

Book Review

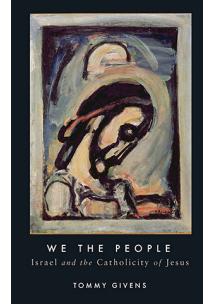
Tommy Givens.

We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus

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Before earning his ThD from Duke University in 2012, Dr. Givens served as missionary in Spain for several years teaching courses in Theology at Centro Teológico Al-Ándalus. Currently, he is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, also teaching Christian Ethics and nonviolence. Dr. Givens is a member of the Society of Christian Ethics, Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana, and the Society of Scriptural Reasoning. *We the People* is the product of the research done toward Givens' doctoral dissertation, research that continued after earning his ThD.

The book seeks to answer one question, which becomes the fulcrum of Givens' work: What does it mean to be the people of God? This raises a second question of almost equal importance: How does the election of Israel as the people of God determine what it means to be Christian? (20) The author understands that these questions cannot be addressed without a clear definition of "peoplehood" and its relationship to God's election of a people. Through the years religion and politics have become two completely different spheres in which the Christian life is lived, nevertheless Givens explains that John Howard Yoder debunks such paradigm by proposing that to be

Christian is to be called to follow Jesus politically as a people (4). Givens explains that the modern idea of peoplehood promotes that "the people has the ability to decide who is and who is not the people." (7) However, Yoder's understanding proposes that the peoplehood of Christians is not ruled by the norms or "general currents of wherever it lives" but by a partnership with Jesus, embracing his Jewishness. (34)

Givens develops his first two chapters introducing and critiquing Yoder's understanding of the politics of the Christian life and the effect this had in how the church viewed and acted toward the Jewish people and their story. According to Givens, Yoder proposes that if Christians are to read Jesus in a more theological and historically sensitive way they must embrace Jesus' Jewishness and the political struggle being Jewish meant during his lifetime. (23) Jesus' pacifism was not a novelty but rather a reflection of Jewish pacifism. With Yoder again, Givens states that when using violence to protect peoplehood is justified, Jesus responds not with a politics that avoids peoplehood, but to the peoplehood of violence Jesus responds with a peoplehood of his own, of his people. (24)

The answer to the fulcrum question Givens responds, "The people of Israel progressively embodied the ethos whereby God brings peace

to the world and faithful Christianity has never ceased to be Israel. God has never abandoned the historical process and Jesus came to fulfill it. There is no faithful Christianity without this process.” (70) This statement raises a key question, “What can history tell us about what it is to be the people of Israel, or to be Christian?” (74) Pursuing an answer to this question, Givens provides us with a sincere critique of Yoder’s eagerness to decide how and why Israel is the people of God. Yoder understood the need to address the issues of the church’s past but saw the Christian-Jewish schism as a more urgent matter, because to him this schism had significant influence in the development of Christianity’s self-understanding, away from Judaism. (80) Yoder insisted that Christianity must not forget that Israel is the people of God and that that is not negotiable, nor changeable. But Givens questions Yoder’s lack of addressing God’s election of Israel as his people. To Yoder Israel remained as the people of God based on their faithfulness. If God elected Israel, Givens proposes, then Yoder’s theory cannot stand, since being his people would have been God’s choice and not Israel’s commitment to abide by his commands. (88) Givens poignantly defines Yoder’s approach to describing the “true” people of God as remaining “captive to the modern discourse of peoplehood” (111) the very discourse he is trying to subvert.

Chapter three continues the discussion. The modern account of peoplehood is what Yoder and others had fought against. Nevertheless, by

placing peoplehood as a people’s self-definition, and by making it their choice to become God’s people, it becomes a vicious cycle fueled by man-made ideas of identity. Givens redirects the readers’ attention from Yoder to Étienne Balibar who helps dissect the history of the modern concept of peoplehood and its violent roots. Givens writes, “Under the emerging and colonizing powers of the modern West, to be a people-to belong to a people-was to be not Jewish. In some cases it would come to mean the eradication of Jewishness.” (133).

