People of God: Eternity
Kevin T. Bauder

As previous essays have shown, a biblical people is a nation, and a biblical nation is an ethnic unit. A people of God is a nation devoted to the worship of Jehovah. Until the constitution of Israel, no people of God existed anywhere. From the moment of its creation as a nation, however, Israel was called out from among the nations to be a chosen people, a peculiar treasure to the Lord, a kingdom of priests. Israel was the first, and for many centuries the only, people of God.

Nevertheless, even within the Old Testament, God revealed a purpose that extended to other peoples. Passages such as Psalm 67 and the miniature Psalm 117 made it clear that God wanted many nations to devote themselves to His worship. In what has to be a millennial reference, Isaiah 19:18-25 indicates that both Egypt and Assyria will someday join Israel, standing side-by-side as peoples of God. Every indication is that God always meant to have multiple peoples to call His own. And why not? If, in individual salvation, God displays the abundance of His grace by extending salvation to many (Rom. 5:15), then why, in national calling, should God’s exhibition of grace be restricted to one?

During the millennium, the pluriform grace of God will be exhibited through the calling of many peoples. Many nations will offer their worship to God through Israel’s messiah. While Israel will retain a unique position (Zech. 8:20-23), many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek Jehovah Tsabaoth and to entreat His favor.

What happens to these peoples after the end of the millennium? Once the final rebellion has been put down and the ultimate judgment has been pronounced at the Great White Throne, do the nations continue or do they dissolve? Even among dispensationalists, opinions vary.

It is possible to argue that the eternal state will represent a restoration of the original status of humanity, only redeemed by Christ. Originally, the human race was a single people with no division into separate nations (Gen. 11:6). Only with the confounding of languages at the tower of Babel did human-
ity begin to fragment into distinct peoples. In other words, the existence of nations is a consequence of God’s judgment upon a disobedient humanity. Hypothetically, the lifting of the judgment might entail the elimination of all its consequences, so that the human race would once again become a single people, undivided into nations. All national distinctions would vanish, all of redeemed humanity would be one people, and this one people would be the people of God.

This is a glorious vision, and it includes several elements that resonate with anyone who desires God’s glory. To see sin utterly overcome, to see all judgments rolled back, and to see a restoration of an ante-lapsarian condition, would indeed place God’s glory on display. If the future held such a plan, no believer could ever complain that God’s wisdom was deficient or that His glory was being slighted. Incidentally, this vision (if true) is not necessarily incompatible with traditional dispensationalism, and variations of it are actually defended by some traditional dispensationalists.

Yet God has not worked this way with respect to individual salvation. When God forgives sins, He does not simply return the believer to an ante-lapsarian condition. The believer who has been freed from the penalty of sin does not return to a state of creaturely holiness, but continues to struggle against the power and presence of sin. Through the Word and the Spirit, God brings the believer to a position of maturity and preparation for eternity. When we stand in our glorified bodies, we shall not be presented as if we had never sinned. On the contrary, God will get glory precisely from the fact that we were sinners who have been redeemed and sanctified and glorified. In other words, the fact of our previous sinful condition will actually magnify God’s grace and multiply the glory that redounds to our great God and Savior.

If this pattern is appropriate for individual sinners who have believed, might not something similar be appropriate for entire nations that have turned to God? Rather than restoring the human race to its original, seamless uniformity, might God not have a different purpose? Might He not choose to highlight different aspects of His grace through the teeming variety of human languages, perspectives, and cultures? Might He not be most glorified by receiving the adoration of many peoples and placing them on display forever?

The Bible does not say much about the eternal state. The clearest hints about the glories of eternity future come from the closing two chapters of the book of Revelation. Even these chapters are the subject of controversy, for some expositors insist that certain aspects could not be true of eternity future. Actually, certain aspects of these chapters could not be true of their vision of eternity future. I think it is fairly clear that these chapters are giving us a glimpse into conditions after the final judgment. They describe our eternal home, the New Jerusalem.

It might be assumed that Revelation 21:3 would have the final word in this discussion: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people” (NASB). Does this text not decisively indicate that humanity will become a single people of God? The evidence, however, is not as straightforward as it seems. Other translations (the NRSV, the ASV of 1901, and the venerable if idiosyncratic YLT) render this text as “they shall be His peoples,” using a plural that indicates multiple peoples of God.

Even the Greek manuscripts are divided. Both the critical text (UBS and NA) and the Textus Receptus (Scrivener) agree in using the plural, while the Robinson-Pierpont Byzantine text and the Hodges-Farstad majority text both favor the singular. Oddly enough, nearly all of the versions that translate “His people” as a singular were done from Greek texts that offered the plural reading.

The upshot is that the most likely reading of the text is “they shall be His peoples,” referring to multiple peoples of God even in eternity future. Some interpreters, however, may object to establishing a theological point upon a disputed textual reading. Fair enough—though this point would prevent us from using Revelation 21:3 to settle the dispute in either direction. By divine design, it is not the only evidence that these chapters offer.

If we are not convinced by Revelation 21:3, then we might glance a bit further down in the text. The description of the New Jerusalem includes observations that ought to remove all doubt. According to Revelation 21:24, the nations will walk by the light of the city and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Then Revelation 22:2 states that the leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations. These constitute clear statements that eternity future will include multiple nations that offer worship to God. Throughout all eternity, God will have peoples and not merely a people.

Every nation has its own culture, which includes its own unique perspectives and expressions. Every nation is able to see and say something about God better than any other nation. Each nation can learn something about God’s glory from every other nation. The inhabitants of each nation should be listening to other nations for their unique understandings of God’s person and works.

What God has done with the nations is to create a chandelier rather than a spotlight. If humanity were a single people, we could focus light directly upon a few aspects of God’s character and set them in bold relief, but other aspects would remain obscure. As it is, the many nations will reflect the