From the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation, the Bible tells us how the one true God is engaged in the lives of those He created. His engagement with humanity is focused on the work of redemption. The people of God in the Old Testament, known as Israel, never knew their God apart from His role as Redeemer. The same is true for the people of God, the Church in the New Testament. Jesus is known to His people as the Redeemer, the One who has rescued them from sin, evil, and death and restored them to fullness of life in relationship with Him. This redemptive act will be ultimately experienced in the new heavens and new earth, when all that God intended for humanity will be fulfilled.

The Bible presents the rather startling reality that God's redemptive mission is accomplished through His people. This happens in primarily two ways. First, from His people Israel, the Redeemer Jesus is born: fully human, a descendant of Abraham through the line of David. Secondly, the redeemed people of God, or the Church, are charged with living in a way that all peoples can know and worship the One True God. The way God establishes and works through His people to accomplish his redemptive mission is a significant point of continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

As we looked at the establishment of God's people in Genesis 12, we read of God’s command to Abram to leave everything that he knew, everything that defined his life: his identity, security, and prosperity. In return, God provides Abram with multiple promises of blessing. The ultimate outcome of God’s promise to Abram is that He will establish a people so that all peoples can experience the blessing that comes from confessing Him as the one true God. The purpose of God’s engagement in our lives is always so that others, and ultimately all peoples, may know Him. This is the fundamental premise for being the people of God: an outward focus toward other people. This is a dramatic change from seeing our relationship with Christ as only for our own benefit. We might
think to ourselves, “I believe so that I can be forgiven. I believe so that I can have eternal life.” That turning inward of what Christ has done for us is a diminished view of what it means to be a child of God.

The People of God as a Nation

Many consider Genesis 12 to be a pivotal point in the biblical narrative. Why are these promises to Abram (later Abraham) so important? The apostle Paul writes about Abraham in Galatians, calling him the “father of faith.” Galatians 3:6 states, “So also Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” This is a direct quote of Genesis 15:6 where God makes a covenant with Abram. Galatians 3:7-9 goes on to say, “Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” In this passage Paul quotes the last line of Genesis 12:3 and considers it to be so important in understanding the work of God that he calls it the gospel preached in advance. Paul does not use the word “gospel” lightly. This blessing, this gospel, is God’s intention for all people. Therefore, we dare not underestimate the importance of the call of Abraham as the establishment of God’s people for the purpose of blessing all people.

At another pivotal event in the history of God’s people, the giving of the Law to Moses, God reiterates his purpose that all peoples will be blessed through His chosen people. Many Old Testament theologians note that up through Exodus 19 the people of God are known as the descendants of Abraham. But in Exodus 20 when they are given the Ten Commandments, a charter by which they are to live, they have a foundation to become a nation. This is a critical moment in the history of the people of God: the transition from being the descendants of a patriarch to the founding of a nation. Hence, we read of the fulfillment of God’s promise in Genesis 12 to make Abraham “into a great nation.”

At the opening of Exodus 19, Moses goes up the mountain to hear from the LORD. God speaks to him in verses 4-6, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured
possession. [Because] the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” God is telling Moses what He wants His people to know about themselves, how to identify themselves, as this new nation. He wants them to know they owe their existence to God’s redemptive work. They would not be there unless God had intervened on their behalf, brought them out of Egypt and restored them. They are the ones God has chosen to redeem.

Secondly, He calls them a treasured possession. This language takes us into the royal treasury of a king. A king would possess many pieces of gold, many gems or jewels, many horses, many houses, even many wives. But out of the king’s entire treasury, there were some things treasured above all others, considered more valuable to the king. That’s what the phrase “treasured possession” refers to. God says to His people, “out of all the nations, you will be what I value most.” Note that their identity is established in relationship to the nations. Out of all the nations, they will be His, they will be most valued. God says the same in Deuteronomy 7:7-11 where He declares that it was because of His love that He called and redeemed them as His people. It is not because of anything they did or anything they possessed, but because He treasured and valued them.

The end of Exodus 19:5 starts a new sentence in English. A lot of our translations say, “Although the whole earth is mine.” This is a legitimate translation of the Hebrew conjunction, but it can also be translated “because.” I prefer to translate this clause, “Because the whole earth is mine.” This translation gives a sense of purpose as to why God is creating His people to be a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. All the nations are His, and because of his desire that all nations know and worship Him, He has created a special people, His treasured possession, set apart from all other nations.

God’s people are to form a “kingdom of priests.” How and for whom are they to serve as priests? The priest served as mediator, someone who created a bridge of relationship between God and a worship. The priest mediated the requirements and commands of God to the people and mediated the worship of the people back to God. When God says, “Because the whole earth is mine, you will be a kingdom of priests,” the immediate question is, for whom are they acting as a mediator? God’s people are created to mediate the relationship of the nations to God. What the nations need to know about God will be revealed through His people. Those who
desire to worship the one true God will do so through His people.

