

Covenant Theology Series #5

One People

Introduction

With this lesson we continue our summary analysis of covenant theology viewed in biblical-theological terms with a consideration of Our defining phrase's second element: *one people*. The import of this term is simply the assertion that there is only one community who are designated the "people of God." In other words, there is only one redemptive community, with whom God relates in terms of a redemptive covenant and through whom He imparts salvation, entailing one single, united destiny. As we saw briefly in study #3, this is contrasted with the dispensational approach, which understands there to be two distinct redemptive communities in Scripture, which it designates "Israel" (defined as the ethnic and/or national descendants of Abraham), and "the Church" (a multi-ethnic community established only in the New Covenant era), with separate and distinct identities, promises, obligations, and destinies.

The Dispensational Understanding

Whether or not one self-consciously subscribes to dispensational theology, the basic elements of its approach to the topic of the people of God are present in the thinking of many as they approach the Bible, especially in the way that they relate revelation about Israel to themselves as Christians. Often this is not comprehended in detail, but the dispensational tendencies are seen, for instance, in a confusion regarding how to relate what God says to and records about the nation of Israel to the experience of modern Christians. This results in a reductionistic approach to the Old Testament which limits its application and significance to examples of moral or immoral behavior and the consequences of such. The *theological* content of the Word of God to Israel is divorced from application to Christians in any explicit way. Even if this is not a self-conscious decision on the part of Bible readers, it often is the case because of a lack of understanding of precisely how the *people* of Israel are related to Christians in the era of the New Covenant (i.e., the New Testament), including contemporary Christians, considered both as individuals and as a corporate entity.

Classic dispensational theology answers these questions with the assertion that Israel was from the beginning God's chosen people *as an ethnic entity*, defined literally as the physical and biological descendants (literally the "seed") of Abraham. In this understanding, all of the promises to Israel are based upon this natural generation from Abraham. The promises of Land and Seed (Descendants) repeated to Israel are applicable only to Israel in this literal sense. Some dispensationalists will acknowledge that non-ethnic people can be added to the community through proselyte admission, but this is always the exception rather than the rule (though the theological basis for *any* such exception, given the insistence of literalistic interpretation of the promises, is seldom, if ever, explained). Traditional dispensationalists rightly understand that the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God was always to come through Christ, but wrongly believe that it was originally meant to be applied exclusively to Israel as a nation. According to

dispensationalism, when, at Christ's first coming, the leaders of the nation of Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah and King, they refused the offer of the Kingdom, and God began an alternate program, founding the Church, which is a "mystery" never anticipated, mentioned, or prophesied in the Old Testament (which is concerned solely with Israel). The Church represents a "parenthesis" in God's program, which is still primarily concerned with Israel, and the Old Testament promises to Israel will be fulfilled solely to Israel. The Church is given separate promises and a separate destiny, apart from God's dealings with Israel as a nation. Once the number of elect Gentiles have been saved, God will "rapture" the Church out of the world, at which time "the prophetic time clock" begins to tick again and God resumes His program for Israel, which is fulfilled in the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of a Jewish, millennial Kingdom with Christ ruling from Jerusalem for a literal thousand years. Thus the Second Coming is seen as *pre-millennial*, that is, *prior to* the "Millennium" (the Kingdom of God in Christ). Believing Jews may be part of the Church now, but all Jews (nationally and ethnically conceived), whether believers in Christ or not, are still considered part of a community to whom God's original promises are still addressed and will eventually be fulfilled.

Scriptural Understanding of the People of God

The notion of a people of God begins with the *protoevangelium*, or "first gospel," recorded in Genesis 3:15. There a "seed" of the woman is prophesied who will crush the head of the serpent, and it is said that the serpent will bruise "*his*" heel. This is, in light of the rest of Scripture, clearly a prophecy which has first and primary reference to Christ, who is injured (crucified) at the instigation of Satan and his "seed" (Pontius Pilate, the Gentile Roman officials, and the apostate Jewish leadership—John 8:39-47; 13:2, 26, 27; 18:3; Acts 2:22, 23; 4:23-28). Paul elaborates on the theme of the "seed" as he asserts the primary significance of Jesus as the singular "Seed" who is the object of the promises to Abraham (Galatians 3:15, 16). But in both of these instances it is clear that the term "seed" is also applied to a corporate body of individuals who are united to and represented by Christ as a covenant head, and to whom the same promises and prophecies apply. This is explicitly asserted when, in an obvious allusion to Genesis 3:15, Paul promises the Roman Christians that "the God of peace will soon crush Satan under [their] feet" (Romans 16:20). Paul applies the same principle in the passage from Galatians 3 cited above when, after establishing that Christ was the "Seed" to whom the Abrahamic promises were directed (vv. 15, 16), he unambiguously states that those who have been united to ("baptized into") and "have put on Christ," so that they are now "in Christ," are "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise" (vv. 26-29). The term "seed" then, with respect to both biblical prophecy and covenant promises, has reference both *primarily* to a singular individual (Christ), who is a covenant and federal head (representative), and *derivatively* to a corporate body who are united to their head.

