

## **The Church as the *People of God* and Its Relation to the Church as a Community**

Robert Osei-Bonsu

*ABSTRACT—The Bible uses different images for the Church and the common designation is the people of God (Judg 20:2; Heb 4:9). Different views have been expressed by scholars in relation to the meaning of the phrase people of God. Some scholars hold that people of God implies that some people are God's people while others are not. Others consider all humanity as belonging to the people of God while others posit that only those who do the will of God are the people of God. Some Christians also are of the view that all OT promises to Israel will be fulfilled literally, therefore, just as the people of God refers to Israel in the OT (Deut 32:9; cf. Heb 11:25), in the NT it also applies to Israel (2 Pet 2:1). The image of the Church as the people of God is integral to an understanding that the Church is a community. While the idea of the people of God is integral to the concept of the church, some questions may be raised: In what precise sense should the church be viewed as the people of God? What is the relationship between the people of God and the concept of the church as a community? Paul uses koinonia for religious fellowship (participation) of believers in Christ. Koinonia denotes mutual fellowship among the people of God. While the people of God cannot be defined as koinonia, it characterizes the church. The Church as the people of God gives it an identity as people who belong to the Lord. Keywords: Church, People of God, koinonia, ekklesia, election, community*

---

Manuscript received Feb. 11, 2011; revised Jul. 24, 2011; accepted Aug. 10, 2011.

Robert Osei-Bonsu (pastorbonsu@hotmail.com) is with the School of Theology and Mission, Valley View University, Accra, Ghana.

## I. Introduction

The Bible uses different images for the Church. The most common concept or designation is the “people of God” which permeates both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) (e.g., Judg 20:2; 2 Sam 14:13; Rom 9:23-26; Heb 4:9; 8:10; 11:25; Jas 1:1 and 1 Pet 2:9-10) (Wiklander, 1995). To some scholars, the phrase “people of God” “sounds self-centered, and projects a monopolistic notion that some people are God’s people, while others are not” (Senn, 1986). This, therefore, makes the subject a sensitive one. Paul Minear is of the view that the “people of God” comprises people whom God has called and thus are supposed to be different from all others (Minear, 1956). However, Laurenti Megesa suggests that from the perspective of creation, the “people of God” comprise all humanity, so that all who live in harmony with the will of God are the “people of God” (Megesa, 1984). On the contrary, some Christians hold that the “people of God” refers specifically to the nation Israel whether in the OT (Deut 32:9 cf. Heb 11:25) or the NT (2 Pet 2:1) (Ferguson, 1996). Therefore, the promises of God to Israel as the “people of God” will be fulfilled literally to Israel as a nation. Others hold that all Christians “belong to the people of God” (Minear, 1956) because the phrase “people of God” designates the church (Worgul, 1982). This notwithstanding, Megesa maintains that it is one thing to be a member of the church and another being a part of the “people of God” for the two are not necessarily synonymous (Megesa, 1994).

Furthermore, Olson V. Norskon contends that the designation “people of God” “binds together the meaning and oneness of *ekklesia* in all ages” (Olson, 1990). He continues that the Church has always existed and there has always been a “people of God” right from the time of Adam even to the present, though at “times the church has been exceedingly weak and so dispersed that it was manifest nowhere” (Olson, 1990). Hans Kung affirms that the church as the “people of God” implies that there is “never merely a particular class of caste within the fellowship of the faithful. On the contrary, fundamentally, all believers are the church, and are members of the people of God (Exo 19:6; Deut 7:6; Isa 61:6; Matt 5:23; 2 Cor. 6:16)” (Kung, 1968). So the church is a composition of people who have responded to the call of God and have become God’s own, just like Israel of old.

While the idea of the “people of God” is integral to the concept of the church as indicated by the foregoing definitions, some questions

may be raised: Are all these definitions biblical? In what precise sense should the church be viewed as the “people of God?” What is the relationship between the “people of God” and the concept of the church as a community? These questions necessitate another look at the concept of the church as the “people of God.”

The study is thematic in nature. Apart from the introductory section, the study is divided into five sections: a) the concept of the “people of God” in the OT; b) the concept of the “people of God” in the NT; c) issues related to the concept of the “people of God” and the nature of the church; d) the “people of God” and its relation to the concept of the church as a community; and e) summary and conclusion.

