People of God: What Is a People?
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One of the differences between dispensationalists and covenant theologians is their understanding of the category people of God. To be fair, this difference also exists among varieties of dispensationalism, and it is one of the reasons that some traditional dispensationalists suspect that progressive dispensationalists are not really dispensationalists at all. Traditional dispensationalists affirm that Israel and the church are distinct peoples of God. Covenant theologians believe that this distinction necessarily disrupts the unity of the covenant of grace, and they insist that the church has taken the place of Israel within the one people of God. For covenant theologians, Israel is the church of the Old Testament while the church is God’s new Israel. Progressive dispensationalists argue that the church has joined Israel within the one people of God, leaving temporal distinctions between the two groups but collapsing the distinction in eternity.

Before one can decide whether Israel and the church constitute one people of God or two, however, it might be useful to understand just what a people of God is. And before one can define the expression people of God, one must define the word people. In fact, much of the debate revolves around unclear understandings of the biblical concept of people.

No wonder. In modern thought—especially in American thought—the word people functions simply as an alternative plural for person. We count one person, but two, three, or four people. Consequently the people of God must simply comprise the aggregate of persons or individuals who belong to God. What could be simpler?

If this is really what it means to be “people of God,” then the concept of a single, unified people of God is unexceptionable. By definition there could not be two distinct peoples of God. To try to distinguish separate peoples of God becomes nonsensical and theologically pernicious. I suspect that something like this perspective lies beneath the incredulity of many covenant theologians when they hear dispensationalists talk about Israel and the church being distinct peoples of God. Ridiculous!

The problem is that this understanding of the term people is not the biblical understanding. In the Bible, a people is not simply an aggregation of indi-
viduals or a plural of the word *person*. In fact, in the Bible, *people* is a singular word that may be (and usually is) pluralized into *peoples*.

The biblical understanding of a people can be glimpsed (among many other places) in Psalm 67. The psalm actually uses three terms interchangeably to refer to the same thing. The first term (v. 2) is *goyim* (plural of *goy*), sometimes translated *gentiles*, but literally meaning *nations*. The second (vv. 3, 4, 5) is *’amim* (plural of *’am*), normally translated *peoples* or *nations*. The third term is *l’umim* (plural of *l’om*), alternatively translated *peoples* or *nations*. Again, these terms are being used interchangeably. They are functioning as synonyms in the text.

This is not an unusual phenomenon. Psalm 2:1 pairs *goyim* with *l’umim*. In Psalm 33:10, *goyim* and *’amim* appear together, while Psalm 33:22 links *goyim* and *l’umim*. The terms *goyim* and *l’umim* are paired twice in Psalm 44, both in verse 2 and in verse 14. Psalm 96:3 links *goyim* with *’amim* in verse 3, then uses *mishpachoth* (tribes or clans) with *’amim* in verse 7 (translated *clans of the peoples*). Psalm 117:1 couples *goyim* with *’amim* (beginning with an *aleph* instead of an *ayin*, but also meaning *peoples*).

The regular conjunction of these terms leads inescapably to the conclusion that the biblical ideas of *nation* and *people* are interchangeable. In other words, a biblical people is not simply an aggregate of individuals. It is a nation. In Scripture, to be constituted as a people is to be constituted as a nation.

A biblical nation, however, is not at all the same thing as a modern nation-state. The solidarity of a modern nation-state consists primarily in its social ideal, often articulated in some form of document. When Abraham Lincoln stated that “fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation,” he was referring to the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Founding the nation in the Declaration allowed him to appeal directly to the ideal of equality rather than to ideals of federal relations between states (such as are found in the actual Constitution). This ploy permitted him to redefine the war between the states as a struggle for freedom rather than a combat over the right of states to secede from a Union that they believed had violated its own Constitution.

The solidarity of the United States as a nation consists in its ideals. The solidarity of a biblical nation, however, consisted in its ethnicity. Granted, other factors such as language, religion, and territory could come into play. Also granted, nations in biblical times had ways to incorporate individuals who did not share the nation’s ethnicity (examples such as Rahab and Ruth come to mind). Nevertheless, the primary point of solidarity for a biblical nation was its ethnicity.

In other words, individuals were members of the nation because they shared descent from a common ancestor. Edomites were descendents of Esau. Ammonites came from Benammi. Moabites descended from Moab, as the Assyrians did from Asshur. The point of the so-called “Table of Nations” in Genesis 10-11 is to show the descent of the principal nations or peoples of the earth.

The biblical idea of nation or people is still at work in many places. Changes in political boundaries may have moved Transylvania from Hungary into Romania, but the Hungarians who still live there do not think of themselves as Romanians. Basque nationalists do not think of themselves as either Frenchmen or Spaniards, though they live in those countries. To many Europeans, ethnicity is very important in defining nationality, which is why the old Yugoslavia so quickly disintegrated into ethnic territories (Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia).

To be a people of God is first and foremost to be a people. To be a people is to be a nation. To be a nation is, at minimum, to be an ethnic bloc, united by descent from a common ancestor. The key insight of dispensationalism (at least in its traditional varieties) is to insist that the term *people*, when used of the people of God, should retain its original and literal usage rather than being viewed metaphorically.

In other words, from a dispensationalist perspective, a people of God is never less than an ethnic unit. It is a *race*. Its solidarity *as a people* consists largely in its connection to a common ancestor. With this understanding of *people* in mind, we must next consider what it means to be a *people of God*.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.