
The Unity of the Spirit

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"In the Bond of Peace"

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Dear Fellow-Believers:

This issue of *The Unity of the Spirit* marks the completion of five full years of our newsletter. It also takes us into a new calendar millenium beginning with the year 2000. In this light, I thought that this would be a good time to reflect a little on the goals of our newsletter and where we have come to at this point in time. First, the central goal of *The Unity of the Spirit* has always been to help bring unity, edification and an increased understanding of God's Word to God's people throughout the world. The articles in this publication over the past five years have all been aimed at accomplishing these purposes. Each issue has been built around one of the central truths of the Bible which God has fully revealed and accomplished in Christ: namely, that there is one God, one people of God and one hope of salvation for all of God's people. These truths are summarized in what I consider to be the theme verses of this newsletter:

This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men – the testimony given in its proper time (I Tim. 2:3-6 NIV).

As a prisoner of the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the

Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism: one God and Father of all, who is over all through all and in all (Eph. 4:1-6 NIV).

By focusing on these central themes we have endeavored in *The Unity of the Spirit* to strengthen God's family by presenting biblical articles - together with information about the Bible itself - which we feel are helpful to the spiritual growth of God's people. In addition, we have endeavored to encourage believers – even of somewhat different doctrinal persuasions – to communicate, fellowship and strengthen each other as fellow-members of God's family.

It is our view that many doctrinal differences fade away in significance when we recognize that most Christian believers are honestly endeavoring to live for God to the best of their ability. If this be true, it follows that we should treat each other with the mutual love and respect that the unity of the Christian faith demands. The basis for this must be the recognition of our common life in Christ: that is, our common belief in Christ and our common efforts to live Christ-like lives until Christ's glorious second coming.

Although this newsletter certainly has emphasized its own perspective regarding biblical topics, it has always endeavored to do so in a non-polemical manner. Having been involved with many different Christian groups throughout my life, I am very aware that learning is a life-long process.

However, when our focus is on our common belief in Christ and living Christ-like lives until Christ's glorious second coming, honest differences in biblical interpretation can be looked at in a much different light – that is, as fellow believers in God's family who are honestly endeavoring to understand what the scriptures say on certain topics. Despite differences, we can all continue to grow-up in Christ until all is made clear at his return (I John 3:1-3).

Of course, it is true that the Bible teaches that we are in a spiritual battle and that divisive doctrines and ungodly living must be opposed by those who know the truth. No one who knows much about the Bible would deny that this is true. Nevertheless, the more I study the Bible and come to understand it the more I believe its central message to be simple, clear and easily received by those who desire to know and live in the truth. When properly taught and properly understood, the Bible focuses on the same central theme throughout – revolving around, and culminating in, God's plan of salvation which he accomplishes in Christ.

Humility is a prime characteristic of true Christian living and is absolutely necessary for maintaining unity in the body of Christ. Dogmatism, on the other hand, seems to be a weapon in the hands of those whose "zeal for truth" often blinds them from realizing their own limitations. Whenever Christ-like living is sacrificed for doctrinal conformity, "sacrifice has triumphed over mercy" rather than the Christ-like intent of "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." How many times have we all been "sure" of something only to find out later that we were simply misinformed, ignorant of certain facts, or even blind to the truth that stared us in the face? It is always wise to look for the "beam" in our own eye before we insist that the "speck" in someone else's be removed.

It is our focus on Christ, then, that must be the common denominator of our fellowship as believers. The early Christian church emphasized this not only through scriptural study but through the simple truths of the Lord's Supper – a practice that they apparently observed quite often in their fellowships. Its vivid symbolism pointed to the central elements of the Christian faith and enabled even those who could not read to have a magnificent reminder of the saving and unifying

effects of the New Covenant established by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

This is not, of course, meant to de-emphasize the benefits and even necessity of reading, study and memorization of the scriptures. But just as education is *not* the answer to life, so pure knowledge of the scriptures is not the answer. Instead, *Christ* is the answer. The focus of scripture study itself is on him. It is to enable us to be "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and, thus, to live for God's glory in every good work. It is through Christ that we come into a proper relationship with God. And, it is as part of the one loaf of the body of Christ that we can, and must, find our true identity and meaning in this life.

Finally, it has always been the policy of this newsletter to recognize that there are many biblical scholars whose knowledge and expertise in the scriptures is far greater than that of the editors of this publication. Therefore, our own focus has constantly been on sharing and emphasizing the simple and central truths of the Bible via our own articles; then, pointing those who desire to know more detail about specific topics towards recognized scholars in the various fields of biblical study. This policy will continue, for I see little gained by rewriting a detailed study of a biblical topic that is already in published and polished form and also readily available to the public at large. Our newsletter is not in competition with other Christians; it is our desire to unify the body of Christ, not to divide it. In this light, we offer the following articles - including a couple of reworked favorites from the past. As always, our goal is to grow together as God's family as we focus on the central unifying themes of *The Unity of the Spirit*.

