

The Concept of the Community of Believers (Church)¹

One of the problems associated with the word “church” (*kaneesa*) in Arabic, as in some other languages, is that it is sometimes used to describe a building in which a group of Christians worship, and other times to describe one particular group or denomination of Christians - like the Coptic Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Maronite Church or various different Protestant Churches.

We find in the Greek language which is the original language of the Noble Gospel that the Greek word “*ekklesia*” which corresponds to the Arabic word *kaneesa* was used to describe any group of believers who worship God in the name of the Lord Christ (his peace be upon us). Later it was used to describe all those belonging to the community of God, that is, all people of different races, languages and cultures who believe that the One Creator God has revealed himself supremely in the person of the Lord Christ.

The peoples of the eastern Mediterranean used the Greek word *ekklesia* before the time of the Lord Christ to describe any public meeting or assembly of citizens summoned by the authorities. Greek-speaking Jews also used this word to describe the Sons of Israel (that is, the Sons of Jacob), the people of God’s covenant as mentioned in the Torah and other books of the ancient prophets. Therefore, in order to understand the concept of *ekklesia*, or the community of believers as found in the noble Gospel, we need to begin with the idea of “the people of God” as it is found in the Torah, the Psalms and other writings of the prophets, and then see how our Lord Jesus (his peace be upon us) gave the idea a new dimension which was then developed by the apostles.

The first book in the Torah, Genesis, describes the creation of the universe, with Adam and Eve as the climax, as they enjoyed a place of great honour and a close and intimate relationship with God in the Garden of Eden. But this relationship with God was broken when they disobeyed God's command and ate from the tree, and so they lost their distinctive position, and fell from paradise to earth. Their estrangement from God and the shame that followed them because of their ugly deed affected all their descendants who were condemned to live in exile. When the sons of Adam became corrupt, God sent the flood upon them as a punishment, but saved Noah

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(peace be upon him) and his family. The story of Abraham (peace be upon him) which comes after this is important because it marks a new stage in God's relationship with humanity, and in this story we can discern four important aspects to the covenant which God made with the prophet Abraham, when he asked him to move from Ur in Iraq to Palestine, as described in the book of Genesis (12:1-3; 15:18-21; 17:1-8):

1. God's promise about the nation: "I will make you a great nation."
2. God's promise about the land: "I will give you the land as an everlasting inheritance"
3. God's promise about the relationship with the people of his covenant: "I will be your God and you shall be my people"
4. God's promise of blessing for all peoples of the world: "I will bless and show favor to all peoples of the earth through you."

Because of this deep relationship, God promised the prophet Abraham (peace be upon him) and his descendants that they would be the people of his covenant. Since the prophet Jacob, the prophet Abraham's grandson, was renamed "Israel" by God, a branch of the descendants of the prophet Abraham later came to be known by the tribal name the "Sons of Jacob" or "the Sons of Israel".

Several centuries later, at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, the prophet Moses (peace be upon him) told his people that God wished to enter a covenant, favoring them over others, as we see in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy: "You are a people holy to God your Lord. God your Lord has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be the special people of his covenant. And God did not favor and choose you because you were greater in number than other nations, but because of his love and to keep the oath that he made to your forefathers." (Deuteronomy 7:6-8). This is one of the clearest expressions in the Torah that shows how the sons of Jacob saw themselves as "God's chosen people". However, this idea of a "chosen people," can be easily misunderstood. At times the Jews thought that God loved them more than any other people. They also forgot that God had chosen this close relationship with the Sons of Jacob in order to pour his love and blessings on all people. God's ultimate objective for this strong relationship with the Sons of Jacob was to make it possible for humans to restore their relationship with God, which had been broken through the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

We can sum up these ideas found in the Torah, therefore, by saying that God is committed to this relationship with the Sons of Jacob not because they were any better than other peoples, but because God wanted his blessing to spread to all peoples of the world through them, and he chose them from the perspective of his all-encompassing love for the whole human race.

When our God sent our Lord Jesus (his peace be upon us) to be the connection that would enable the sons of Adam to recover their place of honor and nearness that they had with the Almighty, he caused the ideas we previously mentioned regarding the people of God to be developed, and this appeared in the context of at least three new ideas. And these are as follows:

The First Idea:

The Lord Christ claimed that he represents the people of the Sons of Jacob in a special and unique way. He does this by referring to himself with titles that appear in the Torah, Psalms, and other books of the prophets, which were applied to the Sons of Jacob as a whole. For example, Christ described himself as “the spiritual Son of God”, a title applied to the people of the Sons of Jacob and their kings in the Psalms and other books of the prophets. The Lord Christ also called himself “the servant of God,” a description that the prophet Isaiah (peace be upon him) applied to the entire people of the Sons of Jacob. He also described himself as “the true vine,” and we know that God described the Sons of Jacob in the Psalms using “the vine”. The Lord Christ wishes to say by means of these names that he is the one who represents the Sons of Jacob, the people of God’s covenant.

