
The Gospel and Race

Ethnic diversity of the NT world

- ❖ At one level, the NT divides the world into two groups, Jews and Gentiles. These two groups represent religious-racial division.
- ❖ But within the “Gentile” group, there is a great deal of diversity.
 - ❖ There is cultural diversity: “Greeks and barbarians” (Rom 1:14); “barbarian, Scythian” (Col 3:11)
 - ❖ There is ethnic/racial diversity
 - ❖ It is important to say at the outset that “Roman” or “Greek” or “Greco-Roman” are not racial divisions, but cultural ones.
 - ❖ “The term ‘Greek’ did not refer to a people, but rather to a community of various peoples who spoke the same language and embraced certain aspects of the same culture” (Hays, 143).

Ethnic diversity of the NT world

- ❖ The Roman empire experienced a great deal of racial mixing.
- ❖ Often many different ethnic and racial groups would be lumped together (i.e. Britannia, Gallia, Africa, Asia, Achaia, etc).
- ❖ Roman centurions would often marry native peoples and settle down in those regions once their required 25 years of service was completed.
- ❖ Slavery, a common feature of life in the era, involved displacement of peoples throughout the empire. These slaves would be integrated into the ethnic mix through intermarriage.

Ethnic diversity of the NT world

- ❖ Black Africa (Cush, Meroe, Ethiopia)
 - ❖ After the defeat of the 25th (Nubian) Egyptian Dynasty in 656 BC, the Cushites would continue to flourish under their own rule in the Meroitic Kingdom until AD 350.
 - ❖ The Romans would have several skirmishes on the border of Egypt and Meroe / Cush; their furthest penetration would be in AD 61. They generally followed the earlier Greek pattern of calling all Cushites “Ethiophians” (lit. burnt faces).
 - ❖ The patterns of intermarriage and intercultural exchange present in the empire included black Africans too (Hays, 150).

Ethnic diversity of the NT world

- ❖ North Africa (Berbers, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans)
 - ❖ The Arab conquest of north Africa doesn't take place until the seventh century AD. During the NT, there were comparatively few "Arabs" there.
 - ❖ The original inhabitants were called "Libyans" by the ancient Egyptians—their ethnic origins were likely a mix of black African, Semitic and Egyptian elements.
 - ❖ The descendants of these original inhabitants are called "Berbers" (from the Latin for "barbarians"). They continue today in many north African countries, as far south as Nigeria.
 - ❖ Aristocratic Berbers would eventually integrate into Greek and Roman society, losing their distinctiveness. In North Africa, the majority of lower classes—farmers—were Berber (e.g. Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine all had Berber backgrounds)

Ethnic diversity of the NT world

- ❖ North Africa (Berbers, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans)
 - ❖ The Phoenicians (i.e. Tyre and Sidon) established several colonies in north Africa by the seventh century BC. The largest was Carthage (in modern Tunisia).
 - ❖ This people were Semitic, descendants of ancient Canaanites (“sons of Ham”).
 - ❖ In the third century BC, led by Hannibal, the Carthaginians with their allies (Berbers, Cushites, others) invaded Italy—it appears that the elephants and handlers that Hannibal used came from Cush.
- ❖ By the end of the 7th century BC, Greek settlers had established colonies in Cyrene (modern-day Libya). This would be a strong center of Greek culture, but many of the settlers took Berber wives. Eventually, Ptolemy I would capture Cyrene and resettle Palestinian Jews there.

Luke-Acts

- ❖ One of the central issues in Luke-Acts: “How did the hope of God open up to include all races?...This racial concern, observed throughout Luke’s Gospel, indicates how God’s plan includes all races” (Bock, 1, 28, 35).
- ❖ God’s plan is not just that the gospel will go to all peoples, but that all peoples will be brought together through the Gospel to form one people in Christ (Hays, 157).