Richie Temple

Unity in Christ

By Scot Hahn

Cary, North Carolina

Recently in my personal and group study of the Bible I have been continually reminded of the importance of understanding God's work in Christ. As we gain insight into the work of God through the New Testament writings we come to understand God's ultimate purposes for man, spiritual principalities and powers as well as creation itself - all of which are bound up in Christ. Exposure to such marvelous knowledge, through the Scriptures, helps us to better understand our privileged position of being God's chosen people in Christ.

It is God's will that by understanding His work in Christ we will be better equipped to fulfill our role as believers in God's great plan. Ephesians sums up well the purposes of God.

He (God) has made known to us his secret purpose in accordance with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect when the time was ripe: namely, that the universe, everything in heaven and on earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ (Eph. 1:9-10 NEB).

Here the fulfillment of God's plan for the entire universe is said to be taking place in Christ. It is obvious that this plan is yet to be fully realized, for no one can deny that all things in heaven and on earth are not unified. But God has already acted in Christ to ensure that this unity will be accomplished.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col. 1:19-20 NIV).

There are different dimensions within this reconciling process. Enmity abounds within God's creation on many different levels. First, mankind, in addition to being alienated from God (Col. 1:21), is divided against itself. Second, there are hostile forces within the heavenlies that must be brought to subjection before unity can be achieved.

Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph. 6:11-12 NIV)

Third, in addition to all this the creation itself "groans as in the pains of childbirth" waiting to be "liberated from its bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:19-22). Thankfully, God's work in Christ is sufficient to deal effectively with all these problems. We ourselves, as God's chosen people in Christ, have an important role to play in the outworking of this reconciling and unifying plan.

In dealing with man, God's work had to change the position in which we stood towards Himself and one another. He did this in Christ. God's message to the world is that,

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them... We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (II Cor. 5:19-21 NIV).

And if we have been reconciled or brought to God then it stands true that there should no longer be divisions among mankind.

For he (Christ) himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (Eph. 2:14-18 NIV).

Although this section speaks specifically to the division of Jew and Gentile, which was of utmost importance for biblical times, it is also true for all men everywhere. For,

here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all (Col. 3:11 NIV).

As men and women who have been brought to the side of God where “Christ is all and is in all” there is no longer any room for divisions; instead, the way to unity has been revealed.

Though there is probably a great deal that man does not know about spiritual powers, we do know that their function does not lay outside of God’s purposes in Christ. It is “all things in heaven and on earth” that will be brought into a unity in Christ. God has,

seated him (Christ) at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:20-23 NIV).

God has also given Christ’s church a mediatorial role to play in displaying his wisdom to these heavenly powers.

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:10-11 NIV).

The eternal purpose of unifying all things can be seen as already accomplished in part within the church. This unity is the design for all of God’s creation and when the “rulers in the heavenlies” look upon the unified people of God in Christ, God’s wisdom in accomplishing unity is revealed to them.

But God’s design for creation is not separate from His design for man. As Paul stated,

In my estimation, all that we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us, for the whole creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed ... that the creation itself might be

freed from its slavery to corruption and brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God (Rom. 8:18-21 NJB)

When God’s goal for man is reached and His children in Christ are finally “revealed” the creation itself will be freed from corruption and will be made fitting for the scene of God’s rule. What a glorious day that will be! May we as God’s children “wait” for this day “patiently” (Rom. 8:25) - with steadfast faith, hope and love - as we serve our God in the unity in Christ to which we have been called.

[Scot Hahn helps coordinate a Bible Fellowship in Cary, NC and is an editor of *The Unity of the Spirit*]

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“Until He Comes”

It is evident that the Christian world, though unified “in Christ” via God’s gift of holy Spirit, is divided in practice. Is there a practical resolution to this dilemma? One good place to start is try to put ourselves in the place of the original disciples of Christ who formed the nucleus of his church. For these disciples it was the unifying truths of the Lord’s Supper as set forth by Jesus himself and then proclaimed regularly in all the churches that symbolized and formed the basis of their fellowship. May these truths be the unifying truths of our lives as well - until he comes. As Paul states,

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes (I Cor. 12:23-26).

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The Basis for Christian Fellowship

By Keith A. Price

These principles are based on many years of inter-denominational fellowship and are conclusions I have reached after making many mistakes and after having had considerable discussion with scores of Christian leaders. I am particularly indebted to the correspondence of Anthony Norris Groves - a dentist-missionary to Baghdad in the 1830s - who practiced many of these principles. Although they have never before appeared in the form I now give, I have retained a number of the excellent expressions he used in his correspondence.

1. The basis of our fellowship is life in the Christ of the Scriptures rather than Light on the teaching of the Scriptures. Those who have part with Christ have part with us. Because our communion is one of life and love more than one of doctrine and opinion, we seek to show that the oneness in the life of God through Jesus Christ is a stronger bond than that of being one of us - whether organizationally or denominationally.

2. Because our fellowship is based on our common life in Christ, we do not reject anyone because of the organization or denomination with which he may be affiliated; nor would we hold him responsible for the conduct within that system, any more than we would a child

for the conduct in the home of which he is merely a part.

