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GOD'S CHURCH

A STUDY IN THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE
OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

by

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I. OLD TESTAMENT PREPARATION

CHAPTER ONE

GOD’S PURPOSE

GOD made man for Himself. The chief end of God in the creation of man was to have a people of whom He could say: I am theirs, and they are Mine. I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The remarkable story of the Bible is the story of the way in which God still continued with this purpose after, and in spite of, man’s fall into sin. In the Bible we learn how, in a fallen and sinful world, in and through earthly history, God is still forming for Himself a people, a people to whom He is pleased to give Himself and the enjoyment of His abiding presence as their God. There is in Scripture no phrase more frequent or more fundamental in its disclosure of the divine mind than variations of the declaration: ‘I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.’ Also, in the closing chapters of Revelation (to me it is significant that we should find this in what is the concluding section of the whole canon of Scripture) we are given a final vision and assurance of fulfilment. There the inspired seer testifies:

And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. 8

Here an illustration may help; and the obvious one to introduce is that of the marriage relationship. For marriage relationship language is used figuratively in the Bible itself for this very purpose of illustrating the character and the intimacy of the relationship between God and men. It is used above in the Scripture just quoted. It is used in the Old Testament of the

1 See e.g. Ex. vi. 7; Lv. xxvi. 12; Je. xxx. 22; Ezk. xi. 20
2 Rev. xxxi. 2, 3
relationship between God and His people Israel. It is used in the New Testament of the relationship between Christ and His Church.

In the establishment of the marriage relationship, a man freely chooses to invite a woman to become his, and offers to give herself to become hers. In response he demands from her that, in a special and an exclusive way, 'forsaking all other', she should acknowledge him as hers, and give herself to be his. The illustration thus afforded is, in addition, still more appropriate to our purpose, because among us it is customary for such an intention on the part of a man and a woman towards each other to be solemnly declared and sealed in the marriage vow and covenant. In this contract each openly declares to the other, 'I take you to be mine. I give myself to be yours.' Henceforth they can be described or introduced with reference to each other—he as her husband, and she as his wife.

So it is in the relationship between God and His people. Notice for example that He sometimes introduced Himself as 'the God of Abraham'; and Abraham was described as 'the Friend of God'. For, as a man chooses a bride and voluntarily invites a woman to become his, so we find that God has freely acted, according to His own will and pleasure. It is He who chooses to say to the children of Israel, 'I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God.' If I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people.'

Furthermore, God has solemnly and repeatedly pledged Himself in covenant. For example, in addition to the covenant which He made with them in Horeb, Moses called upon the Israelites, when they were in the land of Moab, to stand before the Lord:

That thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and into his oath, which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day; that he may establish thee to a people unto himself, and that he may be unto thee a God, as he hath said unto thee, and as he hath sworn unto thy fathers.

1 See Is. liv.; Ho. ii. 16, 19, 20  2 See Eph. v. 23-24  3 See Gn. xxviii. 13; Ex. iii. 6  4 See Is. xli. 8; Is. ii. 23  5 Ex. vi. 7  6 Lv. xxvi. 12  7 Dt. xxxii. 1, 10-13

God's Church

It was in such divine confirmation of God's choice of them, and of their corporate relation to Him, that national leaders like Samuel and David later found assurance and hope. Inspired prophets also spoke repeatedly of a coming fuller realization of this divine intention. God would make a new covenant to further this very end.

This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord; I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This was explicitly the larger hope of the future.

Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; and I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness.

Also, it was foreseen that this would involve bringing into this privileged relationship those who had previously been complete outsiders; so we read that the Lord saith:

I will say to them which were not my people, Thou art my people; and they shall say, Thou art my God.

And the full significance of such words is indicated and underlined by their quotation in the New Testament.

On the other hand, it was usually clearly indicated that full enjoyment on man's part of this relation to God demanded personal separation from every inconsistent attachment in order to be wholly and exclusively His. To further this end disciplinary divine judgments were seen to be necessary to remove the unworthy, and to bring men to repentance and obedience.

And it shall come to pass, that in all the land, saith the Lord, two parts therein shall be cut off and die; but the third shall be left therein. And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried: they shall call on my name, and I will hear them; I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, the Lord is my God.

1 See 1 Sa. xii. 22; 2 Sa. vii. 24; 1 Ch. xvii. 22
2 Ec. xxxvi. 31; cf. Is. xxxvi. 23-28, xxxvii. 26, 27
3 Zc. viii. 7, 8
4 Ho. ii. 23, cf. 1. 10
5 See Is. xix. 25, 26; 1 Pet. ii. 10
6 Zc. xiii. 8, 9; cf. Je. vii. 23
Similarly, in the day of larger fulfilment in Christ, men enjoying the knowledge of the gospel are urged by the apostle, 'Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers', and 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate', in order that they may enter into the realized experience of all that God has both promised and made possible in Christ. Nor can the inspired New Testament writer better express this intended destiny set before us Christians than by quoting the familiar Old Testament language. So Paul says:

For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.¹

It is, therefore, God's unmistakable purpose to have a people of His own; and by His amazing grace it is the utterly undeserved privilege of all who belong to Christ to belong to this community, the people of God. It is the character and outworking of this purpose and this privilege that we are now to study.

