were concerned primarily with the chosen nation and only dealt with the Gentile nations as they related to it. (Deuteronomy 32:8; Acts 17:26.) However, the Scriptures also plainly declare that God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34, 35). As already noted, Israel was chosen as a nation to eventually bless all other nations. The following Scriptures attest to this fact:

- All nations to be blessed through the seed of Abraham (Genesis 22:18).
- All families of the earth to be blessed (Genesis 26:4).
- All kindreds of the nations to worship God. (Psalms 22:27, 28).
- All nations to flow to the house of the Lord (Isaiah 2:2, 3).
- Gentiles to seek the Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10).
- Messiah to sprinkle many nations with blood (Isaiah 52:15).
- Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day (Zechariah 2:11).
- The name of the Lord to be great among the Gentiles (Malachi 1:11).
- The Gentiles shall trust in His name (Matthew 12:21).

The great commission involves the taking of the Gospel of Christ to every creature, making disciples of *all nations* (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The book of Acts shows God’s turning from the chosen nation to the Gentile nations in order to take out of them a people for His name (Acts 9:15, 13:44-49, 14:1, 2; 15:14-18; 28:23-31).

The Scriptures clearly show that the Gentile nations would be blessed through the chosen nation by “the Seed” — Messiah. “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through

faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, in thee shall all nations be blessed" (Galatians 3:8).

3. The Church

- a. **Definition of the Church** — The third group mentioned by Paul in I Corinthians 10:32 is "the church of God." The word Church is a translation of the Greek word EKKLESIA, which is made up of two other words: EK, which means "out of" and KALEO, which means "to call." Thus the word EKKLESIA means literally "the called out ones." It is used in Scripture to refer to the nation of Israel and to the Christian community of believers, whether in heaven or on earth:

- (1) **Israel — the Church in the wilderness (Acts 7:38)**
- (2) **Saints in Heaven (Hebrews 12:23)**
- (3) **Saints on Earth (Revelation 1:11)**

In these three the word Church is used in its two basic senses: universal and local. We understand the universal Church to include the redeemed of all ages both in heaven and earth, and the local Church to be a visible expression of it.

- b. **Calling of the Church** — God has always had a people for Himself; a company of called out ones. Being a "called out one" involves:
- Being called out of darkness into light (I Peter 2:9).
 - Being called to a vocation (Ephesians 4:1).
 - Being called to a calling of hope (Ephesians 4:4).
 - Being called with a holy calling (II Timothy 1:9).
 - Being called to a high calling (Philippians 3:14).
 - Being called to a heavenly calling (Hebrews 3:2).
 - Being called unto eternal glory by Christ Jesus (I Peter 5:10).
 - Being called to His Kingdom and glory (I Thessalonians 2:12).
- c. **Composition of the Church** — The Church, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is composed of both Jew and Gentile. As God called Israel as a nation from the midst of the nations and constituted them as His Church in the Old Testament, so God now calls people unto Himself out of every nation, whether Jew or Gentile, and constitutes them as His Church in the New Testament. The New Testament Church is revealed as the body of Christ composed of Jew and Gentile:
- Christ is the builder of His Church (Matthew 16:18).
 - The Lord adds to His Church (Acts 2:47).
 - Christ is the head of the body — the Church (Colossians 2:19).
 - The Church is Christ's body (Ephesians 1:22, 23).
 - Jew and Gentile all baptized into one body (I Corinthians 12:13).
 - Jew and Gentile are one new man in Christ (Ephesians 2:15, 16).
 - Jew and Gentile are fellow-heirs in the same body (Ephesians 3:6).