3. We do not feel it desirable to withdraw from fellowship with any Christians except at the point where they may require us to do what our consciences will not permit, or restrain us from doing what our consciences require.

Even then, we maintain our fellowship with them in any matter where we are not called upon to so compromise. This ensures that (insofar as we understand the Scripture) we do not separate ourselves from them any further than they separate themselves from Christ.

4. We do not consider an act of fellowship to be indicative of total agreement; indeed, we sometimes find it a needed expression of love to submit to others in matters where we do not fully agree, rather than to prevent some greater good from being brought about. Our choice would be to bear with their wrong rather than separate ourselves from their good.

5. We believe it more scriptural to reflect a heart of love

ready to find a covering for faults,
than to constantly look for
that with which we may disagree.
We will then be known
more by what we witness for
than by what we witness against.

6. We feel it biblical
never to pressure men to act in uniformity
further than they feel in uniformity;
we use our fellowship in the Spirit
as an opportunity
to discuss our differences
and find this to be the most effective way
of leading others - or being led by them
- into the light of the Word.

7. While enjoying such a wide range
of Christian fellowship,
we would not force this liberty
upon those who would feel otherwise minded.
In such circumstances,
we enjoy fellowship as far as they will permit,
then pray
that the Lord would lead them further
into this true liberty
of the common life in Christ.

[This article originally appeared in the *Christian Perspectives* newsletter and is reprinted with permission. It can be found together with many other interesting articles at the "Open House Church" home page of *Christian Perspectives* at: www.mindspring.com/~mmattison]

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“Eternal Life” and the future “Inheritance” of the People of God

The next two articles in this issue of *The Unity of the Spirit* were written by Mark Coomer and were originally published in his own newsletter *Kingdom Come*. We present them here together so as to maintain the continuity of thought that Mark presents. The first article sets the stage for the next. As Mark shows, at Christ’s return Christians will “inherit the kingdom of God” (I Cor. 15:50), which in biblical terms means nothing less than to “inherit the world” (Rom. 4:13). On this most NT scholars are agreed. As an example, N.T. Wright explains:

When discussing the future hope of Christians it is important that Romans 8 ... is given full weight. It is not sufficient, that is, to speak of “eternal life,” on the basis of e.g., Romans 5:21 and 6:23 and to assume that this refers to a generalized “heaven” such as characterizes much common Christian tradition. Paul’s expectation was more specific: “the life of the coming age” (an expanded translation of *zoe aionios*) was to be enjoyed, not in “heaven” as opposed to “earth,” but in the renewed, redeemed creation ...

The Christian inheritance, however, is not a matter of one piece of geographical countryside. It is nothing less than the renewed, restored creation. Paul’s spectacular picture of creation groaning in birth-pangs, longing to share the freedom of the glory of God’s people (Rom. 8:16-27), owes a great deal on the one hand to the image of the “Messianic woes,” but on the other hand to the scriptural sense in which the fate of the land is bound up with the fate, and the covenant behavior of Israel. When Christians are finally redeemed, Paul is saying, then the land – only now, in this case, the whole *cosmos* – will be redeemed.

In 4:13 he says “the promise to Abraham and his seed, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” His point in context is that the promises belong to all Abraham’s family ... But the revealing explanation of what God promised to Abraham ... is a clear indication that he already has in view the way in which God’s fulfillment of his promises in Christ and by the Spirit will result in God’s renewed people receiving as their inheritance not merely one piece of territory but the whole restored *cosmos* ... [N.T. Wright, *Romans and the People of God*, pp. 35, 30-31, Eerdmans]

Christians Will Inherit Planet Earth

By Mark Coomer
Evansville, Indiana

Do you belong to Christ?

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

If you belong to Christ, then God counts you as Abraham's seed. As a child of Abraham, you have an inheritance according to a promise made by God Himself.

God first spoke of this promise long ago when He guaranteed an inheritance to Abraham and his seed, Jesus Christ:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ (Gal. 3:16).

Jesus Christ is the Seed, or offspring, of Abraham. If we belong to Christ, then we are incorporated into his life. God declares that we, too, have become Abraham's seed. Then we also become heirs of all that God promised Abraham and Christ.

What did God promise Abraham and his seed as an inheritance?

It was not through Law that Abraham and his offspring [seed] received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith (Rom. 4:13).

God promised Abraham that he and his seed would inherit the world! This inheritance would not come through the Law, but by faith. If we have faith in Christ, then God says we too are counted as Abraham's seed. If we are in Christ, we too will inherit the world because now we are heirs according to the promise of God.

Heirs Receive Promise by Faith

We no longer have to live under the laws of Moses to become children of Abraham. Abraham lived by faith before the Law was given. Now Christ has redeemed us from the burden of the Law. He had a magnificent purpose in mind when he accomplished this for us:

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14).

The blessing given to Abraham is now available to the Gentiles through faith. The blessing given to Abraham is called the promise of the Spirit (which is the pledge of our inheritance, Eph. 1:14). What did God promise to Abraham as a blessing?