God revealed what was in His mind, and how He purposed to fulfil it, by what He did. Here the Old Testament Scriptures have for men of every age and race an abiding relevance and importance. Not only do they record the beginnings of God's action; they also show—as the subsequent witness of the New Testament explicitly confirms—that in these initial stages God, in His providence and by His Spirit, deliberately acted in such a way as to prepare men's minds for the proper appreciation of the ultimate fulfilment of His purpose in Christ. So we find that in the Old Testament record of God's special dealings with a chosen people, a pattern reveals itself which is indicative of the governing principles and of the successive stages of the divine plan. Let us briefly survey its outstanding features.

In the Old Testament, the history of God's chosen people begins with God's choice and call of Abraham. Here the initiative is wholly God's. He acts in sovereign grace according to His own predetermined pleasure and to fulfil His own predestined end. He selects whom He pleases, and invites him to forsake all else and everyone else in order to follow Him, and to enjoy His rewards. So we read that to Abraham the Lord said:

Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing.²

This movement of God in special relation to one chosen individual can be described more technically or theologically—first, as His 'election' and 'predestination' of Abraham, and second, as His 'calling' of Abraham. All membership in God's chosen people depends primarily upon similar divine action—first, upon God's election and predestination, and second, upon God's calling.³ Also this initial movement of God towards Abraham indicates and emphasizes that God elects and calls men individually, by name, one by one, into intimate personal relationship with Himself. In the ultimate vast community of God's people, therefore, every individual member is meant similarly to be sure of his own personal election and calling.⁴

When God thus said in effect to Abraham, 'I want you,—to be Mine', He also equally said to Abraham, by unmistakable implication, 'You shall have Me. I will be your God.' To this invitation Abraham responded. So we read that Abraham called upon the name of the Lord.⁵ This also is, both theologically and biblically, very significant phraseology. It means that Abraham began to acknowledge and to invoke God in an intimate personal way as his God. Such phraseology becomes in the Bible a familiar way of describing, from the side of human response, all who belong to God and are members of His people. They are those who 'call upon the name of the Lord'.⁶ It is in these terms that the prophet Joel describes those

¹ See 2 Cor. vi. 14-18
² See Rom. vii. 1-12
³ See Gal. i. 15; 1 Thess. i. 4; 2 Pet. i. 10
⁴ See again Gal. i. 15; 2 Pet. i. 10
⁵ See Zp. iii. 9
⁶ See Gn. xii. 8
whom God will save in the coming day of deliverance. 'And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered.'

It is also in such terms that, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul describes the members of the universal Church as 'all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord'.

Thus in God's dealings with Abraham, and in Abraham's characteristic response to God, we see the two complementary activities which bring God and men together into fellowship. First, God calls men individually to be His; and then they, in response, call upon His name, and acknowledge Him as theirs.

When we move on in the Old Testament story to the book of Exodus, we find that it complements the witness of the book of Genesis. It records the outworked fulfilment of God's purpose, which was begun in His choice and call of Abraham. Here we see God dealing, not with a single individual only, but with a whole community, the nation of the Israelites. Here, significantly, we are made aware of the place and necessity of redemption. For the people whom God has chosen to be His are seen to be in bondage in a foreign land. So, before they could fully become God's people, and belong only to Him, they had to be redeemed. Thus we read that God said to them:

I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians... and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments: and I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God.

And after the Israelites went out from Egypt, and had crossed the Red Sea, they sang, "Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed." Also, it is in Exodus xii, in the story of the Passover, that the words first appear in Scripture which are translated 'the whole assembly of the congregation'. The two Hebrew nouns of this phrase provide the antecedents of the more familiar Greek words, which we know as 'ecclesia' and 'synagogue'. It is surely very significant indeed that the Lord's assembly or 'ecclesia', His Church or congregation, is first spoken of as constituted when the Israelites were called together under the Passover blood to eat the Passover lamb. This, indeed, was a night to be much remembered by Israelites, 'a night to be much observed unto the Lord for bringing them out from the land of Egypt'. It was the night of their birth or emergence as God's people. So we find later that the psalmist prayed:

Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old; the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed.

This idea finds its obvious Christian counterpart and fulfilment in the redemption which Jesus wrought, when He was 'sacrificed for us' as 'our passover'. For through His death and resurrection He accomplished 'an exodus' for the Israel of God. (Such is the phraseology used by Luke to describe the subject of our Lord's conversation with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration.) So in Paul's Epistle to Titus we read of Christ that He gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people (av, 'a people for his own possession').