## **II. The People of God in the OT**

In the OT, the “people of God” implies that God is at work in bringing people under His rulership (Miller, 2000). The Hebrew word ‘*am*, which is commonly translated “people,” occurs more than 1800 times in the OT. The phrase ‘*am* Yahweh (Wiklander, 1995), usually translated “people of the Lord/God,” is mostly synonymous with the people of Israel (e.g., Num 11:29; 2 Sam 1:12; 14:13; Ezek 36:20), and in Judges 5:13, for example, it implies the army of Yahweh.

In the Pentateuch, the earliest explicit statement about the “people of God” occurs in the context of the flood (Gen 7:23). Noah and his family found favor with God due to their obedience to God’s command and are regarded as the faithful people of God in the antediluvian world (Hasel, 1988). Abraham’s call also sets in motion the concept of God creating a nation for Himself, with the purpose of blessing the whole world through them (Gen 12:3). Israel as a nation was created according to this promise and they became a unique people of God (Exo 3:7, 10; 6:7) (Clowney, 1995). At Mount Sinai, God formally recognized Israel as His people and made a covenant with them. God in this covenant declared His promise to them (Exo 19:5, 6). This promise is never repeated in the OT (I Pet 2:9, 10). Israel’s selection as God’s people was for a purpose: to serve as a light to other nations (Deut 4:5-8).

The historical books of the OT depict a downward drift in Israel’s relation with God (Judge 5:11, 13; 1 Sam 2:24) due to their disobedience to God’s commandments. This is further highlighted in their rejection of the theocracy and their demand for a king like the

other nations (1 Sam 8: 19; 12:12). The people of Israel were unfaithful and rebelled against God (Judge 5:11, 13; 1 Sam 1:12; 6:21; 2 Kgs 9:6). Later, prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah highlighted Israel's apostasy and distinguished between Israel as a political entity and the real people of God who remained faithful to the covenant (Hos 1:1-11) (Schnabel, 2002).

As a result of the frequent apostasy in Israel, God had a special people within Israel as His people. These special people of God became known as the remnant, a theme that permeates scripture "from Genesis to Revelation as a red thread" (Hasel, 1988; LaRondelle, 2000; Pfandl, 1992)). Prophets such as Isaiah, Amos and Micah used the remnant concept to indicate God's judgment and salvation, which implied a major distinction between the political state of Israel and the true people of God (Isa 11:11; 16:28:5; 37:31-32; Mic 4:7:7:18; Amos 5:15; 19:12). The remnant was the true people of God and they served as a bridge of forgiveness and restoration. Moreover, in Isaiah's prophecy (Isa 56:7; 58:7-14, 19; cf. Zech 14:14) membership in the people of God is extended beyond the boundaries of Israel: when Yahweh restores the earth, both repentant Jews and Gentiles will constitute God's covenant people. It follows, then, that in Isaiah membership in the people of God is no longer dependent upon biological descent (Isa 56:3-8). Thus, Gentiles become beneficiaries of what previously was exclusively reserved for the Jews (Isa 66:21) (Schnabel, 2002). In a sum, the "people of God" in the OT is expressed in the covenant relationship between Israel and their God. In this relationship Israel is the people of God, and Yahweh is their God. The designation "people of God" defines the character of the people and identifies their God (Ferguson, 1996).

### **III. The People of God in the NT**

In the NT the "people of God" (*laos tou theou*) is the community of the new covenant. John the Baptist called on people to repent in preparation for the coming of Christ (Matt 3:1-12; Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:6-8,19-31). Jesus also saw the twelve disciples as a symbol of a new Israel that He was creating (Matt 19:28). Those who accept Jesus as their personal savior (Messiah) are called the people of God in the NT (Moede, 1998). For Jesus, "Sonship and fatherhood are primarily determined not by a physical but by a spiritual relationship (Matt 12:48-50)" (LaRondelle, 2000). Jesus gave a new

dimension to the concept of the people of God. In the new covenant, the people of God include both Jews and Gentiles (Matt 8:10, 11; Acts 10:1,2, 34; 13:47; Rom 2:10; Eph 2:12; cf. Isa 56:3-8; 66:21) (Schenabel, 2002). To illustrate this observation, the following discussion is in order.