At the end of Exodus 19:6, God tells His people, “You will be a holy nation.” In Hebrew, the word “holy” means, “set apart unto.” Therefore, God is saying “you will be a nation set apart unto me.” Through this new nation, God wants to display His character, His holiness. If they live according to the law God gives them in the Ten Commandments and the rest of Torah, they will display to the nations the wonders of the One who created them. Their way of life as set forth in the Torah will distinguish them from the way of life and laws of other peoples and set apart their God from the gods of other nations.

How were their God’s laws different from the laws of other nations? Sabbath law provides a good example. In an agrarian society whose very existence depended upon the provision of food from the land, Sabbath law makes little sense. This law required that Israel not work one day out of every seven days. More so, Israel was required by law not to plant for an entire year every seventh year. For an agrarian nation to be commanded by their God neither to plant nor harvest for an entire year would have seemed foolish. Beyond that, after seven Sabbath years, the law required the celebration of the Year of Jubilee, which was the 50th year. So the 49th year was a year they did not plant, and again the 50th year was to be a year in which they did not work the fields, sow, or harvest. In this 50th year of jubilee, they were also to forgive the debts of those who had become indebted to them so that the society could be re-leveled economically.

If you were an Israelite whose existence depended on the harvest every year, and God tells you not to plant or reap for an entire year, what would be your first thought? Starvation! What might the surrounding nations think, however, when they saw that Israel did not plant and harvest, yet still prospered. Upon whom would that most reflect? Their God, the God of Israel. God is the one who will provide for His people. So obedience to God’s law showcased to all other nations the character of the One who had given them the law. Deuteronomy 4:7-8 speaks to this very idea, “What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to Him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?”

Everything Israel is told to think about themselves is understood in relationship to the nations, not just to themselves. This
understanding of being the people of God is set out not only for Israel in Exodus 19 but is repeated almost word for word in 1 Peter 2 to the New Testament Church. In 1 Peter 2:9, Peter says, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light.” All four characteristics of God’s people used by Peter, are taken directly from Exodus 19. Just after this list of characteristics of God’s people in the text of 1 Peter 2:9 is a word translated “that.” This conjunction in Greek is most frequently used to indicate result or purpose. Peter is saying to believers that you are these special things, “so that” you may declare or make known the virtues, the excellences, the praises of the One who called you into existence as a people, the Lord Jesus Himself. Peter goes on to say in verse 10, “Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” When Peter repeats Exodus 19 to the Church, he is reminding them to live in such a way that the character of the God who created them will be seen and known by all. That has been the mission of God’s people since their founding in Genesis 12:3 and it remains the mission of God’s people today.

Throughout the Old Testament, God gives Israel a picture of their future that includes promises for all nations. In Zechariah 8:22-23 the LORD tells them,

And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat Him. This is what the LORD Almighty says: In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, “Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.”

What a powerful image of the nations being led to worship the one true God. A similar promise is found in Malachi 1:11, “‘My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations,’ says the LORD Almighty.” The name of God is His reputation. So this verse promises that the nations will speak well of God and they will worship Him. This same image appears in Revelation 21:24 as John describes the presence of the Lord in the New Jerusalem, “The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it.
The Sent People of God

Let’s turn our attention to the people of God in the New Testament, the Church. Some biblical scholars argue that the followers of Jesus should be known as the sent people of God. John 20:19-22 is a key passage for this idea, “On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

The language of sending is one of the primary ways that the New Testament describes the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity. The relationship of Father to Son as well as Father and Son to the Spirit is described through the language of sending. The Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Spirit, and in this key passage in John 20, the Son sends His disciples. God’s redemptive mission is frequently expressed by the Latin phrase, missio Dei, the mission of God. This phrase is built from the Latin verb “to send.” Missio means either the one who is sent or the one who is sending, and Dei means God. The Father sends the Son, the Father and Son send the Spirit, and the Son sends the people of God. Therefore, we can argue that, from the beginning, our identity as the sent people of God aligns us with the very mission of God.

The notion of sending is also expressed in the Great Commission in Matthew 28? Verses 18-20 read, “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’” Verse 19 starts out with Jesus telling His disciples to “go.” He is sending them out. That is another picture of the outward movement of the people of God, being sent by the risen Christ. Where does Jesus want them to go? Verse 19 says, “all nations,” or “all peoples.” This is the same language we read in Genesis 12:3 and throughout the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms, Zechariah, Isaiah, and Malachi. The mission of the people of God is to make God known and worshiped by all peoples. Only then will God’s people live out their identity and calling and the nations will experience the
blessing of God.

