

Hugo Bouter

The Church as the people of God

-

“Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, “You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.” Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but also that He would gather together in one the children of God who were scattered abroad.”

John 11:49-52

The prophecy of Caiaphas

In this prophecy the secret of Christ’s vicarious death is pointed out: He would go into death for the people, so that the whole nation would not perish. While the existence of the people of God was at stake, the death of Christ guaranteed them a future. His death would grant them new life. As we know, the ritual of the Day of Atonement demanded for various sacrifices to be offered to maintain the relationship between God and the people. Without sacrifices and without the mediatorial work of the high priest there could be no future for Israel. What is so special and unique about the sacrificial death of Christ is that the High Priest offered the *sacrifice of His own life*, a unique sacrifice which never needs to be repeated.

This subject is dealt with extensively in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Being a merciful and faithful High Priest here on earth, Christ made propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17). His blood is the basis of the New Covenant about which God says, “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Heb. 8:10). He is the true Sin Offering, the blood of which has been brought into the heavenly sanctuary after

He suffered outside the gates of Jerusalem. He did this “that He might sanctify the people with His own blood” (Heb. 13:12). The blood of Christ, the true High Priest and the true Sacrifice, has set apart the believing remnant of the people and sheltered them from judgment. In the book of Acts we see how this took place in practice by true repentance and by baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins (Acts 2:37-41).

A people for His name

However, as John the evangelist had already announced because of Caiaphas’ prophecy, the new people of God were not going to be comprised of Jews alone. By His death the Lord would also gather together in one “the children of God who were scattered”. They are the “other sheep” which He had to bring, and they would also hear His voice. In this way, there was going to be one flock led by the one Shepherd of the sheep (John 10:16).

And so we see in the book of Acts that the door of faith is opened to believers from the nations as well. This happened first with the Samaritans, then with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). After that a Roman centurion, Cornelius, believed together with his relatives and close friends (Acts 10). From these things the Church in Jerusalem concluded that “the Gentiles had also received the word of God” (Acts 11:1). Soon the preaching of the Word led to the formation of the first assembly outside the Promised Land – the assembly at Antioch, which consisted mainly of Gentile Christians (Acts 11:19-26).

The converted Gentiles did not need to join the Jewish people by means of circumcision. God was now also taking a people “for His name” out of the Gentiles (Acts 15:14). However, they did have to keep the Noahic commandments that have a universal scope. The apostle Paul could continue his work among the uncircumcised Gentiles and preach the Gospel among the nations (cf. Gal. 2). The converted Gentiles were accepted by God as His own people. “I have many people in this city”, the Lord told Paul when he was working in Corinth (Acts 18:10). Even God’s promises of blessing made to His old people are applicable to them now. “I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Lev. 26:12; as quoted in 2 Cor. 6:16). God dwells and walks among His new people that gathers (encamps) around Him.

The new people of God are called by grace. They are “vessels of mercy” prepared by God for glory. He called them both from Jews and Gentiles. As Hosea had prophesied in the days of old, “Not My people” has become “My people”. The one

who found no mercy is now “Mercy”. We have been brought near and have become sons of the living God (Rom. 9:23ff.; 15:8-13; 1 Pet. 2:10). Being a people for His name, we are God’s “own” people, a holy nation, His own special people to proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9). We are “His own special people, zealous for good works” (Tit. 2:14). God’s purposes with His old people of kings and priests at Mount Sinai are now being fulfilled in the people brought to the Father’s heart (Ex. 19:4-6).

They shall be His people

But there are also promises for the future. First of all, the veil which covers the heart of natural Israel will be taken away when they will return to the Lord (2 Cor. 3:15-16). In the end time Hosea’s prophecy will be fulfilled a second time. The acceptance of Israel will mean “life from the dead” (Rom. 11:15). Here on earth Zion, the city of God, will be the center of all nations, whereas the New Jerusalem – the glorified Church – will be the heavenly seat of government of God and the Lamb. After the millennial Kingdom the eternal state will begin. In the eternal state there is no distinction any more between Israel and the nations on earth. Mankind will no longer be divided in nations. The tabernacle of God will then be “with men (...) and they shall be His people” (Rev. 21:3).

In our present time there are still three groups of people: Jews, Greeks (Gentiles) and the Church of God (1 Cor. 10:32). The Church consists of believers who have been called out of the Jews and the Gentiles alike to form a new unity together: one flock, one people, one house, one body. What a privilege!