The “people of God” in the NT is related to the idea of *ekklesia* “church” (cf. Matt 16:18; 18:17). The NT uses *ekklesia* to denote the people of God (Acts 8:3; 9:31; 1 Cor 12:28). It shows the nature of the new covenant community (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1) (Miller, 2000). Throughout His ministry, Jesus says that He came to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:6; 15:24). At the inauguration of the new covenant (i.e., when Christ died, Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20; cf. Jer 31:31; Heb 8:8-12), the church can legitimately be described as the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16) and “people of God” (Matt 16:18; 18:17; Heb 4:9; 1 Pet 2:10). On this basis, the NT church is seen as the “people of God” (Miller, 2000). Therefore, it can be said that, in the Gospels, the church is the people of God.

In Acts 15:14, Simeon talks about God visiting the Gentiles and taking out a people for His name (cf. 18:10). This and other references to the church (8:1; 9:31; 15:30; 18:22) show that in the book of Acts, the church, which comprises Jews and Gentiles, is the “people of God” (Doohan, 1989).”

Furthermore, it has been noted that the “people of God” is a “Pauline *ecclesial* title” (Worgul, 1992) which he employs in different passages of his writings. However, his core arguments about the essence and identity of the people of God are found in Rom 9-11 and Eph 2 (Barth, 1983). For instance, in Rom 9:25, 26, he points out that the people of God are those who have believed in Christ Jesus. As Gerhard Hasel indicates, in Rom 9-11 the distinction between the Israel of the “flesh” (ethnic Israel) and the Israel of the “promise” (spiritual Israel, 9:8) or the true Israel of faith (9:6-27) is made very clear (Hasel, 1988). Paul fortifies his idea of the “people of God” with the illustration of the olive tree in Rom 11:13-25. The olive tree symbolizes the nation of Israel. Some of the branches broke off and in their place wild olive branches were grafted in. The wild branches represent Gentile Christians who, together with faithful Jews, form the “people of God.”

Paul’s concept of the “people of God” is further highlighted in Eph 2:11-22 (cf. 2 Cor 6:16-18). Here, he declares that the wall of separation between Israel and the Gentiles is broken through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, Gentiles who were once

regarded as “uncircumcised” and “foreigners to the covenant” are by virtue of the death of Christ members of the “people of God.” The “people of God” no longer applies to ethnic Israel, but to both Jews and Gentiles. A faith relationship with Jesus Christ (Rom 2:28-29; 9:6-8) is the requirement for membership among the “people of God,” be it a Jew or a Gentile (Ferguson, 1996).

In the general epistles, the main text about the “people of God” is found in 1 Pet 2:9-10. In 1 Pet 1:1, 2, the epistle is addressed to God’s elect scattered abroad, which probably consisted of both Jews and Gentiles (Carson, Moo, Morris, 1992). Thus for Peter, both Jews and Gentiles are God’s people (1:18; 2:9-10). The Gentiles were considered as “no people,” but now they have joined the rank of God’s people. According to Barth, the term “people of God” is an honorific title (Barth, 1983) and it can be added that those who had not received mercy have now received mercy by the grace of God.

In the Book of Revelation the “people of God” are called out of “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9), and at the end of this world, God intends to dwell with His people (21:3). The end-time remnant (“who keep the commandments of God and hold to the truth of Jesus,” 12:17, NAB), who may be considered as the end time people of God, profess exceptional allegiance to God and His kingdom, even in the face of the dragon’s deception and oppression (Diop, 1996). It may, therefore, be said that the “people of God” refers to all believers in Christ, irrespective of nationality or race.

#### **IV. Issues Related to the Concept of the “People of God” and the Nature of the Church**

In this section, issues related to the church as the “people of God” are considered. Ferguson mentions five biblical terminologies in the OT which describe the “people of God.” These terms which are used in the OT to describe Israel, are used in the NT in reference to the Apeople of God. “Such usage in the NT gives credence to the continuity of the history of salvation and a description of the nature of the new Apeople of God” (Ferguson, 1996). These biblical terminologies are: Israel of God, royal priesthood, a holy nation, righteous remnant, and covenant people.

