

Study Twelve

CALLED TO BE SAINTS, THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Each person who belongs to Jesus Christ belongs to him personally (John 10:14)—but there is nothing individualistic about belonging to Christ. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours’ (I Corin. 1:2). Each believer comes by one Lord, to one Father, to share one life and purpose, as the people of God. Therefore although each one derives their life from Christ, the purpose of that life cannot be explored and the living of that life cannot even begin other than in the context of the people of God. Gifts of the Spirit are given to each one—for the common good (I Corin. 12:7). Christians do not drink from a common pool—as though the Church dispensed the grace of life, but drinking from Christ, they understand that the life they have can only be fully appreciated when seen as part of a whole river of life.

So God’s people are called to be saints (Rom. 1:7), to be sanctified or set apart as the people of God (Rom. 9:24–29).

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE OF GOD?

From the time of Abraham it has been clear that God would build a nation or people whom he would bless and who would be a blessing to all the earth (Gen. 12:1–2; 17:1–14). The promise was repeated to Isaac (Gen. 26:1–5) and to Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15; 32:24–32; Hosea 12:3f.) whose name was changed to ‘Israel’, meaning ‘God rules’ or ‘prevailed with God’. Israel’s children became the leaders of the tribes of Israel as it grew in numbers. His name remained the name of the Hebrews, until the time of the divided kingdom, when it was used for the Northern tribes. However, after the captivity, it was used again by the prophets for the whole nation as God’s chosen people, and this was still true during the times of Christ and the growth of the church.

Especially at the time of the Exodus, God showed that Israel was his nation. He saved them, and they were a kingdom of priests among all the nations, i.e. representing God to the nations (Exod. 19:3–6). Those who observed their progress through the wilderness and into the land of promise knew something of the nature of Israel’s God. In so leading them, God was fulfilling his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Deut. 7:6–8).

Israel was to do the will of God (Exod. 4:23). Therefore, when they failed to keep their part of the covenant and gave themselves instead to idols, the entire spectrum of God’s judging and redeeming activity was set loose in order that the people may be his people (e.g. Isa. 44:1–3). Hosea traces the

anguish of God as he first casts aside, and then promises to regather his chosen people (Hosea 1–2).

However, in all of the above process, it is made plain, that God owns as his people, not those who reject the covenant, but the Israel within Israel who would learn from God's chastenings and live by faith in God (Hab. 2:2–4; Isa. 49:5f). This should have been plain to the Jews of Jesus' day (John 8:39–47) and was certainly plain to the Israelite of the Israelites whom God sent to the Gentiles (Rom. 2:28f.; 9:3–6; 11:1–5). The Israel of God is that group of people who by the mercy of God, keep his covenant and especially the new covenant, which he would make with his people (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–32). They are Abraham's children, and when some prove unfaithful, they are those children in particular who are the children of the promise given to Abraham, and who live by faith in that promise.

So the people of God are those born to Abraham who do as Abraham did, and the house of Israel who keep the covenant made with Israel. But in the NT, it is shown that Gentiles too, who have the faith of Abraham and keep the new covenant made with Israel are God's people (Phil. 3:3; Gal. 3:7–9). The prophets foretold this day (Isa. 60:22; Jer. 12:14–17; Ezek. 37; Zech. 2:10f.) and the apostles saw that the prophecies regarding the regathering of the true Israel, extended to Gentiles, (See Rom. 9:25f. with Hosea 1:9f.; Acts 15:14–18 with Amos 9:11f.). Paul calls all who are newly created 'the Israel of God' (Gal. 6:15f.). When Jews are converted they remain within the people of God as natural stock, and when Gentiles are converted they are grafted into that one people (Rom. 11:17–24). Jews and Gentiles are made equally citizens among the saints and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:11–21). By the coming of Christ, the people of God have been renewed, and faith in Christ is the only criterion for inclusion in that people (I Peter 2:4–10).

