

sermon on the people of God (2 July 2017)

The New Testament uses a lot of images/descriptions to describe us. We drew a number of them in Pictionary today. How many do you think there might be in the New Testament?

<hear a few congregational guesses>

In 1960, many years ago (before I was born!) Paul Minear, a NT scholar, published a book entitled *“Images the Church in the New Testament”*. Here’s his list... 96 in all!

<PowerPoint slide>

Chapter II	[23] the bride of Christ	[43] remnant	[64] the name	[83] household of God
[1] the salt of the earth	[24] the Wedding feast	[44] the elect	[65] life	[84] sons of God
[2] a letter from Christ	[25] wearers of white robes	[45] flock	[66] the tree of life	[85] brotherhood
[3] fish and fish net	[26] the choice of clothing	[46] lambs who rule	[67] communion in the Holy Spirit	Chapter VI
[4] the boat	[27] citizens	[47] the Holy City	[68] the bond of love	[86] the body of life
[5] the ark	[28] exiles	[48] the holy temple	Chapter V	[87] of Christ
[6] unleavened bread	[29] the Dispersion	[49] priesthood	[69] the sanctified	[88] the body and the blood
[7] one loaf	[30] ambassadors	[50] sacrifice	[70] the faithful	[89] the diversities of ministries
[8] the table of the Lord	[31] the poor	[51] aroma	[71] the justified	[90] spiritual body
[9] the altar	[32] hosts and guests	[52] festivals	[72] followers	[91] head of cosmic spirits
[10] the cup of the Lord	Chapter III	Chapter IV	[73] disciples	[92] head of the church
[11] Wine	[33] the people of God	[53] the new creation	[74] road	[93] the body of this head
[12] branches of the vine	[34] Israel	[54] first fruits	[75] coming and going	[94] the unity of Jews and Gentiles
[13] vineyard	[35] a chosen race	[55] the new humanity	[76] witnessing	[95] the growth of the body
[14] the fig tree	[36] a holy nation	[56] the last Adam	[77] confessors	[96] the fullness of God
[15] the Olive tree	[37] twelve tribes	[57] the Son of Man	[78] slaves	
[16] God’s planting	[38] the patriarchs	[58] the Kingdom of God	[79] friends	
[17] God’s building	[39] circumcision	[59] fighters against Satan	[80] servants	
[18] building on the rock	[40] Abraham’s sons	[60] Sabbath Rest	[81] “with...”	
[19] pillar and buttress	[41] the exodus	[61] the coming age	[82] edification	
[20] virgins	[42] house of David	[62] God’s glory		
[21] the Messiah’s mother		[63] light		
[22] the elect lady				

This might not be exactly the list you’d produce. I’d like to make some amendments, too. BUT even if he’s only half right, that’s a LOT of images! God gave us a lot of ways to think about who we are. The wise Christian and the wise congregation of Christians will not think one is enough; we need the whole “panorama” (as Minear described it) to get the full picture.

But 96! Is there a way to hold all these in our heads? We could group them in some way. You can see Minear did that: he called the first group the “minor” ones, the others are based on connection with Israel, the new creation, social aspect, and finally, the body of Christ. But another approach is to decide and focus on the most important ones. What do you think?

<hear a few congregational suggestions>

Nearly everybody takes this approach. Books that start with Minear’s list often choose a small subset to focus on. John Stott, in his very helpful little book *“One People”*, lists 7 – 3 taken over from the OT (God’s bride, Vineyard and flock) and 4 new in the NT (kingdom, household/family, building, body of Christ – the 4 we are looking at in this series). Interestingly, we have all, by and large, chosen just **one** description as the most important. We use it so often that we may have ceased to believe that it is one description among many, and think all the other images illustrate it. Do you know the term I mean? Even Minear puts it in his title *“Images of the Church in the New Testament”*.

There is a famous discussion about “Church” involving famous Sydney clergymen. (I mean famous among NT theologians studying ecclesiology!) Sometimes called the Knox-Robinson view of “church”, they tried to correct the old view that the word “church” had three senses...

- the local gathering – all the Christians together right here
- the heavenly gathering – all the people in Christ
- the universal church – all the Christians in the world

They said it couldn’t mean the last one as those churches never gather, the essential meaning of the word “church” (*ekklesia*). We were making it mean more than the NT did! Oops!!

“Church” is a really important term, because meeting together is really important, but it just doesn’t capture everything. In his book “Paul’s Idea of Community”, Australian scholar Robert Banks, wrote that because *ekklesia* refers to actual gatherings of Christians, “the word is less theologically significant than people generally assume” (p46): church only takes us so far into Paul’s idea of community. If we ask ourselves WHO gathers, we realise we need a larger term. Graham Cole (another Australian-is there no end?) wrote a paper on just this topic and said “*ekklesia* has been made to do too much work... work properly belonging to the concept of ‘the people of God’ ” (Explorations 2, p9). For Greek geeks: laology before ecclesiology! (cf Marcus Barth.) I agree – we are always the people of God; we sometimes gather. Martin Luther, 16th century German reformer, makes a harsh but perceptive comment: “If these words had been used in the Creed: ‘I believe that there is a holy Christian people’, it would have been easy to avoid all the misery that is coming with this blind, obscure word ‘church’.” John Stott reminds us that the great images of the people of God in NT remind us of either God’s gracious care, or our relation to him and each other (p29).

And that’s why chose 1 Peter 2:9-10 for today. Peter’s letter to struggling Christians draws on many of the pictures of the people of God from the Old Testament (scattered exiles, spiritual building, flock of God etc), but doesn’t use *ekklesia*. He echoes the Exodus and harks back to Hosea when he describes Christians: ⁹ ...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. 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. ¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

Peter uses the term “people of God” to remind us that God has mightily saved us, not for ecclesiastical navel-gazing, but to declare his praise, bear him witness in the world and look forward to his glory. Sometimes we use a sort of shorthand: “the body”, “the church”. But we never say we are “the people” but always that we are “the people of God”. What makes us a people is our connection to God; what binds us together is his mercy. The vertical is the basis for the horizontal (not good in architecture, but essential in theology). Perhaps using “people of God” more frequently could help us see ourselves responsible to him in all of life. And stop us being self-centred as we consider the other images. The kingdom of God. The temple of the Holy Spirit. The family of God. The body of Christ. What are we? We are his!