In the OT, the term *Israel of God* was particularly applied to Israel as a nation (Psalm 98:3; 121:4; 130:7-8; 131:3). The Greek word

*israēl* “Israel” occurs about sixty-eight times in the NT (Bauer, s.v. *israēl*). Most of its occurrences refer to the literal nation Israel (e.g., Matt. 2:6, 20f; 8:10; 9:33; 10:6, 23; Mark 12:29; 15:32; Luke 1:16, 54, 68, 80; 2:25, 32, 34; John. 1:31, 49; 3:10; 12:13; Acts 1:6; 2:36; 4:10, 27; Rom. 9:6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25f; 1 Co. 10:18; 2 Co. 3:7, 13; Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:12; Phil. 3:5; Heb. 8:8, 10; 11:22; Rev. 2:14; 7:4; 21:12). Of interest is Jesus and His apostles’ appeal to Israel (Jews) to repent (Matt 10:6, 23; Acts 2:36; 4:10, 27; 9:15; Rom 9:27). In context, the ‘twelve tribes’ may be a reference to the nation Israel (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30). On the other hand, “Israel” may be interpreted symbolically in reference to believers in Christ (Gal 6:16) or the saints in the consummated eschatological period (Rev 7:4; 21:12). In all these instances, both Jews and Gentiles are meant in context. It should be noted that in the OT Israel was analogous to the people of God (e.g., Exod 3:9; 4:22, 29; 5:1). Paul applies Israel of God to those who have relationship with Christ and confirms that this term no longer applies to mere physical ethnic descent (1 Cor 10:18; Phil 3:3; Col 6:16). In short, in the NT, while Israel is an historical reference to the nation Israel, it is used, though few times, symbolically in reference to believers (Jews and Gentiles) in Christ.

The phrase *basileion hierateuma* “royal priesthood” appears only in 1 Pet 2:9. The passage reads, “But you are a special people, a holy nation, priests and kings, a people given up completely to God, so that you may make clear the virtues of him who took you out of the dark into the light of heaven” (RSV). Linguistically, v. 9a appears to be reminiscent of Ex 19:6: “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (RSV). In this context, if Israel keeps God’s covenant, then literal Israel is assured of becoming a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (v.5). This implies assurance of Israel being special among all nations on a condition of obedience. It stands to reason that after her deliverance, she did not attain this state of royal priesthood or holy nation in view of the fact that she was the descendant of Abraham. Rather, her attainment was predicated on her perpetual obedience to the covenant.

In 1 Pet 2, Apostle Peter exhorts his immediate audience to eschew evil and grow up in Christ (v. 1-3). There is a call to holy living. He makes reference to literal Israel’s rejection of Jesus as the cornerstone (v.4). They are like living stones which should be a spiritual house, place of holy priesthood, “to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (v. 5; RSV). This Jesus is precious to

believers though he is rejected by many (vv. 7-8). Peter emphatically claims that believers are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people . . .” (v. 9a; RSV). In the Greek, the word *hopōs* is used to introduce a purpose/result clause, subordinate clause, to the main clause of believers being a royal nation (See Wallace, 762.). The result clause of the passage reads, “That you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (v. 9b; RSV). Their declaring of His wonderful deeds is as a result of their present state of being a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people. This grammatical relationship explains the purpose of the existence of believers/church. They were once no people but now are God's people through Jesus (v. 10). In this sense, by virtue of them being God's people, they can be symbolically referred to as ‘Israel of God’. It is noteworthy that while literal Israel's eligibility to be royal priesthood and holy nation depended on her perpetual obedience to the covenant, believers are already a royal priesthood and holy nation. This new state of believers should result in holy living, a dominant theme of 1 Peter (1:15; 2:2, 5; 3-5).

We find similar use of the term royal priesthood in Rev 1:6. Both terms indicate the privileges offered by God to believers. God's people have become a holy nation because He dwells among them. God's presence sets His people apart from other nations. It is in this light that the NT makes use of expressions such as “saints,” “beloved,” “called” and “elect” to designate the church (Ridderbos, 1975).

Moreover, the concept of *righteous remnant* has its root in the OT. In times of national apostasy, the few who remain faithful to their covenant relationship with God are called a faithful remnant, hence the true “people of God.” Paul refers to the Jews who believed in Jesus as righteous remnant (Rom 11:5), though they were few in number compared to the Gentiles who believed.

The “people of God” are also referred to as the *covenant people*. The possession of the covenant was one of the privileges of the Israelites because out of the many nations it was only Israel that God made a covenant with. As a result of their disobedience, a new covenant was established by Jesus and it created a new community called Christians (Rom 9:4). Also, the idea of election both in the OT (Psalm 105:43) and the NT (1 Pet 2:9) is connected with the “people of God.” While the idea of election is connected with the “people of



God,” it is also used in both OT and NT alongside God’s possession of the people (Psalm 135:4; 1 Pet 2:9).

