

The People of Faith

by Richie Temple
Cary, North Carolina

In the Bible there is one God and one people of God - the people of faith. This concept of a unique "people of God" comes clearly into focus in the Old Testament with the promises God made to "Abraham and his seed" (Gal. 3:16). It then continues throughout the Bible so as to bind the Old and New Testaments together as one continuous story - a story of Old Testament promise and New Testament fulfillment. This continuity is plainly set forth throughout the New Testament and is seen in quotations of Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled "in Christ:"

For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God.

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (II Cor. 1:20-22).

The new covenant church of the body of Christ, which came into existence on the day of Pentecost, saw itself in direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God. In short, through faith in Christ and their incorporation via the Spirit "into Christ" the new covenant believers saw themselves as the true "seed of Abraham" and heirs of all the promises of God to his covenant people. This theme is set forth in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,

for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26-29).

Through the Spirit the first century believers were "children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17). God's gift of holy Spirit was understood by them to be the "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23) or "first-installment" (Eph. 1:13-14) of God's future inheritance for his people. Through the Spirit the blessings of God's future kingdom, as prophesied in the Old Testament and announced by Christ himself, had already broken into this present evil age. Therefore, both the "last days" of the present evil age and the future blessings of the glorious "age to come" had already begun. Because of this the first century believers saw themselves as those "upon whom the fulfillment of the ages had come" (I Cor. 10:11). What had been foreshadowed in the Old Testament events, law, temple and sacrificial system had now found its "substance" or "reality" in Christ (Col. 2:17). The following section of scripture illustrates this understanding of fulfillment in the NT church:

For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household,

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph. 2:18-22).

The physical building of the Old Testament temple could never be a permanent place for God's dwelling because "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by men" (Acts 7:48). But what had been foreshadowed by the OT temple had now found its greater "reality" or "fulfillment" in Christ. The New Testament people of God had become "a spiritual house" or "a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Such language of NT fulfillment of the Old Testament "shadow" is everywhere on the pages of the NT epistles as well as in the Book of Acts. It was precisely this unique understanding of the first century believers as the NT "people of God" that gave them their revolutionary perspective on all

of life. "Already" they were the children of God possessing the firstfruits of their future inheritance but "not yet" had they received that inheritance in full. They were a people living "between the times" of Christ's first and second comings. The letter of I John illustrates this perspective:

How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.

Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure (I John 3:1-2).

As the children of God within the societies of our own day we also should reflect the qualities of our status as God's new covenant people and bring others into the royal heritage of God's family. The letter of I Peter sums up this unique perspective of fulfillment:

Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind.

Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

As you come to him, the living Stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him

you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For in scripture it says:

"See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe,

"The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,"

and,

"A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall."

They stumble because they disobey the message - which is also what they were destined for.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Once you were not a people but now you are the people of God ... (I Pet 2:1-10).