The New Testament fulfilment is thus described in words which re-echo the language of the Old Testament figure or preparatory pattern. So, just as the psalmist of Old Testament times prayed, 'Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased', so the apostle of the New Testament days spoke of 'the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood'.

In the third place, let us notice from both Genesis and Exodus that these approaches of God to men in grace to make them His, and to offer Himself to be theirs, and to promise them His blessings, were also confirmed by the visible seals of a

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1 Joel ii. 32
2 Ex. ii. 32
3 1 Cor. i. 2
4 Ex. vi. 6, 7
5 Ex. xvi. 13
6 Ex. xii. 6
7 Acts xxv. 28
8 Ps. lxiv. 2
9 See Lk. ix. 30, 31
10 Tit. ii. 14
11 Ps. lxiv. 2
12 See 1 Cor. v. 7
13 See 1 Cor. v. 7
properly ordered covenant; that is, one duly ratified by the performance of the customary ritual. This, says the writer to the Hebrews, is how men make their fellows doubly sure. Having given their word, they confirm it by oath. Such oath-taking and covenant-making commonly involve either invoking God's name or introducing visible pledges. So, for instance, in the form of marriage used in the Church of England, in addition to the mutual promises which both the man and the woman make, the divine Name is invoked by the man, and a ring is given by the man and received by the woman, in token and pledge of the vow and covenant made between them.

In His dealings with Abraham we read that God said:

I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. This is my covenant, which ye shall keep. Every man child among you shall be circumcised, and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you.

Circumcision was, therefore, a sign and seal put upon each male Israelite's body, that God had pledged Himself to be their God, and intended them to be His people. It was a necessary and decisive visible mark indicating membership, first, in Abraham's household, and later, within the nation of the Israelites. For instance, we are later told concerning participation in the ordinance of the passover that 'All the congregation of Israel shall keep it', but that 'no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof'.

In addition, God assured Abraham that his seed should inherit the land of Canaan by introducing the symbolism of putting to death. The pieces or rent parts of slain animals were divided, half on one side, and half on the other, and the light, which symbolized God's presence, passed between them. It seems probable that when men sealed a covenant by thus passing (or by referring to the practice of thus passing) between the divided parts of slain animals, they said, as they made their promise or vow, 'the Lord do so to me, and more also'; that is, may God treat me as these animals have been treated, if I fail to keep my word. This practice may be compared to a man swearing 'upon his life', and perhaps drawing a knife across his throat as he does so, that is, using the symbolism of putting to death. Similarly, at Sinai, Moses sacrificed oxen and sprinkled half of the blood on the altar, and sprinkled the rest of the blood on the people, and said, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you.' Thus, by adopting familiar human usage, God assured Abraham and the Israelites that they were indeed to be His people, and to enjoy the fulfilment of His promises.

Such awareness may perhaps set us on the road to a fuller biblical understanding of the appointed place and purpose in the household of God and in the congregation of Christ of the two so-called sacraments of the gospel: baptism and the Lord's supper. For they, too, confirm God's words of promise. They are seals of God's covenant with His people. In baptism God's name is invoked, and a visible seal put upon the individual's body. Thus are God's promises, to make us His, visibly signed and sealed. In the Lord's supper, on the other hand, 'the pieces used to remind us of Christ's sacrifice are visibly divided. At the institution in the upper room there was a deliberate interval between the breaking of the bread and the handing round of the cup. It was not until 'he had supped' that Jesus 'took the cup'. So, says the apostle, 'as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup', what you proclaim is the Lord's death. Also, when Jesus thus 'divided the pieces' and 'took the cup' in His hand, He immediately spoke of 'the new covenant'. It is, therefore, 'by these presents', by the uttered word and the added visible seal, that in receiving the sacraments we are meant to be assured that we are God's people, and that He and all His promised benefits are ours.

1 See Je. xxxiv. 18-20; Ru. i. 17; 2 Ki. vi. 31.
2 See Ex. xxiv. 3-8; Heb. ix. 18-20.
3 See 1 Cor. xi. 25.
4 See 1 Cor. xi. 26 and RV.
5 See 1 Cor. xi. 23 and RV.
CHAPTER TWO

THE VISIBLE AND THE TRUE ISRAEL

In the Old Testament story, God's chosen people, first the household of Abraham, and later the nation of the Israelites, form a distinct and visibly recognizable community. Such distinction was made the more unmistakable by outward marks which all could recognize, such as belonging by birth to the seed of Abraham, being circumcised, and joining in the public and regular acknowledgement of God, for example by calling upon the name of the Lord, keeping the weekly sabbath, and observing the annual ordinance of the Passover. By such marks as these it was easy for others to distinguish Israelites, and to know whether any individual did, or did not, belong to them. Also, this distinct community was clearly the community with which God in providence and grace had special dealings. It was the sphere in which He particularly manifested His presence, and worked to further His special pre-determined purposes.