Since the idea of Israel or the church as a chosen people has created some disagreement and debate among scholars, a further investigation is warranted (Ferguson, 1996). “In the OT the idea of *election* is met within two connections, that of Israel and that of Yahweh’s Anointed,” (Richardson, 1958), God elected or chose individuals like Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Levi and David. When an individual is elected, it means his descendants are also elected (Acts 13:17). This is very important to understand the nature of the church. In the same sense, God has chosen Jesus Christ so that the people who have relation with Him (who belong to Him) also become the elect or chosen “people of God” (John 3:16). One of Jesus’ messianic titles is the “chosen one” (Luke 9:35). A proof of the title being messianic is attested to by the significance the Jewish leaders attached to His claim to the title (Luke 23:35) (Richardson, 1958). Jesus is the seed of Abraham; therefore, He is the true Israel (Matt 2:15; cf. Hos 11:1). Matthew used Hosea 11:1 to show that Jesus is the fulfillment of the true Israel. Although Isaiah used the theme of “servant” to identify a group or Israel or the remnant within the nation (Isa 41:8-9; 42:1-4; 44:1), Matthew individualized the concept and applied it to Jesus as a fulfillment of a messianic prophecy. Therefore, Jesus Christ being God’s chosen one has fulfilled God’s choice of Abraham, Jacob, and David (Ferguson, 1996).

If the choice of individuals like Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Levi, and David implied the election of their descendants, in the same sense, the election of Jesus as the “chosen one” results in those who believe in Him becoming the elected “people of God.” “This makes Christian believers one with Christ just as the “Jews are in Abraham and humanity is in Adam” (Ferguson, 1996). The NT confirms this election when it indicates that “he has chosen you because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (I Thess 1:4,5). Paul adds in 2 Thess 2:13-14 that “God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news.” The apostle Peter expresses a similar idea: “Who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in sanctification by the Spirit” (I Pet 1:2). He adds “you who believe” are a “chosen race” (I Pet 2:9). Furthermore, in Eph 1:2 he says that “God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

One crucial point about election is that it is not permanent (Rom 9:6). Although God chose the tribe of Levi for the priesthood, yet some were rejected (Lev 10:1-2; 1 Sam 2:27-36). There were some also who were rejected from the dynasty of David although God promised David that his kingdom will endure forever (II Sam 7:16; Ps 89:4, 28-45). These incidents help us to understand that though God can elect a person, if that person is not faithful to God his or her election can be abrogated. God called Moses (Exo 3:1-12), and he is described in Ps 106:23 as God's "chosen one." Jesus also chose the twelve (John 6:70). Paul was chosen to be an apostle to the Gentiles (1 Tim 1:1). The purpose of God's calling or choosing is ministry or service, is not for salvation. The one called can decline or refuse the task (1 Kgs 11:25-13:10; Acts 1:17, 20).

We can summarize the concept of "people of God" and its connection with election as follows. God's election is twofold: individual and corporate. The election connected with particular individuals like Moses, Saul, Paul and others were mainly for service and not for salvation. On the other hand, God's election of individuals like Abraham, Levi, and David was connected with the purpose of electing a people for his own. When God elected Abraham, he also elected his descendants—the people of Israel. Likewise, God has elected Jesus Christ so that those who are in Him become the elected "people of God." However, this election is conditional (2 Pet 1:10; Gal 5:4; Heb 3:12; 6:4).

The "people of God" as the church has received a corporate identity and unity through Jesus Christ (Gilliland, 1983). This unity transcends all other human unity and it binds them together (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). "The people of God are those chosen by him to fulfill his purpose, and this sense of being called and chosen brings a strong sense of solidarity to them" (Guthrie, 1981). However, according to Kevin Giles, the term "people of God" has its limitations (Giles, 1995). Since the church is the community which came into existence through the ministry, death and resurrection of Christ, it cannot be defined apart from Christ who is the source of its life (Matt 16:18). Hence, there is a difference between the term in relation to Israel as an ethnic and religious community and the Christian church, because the church is made up of many people from different nations, tribes, peoples and tongues. Moreover, the term "people of God" makes a definite claim that Christians are the true Israel of God.

## V. The Relationship between the “People of God” and the Concept of the Church as a Community

It is important to note that the concept of the “people of God” does not refer to the church as a building, but people who come together to form the church (I Cor 11:18) (Fee, 1996). A proper understanding of the concept of the “people of God” will help us understand that the church is made up of those elected to live holy lives, to fellowship with one another and anointed by the Holy Spirit to witness about Christ to the world.

