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Introduction

Perhaps the single truth of the Christian faith needing re-evaluation more than any other in the 21st century is the doctrine of the church. The widespread divisions, the lack of singularity of purpose in the midst of a splintered universe of humanity, testifies strongly to the need for the church of Jesus Christ to understand itself correctly so that it may minister to a broken world from the perspective of unity of mission.

The church and its theologians have regularly investigated and reinvestigated the nature of the church as defined by the Apostle Paul. He above all others of the apostolic band brought into being the church of the Christ as it exists until today. More than any other individual Paul defined its unique nature and mission among the various organized bodies of humanity.

But an altogether different defining of the church's essence may be found in other ancient documents of the Christian community. Outstanding among these is the anonymous writing known as *the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Nowhere in this



God's People in the Wilderness

composition does the author refer to the church as the 'body of Christ', as does the Apostle Paul. Neither does he develop very fully the concept of the 'kingdom of God' as that teaching is found in the ministry of Jesus and the gossellers. His perspective on the people of God is altogether different, even though wholly compatible with other images of the church in the new covenant scriptures. For the writer to the Hebrews, the church of today finds its most proper definition in terms of the historical experience of the old covenant people of God 'in the wilderness' during the days of Moses.

For him, the church is *God's people in the wilderness*. His unifying perspective on this vital question of the church's self-definition provides fresh insight into the nature of the church – an insight that has the promise of reviving and redefining the life of Christ's people even today. Rooted in the redemptive experience of the old covenant people of God, this life-shaping self-definition may provide much-needed aid to the confused state of churches in Christ for the 21st century. Consider then the nature and mission of the people of God in today's world as defined by Hebrews. Viewed from this perspective, the church of today may deliver itself from a false triumphalism on the one hand, and from a compromising secularism on the other.

In order to gain a proper perspective on evidence in the book of Hebrews which presents the new covenant people of God as a wilderness people, it is necessary first to examine the wilderness theme as it appears throughout ancient Israelite tradition. Then a consideration of the theme as it appears in the broader context of the new covenant scriptures may be grasped with greater clarity and practicality. This combined perspective may offer a legitimate understanding of the concept for God's people as they ought to be perceived in the world of today.