In the Old Testament, the terms *people* and *nation* are used interchangeably. Both terms have a significant ethnic component in their definition. In normal usage, a people or nation is constituted at least partly by its descent from a mutual ancestor. Assyrians descended from Asshur. Moabites were the children of Moab. Ammonites were sired by Benammi. Whatever other factors might enter into the description of a people or nation, its solidarity rests in its union with a common forebear.

Identifiable nations developed as a consequence of the division of languages at the tower of Babel. Prior to Babel, humanity functioned as a single people (Gen. 11:6). God used the division of languages to separate humanity into family groups that were divided, not only linguistically and ethnically, but also geographically (Acts 17:26).

These observations have sometimes been used to support a policy of racial segregation, often expressed in terms of a ban against interracial marriage. If this policy were limited to the Ku Klux Klan or the Posse Comitatus, it would hardly be worth noticing. Significant portions of evangelicalism and fundamentalism, however, have occasionally attempted to use Acts 17:26 and the division of nations at Babel to justify racial separation. For example, early editions of the *Dake Annotated Reference Bible* included a list of thirty reasons for segregation of the races after Acts 17:26. During the early 1960s, Bob Jones, Sr. preached (and his university subsequently distributed) an entire sermon justifying segregation, with Acts 17:26 as his pivotal proof text. Similar arguments were heard from supporters of Pillsbury Baptist Bible College when, under the presidency of Joseph Rammel, that school enforced a ban against interracial dating.

Peter spoke about people who twist or distort the Scriptures (2 Pet. 3:16). Certainly the use of Acts 17:26 to authorize segregation (or to prohibit interracial marriage) constitutes a distortion of Scripture. While the Bible does understand a people or nation as an ethnic unit, it is not possible to argue from this perspective to racial segregation.

In the first place, the modern use of the term *race* is not equivalent to the biblical use of the terms *people* or *nation*. The modern concept of race revolves...
around imprecise combinations of characteristics such as hair texture, bone structure, the concentration of melanin in the skin, and geographical distribution. At most, however, defining race by features of this sort produces a kind of ambiguously sliding scale that allows no sharp differentiation between races. The weakness of the system is illustrated (e.g.) by the inability of anthropologists to agree upon a racial classification for the Dravidian peoples. Even if these classifications could be tightened up, however, they do not correspond to anything in Scripture.

Second, the only division that God imposed directly at Babel was a confounding of languages—a process that is still going on today. If, as racists argue, the changes that follow Babel are divinely intended, and if it is invariably wrong to reverse these divinely-imposed separations, then a reversal of the linguistic division ought to be the most serious sin. In other words, it should always be wrong to learn a foreign language or to translate a text—including the text of the Bible.

Third, Acts 17:26 specifically mentions that God decided ahead of time which lands the nations would occupy. In other words, geographical boundaries are part of God’s purpose. No one infers, however, that a shift in national boundaries is always and everywhere a violation of God’s purpose for humanity. The world—including the biblical world—has witnessed ceaseless migration. What Paul is saying in Acts 17 is that God’s eternal purpose has already taken account of when and where the movements of entire peoples would occur. God does not prohibit people from moving from one place to another, but He has providentially determined when those movements will occur.

Fourth, while recognizing a diversity of nations, Acts 17:26 strongly emphasizes the unity of humanity. Even after the division into “languages, families, and nations” (Gen. 10:5), the oneness of the human race remains far more important than its divisions. This oneness is particularly significant when contrasted with the mutable and secondary characteristics that anthropologists and others have employed in attempting to distinguish races (in the modern sense). These characteristics exhibit the tremendous capacity for diversity with which humanity was created, but they do not introduce any new genetic information into the one human race.

Finally, the Bible itself exhibits no irrevocable pattern of ethnic segregation. Quite the opposite: Scripture imposes ethical or theological separations, but never purely ethnic ones. The children of Israel were forbidden to marry idolaters, but they were permitted to select believing spouses from other ethnicities. The family tree of David, and eventually of the Messiah, includes an ethnic Canaanite (Rahab) and a Moabite (Ruth). By marrying into Israel these women became part of Israel.

Even Moses married a Cushite woman—almost certainly a black African (attempts to argue otherwise have to be strained almost to the breaking point). When Moses’ sister, Miriam, complained about this arrangement, God struck her with leprosy. The text carefully notes that Miriam became white “as snow.” So much for pride in the color of one’s skin.

To say that a biblical people or nation has an ethnic identity is not an argument for racism. It provides no foundation for any version of racial segregation, including any prohibition against interracial marriage. Furthermore, a correct understanding of the church as a people of God provides one context in which the older ethnic distinctions are simply obliterated. That consideration, however, merits separate examination as part of a separate problem.

The larger problem is this. If a people or a nation finds its identity in its solidarity with an ancestor, then how can the church be understood as a people at all? How can a body that comprises individuals from all sorts of ethnicities be viewed as a people in any sense, let alone as a people of God? This important question will occupy our attention next.