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Givens turns to Karl Barth in chapter four, which aims to “substantiate and develop” the understanding of the people of God as elect and not as being people of their choosing, in response to the supersessionist people of modernity, “whose theologically derived racism

and nationalism have been the source of such diabolical violence.” (178) The author shows his affinity with Barth sharing the idea that God’s election of Israel is irrevocable and thus Christianity cannot tear Jewish flesh away from the people of God, so as to retain a “pure” or “spiritual” constituency. (228)

Nevertheless, Givens finds in Barth the same dead-end as in Yoder. He sees Barth’s accounts of God’s election of the people as eclipsed by the “formal categories of his Christology.” (231) There is a whole history of a people which was elected by God, a history that cannot be ignored or encased in theological terminology. Givens emphatically states, “Thus, by God’s election the people is not determined by the way it lives in time, but by the time in which it lives.” (282)

The author ends chapter five by providing a more theologically refined answer to the second question at the core of the book's argument. Givens proposes that to be a Christian is to be adopted by the God of Israel into the community of the elected people of God. (294)

The book ends with chapters six and seven developing a careful exegesis of the book of Matthew and Paul's letter to the Romans. Givens sees the result of his work through the first gospel as opposing Yoder's idea of what it is to be people of God. Matthew shows that the people of God is not marked by the difference between faithfulness and unfaithfulness, but rather the people of God are those whom God has formed by election over time." (341) Likewise, in his exegesis of Romans 9-11, Givens argues that Paul is not, at any moment speaking in terms of ethnicity, or an ethnic Israel of any sort. (407) He explains that all the apostle is doing is telling the story of the elect people of God in the flesh and in the promise. (409)

Givens concludes his book reflecting on the need for repentance for pretending to decide who is the true people of God, and all that implies. Such an arrogant attitude has only served to divide, not only the Christian church, but humanity at large. He invites the readers to read the Bible -more carefully, as to tell the gospel as a story of solidarity and not of oppression. (418).

In *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus*, the challenge Givens proposes from the very beginning is surprisingly easy to follow throughout the book, and clearly defined in the end. The answers to the questions at the core of Givens' work are carefully developed from

chapter to chapter. Givens accomplishes this by not losing sight of the issues at hand and by repeatedly addressing what it is to be the people of God (7, 10, 20, 86, 93, 110, 115, 120, 122, 173, 177, 210, 234, 401). This is relevant if we are to consider the complexity of the task, the dense theoretical framework, the grade of difficulty to decipher the main sources utilized (Yoder, Barth, Balibar), and the size of the book. Givens does an outstanding job resisting the temptation to be sidetracked by other equally challenging issues. By doing this he allows the reader to follow along without feeling intimidated by the vast amount of philosophical, theological, and theoretical terminology.

Givens accomplishes his goal, although noticeably laboriously, with ease by stating his agenda with clarity from the opening chapters. Israel is the people God elected as his people. Israel did not do anything to deserve it, God chose them. To be a Christian is to be part of the elected people of God by "adoption" through Jesus. Nevertheless, Givens' argument falls in the same trap he claims Yoder and Barth did, that is to define who is the people of God while not mentioning key factors in the election history of Israel. Givens proposes Jesus' pacifism as "the political continuation—the fulfillment—of what had long characterized Israel in exile." (64) Yet, Israel's election as the people of God is filled with language of justified violence, such as Deuteronomy 7:1-2. Givens does not address God-sanctioned or God-performed violence against other nations for the sake of his people. A brief survey of Old Testament ethics on the dynamics between Israel's election and violence would have provided the book with

much-needed context. Such context would have challenged Givens' view of pacifism and its status within the people of God but would have provided a more balanced framework.

Political theory, supersessionism, and election theology are not appealing subjects for the common reader, yet Givens succeeds at managing the complexity of the subject and the tedious language. This allows readers to engage the subject even if intimidated by the terminology. Books of this nature usually land in the hands of those who already manage the subject well; books of this nature are discussed in academic circles, and among scholars who would write more books and articles on similar topics. *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* may be the book that breaks that trend and opens the discussion to scholars in other fields as well as Christian leaders who struggle with the ideas Givens tackles. If supersessionism did not stay in academic circles but became part of Christian thought and culture, then Givens' work should not stay in academic circles but become a part of a movement that changes Christian thought and culture.