

The People of God

By Dale R. Stoffer

THOSE WHO SEEK to understand scripture in a systematic way generally propose some biblical theme or concept that serves as the focal point for their theology. Some theologians, for example, have emphasized God's sovereignty, while others have stressed human responsibility. Some have started with an aspect of human experience or existence, while others have developed their theology around the theme of liberation.

All of these theological starting points need to be judged on the basis of how well they represent the whole of scripture, or-as one of my professors used to say how well they string all the beads of scripture. If important concepts in scripture are overlooked or distorted, that theological view should rightly be questioned.

Another way to approach this search for a unifying theme in scripture is to see if scripture itself offers us one. I am convinced that scripture does in fact provide us with just such a theme.

Intriguingly, the Brethren, and especially the Anabaptists, viewed this theme as a key for understanding God's eternal purposes. In fact, I was initially made aware of this theme by my reading in Brethren and Anabaptist sources. This theme answers probably the most basic question we can ask about our faith: What is God's ultimate purpose in human history?

Dr. Stoffer is assistant professor of historical theology at Ashland Theological Seminary. He serves on The Brethren Church's Committee on Doctrine, Research, and Publication, which is preparing this series of articles.

Biblical background of the theme

In scripture a statement appears more than 50 times throughout the Old and New Testaments that directly answers this question. Its first appearance is in Genesis 17:78, while its last appearance is in Revelation 21:3. As generally stated it is: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." Sometimes the declaration is added: "I will dwell in the midst of you." This declaration is especially significant in the light of Exodus 33:12-16. The one thing that distinguished Israel from all other people was that they had the presence of God among them.

I call this theme the "peoplehood formula." It states that God's eternal purpose, which He has been working out throughout human history, is to have a people for Himself and for His own glory. It has been His purpose to have a people for His own possession among whom He will one day dwell in intimate communion (Rev. 21:3, 22).

This peoplehood formula appears most frequently in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and in the Old Testament prophetic books. But it is also scattered throughout the New Testament in the writings of Paul, Peter, and John, in the book of Hebrews, and on the lips of James in Acts 15.

What is especially significant about this formula, or variations of it, is that it constantly appears whenever the topic of God's purposes for Israel and humanity are being discussed. It appears in the context of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 17:7-8; when God reaffirms His covenant with Israel under Moses in Exodus 6:7;

Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2; as Israel is poised to enter the Promised Land in Deuteronomy 7:6; at the institution of the monarchy in 1 Samuel 12:22; at God's disclosure of the new covenant to Jeremiah in Jeremiah 31:33; in connection with the promise of the restoration of Israel following the Babylonian captivity in Ezekiel 11:20; in the context of the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah 63:8-9 and Zechariah 8:8,13:9; as a rationale for God's intention to receive the Gentiles into the church without their having to become Jews by circumcision in Acts 15:13-14; as justification for God's rejection of unrepentant Israel and His inclusion of the Gentiles in His people in Romans 9:24-26; as a means of indicating the continuation of God's Old Testament people in the New Testament church in 1 Peter 2:9-10; as the final fulfillment and climax of God's redemptive plan in Revelation 21:3, 7. This peoplehood formula is the element of continuity that runs unbroken through all the major transitions in Israel's and the church's existence.

Theological significance of the formula

The concept that God desires to form a people for Himself has profound implications for all aspects of theology. I will sketch out some of these implications below.

The view of God

The peoplehood formula stresses not only the sovereignty of God and His otherworldliness in the first part ("I shall be your God"; see Exodus 20:2-3), but also His compassion and immanence in the second part ("You will be my people"; see 1 Samuel 12:22). It likewise affirms

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that all history is purposeful and is directed toward a single goal: the presence of God among a people who have His character and who bring Him glory.

The formula views God as the initiator of our relationship with Him, while we are always the responder to His grace. We are God's people solely because God graciously chose us, not because we merited His interest (see Deut. 7:6-8). What is most wondrous is that God has unilaterally acted over and over again on our behalf to bring His purpose to pass.

