

Biblical Theology of the People of God

Differences between the Old and New Covenants

Introduction

- What is the difference, if any, between OT believers of God (*Yahweh*) and NT believers in Jesus?
- Some Christians even argue that the experiences and conditions afforded to OT believers are better over those of the NT
- The biblical teaching on the “People of God” is one of the most fundamental and comprehensive truths in the Bible

Historical and Theological Background

- The Bible opens and simply states as undeniable fact without argumentation that God is the all-powerful Creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1)
- The highlight of God's good creation occurred when God created humans in his image so that they, as his people, might rule of the rest of the created order under God's authority (Gen 1:26-28)
- Unfortunately, sin entered into the world (Gen 3) and increasingly expanded to all areas of life (Gen 4-11)
- Although it seems that God's purposes have been derailed, God begins the process of reconstituting his people through a series of judgments (Gen 3-11)

Historical and Theological Background

- The reconstituting of God's people continued, when God called Abram to be the father of a great nation, which included the promise of blessing for all nations (Gen 12:3)
- Genesis describes God's special relationship with Abraham and his descendants: "I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7)
- This promise is tied to the land of Canaan, and it comes with the obligation that God's people remain faithful to the covenant (Gen 17:9)
- Throughout the book of Genesis, the author shows how God preserved a chosen seed line of God's people through succeeding generations of the children of Abraham—Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph

Nation Building

- It took 400 years (Gen 15:13), but God liberates Abraham's descendants from Egyptian slavery
- There at Sinai, God says: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, ⁶ you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites" (Ex 19:5-6)
- Integral to this event are the giving of the law (covenant obligations, Ex 20-24) and the construction of a tent (the Tabernacle) for God to dwell among his people (Ex 25-50)

Nation Building

- Because the people of God did not trust *Yahweh* (Num 13-14), they did not possess the land of Canaan for an entire generation, but eventually God plants them there as a vine (Ps 80:9-10)
- During the chaotic period of the judges, the Israelites fell into a cycle of sin and deliverance (Judg 2:10-19)
- Because there was no king, people acted without restraint (Judg 17:6; 21:25)
- For the sake of political stability, God established a monarchy in Israel (1 Sam 8) with Saul installed as the first king (1 Sam 15)
- The monarchy was a theocracy in which God ruled his people through the appointed king (Pss 10:16; 24:7-10; Isa 6:5)

Nation Building

- David would eventually become king and prefigured a King to come whose “house and [your] kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever” (2 Sam 7:16)
- Solomon’s reign witnessed the building of a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, where God fills the temple with his presence, signifying that he dwells in the midst of his people (1 Kgs 8:10-12)
- Due to moral corruption and spiritual idolatry, God judged his people by allowing foreigners to destroy Jerusalem and its temple and exiling the people from the land (Ps 80:16)
- Eventually, groups of Jewish exiles return to the land, but they have no king and are subjugated to foreign oppression
- Although the temple is rebuilt, the Bible does not say that God filled it with his glorious presence (Ps 85:5-6)

Fulfilment

- In spite of all the blessings that God's people enjoyed in the OT times (Heb 11:1-38), "These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised," (Heb 11:39)
- That waits until the King, David's son, makes his appearance (Matt 1:1)
- Through the arrival of Jesus, the kingdom of God breaks through in the present time (Matt 12:28)
- He is the one who "will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21)
- He is the one, who "made his dwelling among us (pitched his tent)" among his people and manifested the divine glory (Jn 1:14)
- By choosing 12 apostles (Lu 6:13), Jesus reconstituted the people of God in that the newly formed nation is no longer identified with a political entity or an ethnic group

Fulfilment

- In other words, the kingdom of God has been taken away from the Jews and given to a new people of God:
- “Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit” (Matt 21:43)
- It becomes clearer that the true Jew is not the one who is a Jew “only outwardly” with physical characteristics; a true Jew is the one who is a Jew “inwardly... of the heart” through the operation of the Holy Spirit (Rom 2:28-29)
- The true descendants of Abraham, to whom God made the promise, consist of those who follow in the footsteps of Abraham’s faith, for Abraham is “the father of all who believe” (Rom 4:11), whether Jew or Gentile (Rom 4:9-17)

Fulfilment

- Even though ethnic Israel as a whole did not receive Jesus, God's word has not failed, for:
- “⁶ It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷ Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” ⁸ In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring” (Rom 9:6-8)
- Thus, Peter can apply to believing Gentiles: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Pt 2:9-10)

Fulfilment

- Importantly, as God's temple, God indwells Christians individually (1 Cor 6:19) and in believers collectively as God's temple (1 Cor 3:16-17)
- Thus, God's promise is truly fulfilled: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people" (2 Cor 6:16b, citing Lev 26:12; cf. Jer 31:33; Eze 37:27)

Continuities and Discontinuities

- Continuities and Discontinuities: Since the church was instituted under the new covenant, as might be expected, religious life in the church age was changed quite drastically in many respects from religious life in the patriarchal and national periods.
- **Discontinued**: Heb. 9:1-10:22—Many of the principles of religious life in these two previous periods are discontinued during the church age—e.g., the offering of animal sacrifices.
- **Continued**: Other basic practices are retained and reinstated, sometimes in unaltered form in the church age.

Continuities and Discontinuities

- Fellowship with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- Exercise of faith
- Prayer
- Grace: The eternal moral laws are retained and reinstated in the church age but in a fuller context of grace
- **Additions:** Certain new features appear in the religious life of the church period
- Religious organization is no longer on a national basis, but now greater emphasis is placed upon:
 - Jn. 4:21-24—the individual believer
 - Matt. 18:19-20; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; Heb. 10:25—local gatherings of believers scattered worldwide.

Continuities and Discontinuities

- Each believer is:
- Jn. 14:20: “You in Me, and I in you” —united with Christ in a mystical, spiritual sense.
- 1 Cor. 12:13—a member of the universal body of Christ.
- All of God’s people in the church period are:
- Jn. 14:16; 1 Cor. 6:19-20—permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit.
- 1 Pt. 2:5, 9—able to function as spiritual priests.
- Gal. 3:28—enjoy equal spiritual standing in Christ.
- Rev. 22:18-19—finally, after the first century AD, it became possible for believers to enjoy a completed revelation from God.

Conclusions

- The church is not merely improved Judaism
- Relation between the church and biblical Judaism
- Gen. 15:6; Acts 16:31; Rom. 3:21-26; 4:1-25; Eph. 2:8-9; Heb. 9:22; 11:6—there are certain similarities between the people of God of all ages. In other words, all believers are saved by grace through faith (Rom. 3:25) on the basis of Christ's redemptive work.
- Jn. 10:16; 1 Pt. 2:10, “**People of God**”—such essential similarities give a basic continuity between believers during the entirety of earth's redemptive history.
- Thus, it is obvious that the church and biblical Judaism share certain mutual characteristics.
- However, the church also has certain dissimilarities which distinguish it as a unique existence separate from Judaism

Conclusions

- Distinction between the church and Judaism
- The church was presented by Christ as new and unique in relation to Judaism.
- When Christ made his prediction, “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18), he implied a clear-cut distinction between Judaism and the church.
- Judaism already existed, but Christ promised that the church would come into existence as an entirely new identity.
- The church was presented by Paul under the figure of a “new man.” Paul recognized the special character of the church as distinct from Judaism when he called it “one new man” (Eph. 2:15). Christ united both believing Jews and Gentiles in his body when he “made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in his flesh and enmity, which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Eph. 2:14-15). This work of Christ is more than merely revising Judaism, for it was done that “He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace” (Eph. 2:15).