Thus the Church, being the third major ethnic division, is a called out company, consisting of Jew and Gentile, circumcision and uncircumcision, chosen nation and Gentile nations in the one body of Christ. National divisions are determined by natural birth, but by

spiritual birth all national distinctions cease to exist, for “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision avails anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature” (Galatians 6:15).

d. **Significance of the Church** — This Church taken out of every kindred, tongue, people and nation (Revelation 5:9) now constitutes God’s nation. It is the true Israel of God entitled to the spiritual promises in the Abrahamic Covenant:

- Those in Christ are “an holy nation” (I Peter 2:9).
- The kingdom was taken from Judah and given to a nation that would bring forth the fruits thereof (Matthew 21:43).
- The prophets foretold of a righteous nation that would keep the truths (Isaiah 26:2).
- Salvation was offered to a nation not yet called by His name (Isaiah 65:1; also Romans 10:20, 21).
- All those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus constitute the Israel of God (Galatians 6:15, 16).
- The Gentile by faith in Christ is brought into the commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:12).
- The believing Gentile is grafted into the olive tree of Israel (Romans 11).
- The Israel after the flesh is not necessarily the Israel after the Spirit (Romans 9:6-8).
- The true Jew and true circumcision is of the heart and in the spirit, and not of the flesh or the letter (Romans 2:28, 29).
- The believers in Christ are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:16, 29).

These Scriptures attest to the fact that the Church, composed of Jew and Gentile, is God’s holy nation, the true Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, and the called out company. This is the “mystery” revealed to Paul: that Jew and Gentile would become one body in Christ (Ephesians 3:1-9).

D. **Conclusion:** In conclusion it can be seen that the three main ethnic divisions mentioned by Paul in I Corinthians 10:32 are supported by the testimony of Scripture. (Note: For further study, trace these three distinctions through the book of Acts.)

Thus the literary method of *progressive ethnic division revelation* used in writing Scripture gives rise to the *Ethnic Division Principle* of interpreting Scripture.

III. QUALIFICATION

A. The first step in using this principle is to determine whether the verse or passage under consideration is relevant to any of the three main ethnic divisions. To facilitate this one may ask the following questions:

1. Does this verse refer to the united nation, the *whole* House of Israel?
2. Does it refer to the 10-tribed House of Israel, the Northern Kingdom?
3. Does it refer to the 2-tribed (plus the Levites) House of Judah, the Southern Kingdom?

4. Does it refer to the Gentile nations?
5. Does it refer to the Church, chosen out of every nation?

B. In interpretation, extreme caution must be used in order to avoid confusing these ethnic divisions. That which is said of one division must not be interpreted as referring to another.

1. The same is also true of certain divisions within these main divisions. This becomes especially important in interpreting the prophets. Some of the prophets ministered distinctly to the House of Israel and others to the House of Judah. However, even though the prophets generally were sent to one specific House, sometimes they prophesied concerning both Houses (e.g., Isaiah and Jeremiah were sent to the House of Judah. Hosea was sent to the House of Israel. Micah was sent to both Houses. Yet all these prophets at times gave utterances involving both Houses. See Isaiah 1:1, 2; Jeremiah 1:3; Micah 1:1, 2; Hosea 1:1-3; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Isaiah 8:14; Hosea 1:4-7). Unless this distinction is maintained the prophets may seem to contradict each other.
2. The interpreter must realize that the name "Israel" is used in Scripture to refer to:
 - a. The patriarch Jacob (Genesis 49:1, 2).
 - b. The twelve tribes of "Israel" (Exodus 19:3).
 - c. The 10-tribed House of Israel, the northern kingdom (I Kings 12:21).
 - d. The 2-tribed House of Judah, the southern kingdom (Ezra 6:21 — spoken of here as the children of Israel).
 - e. The Church, the spiritual Israel of God (Galatians 6:16; Romans 9:6).

Israel is used as a collective name and thus may involve both Houses. Judah, however, is never used in a collective sense of the whole 12-tribed nation.

3. Some interpreters have haphazardly interpreted prophecies given concerning Israel and Judah to be relevant primarily to the Church. Some Bibles, with their marginal headings, have brought much confusion to Bible students by randomly assigning the blessings and promises in the prophets to the New Testament Church, leaving all the curses and judgments to Israel and Judah. Great care should be taken in looking for the Church in the prophets.
4. Other interpreters fail completely to see the Church at all in the Old Testament, thus missing a vital link in the purposes of God. There is an interpretative danger of exalting the chosen nation and natural birth above the Church and spiritual birth.
5. Generally, the key to finding the Church in the Old Testament prophets is found in the prophecies concerning the coming of the Gentiles into Messianic blessings through the New Covenant in Christ.