Significantly, this theme tells us that the basis of the relationship between God and humanity is relational before it is legal. God has chosen to be our God because He loves us (see Deut. 7:7-8), not because of our ability to keep His commandments. But this relationship lays upon His people concrete demands and expectations in both Old and New Testaments. While we don't come to God on the basis of our works, nonetheless obedience is to be one of the marks of God's people because of our love for Him (see Deut. 6:5-9; John 14:15, 21, 23). Our inner love relationship with God is the.. motivation for our obedience to Him. This view of our relationship with God thus affirms both divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

View of humanity and sin

The declaration "You will be my people" tells us that we find our purpose only in relationship with God. We cannot find meaning and purpose in anything else, for only God can satisfy our need for fellowship, love, and acceptance. We are made for fellowship with God. But we are also made for fellowship with God's people. I will return to this idea when I talk about the church.

Our relationship with God, for which God created us, was broken by sin; because of the fall we all have become rebels to God's purpose for us. Our sin not only de

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strays fellowship with God, but it distorts all that we were meant to be by creation. It likewise introduced death into the human experience and the prospect of eternal spiritual death for those who reject God. Though we were meant for eternal fellowship with God, spiritual death is viewed in part as eternal departure or separation from God (see Matt. 25:41, 46).

View of Christ and salvation

Jesus Christ is the one who reverses the terrible effects of sin, introduced by Adam and experienced anew by every one of his descendants by their own sinful acts. Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, unites God and humanity in His own person and reveals perfectly the life we are called to live as God's people. He alone, as the God-Man, is capable of restoring the broken relationship between 'God and humanity. As our Representative, He suffers the penalty due our sins on the cross; as our Redeemer, He frees us from our slavery to sin and defeats death and Satan, as our Reconciler, He makes possible renewed fellowship with God, as our Restorer, He embodies the new humanity we are to become.

We enter into renewed fellowship with God as His sons and daughters through repentance of our sins and faith in Jesus Christ. We continue to grow in the Christian faith through our faithfulness and obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ. The goal of this growth process is Christlikeness, to

View of the Spirit and the church

One of the important promises Jesus Christ gave to His disciples was: "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). Though Christ is not now with us bodily, He is present through the Holy Spirit, the Comforter He promised to send, who would be with us forever (John 14:16-17). The promise that is part of the peoplehood formula that God would dwell with us finds partial fulfillment already in the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence. Though one day we will dwell in the presence of God the Father and Son, the Spirit is now our "deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession" (Eph. 1:14).

I earlier noted that part of the concept of being God's people means that we were made for fellowship not only with God but also with God's people. God is continuing to fashion a people for His own glory in and through the church. It has been God's eternal purpose that, through the church, His will and redemptive plan in Christ should be made known (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:8-12).

Both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are essential to the church. Paul indicates that Christ is the Head of the church, uniting all believers in His body (1 Cor. 12:12) and providing the sustenance necessary for the body's growth (Col. 2:19). Using a different metaphor, Paul states that believers are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:22). Again we are reminded that God's promise to dwell among His people is now being realized through the Spirit's indwelling the church.

The teaching of the New Testament makes it clear that we, as God's new covenant people, cannot grow and mature without active (continued on page 9)

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involvement in the church (Eph. 4:11-16). Though we enter Christ's body individually by faith in Him, we cannot continue to grow in Christian maturity unless we are a functioning part of His body.

This truth directly challenges an unfortunate trait of American Christianity. We at times put so much stress on individual salvation that we minimize the necessity of being an active participant in the church. The church is not optional in God's redemptive plans. It plays the central role in God's present-day plan to form a people for Himself.

The view of last things

As I read the book of Revelation, one of the things that strikes me is the number of passages that are devoted to the worship and praise of God by His people. When time becomes eternity by God's consummating work, we will live

in the very presence of God, beyond the touch of death, mourning, crying, and pain (Rev. 21:3-4). The joy and love experienced in God's presence certainly will provide His people with the inspiration for the worship that rings throughout John's prophecy.

All of this is an assured promise to every one of us who is united with God and His people. Rightly does John end his Revelation with the words, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (Rev. 22:20-21).

Conclusion

The peoplehood formula acquaints us with God's "big picture." God Himself reveals to us that His eternal plan is to have a people for His own possession. All that He has done from Genesis to Revelation is to the end that His people might again experience the blessed joy of His presence, a blessing God had intended for humanity from the beginning.