There has only ever been one people of God whether they be called heirs of Abraham, Israel, followers of Christ, or the Church. What is required is that they be truly that people, not in name only, and be faithful to the revelation of God available to them (cf. Rom. 2:6–16).

It is instructive to see, that although John the Baptist said that the axe was ready to strike at the tree of unfaithful Israel, grace and patience are still extended to those who are formally the people of God. Paul says that to Israel, nationally, belong the covenants and promises and law etc. He, and Peter, address them as brethren throughout the book of Acts, just as they address the believers as brethren, so keeping the door open for a formality to become a reality.

Finally, the people of God will include people from every tribe and tongue and nation (Rev. 7:9–17). The holy city Jerusalem will be the bride; and this will be the heritage of all who conquer, the sons of God. This Jerusalem will have the names of Israel's tribes inscribed on its foundations, and the names of the apostles on its gates (Rev. 21:1–14), suggesting that all that God began to do with Israel, he made freely available by the Church. The people of God

are ultimately one people bearing a common treasury, the presence of their God.

THE NATURE OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Primary to being the people of God in the OT is that they are possessed by God (Exod. 19:5). They are his son (Exod. 4:22 or sons Deut 14:1) his sheep or flock (Ps. 95:7) his holy people (Deut. 14:2; 28:9, Isa. 62:12). This signifies that they are to receive his goodness and live under his rule and so be a testimony to the presence and nature of God among all the nations.

If God is a holy God and man sinful, it becomes a very real question as to how any people can be a people of God. This may be stated as follows:

- (a) God promised to bless Abraham and his seed. Abraham believed God, and God made a covenant with him (Gen. 15). Paul notes that this was not based on Abraham's keeping of the law (Gal. 3:18).
- (b) God chose Jacob before his birth, to be the father of the nation, so that it might be clear that it was God's promise and not Jacob's manner of life that was the basis of the people's existence (Rom. 9:6–13). This becomes very significant when it is seen that if God chose Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob to be the fathers of his people on the basis of their conduct, he would be giving approval to their conduct in the eyes of the whole world. But he never did this.
- (c) Prior to the giving of the law, the people were to set themselves apart by means of certain ceremonies, for God. Numerous ceremonial provisions were made for the people thus to sanctify themselves (Exod. 19:10; 28:41), but this was a recognition that God had first sanctified them (Exod. 31:13; Lev. 21:8). If this were not so, it would be an act of presumption for an unholy people to set themselves aside for a holy God. For the people to sanctify themselves—or keep themselves especially for God, by means of these ceremonies, became important for Israel's identity as the people of God (e.g. II Chron. 30).
- (d) Those who were sanctified by God, i.e. the people of God, were to keep the law with a willing heart (Exod. 24:1–8). This would not be so much the basis of the covenant, as the daily proof that they were living within the covenant. Faultlessness in regard to the law was never anticipated because the people of God had abundant provision within their worship for the removal of guilt. But love for the law and an eagerness to live in its beauty were certainly anticipated.
- (e) Frequently, the psalmists or prophets could see that Israel was still ceremonially living as the people of God, but had forgotten the promise of God and the faith which were the basis of their being the people of God. (Psalm 50:7–23; Isa. 1:4; 8:13; 31:3; Hosea 11:9). Consequently, they were manifestly unable to keep the law. Therefore, the prophets, and psalmist set less store by ceremonial correctness, and give more emphasis to moral and spiritual aspects of sanctity (Ps. 15; Isa. 57:15).