May He give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham (Gen. 28:4).

The "blessing given to Abraham" is the land God gave to Abraham as an inheritance forever. God promised the land to Abraham and his seed, who is Christ. If you belong to Christ, then you also will inherit the land.

Speaking in a prophecy to Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham, God expanded His promise of the land to encompass the whole world with all its nations:

Ask of Me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. You will rule them with an iron scepter. You will dash them to pieces like pottery (Ps. 2:8).

If we inherit something this means we receive possession of it. This promise of the ownership of the earth - ruled in the future by Abraham's Seed - was passed from Abraham to his son Isaac, who in turn passed in on to Jacob (see Gen. 28:4, above). Jacob was later renamed Israel. The children of Israel, Jacob's descendants, carried this promise with them for hundreds of years.

Heirs Will Govern The Earth

If we are the seed of Abraham, then owning the earth means participating in Jesus Christ's

government of the world. God elaborated upon His promise to Abraham when He promised the children of Israel that they would become a kingdom of priests:

You will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites (Ex. 19:6).

This same promise of ruling the earth with Christ has now been offered to the Gentiles through faith:

And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev.5:9-10).

This vision of the saints reigning over the earth was given to Daniel:

He [the Son of Man, Jesus Christ] was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His [their, GNB] kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him [them] (Dan. 7:14,27).

Jesus called this future age the Kingdom of God. Observe that it is through the Son of Man that the Saints are to reign with power. The saints are incorporated into his life; where Messiah rules, the saints will rule also. Since Gentiles will also inherit the Kingdom of God through faith, Paul calls Christians the "Israel of God":

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God (Gal. 6:15,16).

Heirs Are God's Children

Once we understand that God has made us heirs of the promise to Abraham in Christ, we can rejoice in His love for us:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men) - remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13).

People of all languages, races and nations are no longer excluded from citizenship in Israel; they are no longer foreigners to the covenants of The Promise made to Abraham and his seed:

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 the prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19,20).

We are members of God's household. He has made us His sons and daughters. God's children inherit all that he gives them.

Now, if we are children, then we are heirs - heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may share in his glory (Rom.8:17).

We are co-heirs with Christ Jesus, the Seed of Abraham, because we are also counted as Abraham's offspring through our faith in God. If we faithfully live for Christ, regardless of the opinions or actions of others, we are guaranteed by God to share in his inheritance, which is his glory on earth forever.

Holy Spirit Guarantees the Christian Inheritance

By Mark Coomer

Every believer is guaranteed an inheritance - the inheritance of the Kingdom of God - which will be bestowed at Jesus Christ's return. This future

inheritance is guaranteed by the seal with which God now marks each Christian - the Holy Spirit:

Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, which is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13,14).

The Holy Spirit is the deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until we, who are God's possessions, are redeemed by Him and granted administrative positions with Messiah in the Kingdom of God (Rev. 5:10; Tim. 2:12; etc.).

Ancient Israel Anticipated the Spirit

Many years before the Holy Spirit sealed each believer, God promised Abraham and his offspring this inheritance. God gave Abraham's descendants, the Israelites, a sign to watch for, so that they would know when their inheritance was near. This sign would be the Spirit of God poured out on all those who obey God:

And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, and your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire, and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors [remnant] whom the LORD calls (Joel 2:28-32; cp. Ezek. 36:25-30, 39:29; Isa. 32:15, 59:21; Zech. 12:10).

God revealed to the prophet Joel that "in those days" before the "Day of the LORD," the day of Israel's deliverance and redemption into its inheritance, He would pour out His Spirit on the minority of Israelites, the remnant, who faithfully serve Him.

Every descendant of Abraham understood that his inheritance would include eternal life in an age of permanent peace and prosperity under God's rulership in the land which He had promised to give them. According to the prophet Joel,

Then you will know that I, the LORD your God, dwell in Zion, my holy hill. Jerusalem will be holy; never again will foreigners invade her. In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk; all the ravines of Judah will run with water. A fountain will flow out of the LORD's house and will water the valley of acacias. Judah will be inhabited forever and Jerusalem through all generations (Joel 3:17, 18, 20).

We can easily understand why faithful Israelites eagerly awaited the arrival of God's Spirit in preparation for the Kingdom of God.

Jesus' Disciples Receive the Spirit

But the sign did not appear until after Jesus, their Messiah, had ascended into heaven about two thousand years after the promise to Abraham. The Apostles and others who followed Jesus were the first to be filled with the Holy Spirit on the Jewish feast of Pentecost:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (Acts 2:1-4).

Curious bystanders gathered around as Peter explained that this event fulfilled the expectations which the prophets had instilled in Israel since ancient times.

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel:

'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.

I will show wonders in the heaven above and on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord.

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Acts 2:16-21).

Peter declared that this outpouring of the Spirit was the sign for which Israel had long been waiting. The last days of this age had arrived at last. Israel's promised inheritance which would accompany the day of the Lord, was near.