This dual reference has its roots, as does most of biblical theology, in associations established in the first chapters of Genesis. The biblical significance of the term "seed" is developed as an outflow of God's original creation, specifically in Genesis 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25, 27, 28; 3:15; 5:1-3. From these verses, it can be seen that the most biblically significant thing about the offspring or "seed" of a living thing is that it partakes of the "likeness" or "image" of its parent; beings reproduce "after their kinds." This biblical understanding gave rise to one of the most common

Hebrew idioms: the ascribing of characteristics to a person or thing by referring to them as “children” or “sons” or “daughters” of that thing (e.g., Isaiah 57:4; Ephesians 2:2, 3). This is the understanding underlying Jesus’s words to the Jewish leadership in John 8:18, 19, 27-29, 31-47. In these verses Jesus acknowledges that they are *physical* descendants of Abraham, but proclaims that if they were *really* sons of Abraham, they would do the things Abraham did and have the faith of Abraham. They claim to have God as their Father, but Jesus says that if they *really* had God as their Father, they would love Him as the Father does. He states that they are children of the devil and take on his characteristics. The author of the gospel in which this discussion is recorded sums up the same principle with respect to God’s true children in I John 3:1-3, 8-10, where he makes it clear that the true children of God take on His likeness and characteristics, including righteousness and love.

All of this is the foundation of the understanding that, when the covenant promises are made to “the seed,” whether conceived as the seed of Eve, who is named such because she will become the mother of all the living, *spiritually* (Genesis 3:20), or of Abraham through Sarah, or of Mary (the antitype: Christ), they are made to Christ and to all who by faith partake of the nature of Christ and are being conformed to His likeness and image: the Church (Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:1-10, esp. v. 10). It is this Church who is symbolically portrayed in Revelation 12. The Church, as we will see, is the mother of Christ and all who are in Him, the Church typologically represented by all those women in redemptive history who through the miraculous power of God bore children though not naturally able to do so. The true children of God are born through the miraculous power of God’s Spirit, not by natural means. This is why Jesus proclaimed that Nicodemus, presumably a spiritual leader in Israel, should have understood these things (John 3:3-10). It is also the basis of the theology behind Romans 5:12-21, a passage in which Paul portrays both damnation (“condemnation”) and salvation as coming to all, to every existing person, through association and solidarity with at least one of two representative covenant heads: Adam and Christ.

We are now in a position to survey the additional scriptural evidence for the identity and nature of the people of God, as follows:

- 1. The biblical term that refers to the covenant community (both in its Hebrew and Greek translations) is used to refer both to the nation of Israel and to the “Church.”** Dispensationalists often assert that the “Church” is absent from the Old Testament and never mentioned, even in prophecy, making it a “mystery” not anticipated in biblical revelation until it is revealed in the New Testament. This is manifestly erroneous from a simple analysis of the term for “church.” The Old Testament word, the term most commonly used to refer to the community of Israel, is קהל (*qahal*), which literally means “called out assembly.” This term is translated in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), by the term ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia*), which is the word translated “church” in our English New Testaments. So the word “Church” is applied to Israel in the Old Testament, a fact obscured by the different ways that translators rendered the same word from the different languages employed in the writing of the Testaments. Accordingly, the Church is called “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16.