The Second Idea:

Our Lord Jesus (his peace be upon us) called people to be his followers, and spoke about founding his own community. When he chose twelve men to be his apostles, this was a clear reference to the twelve tribes of the Sons of Jacob. When Peter, one of the apostles, spoke about his faith that our Lord Jesus is the awaited Messiah, he answered saying: “and I bestow upon you the nickname Rock. And on the foundation of this rock I will establish my community, and its faith will be firmly established and the gates of death will not stand before it!” (Matthew 16:18) Among the teachings of the Lord Christ, he clarified to his followers the way of making relationships among them on a firm foundation, and he gave them the evident signs of life under their new community. Therefore, we must look at the community of believers as an extension of the previous community, that is, of the Sons of Jacob, with this community having entered a new era through the Lord Christ, with the duty of showing that it follows and obeys the Lord Christ as its head. In the same way the apostles are in the position of patriarchs of this new community.

The Third Idea:

The Lord Christ looked forward to the time when the people of God’s covenant would be made up not only of Jews, but also people from all nations. By means of the resurrection of the Lord Christ from death, God showed his approval of all that he said (his peace be upon us) about himself, and vindicated him before all nations. Then a short time after his resurrection from death he spoke about the unique authority given to him by God, on the basis of which he commanded his apostles to spread his message widely and to invite people to enter the Divine Kingdom: “God has granted me all authority in heaven and on earth, so go out and travel the earth to all nations and speak to them about my message so they will believe in it and become

my followers, and as a sign of their faith, purify them with water in the name of God the eternal Father and his spiritual Son and his Holy and Exalted Spirit, and teach them to do all that I have commanded you, and be certain that I will be with you continually, until the end of time.” (Matthew 28: 18-20)

The book of the Annals of the Apostles (or Acts of the Apostles) describes the growth of the number of those in the community of believers in the weeks and years following the ascension of the Lord Christ to heaven, so when the apostle Peter preached to the crowds of worshippers in Jerusalem on the day of the Feast of Pentecost, three thousand people believed and were purified by immersion in water by the apostles (see Annals of the Apostles 2: 1-47). The rite of purification by immersion was known among Jews as a sign of welcoming a new person to their faith, which was a role that purification through immersion continued to have even among the believers in the Lord Christ.

The apostles developed the concept of the community of believers in many ways through their writings, and they indicated the significance of all communities of believers no matter where they formed. Thus Paul for example spoke in his first epistle to the believers in Corinth about the group of believers that met in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (1 Corinthians 16:19). He was also aware of a number of communities of believers in other regions because he spoke of the communities in the province of Asia.

The apostle Paul also spoke of the followers of the Lord Christ not only as believers but also as “righteous worshippers”. For while the prophet Moses (peace be upon him) noted that the Sons of Jacob are a people enjoying a special status with God, we find that the apostle Paul speaks of all believers in the Lord Christ as saints having a special status before God, regardless of their ties to the descendants of Jacob. He opened his epistle to the believers in the city of Philippi with these words: “to all the righteous worshippers of God in the city of Philippi, the followers of our Lord Jesus the Messiah” (1:1). Paul also uses a striking description for the community of believers when he compares them to “the community of the one body of the Lord Christ”. “The man is the source of the woman, just as the Lord Messiah is the source of the community of believers, and their savior in that they are the community of the one body of him on the earth” (Ephesians 5:23). The basic idea here is that all believers in Christ (his peace be upon us) are not only joined and united to one another, but also to the Lord Christ because he is seen as the head of the body.

When the apostle Peter the Rock wrote his epistle to the followers of the Lord Christ living in what is now known as Turkey, there being among them both Jews and non-Jews, he employed images and titles which in the Torah, Psalms and other books of the prophets were reserved only for the Sons of Jacob, describing with them the followers of the Lord Christ of diverse races: “But as for you, you are a community chosen by God, priests to the Mighty King, a nation of those dedicated [to God], those he has set apart to himself that you would lift up his praise among people,

because he brought you out of the darkness of evil into his dazzling light. You did not belong to God's nation previously, but today you have become part of the nation of the Almighty. You did not enjoy the mercy of the Almighty, but now you enjoy it."
(1 Peter 2:9-10)

In this way the expression "the community of the believers" found in the teachings of the apostles came to mean all individuals of the people of God's covenant, the believers in the Lord Christ as savior, over the passing of ages, past present and future. It encompasses all humans from all races and cultures, men and women, young and old, in short, all who respond by accepting the good news of the love of God as revealed through the Lord Christ.