Jesus Prepared Israel to Receive the Spirit

Peter naturally knew the meaning of these things since he was a student of Jesus Christ. Jesus' basic teaching was that the Kingdom of God, the coming age of Israel's deliverance, was near at hand. Throughout his ministry on earth, Jesus was constantly preparing his people to receive the soon-coming Spirit of God about which the prophets had spoken:

On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me. And let him drink, who believes in me. As the scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39, NIV margin. See also John 3:3-10; 4:21-26; 7:37-39; 14:15-26; 16:7-15; 20:22-23; Acts 1:8, 2:33).

Jesus declared that he was the prophesied Messiah of Israel who would administer the Spirit to those who believe in him. But the Spirit was not yet given because Jesus had not yet ascended to the right hand of God in Heaven, from whence he would pour out the gift.

After his resurrection from the dead, Jesus gave his disciples final instructions concerning the coming Kingdom of God. He reminded them of that which he had spoken so often before, that is, God's promised gift of the Holy Spirit:

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4,5; cp. Lk.24:49).

A few days later, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus poured out the Spirit (Acts 2:32, 33) just as he had promised.

"Even the Gentiles" Receive the Spirit

The Apostles knew that the gift of the Holy Spirit, the pledge of their future inheritance, had arrived in the final days of this age, before the great Day of the Lord, when God would usher in His Kingdom. What they did not understand until some years later, however, was that God had planned to include the Gentiles among the inheritors of this Kingdom. This secret was revealed to Peter. While preaching to the Gentiles, he observed them receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same manner as the Jews had at Pentecost years before. He later reported this experience to the church in this way:

As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them [Gentiles] as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the gift he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God? When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (Acts 11:15-18).

To the Jewish believers, "repentance unto life" meant repentance with a view to gaining life in the coming age of Israel's restoration when Messiah would rule the earth from Jerusalem.

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them:

"Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are" (Acts 15:6-11).

Notice carefully that before the introduction of Gentiles into Christ, the doctrine of salvation by faith, without the yoke of the law, is already firmly in place. The believers who had accompanied Jesus during his earthly ministry knew that "the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). God no longer makes any distinction between Jew or Gentile believers. The Holy Spirit is given freely to all who believe Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom (Mk. 1:14, 15). The "blessing given to Abraham" is now available to the Gentiles through faith:

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal. 3:14).

The "blessing given to Abraham" is "the land God gave Abraham (Gen.28:4). The believing Gentiles also received the "promise of the Spirit," which is the token of inheritance with Israel. The Apostle Paul, who had received from Christ a special ministry (*oikonomia*, Eph. 3:12) to the Gentiles, explained this to them clearly:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, which is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession - to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13, 14).

Gentiles also are now included in Christ when they believe. As a result, they too are counted as Abraham's children, and they too will receive the same inheritance according to the same promises. Paul the Apostle expresses it this way:

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

The "last days" of the Holy Spirit

One question remains: If the coming of the Holy Spirit marks the beginning of the "last days" before the Day of the Lord spoken of by the prophet Joel, why have nearly two thousand years passed without the establishment of the Kingdom of God? Why hasn't the sun "turned to darkness and the moon to blood?" Once again Peter has the answer:

First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation."

But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:3, 4, 8, 9).

These words, written by Peter near the close of his life, remind us of the command he gave to those who believed his words on that day of Pentecost long ago, when they asked, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter answered:

Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

May this be our counsel also to those who inquire about our faith.

[Mark Coomer has written an excellent research paper entitled *The Church: The Israel of God* which he will be glad to mail to anyone interested. He can be reached at: Mark Coomer, P.O. Box 2292 Evansville, IN 47728 or by e-mail at: mscoomer@evansville.net]

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Notes & Quotes on the Bible

The People of God

The biblical topic of the one "people of God" is a fascinating study that begins in the Book of Genesis and continues throughout the Bible. It culminates in the creation of a newly constituted new covenant people of God called out from among Jew and Gentile alike to be "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28) and "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (Eph. 2:19). This newly formed "church of the body of Christ" is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's "plan of the ages" (Eph. 3:11) to bring redemption and salvation to God's people throughout the world. It is the "end-time" goal of all that God has been "working out" from before the foundation of the world "in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:9-11).

F.F. Bruce explains the continuity of this theme of the "people of God" in the light of God's overall plan of salvation:

The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both Testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Savior of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant-mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.

The continuity of the covenant people from the Old Testament to the New Testament is obscured for the reader of the common English Bible because "church" is an exclusively New Testament word, and he naturally thinks of it as something which began in the New Testament period. But the reader of the Greek Bible was confronted by no new word when he found *ekklesia*

in the New Testament; he had already met it in the Septuagint as one of the words used to denote Israel as the "assembly" of the Lord's people. To be sure, it has a new and fuller meaning in the New Testament. The old covenant people had to die with him in order to rise with him to a new life - a new life in which national restrictions had disappeared. Jesus provides in himself the vital continuity between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new. The servant Lord and his servant people bind the two Testaments together (*The Origin of the Bible*, pp. 11-12, Tyndale Pub.).