2. **Terms applied exclusively to Israel in Exodus 19:3-6 are applied to the Church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, in I Peter 2:9, 10.**
3. **“Israel,” with respect to its relationship to God, is always represented in Scripture as being composed of more members than the ethnic descendants of Abraham.**
This is clear from the following scriptural examples:
- This is explicitly taught in Romans 9-11, where Paul answers the concern about the promises to Israel by identifying true Israel as the elect, and making the point that many of the actual physical descendants of Abraham were not reckoned as a part of Israel. Jesus affirms that it is God who produces true Israelites by miraculous activity and that He is able to do it from literally anything (even rocks!) apart from biological progeny (Matthew 3:9). He explicitly expounds this truth in His dialogue with the Jews recorded in John 8:33-58, in the context of their prideful claim that they are descendants of Abraham and therefore special, by affirming that they are biological descendants of Abraham while denying that they are true descendants of Abraham because of their unbelief and their actions, calling them rather “children of [their] father, the Devil.”
 - The community of Israel redeemed from slavery in Egypt and which leaves there and enters into covenant with God at Sinai is explicitly said to be composed of more than ethnic Israelites, a “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38).
 - Psalm 87 predicts that Gentiles born as members of foreign nations will be said to have been “born in Zion” and registered among the peoples as having been born there. Zion is a frequent symbol for Jerusalem and the Temple, and thus for Israel as the covenant people of God. It is a symbol of the Church in Hebrews 12:22-24, which constitutes another blending of Israel and the Church.
 - The tribes of Israel are identified with a vast, multi-ethnic throng in Revelation 7, representing a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 15:5. This is seen in the fact that what John initially *hears* is to be identified with what he then *sees* (cf. Revelation 5:1-10).
 - As previously mentioned, the children of Abraham and heirs of the covenant promises are explicitly asserted to be determined by their *union with Christ*, whether Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:26-29).
4. **Scripture explicitly teaches that Gentiles are added to the same, already existing covenant community of Israel.** This is especially evident in the following passages:
- In Romans 11:11-24, Paul expounds on how believing Gentiles are “grafted into” the same community from which the “natural branches,” ethnic Israelites, have been removed because of unbelief. This community cannot be anything other than the covenant community of Israel, given the context and issue under consideration in Paul’s remarks, namely why Israel has not received the fulfillment of certain promises. Paul’s answer is that those of faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are united to Him, are part of Israel, and receive what was promised.
 - Paul explicitly reiterates all this in Galatians 3:5-9.

- In Ephesians 2:11-3:13, Paul asserts that there is no longer a *theological* distinction between ethnic Jew and ethnic Gentile, because God has joined the two into one body by making Gentiles part of Israel, giving them “citizenship” in it and making them heirs of the covenant promises, through faith in Christ, which is the only way Jews can receive them as well. Notice how this is predicted by Jesus in John 10:16.

5. Scripture clearly demonstrates that God has always had only one plan for the salvation of human beings, and that this plan has always included Gentiles.

Consider the following:

- From the beginning, the promises to Abraham always included the Gentiles (compare Genesis 12:1-3 and Galatians 3:8).
- Romans 9-11 discusses how God’s one plan included Israel’s rejection of Christ so that the Gentiles would come in. The Church was not an alternate community formed by an alternate, “mystery” plan, but God’s plan from the beginning, according to this passage.

6. Covenant promises given to Israel are explicitly said in the New Testament to be fulfilled in the Church. Examples include:

- Being the People of God—Hosea 1:6-11; 2:14-23 —> Galatians 3:29; Romans 9:22-26; John 10:16
- Blessing through Abraham—Genesis 12:3 —> Galatians 3:8
- Rule over the nations—Genesis 15:7, 18-21; Psalm 2:7-12 —> Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:16; Matthew 5:5; Revelation 2:26, 27; 3:21
- Amos 9:11, 12; Isaiah 43:1-7; Daniel 9:19 —> Acts 15:13-19

Significance of This Understanding

This truth has significant implications for Christians as they live out their faith, to wit:

1. We have a *covenant identity* and a heritage, the history and nature of which is set forth in the whole Bible, including the Old Testament.
2. Our understanding of our relationship to God must involve an understanding of the totality of Scripture, and our expectations and hope include all of the promises to Abraham and to Israel, as they are amplified and clarified in the New Testament.
3. It is crucial to understand that the reason we are included among the people of God has to do with God (i.e., His election of us as individuals), not anything in us, including our physical ethnicity. Pride concerning anything intrinsic to us is unchristian.
4. The people of God is the community of people in covenant relationship to God. This is what defines their (our) identity.
5. The division of the people of God into two separate redemptive communities is one of the linchpins in the dispensational system of eschatology, which is essentially pessimistic with respect to the prospects of the widespread growth and influence of the Kingdom of God prior to the Second Coming of Christ. This has often become a self-fulfilling

prophecy. Emphasis in the ministry of the Church, as it has been influenced by this perspective, has been overly on simply “getting people into the Kingdom,” with a neglect of the primary emphasis of the Great Commission, which is the production of mature disciples of Christ who have been trained to obey Him in all of life. It is obedience to this directive which truly builds the Kingdom of God—ironically, it is only through mature Christian disciples that truly effective evangelism occurs—and changes the world, and this is what is involved in the fullness of the plan of God (I Corinthians 15:20-28; cf. Matthew 28:18-20). This perspective, not some prophetic inevitability, is a major reason for the decline of Christian influence in the West. There is a need to return to a vision of the Kingdom of God which sees Christian thinking dominating every institution and every dimension of society, resulting in God’s blessing. But Christians cannot do this if they only know the bare essentials of how to be forgiven of their sins. The Church must return to the ministry of teaching the whole counsel of God with the intention of equipping Christians to “bring every thought captive to Christ” (II Corinthians 10:3-5) and be salt and light with the effect that the world is Christianized in its thinking and practice, albeit with the realization that every individual will not be a true believer (Matthew 13:24-43).