

The People Called by God

CHAPTER TWO: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

This resource contains:

UNIT 4: THE NEW PEOPLE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

- A. THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN CHRIST**
- B. WORDS OF HOPE FOR A SUBDUED PEOPLE**

INTEGRATING EXERCISE: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The New People of God in Jesus Christ

Texts: Ephesians 2:11-22

1 Peter 2:9-10

Within the context of Israel's covenant relationship with God, the early church offered its claim to be "God's people." This self-understanding was based on the confession that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah of Israel.

The New Testament offers several different interpretations of the relation of Israel and the new community gathered around Jesus Christ.

In Galatians 3 the Apostle Paul insists that it is through baptism into Christ that one becomes a true child of Abraham and therefore part of God's people. This way of "incorporation" into God's people is presented not as a rejection of the Old Testament, but as perfectly consistent with those scriptures. Indeed it is presented as fulfilling the real purpose of the Law given to the Israelites by God.

Then in Romans 9-11 Paul spells out a three-stage process in the historical movement of salvation:

1. While some Israelites like Paul have accepted the gospel, there is a hardening of heart and mind in a part of Israel.
2. The Gentiles are now being included in the people of God. When the full number of Gentiles comes in, the hardened part of Israel will become jealous and then accept the gospel.
3. In the end all Israel will be saved.

Paul is very aware of Israel's traditional claim to be the people of God and hesitates to apply that title too easily to the church (except perhaps "the Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16).

Some later New Testament writings show less hesitation in transferring the Israel's privileges to the church. The letter to the Ephesians speaks of Jews and Gentiles coming together to form one new humanity, one body, and one Spirit (2:11-18). In 1 Peter the tie that binds Christians is said to be so close that they can appropriately be addressed as a race and a people (2:9-10). The author of the letter to the Hebrews urges the church to profit from the bad example of Israel in the wilderness (3:7-4:11). The book of Revelation addresses Christians as priests of God and of Christ (1:6; 5:10; 20:6). In all these documents the Christian community is portrayed as somehow replacing Israel as God's people, and there is little or no interest in the future fate of "unbelieving" Israel.

A. THE PEOPLE OF GOD IN CHRIST

Ephesians 2:11-22

When Paul used the term *ecclesia* (church), he was referring to churches in specific places. That is, the church at Corinth or the church at Rome or the church in Jerusalem. Yet there are dimensions to Paul's theology (his understanding of God) and practice (the way he interacted with churches), that point in the direction of a certain kind of overarching bond between local communities. A universal or catholic outlook shaped Paul's theology. He shared the Jewish belief that the God of Israel is the God of all the universe and thus there are no other gods. Thus the need for salvation applies to all peoples, Gentiles and Jews: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Furthermore, as the new Adam and the lord of the whole created order, Jesus Christ has worldwide significance. Within this perspective, the church is the totality of those redeemed in Christ and believing in God's power.

A universal or ecumenical outlook is also evident in Paul's missionary practice. Convinced that non-Jews could share in the blessings of the Christ-event, the apostle took as his special mission the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. He preached to Jews and Gentiles without distinction. And he preached in places where the gospel had never been heard. He kept in touch with the various communities by sending personal emissaries and by writing letters to the local churches. By insisting that a collection be taken up for the church at Jerusalem, he indicated that Christians of one locale are responsible for the welfare of those who live elsewhere.

Both Paul's theological outlook and his pastoral practice point beyond the local community. While the particular congregation is vital, it is not the whole story. This perspective is especially evident in Ephesians, which appears to have been written by a disciple or admirer of Paul after his death. The author develops Paul's universal dimensions by passing beyond concern with only the local community and by showing how Gentiles and Jews become part of the church as the cosmic body of Christ.

Read Ephesians 2:11-22 and answer the following questions, working with another person.

1. What was the situation of the Gentiles before Christ?
2. List the various ways the Eph. 2:11-22 passage asserts that Christ has enabled the unity of Jews and Gentiles into a new people close to God.
3. List the images used to describe the church in vv. 19-22. What holds them together?
4. How does this text relate to or transform your understanding of the People of God?

D. WORDS OF HOPE FOR A SUBDUED PEOPLE

I Peter 2:9-10

The development of the Christian communities in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) was hardly an untroubled expansion. The Christians were perceived as an apparently insignificant religious minority professing what seemed to be a new variety of Judaism. And they quickly found themselves at odds with those who participated in the pagan cults that were well established in the Mediterranean world.

As a Jewish messianic movement proclaiming the coming kingdom or rule of God, they must have attracted the suspicions of government officials. These officials were naturally seeking to preserve the political status quo. 1 Peter was written to give encouragement and hope to Christians who were undergoing persecution. The document shows how Christians who thought of themselves as "strangers and aliens" vis-a-vis the world around them, drew upon imagery expressing ancient Israel's sense of peoplehood in order to express their own consciousness as a community.

Read 1 Peter 2:9-10 and answer the following questions, working with another person.

1. How are Christians addressed at the very beginning in this passage? What does this say about the author's understanding of the Christian community?

2. This text draws upon Exodus 19: 5-6a.

*"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant,
you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.
Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be to me a priestly
kingdom and a holy nation."*

Having received the identification with the Israel of Exodus 19, what are the people called to do?

3. How have Christians been constituted as "God's own people"?
4. How do you respond to the assertion that as a Christian, you are part of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"?

Integrating Exercise: The People of God

As a way to focus and integrate the study of the biblical image of the church as the People of God, use the five characteristics of the biblical understanding of community outlined in the First Part of *The People Called by God* Bible study:

1. The divine initiative: God speaks a powerful and creative word into a particular and concrete situation.
2. The communal character of salvation.
3. The central significance of God's continual guidance and fidelity.
4. The trust and obedience required of the people.
5. The commissioning: God's people play a key role in the fulfillment of God's redemptive intent for all peoples.

Our goal in the study of the biblical images of the church is not to develop a consistent system of doctrine, nor to examine biblical texts in an isolated and self-contained manner. The intent is to explore the biblical understanding of the people called and empowered by God to accomplish God's purposes. And the study of the biblical understanding of community is to enable us to discern God's call and God's will for our congregation.

Reviewing your notes from the discussion of the various texts in
CHAPTER 2: THE PEOPLE OF GOD:

UNIT 3: THE SENSE OF PEOPLE-HOOD IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

UNIT 4: THE NEW PEOPLE OF GOD IN JESUS CHRIST

Using the chart on the next page, jot down the insights you have received from the study concerning the biblical understanding of community:

	DIVINE INITIATIVE	COMMUNAL CHARACTER OF SALVATION	GOD'S CONTINUAL GUIDANCE AND FIDELITY	TRUST AND OBEDIENCE REQUIRED OF THE PEOPLE	COMMISSIONING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD
Gen. 12:1-4a					
Ex. 6:1-8					
Deut. 7:6-9					
Isaiah 42:5-9					
Eph. 2:11-22					
1 Peter 2:9-10					