It should be emphasized that biblically the NT church of the body of Christ is *not* the subject of a special dispensation placed *in between* God's dealings with Israel. Instead, the new covenant church stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God and is the legitimate development of that people. Thus, the new covenant church is the true circumcision and heir to all of God's covenant promises that are now fulfilled in Christ. The "mystery of Christ" in regards to the new covenant church had to do primarily with the inclusion of believing *Gentiles* into the new covenant people of God on an equal basis with believing Jews. As Paul says, "This mystery is that through the gospel the *Gentiles* are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6 NIV). It is the original Abrahamic covenant of faith, as set forth in Genesis 12, 15, etc. and then expounded by Paul in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 and 9-11 that marks out the true people of God throughout the Bible. "In Christ" the church is the true "seed of Abraham" and heirs of these covenant promises (Gal. 3-4). This provides the specific continuity between the Old Testament and the New because, biblically, there is only one continuous "people of God" - i.e., the people of faith. As Paul states:

"... not all who are descended from [ethnic] Israel are [true] Israel.

Nor because they are his [ethnic] descendants are they all Abraham's [true] children.

In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise [i.e., those who receive the

promise by faith] who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom. 9:6-8).

In the OT God called Israel as a nation to be his people of faith and to show forth the fruits of their relationship with him as their God. This was intended to be a witness to the nations of the world of the one true God's love, justice and goodness to his people and, thus, to bring these other nations into the blessings of the people of God. But the infidelity of the people of Israel made this impossible for God to achieve in the circumstances of the Old Testament era. The only solution was for the establishment of a *new* covenant via the work of Christ. The resulting newly constituted "circumcision" (Phil. 3:1-3) or true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) is a people who are now set free, by the Spirit, to worship God in spirit and in truth - thus, fulfilling that which the Father had always desired (John 4:21-24).

The Turning of the Ages

In order to fully appreciate the significance of this subject to us as believers within the new covenant era we must endeavor to understand the Old Testament in *exactly the same way* as the original believers of the first century church interpreted it. In short, we must put ourselves in their "sandals," accept their perspective and interpret the New Testament fulfillment of Old Testament themes according to *their* understanding. In doing so we will be on solid ground, for the apostles' understanding of these matters was not only shaped by the "Christ event" (i.e. Christ's life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Spirit). It was also shaped by the risen Christ's own personal explanation of the significance of these events as well as by his continued guidance, after his ascension, through the Spirit (Luke 24: 25-27, 44-49; Eph. 3:5-6).

Fundamental to the understanding of the first century church was a unique perspective of history that had its roots in the Jewish conception of history as consisting of two ages. E. Earl Ellis explains this in his book *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (pp. 163-166, Baker):

Jesus and his disciples conceive of history within the framework of two ages: this age and the age to come [e.g. Mt. 12:32; Mk 10:30; Lk. 20:34f; cp. Paul, Eph. 1:21]. This perspective appears to have its background in the Old Testament prophets,

who prophesied of 'the last days' and 'the day of the Lord' as the time of an ultimate redemption of God's people and the destruction of their enemies. It becomes more specific in the apocalyptic writers, who underscored ... the doctrine of two ages and the radical difference between the present time and the time to come ...

Platonic and later Gnostic thought anticipate a redemption *from* matter, an escape from time and history at death. The Jewish hope includes a redemption *of* matter within time: the present age, from creation to the coming of the Messiah, is to be succeeded by a future age of peace and righteousness under the reign of God. The New Testament's modification of [this Jewish view] rests upon the perception that in the mission, death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, the age to come, the kingdom of God, had become present in hidden form in the midst of the present evil age, although its public manifestation awaits the parousia of Jesus. Thus, for Jesus 'the kingdom of God does not culminate a meaningless history, but a planned divine process.' Equally, for the NT writers faith in Jesus means faith in the story of Jesus, the story of God's redemptive activity in the history of Israel that finds its high-point and fulfillment in Jesus.

For this reason the mission and meaning of Jesus can be expressed in the New Testament in terms of a *salvation history* 'consisting of a sequence of events especially chosen by God, taking place within an historical framework' ... The concept is most evident in the way the New Testament relates current and future events to events, persons and institutions in the Old Testament. That relationship is usually set forth as a typological correspondence [and] expresses most clearly the basic attitude of primitive Christianity toward the Old Testament. It is ... a 'spiritual perspective' from which the early Christian community viewed itself.

Gordon Fee further explains this post-Pentecost understanding of the NT church in his commentary on I Corinthians (*The New Int. Com. on the NT, I Corinthians*, p. 459, Eerdmans):

Through his death and resurrection Jesus Christ marks the turning of the ages; the old is on its way out, the new has begun (2 Cor. 5:17). He has set the future irresistibly in motion; and the new people of God, whether Jew or Gentile, bond or free, male or female, who are his by grace alone, are the people of the End, "upon whom the ends of the ages have come" and "toward whom all history has its goal." That is what constitutes the typological

element in OT stories; ultimately the whole OT has been pointing toward its eschatological fulfillment in God's new people. And that is why the OT is their book in particular - because it has Christ as its prime actor and final goal. This does not mean that Israel, or its history, was not important in its own right, but that they stand at the beginning of the promises of God that are now finding their fulfillment at the end of the ages ... Christians stand at the end of history, at the time when God is bringing all of the divine purposes into focus and fulfillment in Christ.