- (f) Jesus came to sanctify the people of God through his blood (Heb. 13:12). He consecrated himself, that his followers may also be consecrated (John 17:19). He died for the nation of Israel and to gather together all the children of God (John 11:52). So all the followers of Christ are sanctified in him (I Corin. 1:2, 30; 6:11; Heb. 2:11; 10:10, 14). (In a loose sense, those who are associated with the people of God are said to be sanctified I Corin. 7:14; Heb. 10:29). The inclusion of the Corinthians whose life was far from holy, and the 'perfected for all time' of Hebrews 10 makes it clear that this is a positional sanctification from which would naturally grow a true sanctity of life. Paul proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles with a view to people receiving the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit, thereby being sanctified and acceptable to God. (Rom. 15:16; Acts 20:32; 26:17f.). It is by this word of the Gospel (as formerly by the word of promise) that people are called to faith, to sanctification, and to acceptance with all who are the people of God. (John 15:3; 17:17, 19; Eph. 5:26)
- (g) By this act of sanctification, the believer comes to understand that his life has always been set apart for God (Gal. 1:15; Eph. 1:4) and ceases to rebel against God's call (I Peter 1:2). There is a sense in which, just as the spoil of Jericho was devoted to the Lord, some to be burned and some to be brought to the treasure, (Josh. 6:17–19), the whole former life of the convert is devoted to God. For example, the blind man whom Jesus healed was born blind so that the works of God could be made manifest in him. Paul's former life of hatred towards the church became a testimony to all that salvation was by grace (I Tim. 1:15f.). Similarly, every person comes into the faith with numerous failings and idiosyncrasies, and in a sense, these may be said to be sanctified, not meaning that they are excused, but that they will be the field in which the Holy Spirit will work out the grace of Christ and the refining of the word. Likewise, all the creational gifts and station in life are shown to be for the Lord.
- (h) Those who are called to sanctification, are to co-operate with the action of God concerning them. (cf. Jesus: John 10:36; 17:19). They are to save themselves from their crooked generation (Acts 2:40), be baptised and wash away their sins (Acts 22:16), and thereafter to separate themselves from all that is unclean so as to be the people of God, his sons and daughters (II Corin. 6:14–18). Although the OT has numbers of references to the people sanctifying themselves (Exod. 19:22; I Sam. 16:5; II Chron. 35:6; Isa. 66:17) this wording is not used in the NT. However, the idea is present in many places (Acts 2:42; Rom. 6:19–22; 12:1; I Thess. 4:3ff; and the above references). Believers are to seek after holiness because without it, they will not see the Lord. (Heb. 12:14).
- (i) No real distinction can be made between sanctification as God's setting apart of a person for himself, and the subsequent change of character that results. When believers are said to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, it is linked with election, and proclamation of the gospel, belief of the truth and sprinkling with Christ's blood (Rom. 15:16; II Thess. 2:13; I Peter 1:2). In these cases, sanctification leads to conversion. But just as clearly,

conversion leads to sanctification in behavioural terms because the sanctified one understands that his life is from God and for God, and the continuing action of God in his life is directed towards that end (I Thess. 4:3; 5:23; II Tim. 2:21). Sanctification may be compared to marriage in the sense that husband and wife must consider their bodies to be for the other. In both cases, the relationship is fixed by God, and provides the secure relationship within which all of the intricacies of relating may be explored.

- (j) The same principle may be seen then, in both OT and NT, that God calls people to be his own without regard to works; these he shows to be his own by his saving acts, by their public acknowledgment of the Lord as their God, and by their reflecting the nature of the God to whom they now belong (e.g. Mal. 1:6). This must especially reflect his graciousness and mercy, since the people of God have such constant need to seek these. (cf. I Peter 1:10).

The word 'saints' is used of the people of God, meaning 'holy ones'. In the OT it is used chiefly of angels, but occasionally of men, particularly the faithful element within the nation of Israel (Ps. 16:3; 34:9; Dan. 7:18–27). Another word translated 'saints' is used, in a similar way, particularly in Psalms, but means 'kind', or 'pious'. (e.g. Ps. 30:4; 85:8; 149:1, 5, 9). In the NT however, the Greek word 'hagios', (as used in 'Holy Spirit') is translated 62 times as 'saints', and is one of the common words used for Christians. This simply emphasises that every Christian is set apart for God and that the course of his life would most naturally tend towards holiness.