In the NT, the word *ekklesia* is usually translated as “church,” denoting a group of believers (e.g., Matt 18:17; Acts 7:38; I Cor 1:2; Eph 1:22; 3:21; 5:24) (Schmidt, 1964). On the other hand, *koinonia*, derived from *koinos* and *koinoneo*, means “association,” “communion,” “intercourse,” “fellowship,” and “participation” (Hauck, 1964-76). The Greek *koinōnia*, a feminine noun, occurs nineteen times in the NT (e.g., Acts 2:42; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal 2:9; Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phm 6; Heb 13:16; 1 Tim 6:18; 1 John 1:3,6,7). *Koinōnia* basically denotes relationship. But the form which such relationship is defined may be determined by the literary context. For example, there was *koinōnia* of food sharing among believers (Acts 2:42; Heb 13:16). There is a *koinōnia* of contributing money to the poor in Jerusalem (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13). According to Paul, believers were called into *koinōnia* (unique relationship/covenant) with Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:9; see also Phil 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phlm 1:6). The blood and the bread of Jesus may be symbols of believers’ *koinōnia* with Jesus (1 Cor 10:16). Here, Paul argues that eating of food offered to idols is synonymous to partnering with demons or identifying oneself with the devil (v. 20). Paul understands that partaking of the blood and bread of Jesus is to symbolically identify with Jesus and His values (so also 6:14). Galatian 2:9 states that James, Peter, and John, the pillars of the early church, gave Paul and Barnabas hands (*dexiai*) and *koinōnia* to permit Paul’s preaching of circumcision or free gospel (Acts 15:8-17). The construction *dexiai* and *koinōnia* may be understood as hands of agreement/acceptance, as v. 19 makes clear. In sum, *koinōnia* has a variety of meanings depending on its context.

In the context of 1 John, *koinōnia* is never used as an apposition to believers or church. The literary context betrays the force of this word. Verses 1-2 premise the event that led to the proclamation of gospel of eternal life John’s audience. In v.3, John underscores the

purpose for proclaiming the gospel as, “so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (RSV). The transmission of the relationship is initiated by God to the witnesses (including John) to the eternal life, and then to the recipient of the gospel. This chain of relationship may define the core values shared by these three parties. Joseph Henry Thayer’s observation is right: “. . . fellowship, according to John's teaching, consists in the fact that Christians are partakers in common of the same mind as God and Christ, and of the blessings arising therefrom” (s.v. *koinōnia* ). Verses 4-5 make clear that there is no darkness in God. Verse 6 assumes that if believers have *koinōnia*, relationship of shared values and identity, then they should not walk in darkness. If they do otherwise, they are liars; there is no *koinōnia* between the believers and God. Verse 7 states that if they walk in the light as God is in the light, then there should be *koinōnia* among members. Simply put, if a believer has a cordial relationship with God, such relationship should be extended to believing members. Vertical relationship of believers to God and horizontal relationships of believers to one another may define the *koinōnia* of 1 John.

*Koinonia* is also used with reference to the church and its relationship with the triune God (e.g., 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 1:7; 13:13; Philp 3:10; 1 John 1:6). In effect, *koinonia* seems to characterize the church (Mitchell, 1993). This is probably why J. Hainz says that *koinonia* is the heart of the *ekklesia* (Hainz, 1991).

Several proposals have been made as to whether the church as a “people of God” can be called a community (Hainz, 1991). The Catholic Church, twenty years after Vatican II, at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod concluded that the ecclesiology of Vatican II is *communio-ecclesiology*. This communion ecclesiology is based on 1 John 1:3, according to Joseph Ratzinger (2005). There are other modern Evangelicals like Stanley Grenz who hold that the church should be seen as a community (Grenz, 1995). On the other hand, some Evangelicals hold that *koinonia* primarily implies “participation in something with someone” (Sugg, 1984) and does not necessarily refer to the church. However, Jean-Marie R. Tillard notes that while *koinonia* does not itself define the church, “everything expressed by the term or its cognates belongs to the essence of the Church” (Tillard, 2005).

*Koinonia*’s primary and common meaning in the NT is “participation along with others in something” (Avis, 1990). As Gabriel Fackre points out, “the tepid word *fellowship* does not convey

the deep sharing that *koinonia* implies,” when one compares its usage in the Acts community and among Christians through the ages (Fackre, 1996). According to Kasper, *koinonia* (Latin *communio*) originally does not mean community but rather “means participation, and more particularly, participation in the good things of salvation conferred by God: participation in the Holy Spirit, in new life, in love, in the gospel, but above all participation in the eucharist” (Kasper, 1989). Nonetheless, many theologians, especially Catholics, prefer to interpret *koinonia* as communion based on two images of the church in the NT, namely the “body of Christ” and the “people of God” (Hamer, 1965).