It must be emphasized in all of this that the effects of Christ's accomplishments are "once for all." There can be no "going back" under the law or a future dealing with Israel "according to the flesh" *apart from* this already accomplished reality "in Christ." The new covenant has been established and the one newly constituted people of God has been realized "in Christ." Membership in it is based solely on faith in Christ and the corresponding reception of the Spirit - for both Jew and Gentile alike. For "all (ethnic) Israel" to be saved (Rom. 11:26) they must be brought into this new covenant which Christ has already established. There can be no "undoing" of what Christ has done. All that remains is the final consummation at Christ's return (Eph. 1:9-10).

The New Covenant "People of God"

That the new covenant post-Pentecost church of the body of Christ believed itself to be in direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God as those "upon whom the fulfillment of the ages had come" cannot be stressed strongly enough. This truth is seen in the typological correspondence between the OT and the NT and especially in the use of Old Testament "people of God" language to describe the NT people of God. Gordon Fee describes the significance of this terminology in his book *Gospel and Spirit* (pp. 124-130, Hendrickson). I quote at length:

By pursuing the New Testament language for the Christian communities, I hope to demonstrate two realities about them: (a) their strong sense of *continuity* with the people of God under the former covenant, and (b) their basically *corporate* nature. That the early believers thought in terms of continuity is writ large on nearly every page, in nearly every document. They did not see themselves as the "new people of God," but as the

"people of God *newly constituted*." Nowhere is this more clear than in their adopting Old Testament "people of God" language, a language appropriation that is as varied as it is thoroughgoing.

a. *Church (ekklesia)*: Because this word does not appear in the English Old Testament, and because its usage for the "assembly" of the Greek *polis* is generally well known, the Old Testament background for New Testament usage is frequently overlooked. In the Septuagint (LXX) *ekklesia* is regularly used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, referring most often to the "congregation of Israel," especially when it was gathered for religious purposes. Thus this word in particular was a natural one for the early believers to bridge the gap as they began to spill over into the Gentile world.

Since the concept of a "gathered people" was primary in Greek and LXX usage, it is arguable that this is what lay behind the earliest Christian usage as well. Thus in its first [chronological] appearance in the New Testament (I Thess 1:1) Paul is probably thinking primarily of the Christian community as a gathered people, constituted "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ," who would be listening to the letter as it was read. It is also arguable that its usage throughout the New Testament never gets very far away from this nuance; the *ekklesia* refers first of all to the people in the various cities and towns who gather regularly in the name of the Lord for worship and instruction.

b. *People (laos)*: Although not particularly popular with Greek writers, this is the word chosen by the LXX translators to render the Hebrew *'am*, the word that occurs most often (over 2000 times) to express the special relationship Israel had with Yahweh: Above all else they were Yahweh's "people." ... In most cases it is the collective word that designates the whole people whom God had chosen ... Thus, in Exodus 19:5, in establishing his covenant with them at Sinai, God says (LXX), "You shall be for me a *laos periousios* (special/chosen people) from among the *ethnon* (nations/Gentiles)."

In the New Testament the word occurs most often to refer to the Jewish people of that era. But in many striking passages it is used in its Old Testament sense, especially reflecting the language of Exodus 19:5-6, to refer to people of the new covenant, usually in contexts that include Gentiles. Thus Luke reports James as saying: "How God at first showed his concern by taking from the *ethnon* a *laos* for his name" (Acts 15:14); in 2 Corinthians 6:16 Paul, by way of Old Testament citation, specifically applies "people of God" language to

God's new temple, the church; in Titus 2:14 the goal of Christ's saving purpose is "that he might purify for himself a *laos periousios*," while I Peter 2:9-10 combines "people" language from two Old Testament passages (Isa. 43:20/Exod. 19:6/Isa. 43:21), followed by a word play on Hosea 2:25, to designate Gentile Christians as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," who were formerly "no people" but now "are the people of God." So also the author of Hebrews transfers several Old Testament "people" passages or concepts to the church (2:17; 4:9; 7:27; 13:12).

c. *Covenant (diatheke)*: Although this term does not occur often in the New Testament, it is used in ways that are significant to our topic. The author of Hebrews in particular adopts covenantal language to tie the new to the old, seeing Christ as the fulfillment of Jeremiah's "new covenant" in which God says again, as in the Sinai covenant, "They shall be for me a people" (Heb. 8:7-12; citing Jer. 31:34). Paul also adopts this language to refer to the "new covenant" of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:6; cf. Gal. 4:24). Perhaps even more significantly, as the people joined in common fellowship at the Table of the Lord in the Pauline churches, they did so with these words: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25; Luke 22:20). It should be noted that both the language "new covenant" and its close tie with the Spirit and the people of God are seen in terms of continuity with the Old Testament (in this case as fulfillment); thus in the church's earliest worship ... there was the constant reminder of their continuity/discontinuity with the past.