Luke-Acts

- ❖ One of the ways that Luke-Acts does this is by repeatedly connecting Jesus and the church's mission to God's promise to Abraham.
 - ❖ Jesus' coming was a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Luke 1:54-55, 73; 3:34)
 - ❖ "People will come from east, west, north, south" to join Abraham at the eschatological feast (Luke 13:28-30)
 - ❖ The peoples will trust in the Messiah as part of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham (Acts 3:25)
- ❖ From the beginning, Jesus' mission is focused on "all peoples" (Luke 2:28-32)
 - ❖ And the disciples are commissioned to preach in his name "to all nations" (Luke 24:47; cf. Genesis 18:18).
 - ❖ The disciples were to start in Jerusalem, but go "to the ends of the earth" with the Gospel (Acts 1:8, cf. Luke 24:47).

Luke-Acts

- ❖ Pentecost
 - ❖ The disciples were to “start in Jerusalem” with their witness to Jesus; Acts 2 depicts how that happens and how the prophecies of Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 happen.
 - ❖ “There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” (2:5; cf. Gen 12:3; Acts 3:25)
 - ❖ Parthians, Medes and Elamites, Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome, Crenate and Arabs (Acts 2:9-11).



Luke-Acts

- ❖ Pentecost
 - ❖ The miracle of Pentecost wasn't that Peter preached in Greek and everyone understood; rather, it was that Peter spoke and everyone heard "in our own tongues" (2:11).
 - ❖ In Genesis 11, God had scattered the peoples and confused their languages; in Acts 2, in response to his promise to Abraham in Genesis 12, through Jesus's Spirit, he gathers the peoples and speaks in their own languages.
 - ❖ Also, the promise of Joel 2, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people," involves the nations (Acts 2:9-11, 16-21).

Luke-Acts

- ❖ The movement from Judea to Samaria involved crossing racial / ethnic boundaries for the Gospel.
- ❖ “The ethnic and cultural boundaries between Jews and Samaritans was very bit as rigid and hostile as the current boundary between blacks and whites in the most racist areas of the United States” (Hays, 163).
- ❖ There is preparation for this transition through Jesus’ own engagement with and depiction of Samaritans:
 - ❖ Luke 9:51-56: refuses to curse a Samaritan village, demonstrating that he is committed to those whom the Jews reject.
 - ❖ Luke 10:25-37: Jesus uses a Samaritan as his example of what it looks like to be a neighbor
 - ❖ Luke 17:11-19: a Samaritan is cleansed by Jesus and shows gratitude—an example and rebuke to the Jews.

Luke-Acts

- ❖ The movement from Judea to Samaria involved crossing racial/ethnic boundaries for the Gospel.
- ❖ In Acts, this pattern sets the stage for the crossing of racial boundaries with the Gospel:
 - ❖ Philip's mission (along with Peter and John) to Samaria: Acts 8:4-17
 - ❖ This church will receive missionary reports from Paul and Barnabas, rejoice, and perhaps even join with them in the Jerusalem Assembly (Acts 15:3-4)

Luke-Acts

- ❖ The movement of the Gospel to “the ends of the earth” involves crossing other racial boundaries:
 - ❖ Acts 8:26-40: the “Ethiopian” eunuch
 - ❖ This man was from the Meroitic Kingdom (Cush); he was “an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means ‘queen of the Ethiopians’)” (Acts 8:27).
 - ❖ He was also a “eunuch”—so both as a foreigner and as a eunuch, he was excluded from full membership in Israel (cf. Deut 23:1; Isa 56:5)
 - ❖ But because of faith in Jesus, he is now a full part of God’s people.

Luke-Acts

- ❖ The movement of the Gospel to “the ends of the earth” involves crossing other racial boundaries:
 - ❖ Acts 10-11: Cornelius’ conversion
 - ❖ Unlike the Ethiopian, Cornelius is a “God-fearer” but not identified as a Jew via circumcision or dietary practices (cf. Acts 8:27, 11:3).
 - ❖ Central to Peter’s vision were the religious purity boundaries that kept Jews separate from Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16, 27-29).
 - ❖ Peter’s sermon emphasizes that “God does not show favoritism”; God demonstrates this by pouring his Spirit out upon these uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 10:47).
 - ❖ Peter was not alone in this outreach to racial others; others did the same (Acts 11:19-21).
 - ❖ Eventually, this Antioch church would have an elder named “Simeon called Niger” (Acts 13:1). Niger means “black”; most likely, his roots were Cushite.
 - ❖ Also, the Antioch church would have another elder named “Lucius of Cyrene” (13:1). Remember, Cyrene would be a racial hodgepodge of Greeks, Berbers, and Jews.