Christian *koinonia* is an indication of “authentic” common life, “a sharing and caring life together in which the ‘people of God’ dwells in the joyful unity of the Spirit” (Fackre, 1996). Paul used *koinonia* to designate various community relationships that results through common participation and take place through reciprocal “giving and taking part of a portion. *Koinonia* applies to persons who stand in a relationship of community because they have a common share in something” (Hainz, 1991). It may, therefore, be said that Paul in his use of *koinonia* not only called the “people of God” to have fellowship with Christ but also to be in social communion (fellowship) with one another.

*Koinonia* is never used as a “surrogate for *ekklesia* and it is certain from the totality of the evidence that such usage was not common in the New Testament period. . . . The primary meaning of words in the *koinon* group is “participation” (Sugg, 1984). Schattenmann points out that although Paul uses *koinonia*, he never equated it with “*societas*,” companionship or community. It is not a parallel to *ekklesia* and has nothing to do with the local congregation (Schattenmann, 1967-1975). Therefore, *koinonia* and its roots do not directly refer to the church but designate participation.

However, Tillard is of the view that though “Scripture never makes *communio-koinonia* the definition of the church; it is nevertheless in the Church of God” (Tillard, 2005). He goes further to point out that “*koinonia* is never given as a definition of the Church, but it is understood that everything expressed by the term or its cognates belongs to the essence of the Church” (Tillard, 2005). Nevertheless, it can be noted that *koinonia* is not a vague concept but implies a deliberate and deep commitment to one another. It has to do with relationship and fellowship which ought to be nurtured and maintained among the “people of God” (Bubna and Ricketts, 1978).

To sum up, *koinonia*, usually translated “fellowship,” “community,” “participation,” or “sharing,” describes the intimate relationship of the church with the Godhead and with one another. *Koinonia* is never used as a synonym or surrogate for *ekklesia* or a definition of the church. This notwithstanding, there is a link between *koinonia* and *ekklesia*. However, to define the church as communion is unbiblical; *koinonia* is rather found in the church. It is an attribute of the church but not a definition for the Church.

## VI. Summary and Conclusion

The concept of the church as the “people of God” permeates both the OT and the NT. In the OT, apart from Noah’s family in the antediluvian era, the concept of the “people of God” refers to Israel. Israel was chosen by God through the call of Abraham, and the nation was formally recognized as God’s people at Sinai. Israel’s faithfulness to God in keeping the commandments defines her covenant relationship with God.

In the NT, the “people of God” are not ethnically defined: they come from “every nation, tribe, people and language.” The church is elected “in Christ” to be a holy “people of God.” They are royal priests called for the service of God in order to proclaim the wonderful deeds of the Lord. It is a mixed society comprising Jews and Gentiles. Thus, faith in Christ and sincerity to biblical truth are the hallmarks of the “people of God.”

As to the relationship between the “people of God” and the concept of the church as a community, it was established that Paul used *koinonia* for religious fellowship (participation) of believers in Christ. *Koinonia* denotes mutual fellowship among the “people of God.” This participation and fellowship are possible all because of the *koinonia* that exists between the “people of God” and Christ. However, *koinonia* in its NT usage does not define the church. Rather, *koinonia* is a characteristic of the church. There is the tendency also that in our quest for fellowship and participation in the church, we will be so much absorbed with internal *koinonia* and lose our mission as a church. The fellowship, therefore, should not be inward looking but should spread to all others in and outside our fellowship. Our quest for fellowship should not lead us to swallow the individuality of members. The church should affirm and strengthen each individual.

In conclusion, it can be said that the image of the church as the “people of God” gives the church an identity as people who belong to the Lord. The church is, therefore, to live a holy life. Fellowship with one another in the church and the world through witnessing should be a hallmark of the church. This concept should be internalized among church members so that it will help each member know his or her identity in Christ to help the church work for the salvation of sinners. *Koinonia* is of a twofold dimension: fellowship with God and fellowship with one another. In other words, it has vertical (toward God) and horizontal (toward one another) dimensions.