The role played by the Holy Spirit in the sent people of God can be seen in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit to his followers. In turn, the Spirit will empower them to be witnesses for Christ. Where are they to witness? As this verse says, “to the ends of the earth.” That is language describing a place as far away as you can imagine. God’s desire to be known and worshiped has no boundaries. The scope of His mission is universal; all nations are included in this promise and mandate to Jesus’ disciples. Hence, the foundational understanding of those who confess Jesus is that they are the sent people of God to bless all nations.

**Origins of the Church**

The creation of the first community of Jesus followers is recorded in the book of Acts. After the ascension of Jesus in chapter one, followed by the coming of the Holy Spirit in chapter two, we see thousands of Jews respond to the powerful preaching and miracles done by the apostles. A new community of Jewish believers forms in Jerusalem. Acts 4:32 describes their care for one another, “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” Unfortunately in Acts 5, with the story of Ananias and Sapphira, we begin to see what happens when the people of God do not live up to their calling.

Acts 6 appears to be a turning point. It gives the first indication of tension among the followers of Jesus between Hebraic Jews, those who held on to the traditions and ways of life of their ancestors, and Hellenized Jews, those who had adopted Greek language and culture. Evidently Hellenistic Jewish widows were not being cared for in the daily food distribution. This tension caused the apostles, most of whom were Hebraic Jews, to appoint another leadership group among the believers (Acts 6:5), most of whom appear to Hellenized Jews. From this point forward in the Acts narrative a tension begins to develop among the followers of Jesus. How much did followers of Jesus have to adopt a Jewish way of life to be members of the believing community? The tension becomes most acute when Gentiles come to faith in Christ. (See Acts 10 and the conversion of Cornelius.) The question that creates tension...
through the early history of the Church is this: can Jewish believers and Gentile believers form one body of people if Gentile believers do not adopt the culture and traditions of Jewish believers? That tension persists all the way through the book of Acts and is an undertone in all of Paul’s letters.

The newly formed church in Antioch signals that it is possible for Jews and Gentiles to come together as one body of believers. Acts 11:19-20 says, “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.” These believers from Cyprus and Cyrene would have been Hellenized Jews, growing up in Greek culture. In Antioch the disciples were proclaiming Jesus to Jews and to Gentiles and many believed.

Barnabas was sent by the apostles from Jerusalem to observe and confirm what was happening in Antioch. Verse 22 says, “He was glad, and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.” Barnabas then sets out to find the apostle Paul and bring him back to Antioch so they can teach together in this newly formed church for a year. The end of Acts 11:26 is key, “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” Why are they called Christians? As a group, you couldn’t call them Jews because there were also Gentiles present. Nor could you just call them Gentiles, as Jews were included as well. So their identity as followers of Jesus supersedes their identity as Jew or Gentile. Jesus’ followers are those whose identity is not based on ethnicity, culture, geography, national identity, or economic status; it is based solely on their confession of Jesus as Savior and Lord. That is why Paul says in Galatians 3:26-29 that among the people of God there is neither Jew nor Greek.

Earlier we looked at 1 Peter 2:9 where believers are described as, “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession.” I Peter 2:11 Peter gives them a new title “foreigners and exiles.” Some translations use the terms “aliens and strangers.” Taken together these terms describe someone who is not living in the country of their birth. Why does Peter use this language? Because the first and primary identity of God’s people is based in our confession of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. In Him there is no distinction made with regards to nationality, ethnicity and language. Furthermore, as foreigners and exiles we will always be
to a certain degree cultural “outsiders.” As believers, we should be different, always distinct, not completely of the culture in which we live, because we are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus said to Pilate in John 18:36, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.” That doesn’t mean that Christ’s Kingdom isn’t present in the mess of this fallen world. It does mean that the beliefs, values and behaviors in the Kingdom of God are distinct from every earthly kingdom.

Where do you find your primary source of identify? Is it your country, race, ethnicity, political viewpoint, profession or even sports team? We are God’s people first. We are God’s people before we are white. We are God’s people before we are black. We are God’s people before we are Americans. We are God’s people before we are Republicans or Democrats. Our primary identity is being the redeemed, the people of God’s mission, followers of Jesus. That is where we must begin. Instead of referring to someone as a businessman, a teacher, a democrat, or black or white, what if we said, “I know him. He is a Jesus follower.” That is powerful. It is how we are to be known.

Just as Israel was to be known among the nations as those who worship the one true God, the Church carries the same identity. Revelation 5:9-10 paints a beautiful picture of what is to come at the end of human history, “And they sang a new song, saying: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’” A similar description is given two chapters later in Revelation 7:9, where the Apostle John says, “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.” When we think about the people of God, we must never fail to recognize that the people of God are everywhere - every tribe, every tongue, every nation. This will be the fulfillment of God’s mission: that His people will ultimately make Him known throughout all the earth and people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship Him alone.