Yet from the Old Testament story it is equally plain that, within this clearly-defined, visible community, a further distinction is frequently to be made between nominal and actual membership, between the professing and the true people of God. As it is put by the apostle Paul: "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel.¹" In other words, not all who belong to the visible community are genuine Israelites.

Also, while the witness of Scripture compels us to recognize the presence of this further distinction, it is not possible in the same decisive way, from evidence immediately open to the senses, to know where the dividing line comes, or to which class any particular individual may belong. For the true seed is to be recognized primarily by faith rather than by sight, and the essential characteristics of a true Israelite are funda-

manently inward rather than outward. So this distinct community of true Israelites, because it is not discernible by the senses, particularly by sight, has by some been called, in contrast to the outwardly visible community, a spiritual or "invisible" community, whose membership is exactly known only to God.

This inevitable distinction between the visible and the true is, in principle, still one of great relevance to the community of God's people, which is to be found in the Church of Christ. It is worthy of careful, detailed attention, therefore, particularly as there is so much to be learnt about it from the Bible itself. Here, too, we are not left to our own judgment. We have the inspired and apostolic guidance of the New Testament to help us to arrive at a proper Christian understanding of the witness of the Old Testament. There are in the Epistles several passages of pointed comment on Old Testament history, indicating its abiding significance for the people of God.

Let us start with the household of Abraham. Here all the members belonged to the distinct visible community; and so, when circumcision was introduced as a token of God's covenant with Abraham and his seed, all the males were circumcised.

In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son. And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him.²

Yet, this is how St. Paul comments:

Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.³ That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.⁴

So, among the members of Abraham's household, Isaac only was the true seed, and his identity was not distinguishable by sight, but known only to faith. What secured for Isaac participation in the inheritance was not just physical descent from

¹ Gn. xvii. 26, 27 ² Quoted from Gn. xxii. 12 ³ Rom. ix. 7, 8
Abraham and circumcision, by themselves, for Ishmael had both of these. Rather it was what he possessed in addition, the election and promise of God, and a divinely-wrought, supernatural birth.

Let us look further at the significance of circumcision. On the one hand, circumcision was the indispensable condition of membership in the visible community of God's people. 'Every man child' we read, 'must needs be circumcised', or 'be cut off from his people'. Yet, in his Epistle to the Romans, Paul argues that the essential gospel blessing of justification before God, of having righteousness instead of sin reckoned to his account, was enjoyed by Abraham through faith alone before he was circumcised. Circumcision was added as a sign and seal of a blessing enjoyed. The blessing came, not through circumcision, but through faith. This means, says St. Paul, that others can, without sharing his circumcision, become Abraham's true spiritual descendants and share his blessing, if they share Abraham's faith; and that those who do share Abraham's circumcision will become true children of Abraham and share his blessing only if they share his faith.

To put it in other words, as St. Paul had already done in this same Epistle to the Romans, this means that the true Israelite, the genuine member of God's people, is not the perfect, visible conformist, who has properly shared outwardly in the divinely-ordained rite of initiation, but the man who makes unseen and sincere heart response to God and His ways.

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

One way to reckon the people of God is to reckon them as seen by men, according to what is visible. This community is, however, always mixed, not pure. 'In the visible Church the evil be ever mingled with the good.' The right way to reckon the true people of God is by faith, to reckon them as seen by God.

For the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

These things thus 'written aforetime' in the Old Testament were, as St. Paul also says in the same Epistle to the Romans, 'written for our learning'. They have their obvious Christian application. For instance, while it is proper for professing Christians to be baptized, since baptism is the divinely-ordained seal of membership in the visible Church, in God's sight the true children of Abraham are not the baptized as such, but the believers in Christ. Those, upon whom 'the blessing of Abraham' comes, are those who receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

It is very necessary, therefore, in all our thinking about God's people to make a proper distinction between the nominal and the genuine, between the professing and the real, members; between the formal or sacramental membership able to be numbered outwardly associated with the things of God, and the inner and true elect community, those who know the Lord; between what Richard Hooker and others, both before and since, have called the visible and the invisible Church, between the formal or sacramental membership able to be numbered by men, and the deeper spiritual membership fully known only to God.

Let us think next of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. In writing to Christians, St. Paul, when he mentions them, calls all 'our fathers'. He recalls that these Israelites all shared outwardly and visibly in the signs and seals of membership in God's people. In a word, as St. Paul explicitly emphasizes, they all shared in direct counterparts of the Christian sacraments. Yet they were not all pleasing to God. Many of them were overthrown in the wilderness. Though, on the other hand, it is equally important to remember that their failure was not complete. There was a remnant of faith. Joshua and...