## References

- Barth, Markus. (1983). *The People of God*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Bauer, Walter. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Translated and revised by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. S.v. *israēl*.
- Brown, Schuyler. (1976). “*Koinonia* as the Basis of New Testament Ecclesiology? *One in Christ*, 12, 159-178.
- Bubna, Donald L. (1978). With Sarah Ricketts. *Building People through a Caring Sharing Fellowship*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndall House.
- Campbell, J. Y. (1932). *Koinonia* and Its Cognates in the New Testament. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 51, 352-380.
- Carson, D. A., Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris. (1992). *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Manila, Philippines: OMF Literature.
- Clowney, Edmund P. (1995). *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology*. Edited by Gerald Bray. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Diop, Ganoune. (1996). The Remnant Concept As Defined by Amos. *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 7, 67-81.
- Dooan, Helen. (1989). *Paul's Vision of Church*. Wilmington, Delaware, Michael Glazier.
- Fackre, Gabriel. (June 1999). Bible, Community, and Spirit. *Horizon in Biblical Theology*, 21, 66-81.

- Fee, Gordon D. (1996). *Paul the Spirit, and the People of God*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.
- Ferguson, Everett. (1996). *A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today: The Church of Christ*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Giles, Kevin. (1995). *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.
- Gilliland, Dean S. (1983). *Pauline Theology and Mission Practice*. Grand Rapids: Baker.
- Grenz, Stanley J. (1994). *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Guthrie, Donald. (1981). *New Testament Theology*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.
- Hainz, J. (1991). *Koinonia, Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Horst Batz and Gerhard Schneider. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Vol. 2, 303-5.
- Hamer, J. (1964). *The Church Is a Communion*. New York: Sheed & Ward.
- Hauck, Friederich. (1966). *Koinonia, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Vol. 3, 797-809.
- Hasel, Gerhard F. (Fall 1988). The Remnant in Scripture and the End Time. *Adventist Affirm*, 2, 5-12, 62-64.
- Kung, Hans. (1971). *The Church*. London: Search.
- LaRondelle, Hans K. (2000). The Remnant and the Three Angels' Messages. *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*. Edited by Raoul Dederen. Hagerstown: Review & Herald.
- Megesa, Laurenti. (August 1984). Who are 'the People of God'?" *AFER*, 26, 204-212.
- Miller, Donald G. (1957). *The Nature and mission of the Church*. Richmond, VA: John Knox Press.
- Miner, Paul S. (1956). *Jesus and His People*. London, Lutterworth.
- Moede, Gerald F. (July/October, 1998). What it Means to Be God's People. *The Ecumenical Movement Today*, 37, 306-312.
- Olson, V. Norskov. (1990). *Myth and Truth about Church, Priesthood and Ordination*. Riverside, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1990.
- Pfandl, Gerhard. (1992). Remnant Church and the Spirit of Prophecy. *Symposium on Revelation- Book II*. Edited by Frank B. Holbrook. Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute. 296-333.



- Ratzinger, Joseph. (2005). *Pilgrim Fellowship of Faith: the Church as Communion*. Translated by Henry Taylor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Richardson, Alan. (1958). *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*. New York: Evanston, Harper & Row.
- Ridderbos, Herman. (1975). *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. Translated by John Richard De Witt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Schattenmann, J. (1967-1975). *Koinonia. The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Colin Brown. Translated by Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther and Hans Bietenhard. Grand Rapids: Zondervan., 1:639-44.
- Schnabel, Eckhard J. (March 2002). Israel, the People of God, and the Nations. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45:35-57.
- Senn, Frank C. (Spring 1986). The Church: 'People of God' or Liturgical Assembly? *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, 25, 134-138.
- Suggs, M. Jack. (1984). *Koinonia* in the New Testament. *Mid-Stream* 23, 351-362.
- Thayer, Joseph Henry. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Grimme's Wilker Clovis Novi Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977. s.v. koinōnia
- Tillard, Jean-Marie R. (2005). Communion. *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*. Edited by Jean-Yves Lacoste. New York: Routledge. Vol. 1, 322-330.
- Tillard, Jean-Marie R. (1992). *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*. Translated by R. C. De Peaux. Collegeville: Liturgical.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996.
- Wiklander, Bertil. (Nov. 30, 1995). The People of God. *Adventist Review*. 12-15.
- Worgul, Jr. George S. (Jan. 1982). People of God, Body of Christ: Pauline Ecclesiological Contrasts. *Biblical Theological Bulletin* 12, 24-28.