Luke-Acts

- ❖ Paul's missionary journeys involved witnessing to Jews and Gentiles and forming churches of mixed religious / racial backgrounds:
 - ❖ When Paul preaches in Pisidian Antioch (Phrygia), he quotes Isaiah 49:6 as justification for his Gentile mission.
 - ❖ They move from there to Iconium, Lystra, Derbe (Galatia, but likely Phrygians)—these Jews and Gentile believers were formed into churches (Acts 14:23).
 - ❖ The mission to the Gentiles was defended in Acts 15; Amos 9:11-12 is quoted to justify the Gentile mission (Acts 15:12-19).
 - ❖ In the second journey, churches established in Macedonia (Acts 16-17) and Achaia (Acts 18) and Asia (Acts 19).
 - ❖ Acts ends with Paul sitting in Rome at the "ends of the earth," strongly affirming the Gentile mission (Acts 28:25-31)

Paul: Galatians

- ❖ A key issue in many of the Apostle Paul's letters is how Jews and Gentiles must work together to form interracial churches—centered on a common faith in Jesus Christ.
- ❖ Around the time Paul is defending his mission to the leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 15), he is dealing with problems arising from his first missionary journey to Galatia.
- ❖ What was the different Gospel (1:6-9)? The demand that Christians had to become “Jews” in order to be part of the church (circumcision, dietary laws)

Paul: Galatians

- ❖ Paul's response:
 - ❖ Paul observes that his Gospel came directly from Jesus—he got it first hand from him (1:12)
 - ❖ Further, the leaders never questioned, challenged, or corrected Paul's Gospel that until "false believers" raised questions (2:1-10).
 - ❖ But the religious-racial demarcation is a betrayal of justification by faith alone (2:16-21)—that is the only basis for entrance into the church.
 - ❖ The Gentiles are included in the church and receive the Spirit in fulfillment to the promise to Abraham and received by faith alone (3:1-14)
 - ❖ Those who are clothed with Christ (by faith alone represented in the common waters of baptism) find a deeper basis of unity than race, class, or gender (3:26-28)

Paul: Romans

- ❖ Paul writes Romans to a people whom he has never met or with whom he had no prior association. He desires to be sent by them on to Spain (15:24).
- ❖ In order to secure their support, he lays out his Gospel for them—a Gospel that is for both Jew and Gentile:
 - ❖ The Jews have no real advantage or source of boasting against the Gentiles—there is no difference for all have sinned and all are justified by faith in Jesus (3:22-24, 27-31)
 - ❖ The inclusion of the Gentiles is in fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham—just as he trusted God (and was justified) prior to receiving circumcision, so the determinative factor for Jew and Gentile is faith in Jesus (4:1-25).
 - ❖ But even before covenant, there is a deeper divine commitment: his purpose of election. That is the only reason why anyone—Jew or Gentile—hears God's call and believes the promises of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 9-11).
 - ❖ Hence, there is no basis for arrogance on the part of Jews or Gentiles: rather, gratitude and praise for God's inscrutable mercy and grace.

Revelation

- ❖ Richard Bauckham: “the conversion of the nations is actually at the center of the prophetic message of Revelation.”
- ❖ God’s covenant promise of Abraham—indeed, his salvific promise made in Genesis 3—is realized finally.
- ❖ Revelation 1:7—combines Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10 with a reference to “all peoples”: a double-meaning, both mourning for repentance for those who believe and mourning for coming judgment for those who don’t.
- ❖ Revelation 5:9: “with your blood you purchased for God persons from every *tribe* and *language* and *people* and *nation*”—Daniel 7:14 with Genesis 10:5, 20, 31.
 - ❖ This four-fold description of the peoples (tribe, language, people, and nation) occurs seven times in Revelation (5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:15). “In Revelation, four is the number of the world, seven is the number of completeness...In the symbolic world of Revelation, there could hardly be a more emphatic indication of universalism” (Bauckham).