The term "Gentile" has a two-fold significance in the Old Testament:

- a. It is used as a collective term, referring to the heathen nations surrounding Israel (Jeremiah 46:1).

- b. It is used to designate those out of all nations who would come to Christ (Romans 15:8-12).

C. This principle should be used in connection with the Covenantal Principle and the Election Principle.

IV. DEMONSTRATION

A. **The Chosen Nation:** Jeremiah 31:31-34 — “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; . . .”

The burden of this passage involves God making a new covenant with the ethnic division of the human race known as Israel/Judah. The prophet speaks of the time when God took the nation of Israel out of Egypt and brought them to Mt. Sinai, where He made a covenant with them. This was the Mosaic Covenant and is referred to specifically in Scripture as the Old Covenant (Hebrews 8:8-13). Jeremiah points out that they broke this covenant, divorcing themselves from Jehovah, their husband (Jeremiah 3:6-8; Isaiah 50:1). The purpose of this New Covenant was to allow Israel to come back into relationship with God. The New Covenant was to be made with Israel/Judah and not with the Gentiles or the Church. However, when Jesus fulfilled this prophecy and established the New Covenant (Matthew 26:26-29) with His disciples, who were of the House of Judah, He spoke of His sacrifice at Calvary, which would in due time involve the Church, composed of Jew and Gentile. Both Jew and Gentile were to come into relationship with God through faith in Christ on the basis of the New Covenant. This New Covenant was made with Israel/Judah, but it also involved the Church. Thus, our interpretation of Jeremiah 31:31 includes these main points:

1. God, in Christ, was to make this New Covenant.
2. Christ made this covenant at His first coming through the work of the cross.
3. This covenant was to be a completely new arrangement between God and man.
4. The covenant was to be made distinctly with the chosen nation.
5. The covenant would eventually include those out of every nation who would believe in the blood of the Lamb and accept the terms of the New Covenant.

B. **The Gentile Nations:** Matthew 12:17-21 — “Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall show judgment to the Gentiles . . . And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.”

This passage is quoted from Isaiah 42:1-4 and deals with Messiah’s ministry to the Gentiles. This prophecy is spoken concerning the ethnic division of the Gentiles, not the chosen nation. The Gentiles were not in covenant relationship with God, were outside the commonwealth of Israel, and therefore were not entitled to the blessings of God. The prophet refers to a time when the Gentiles would come into blessing and trust in Messiah’s name. There are two main streams of prophecies in the Old Testament pertaining to the Gentiles: prophecies of judgment (Isaiah 15-21; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32), and prophecies of blessing (Isaiah 11:10; 42:1-4, 6; 49:6; 52:15; 55:5; 60:1-5; Zechariah 2:11; Malachi 1:11). The prophecies of blessing could only be fulfilled in Christ. Outside of Christ they could only have judgment. Thus, this passage in Matthew is Christ’s confirmation that through Him the Gentiles would be blessed.

C. **The Church:** Matthew 16:18 — "... upon this rock I will build my church. . ."

The subject of this verse involves the Church. The word Church means "the called out ones." In using this term Jesus was not referring to the ethnic divisions of the chosen nation, nor to the Gentile nations. Rather He was referring to those who would be called out of every kindred, tongue, tribe and nation. These, the redeemed through faith in His blood, would constitute the third ethnic division, the New Testament Church. In Matthew and Acts the redeemed are spoken of corporately as the Church (Matthew 18:17; Acts 2:47). In the epistles the progression of this thought is that the Church is the body of Christ (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22, 23). Paul states that "by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles. . ." (I Corinthians 12:13), and that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek . . ." (Galatians 3:28). Therefore, this Church of which Christ spoke was to be composed of the redeemed of every nation, but these national distinctions were to cease in the Church, the body of Christ, the one new man (Ephesians 2:14-16).