The most prevalent NT name used for the people of God is 'brothers'. In the OT the word was used naturally within Israel because all were descended from one father, their God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This had implications as far as their sonship and brotherhood were concerned (See for examples Neh. 5; Mal. 1:6. See whole study on 'Called Children of God' in Study Seven) The NT calls Christians 'brothers' over 150 times, which draws attention to the familial nature of the people of God. They are the heirs of Abraham, the children of God, the brethren of Christ, those in whom the Spirit cries out 'Father'. They are the household of God, a temple where God dwells (Eph. 2:17–22), the household of faith in which they do good to one another (Gal. 6:10). It is for this that they are made God's people and for this they are to separate themselves from all that defiles (Hosea 1:10; II Corin. 6:16–18; Eph. 5:1; I John 3:1–3).

The household of God is the church (I Tim. 3:15). While Jesus spoke more about the kingdom than the church, he clearly said that he would build his church (Matt. 16:18). He said he would build it on a rock. This rock could be himself, or the confession that Peter had made that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and in a limited sense could be Peter himself. Peter had been previously and aptly named by Jesus and Jesus now recalls this. No other foundation than Christ could be laid for the people of God (I Corin. 3:11) because he was the only holy one, and the only one who could sanctify the people of God by the putting away of their sin. And because the people of God were to be sons under one Father, he became the firstborn among many

brethren (Rom. 8:29), the only one who lived truly as a son (Matt. 17:5) and so the only one eligible to bring many sons to glory (Heb. 2:10).

So Christ is the foundation, yet in another sense he is the cornerstone (I Peter 2:6–8) and those who first believe and give testimony to the truth are with him, the foundation on which the church is built (Eph. 2:20; cf. I Corin. 3:10). In this sense then, Peter confessing Jesus as the Christ, not Peter in himself, is the rock on which the Church is built. Consequently, Peter is given the keys of the kingdom to let in and keep out whoever he chooses. These keys are given to the apostles together (Matt. 18:18) and to the church wherever it meets with Christ in their midst (Matt. 18:19f.).

THE WORK OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

Much has been said already concerning the work of God's people, as this arises out of their identity and nature. In addition we may say that the saints or people of God are not set apart and blessed to the exclusion of all the other peoples of the earth, but for all these people. Just as priests were consecrated for their work of representing God to the people, so the whole people of God is called to be a royal priesthood (I Peter 2:9) declaring the wonderful deeds of God which they themselves experience (e.g. Rom. 15:16). In this way they make known the many faceted wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10), not least by showing how the hostility among the people of the earth can be brought to an end by being reconciled to one Father (Eph. 2:14–18).

God himself indwells his people (Eph. 2:20; Isa. 57:15) and is enthroned on their praises (Ps 22:3), therefore their work is to glory in him (Phil. 3:3) to keep themselves pure for him and to do the works that he wants done both creationally and redemptively (James 1:27; II Tim. 2:19–22). As sons their work is to do what the Father does (John 8:29; Rom. 8:12–17). Uniquely, this work is to love (John 13:34; 15:12–15; Eph. 5:1–2; Acts 2:43–47; 4:32)

Because the doing of the work of God is so dependent on God's relationship with them and indwelling of them, the people of God must 'keep their hearts', for out of such are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). To lose their love for the Lord is to invite judgement and the removing of the church's lampstand (Rev. 2:4f.; 3:15f.). But those saints who know God's purpose and power, know that they are, the body, or 'filling out' of Christ, and that he fills everything everywhere with his fullness (Eph. 1:15–23).

Therefore, ultimately, the work of God must always be what it was in the beginning, that the people of God believe in what God is doing for their salvation and for the renewing of all things (John 6:28f.) and this is the work that overcomes the world (I John 5:4f.).