Revelation

- ❖ God's covenant promise of Abraham—indeed, his salvific promise made in Genesis 3—is realized finally.
- ❖ Revelation 7:9: “After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every *nation, tribe, people, and language...*”
- ❖ From one angle in Revelation 7, an idealized description of “true Israel” (vv. 1-8); from another angle, a realistic view (vv. 9-17)—cf. 14:1-4
- ❖ They belong to the new heavens and new earth (cf. 7:15-17 with 21-22).
- ❖ They have in common faith in “the blood of the Lamb” (7:14)

Revelation

- ❖ God's covenant promise of Abraham—indeed, his salvific promise made in Genesis 3—is realized finally.
- ❖ Revelation 21-22:
 - ❖ The heavenly Jerusalem—representing the people of God—is depicted with both the names of the tribes of Israel and the names of the Apostles: i.e. Jew and Gentile together (21:12-14)
 - ❖ “The *nations* walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it...The glory and honor of the *nations* will be brought into it” (21:24, 26; cf. Isa 60:3, 5, 11)
 - ❖ “The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the *nations*” (22:2; cf. Ezek 47:12)

Summary

- ❖ So, the story of the Bible from Genesis 3 on is how God restores his image and reclaims his world for his own glory.
- ❖ Adam and Eve—created in God’s image, rebel against God’s Word, and poisoned the stream: every human being is a glorious ruin.
- ❖ But God promises, starting in Genesis 3:15 and more explicitly in Genesis 12:1-3, that he will restore his image in such a way that “all *peoples* on earth will be blessed through” Abraham.
- ❖ That promise never changes throughout the OT—God’s purpose is always for the peoples, clans, nations, languages to come to know him and to be restored as his image in a remade world.

Summary

- ❖ So, the story of the Bible from Genesis 3 on is how God restores his image and reclaims his world for his own glory.
- ❖ Jesus comes and accomplishes this purpose through his life and death on the cross. His substitutionary sacrifice satisfies God's judicial wrath against sin, secures a righteous status for his own, and starts afresh the renewal process in us.
- ❖ He calls us to go to the "nations" with this message and grants us the Holy Spirit to extend the boundaries of his kingdom to the ends of the earth. Paul and other missionaries do this and defend the Gospel: Jesus came to reconcile men and women from different races to himself and to each other in one body.
- ❖ And this mission will be finally realized: God's missionary purpose to restore his image in his remade world will happen. The nations will come in and be healed; the world will be made new; God's purpose will be accomplished.

Key questions moving forward

- ❖ The questions then become:
 - ❖ Why would we think that racism is not a significant sin and a betrayal of the Gospel?
 - ❖ And in response to that story, what should we do about it?
 - ❖ Is there a way to confess, repent, and live in the light of the Gospel when it comes to God's purpose for us and our churches?
 - ❖ In what ways might we need to move intentionally to reflect this divine mission as a church? In our leadership? In our programming?
 - ❖ Are there ways we need to listen well to each other across racial or ethnic lines that will allow us to develop into maturity as "one new humanity"?

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Luke-Acts has a clear focus on the Gospel extending beyond a single religious-racial people to encompass ethnic and racial diversity of the world. We know this for international missions but we don't actually reckon with it in the life of our local churches: why do we struggle to see Luke-Acts requiring us to seek this reality in our own places? How might doing so shift our approach to leadership? To Mission?
- ❖ Obviously, Galatians (along with several other Pauline letters) focuses on forging a single congregation drawn from various racial groups. Paul establishes that the only basis for belonging among the people of God is faith in Jesus Christ as the instrument of justification. In what ways do we find it difficult to keep this as the standard for membership among God's people? Conversely, why is this the most hopeful prescription for diversity-in-unity within the Church today?
- ❖ Revelation clearly draws on the categories of Genesis 10 to emphasize the universal reach of the Gospel and the diverse nations who make up the people of God. In what ways might the vision of Revelation shape our congregations today? What practical steps might we take to ensure that our mission, discipleship, and leadership development works toward this vision?