Volker Leppin

Chapter 2

The Transformation of the Concept “People of God” in the Reformation Era

This chapter presents the transformation of the “People of God,” a key concept in the Jerusalem Code. The Reformation theologians continued – and transformed – the common medieval conviction that the Christians (the Protestants) had succeeded and replaced Israel as the people of God.

“People of God” in the Reformation era is an entirely theological concept. The Latin word *populus*, meaning people, has no ethnic connotation, as the word *natio*, nation, has. “People of God” means those who are elected by God as his followers and believers on earth and the heirs of his kingdom in heaven. Additionally, “people of God” not only renders *populus Dei*, but also *civitas Dei*, “God’s citizenship.” This concept, introduced by Augustine (354–430) into Christian thinking had a strong ecclesiastical interpretation since the Early Middle Ages, identifying the history of the *civitas Dei* in the world with the history of the Church. Thus, in the Middle Ages one might see an understanding of people or citizenship of God as a social group, namely the orthodox Church in the Latin World. Applying the Old Testament term of “people of God” to it implied that Christianity had taken over the promises given to Israel and Judaism (“theory of substitution”).

Most reformers agreed with the common medieval conviction that Christians had replaced Jews as the true people of God. As early as in his *Dictata super Psalterium* (1513–1515), for example, Martin Luther understood Ps 65 (64 Vg.) *De Ecclesiae profectu et gloria amplianda per euangelium* “of the Church’s success and glory to be broadened by the Gospel.”¹ In fact, the Psalm itself spoke about Mount Zion and the temple in Jerusalem. But for Luther it spoke “against the envy of the Jews who alone want to be the people of God.”²

Against this background the question is not whether the church of their own days would constitute the true people of God, but how this would be understood. It is here that the difference to medieval ideas began, as all reformers tried to avoid direct identification of the people of God with any external institution like the

¹ “contra Iudeorum Inuidiam, qui soli volunt esse populus Dei,” WA 55/1,462.

² WA 55/1,462.

Volker Leppin, Professor, Evg.-Theol. Fakultät, Institut für Spätmittelalter und Reformation, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Germany

Fig. 2.1: Moses with the law tablets. Illustration to *Decem praecepta Vuittenbergensi predicata populo per. P. Martinum Luther Augustinianum*. (Leipzig: Valentin Schumann, 1518).

earthly Church. Basically, reformers understood the *ecclesia* differently to that which the medieval church had taught them. Nevertheless, they knew about the common understanding of the church as an institution. Thus, at no point in his translation of the New Testament did Luther use the word *Kirche* (“church”), but spoke instead of *gemeine* (“congregation”).³ In addition to the term “congregation,” he also preferred the words “people of God.”

In contrast to the “blind word” *ecclesia*⁴ misused in the history of the church, the term “people of God,” in Luther’s view, was capable of giving a non-hierarchical image of the church, and the possibility of concentrating on the Word of God instead of on any human holders of an office. To Luther, the people of God on the one hand was created by God’s Word and on the other hand made this Word vivid: “The word of God cannot be without the people of God, the other way round, the people of God cannot be without the word of God.”⁵

Therefore, the preaching of the Word is a sign for the church, as the right use of the sacraments is as well.⁶ Even if Luther in his later texts mentioned many more signs of the church, he never lost the conviction that the people of God is hidden in this world. There is no special place for it, as Luther explains, mocking himself in respect to the concept of a “Roman Church.”⁷ To identify the people of God within this world would mean understanding faith as something visible. Thus, the concept of the people of God is in no way a purely social one. Here, Luther lays down a sharp contradiction to the Old Testament understanding of the people of God, identifying it with a homogenous nation. In his concept of the people of God – in contrast to the later Lutheran use of it – there is no identification like this with any group within the world. The unification of the people of God lays in the view of God, not in human understanding.

Thus, the people of God is spread over the world, unified by the love of the Holy Spirit which sanctifies it⁸ and makes it enduring from the apostles’ time to the end of the world according to Christ’s promise in Matt 28:20.⁹ Even if Luther insisted on the hiddenness of the people of God, there is a tendency to find it, at least to a great part, in the communion of Lutheran believers. Here, the signs of the Church find their place: In *Wider Hans Worst*, Luther lists ten signs, by which the reader should be able to under-

3 Paul Althaus, *Die Theologie Martin Luthers*, 2nd revised ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1963), 249, n. 6.

4 WA 50,625,32.

5 “Denn Gottes wort kan nicht on Gottes Volck sein, widerumb Gottes Volck kan nicht on Gottes wort sein,” WA 50,629,34.

6 WA 6,301,4.

7 WA 50,625,33.

8 WA 50,625,25f.

9 WA 50,625,21–23.

stand, “that we stay with the right Old Church,”¹⁰ which means: there is a visible true Church and accordingly, a visible true people of God – and we may see it in the Old Church even as in the Lutheran one. Even if Luther himself did not say this directly, later generations could draw from this the inference that the true and right people of God was the Lutheran Church. Yet, they could not do this in terms of theology: theology, following *Confessio Augustana* 7, quite clearly confirmed that the true church as *congregatio fidelium* could not be grasped in any external groups.

This situation was different in the Reformed Church, where the tendency towards the visibility of the people of God was stronger – interestingly enough, the Zurich pastor Heinrich Bullinger (1504–75) dealt with the question of who the people of God are in his *Decades* when he addressed the question of who should be baptized.¹¹ Obviously his aim was to argue, against the Anabaptists, why children’s baptism should be allowed. He admitted that the people of God was constituted by the confession to God, meaning by something only an adult would be able to give. However, the basis for that was God’s election – even if human beings could not ascertain who was actually elected by God, they were not allowed to exclude anyone possibly elected from the church and so from the possibility of being a member of the people of God by means of the sacraments. Here, again the relationship to the Jews comes in: in Bullinger’s concept of “federal theology,” Christians are heirs to the promise given to Abraham in the First Covenant, and thus they are the true successors of Abraham. Therefore, being a member of the Christian community at least meant being disposed to benefit from the Covenant. Even as the circumcision had given the heritage of Abraham to his children, baptism should also give this to the young children of Christians. This explanation gave a strong reason for the baptism of children, but at the same time it also made the people of God more visible than a strong Augustinian theory of predestination would have done. There was a tendency at least to identify the social community of a Swiss town constituted by baptism with the true people of God and so to make it more of a social phenomenon than it had been in Luther. This was the consequence of a theology that had its background in the community of a city. The duty of the city – in Zurich, as well as in Geneva with Calvin – was to maintain the honour of God in the behaviour of the people of the city. Even if the citizens were never identified with the people of God, as all Reformed theology understood the discrepancy between God’s election and human visibility, the intersection between society and a theological understanding of the people of God was powerful, and the population had to live according the rules made for the people of God.

¹⁰ “das wir bey der rechten alten kirchen blieben (. . .) sind,” WA 51,478,17–479,1.

¹¹ Heinrich Bullinger, “Sermonum Decades quinque de potissimis Christiane religionis capitibus (1552),” in *Theologische Schriften*, ed. Peter Optitz (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2008), 983.

In general, one sees in reformation theology the common conviction that (Protestant) Christians had succeeded and replaced Israel as the people of God. All of them agreed that, in the final sense, this people could only be identified by God Himself. But in reformed tradition a social representation of the people of God was more clearly shaped than in Lutheran theology.