

## How Can We Be the People of God? The Essene Model

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Isaiah 40:3 – “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Mark 1:1-8

One of the questions that every generation of believers must ask and answer is “How can we be God’s people?” What is required of us to demonstrate that we are followers of God?

Interestingly, this is a question that Jesus himself had to answer in terms of his own earthly existence and purpose. His temptations reflect this question. His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane – Father, if there’s another way, let this cup pass from me – reflects this question. And I believe, His response to the options before Him in terms of the Jewish sects very vividly characterizes His attempt at self-understanding in terms of His religious role and response to God and to the world around Him.

The Sects of Judaism – Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots – All of these provided an option or a model for expression of commitment to God.

I. I want to look at one of these options and to see if we can learn something about the issues facing Jesus and ourselves as we seek to do what we often describe as the “will of God.”

A. Who were the Essenes?

1. Jews – Josephus estimated that there were about 4,000 during the first century.
  - a. Some lived in villages, according to Josephus.
  - b. Others lived in isolation from society – these are the ones with whom we are concerned in this study. The basis for their withdrawal was Isaiah 40:3, which as they understood it said "The voice of one crying "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." They took this passage literally and went into the Judean wilderness to prepare for God's intervention into history.
2. Communal – the group that I want to emphasize lived at a place called Qumran, a desert setting on the Dead Sea.
3. Separatist – they were convinced that the world was corrupt and that even the priesthood at Jerusalem was corrupt and false.
4. Celibate – Josephus says that they “disdained marriage” although some Essenes may have married – marriage was only for the procreation of children.
5. Committed to the Law of Moses and the Prophets – Their commitment to the writings that we call the Old Testament – is seen in the discovery beginning in 1947 of what is now called the Dead Sea Scrolls. They contain at least fragments from all writings of the Old Testament except the book of Esther.
6. Exercised rigid discipline – an offender of their laws could be punished or even expelled – the regulations of the community went into great detail. E.g. spitting in the midst of their council was prohibited.
7. Adults only – they would receive and train children – and they would provide asylum for the sick, aged, and travelers.
8. Eschatological – they looked to the future when God would intervene in human history and defeat the forces of evil. One of their scrolls was a “War Scroll” on

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a future war between the children of light and the children of darkness – they were predestinarian, believing intensely in a sovereign God.

- B. In answering the question, “How can we be God’s people?” we can draw several conclusions about the Essenes’ response.
1. You separate yourself from a corrupt world – they not only wanted to avoid contamination by a secular world, such as that in Roman society, but also by a defiled Judaism.
  2. You reflect a primary concern about your own group or community. They were the true Israel, God’s faithful.
  3. You are more concerned about the future than you are about the present – they anticipated the intervention of God, the end of time, ultimate victory and vindication.
- C. The Essenes are the only major sect of Judaism not mentioned by name in the New Testament. Yet their presence can be seen.
1. Some believe that there was a close association between the Essenes and John the Baptist. Luke 3:1-6 identifies John with Isaiah 40:3, with some differences. Luke quotes the Isaiah passage as follows, “As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”
  2. They are the only sect that Jesus does not openly condemn. We can conclude that He found nothing offensive in their lifestyle and in their religious practices. At the same time, He rejected in his teachings an overemphasis on a separatistic way of life. He called His disciples “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” “Leaven” was another descriptive term which indicates an active role in the world in which we live. And He prayed that although His disciples should not be of the world, they should be in the world. Concerning the future, he warned them not to be overly concerned.

### Conclusions:

- A. We are to be in the world – we must look beyond ourselves.
- B. While we should anticipate the future, we must be God’s people in the present. He has placed us here today. Sometimes our primary concern seems to be almost totally future-oriented – get people out of hell and into heaven. Good. But what about our place here and now? Discipleship, ministry, mission, social and ethical leaven in this world.
- C. There may need to be times of withdrawal – retreat – refueling – this we can learn from the Essenes. But such activities should refresh us to go back into the world.
- D. In the end, Jesus called for engagement in the world, not isolation from it. And He focused on the present more so that the future.
- E. In the final analysis, Jesus rejected all four models represented by the major sects of Judaism in the first century, A.D. His answer to “How can we be the people of God” has to be gleaned from the lessons of his temptations, His teachings (especially the Sermon on the Mount,” and the example of vicarious suffering, as portrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane experience.
- F. Our task answer to the question of how can we be the people of God is found in the response of Jesus to those that he encountered and to their answers, as well as in his own life, ministry, and teachings.