d. *Saints (hoi hagioi)*: Although not frequent in the Old Testament, the designation of Israel as God's "holy people" occurs in the crucial covenantal passage in Exodus 19:5-6, an expression that in later Judaism referred to the elect who were to share in the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Dan. 7:18-27). This is Paul's primary term for God's newly formed, eschatological people ... In all cases it is a designation for the collective people of God, who are to bear his "holy" character and thus to be "set apart" for his purposes. To put that another way, the New Testament knows nothing about individual "saints," only about Christian communities as a whole who take up the Old Testament calling of Israel to be "God's holy people" in the world.

e. *Chosen (eklektos and cognates)*: Closely related to the covenant is the concept of Israel as having been chosen by God, by an act of sheer mercy on his part. In the Old Testament this

concept is most often found in verb form, with God as the subject. However, the LXX of Isaiah 43:20-21 uses *eklektos* as a designation for the restored people of God. This usage is picked up in several places in the New Testament (e.g. Mark 13:22; 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Thess. 2:13; Col. 3:12; Eph. 1:4, 11; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:9). As in the Old Testament, the term refers not to individual election, but to a people who have been chosen by God for his purposes; as one has been incorporated into, and thus belongs to, the chosen people of God, one is in that sense also elect. Likewise in the Old Testament, this language places the ultimate ground of our being in a sovereign and gracious God, who willed and initiated salvation for his people.

f. *Royal Priesthood*: This term, taken directly from Exodus 19:6, is used in 1 Peter 2:9-10 to refer to the church. I include it here not only because it is further demonstration of continuity, but also because as in the Exodus passage it so clearly refers to the people corporately, not to individual priests or to the priesthood of individual believers. The NT knows nothing of the "priesthood of the believer" as it is popularly conceived, with each person's being his own priest with God ... To the contrary, the NT teaches that the church has a priestly function for the world (1 Pet. 2:9-10); and our role of ministering to one another makes us priests one for another.

g. *The Israel of God*: This unique expression occurs only in Galatians 6:16 in the entire Bible. Nonetheless, in some ways it gathers up much of the NT thinking - especially Paul's - on this matter. All those who live by the "rule" that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, these are "the Israel of God" upon whom God's benediction of *shalom* and mercy now rests. While it is true that Paul does not call the church the "new Israel," such passages as Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6; Philippians 3:3, and this one demonstrate that Paul saw the church as the "true Israel," i.e. as in the true succession of the Old Testament people of God. At the same time it emphasizes that those people are now newly constituted - composed of Jew and Gentile alike and based solely on faith in Christ and the gift of the Spirit.

This comes through nowhere more forcefully than in the argument of Galatians itself, for which this passage serves as the climax. Paul's concern throughout has been to argue that through Christ and the Spirit Gentiles share with believing Jews full privileges in the promises made to Abraham ... They do not need to submit to the regulations of the

old covenant in order to be full members of the people of God; indeed, in "belonging to Christ" they are "Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (3:29) ...

Here especially the primary name of God's ancient people has been taken over in the interests of continuity, but now predicated on new terms. The Israel *of God* includes both Jew and Gentile, who by faith in Christ and "adoption" by the Spirit have become Abraham's "free children" and ... inheritors of the promises made to Abraham ...

h. *Further (Non-Old Testament) Images:* The essentially corporate nature of the people of God is further demonstrated by the various images for the church found in the New Testament: *family*, where God is Father and his people are brothers and sisters (2 Cor. 6:18); the related image of *household*, where the people are members of the household (I Tim. 3:5, 15) and their leaders the Master's servants (I Cor. 4:1-3); *body*, where the emphasis is simultaneously on their unity and diversity (I Cor. 10:17; 12:12-26); God's *temple*, or sanctuary, where by the Spirit they corporately serve as the place of God's dwelling (I Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22); God's *commonwealth*, where as citizens of heaven Jew and Gentile alike form a *polis* in exile, awaiting their final homeland (Phil. 3:20-21; Eph. 2:19; I Pet. 1:1, 17).

In sum: By using so much Old Testament language to mark off its identity, the early church saw itself not only as in continuity with the Old Testament people of God, but as in the true succession of that people. One of the essential

features of this continuity is the corporate nature of the people of God. God chose, and made covenant with, not individual Israelites but with a people, who would bear his name and be for his purposes. Although individual Israelites could forfeit their position in Israel, this never affected God's design or purposes with the people as a people. This is true even when the majority failed, and the "people" were reduced to a "remnant." That remnant was still Israel - loved, chosen, and redeemed by God.

This is the thoroughgoing perspective of the New Testament as well, but at the same time Christ's coming and the gift of the eschatological Spirit also marked a new way by which they were constituted. The community is now entered individually through faith in Christ and the reception of the Spirit ... Nonetheless, the church itself is the object of God's saving activity in Christ. God is thus choosing and saving a people for his name.

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