

“All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed”

BY MIKEAL G. PARSONS

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More than the other Gospel writers, Luke consistently focuses on issues of race in Jesus' ministry and in the mission activity of the early church. For Luke, God's people are inclusive of all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity. This radical vision of God's covenant people was articulated in the words and deeds of Jesus and his first followers.

Undergirding this vision was the covenant in which God promised that through Abraham and his descendents “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The Abrahamic covenant provided for Luke the scriptural warrant for the Gentile mission and the radically inclusive covenant community resulting from that mission. From the beginning of the Third Gospel until the end of its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, the nature and shape of the Abrahamic community remain a central concern.

The radical inclusivity of the Abrahamic covenant is *anticipated* in the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon's speech about the infant Christ (which is replete also with echoes of Isaiah 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; and 52:9-10):

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of *all peoples*,

a light for revelation to the *Gentiles*,
and for glory to your people *Israel*.

Luke 2:29-32

Jesus is God's salvation for *all people*, regardless of ethnicity or race.

The wideness of God's redemptive mercy is a major theme in Jesus' inaugural sermon in Nazareth. At the end of his sermon, Jesus declares:

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed — only Naaman the Syrian.

*Luke 4:25-27 (NIV)*¹

In recounting these two stories, Jesus emphasizes that the object of each prophet's miraculous ministry is a Gentile. In Elijah's case it is the poor widow at Zarephath in Sidon; with Elisha it is Naaman the Syrian official. These stories make it clear that prophets of old did not limit their ministries to the in-group. They, like Jesus, were no respecter of gender, class, or race.

The radical inclusiveness of Jesus' ministry shocks his audience: "When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage" (4:28). They had understood themselves to be the primary beneficiaries of Jesus' message. They could all relate to being poor, captive, blind, or oppressed (cf. Luke 4:18-19). They were ready for deliverance, but they were not prepared to share it. When they hear that Jesus intends his Jubilee ministry to extend to Gentiles, they are "filled with anger" and fulfill Jesus' prophecy that "no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town" (Luke 4:24). Instead, "they got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff" (4:29). The crowd's intentions, however, are thwarted: "But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way" (Luke 4:30). On this day, Jesus escapes death on a hill in his hometown. His radical ministry of reaching out to those excluded because of race, gender, or economic and social status, however, eventually leads to his execution on another hill called Calvary in the city of Jerusalem.

This story should not be taken to mean that Israel, in Luke's view, is permanently rejected. Stories of positive Jewish response to Jesus' ministry are found throughout the Third Gospel (and later Acts). But those who respond positively to Jesus' message recognize the inherent inclusiveness of his message. Those who do not hear that message of inclusion or choose to reject it do not respond positively.

Throughout the rest of the Third Gospel, the inclusivity of God's covenant people is seen in both Jesus' words and deeds. He tells a parable about a man

beaten, robbed, and left for dead by the side of the road (Luke 10:25-37). The only person who gives aid to the man is a Samaritan, whose identity could only have shocked those familiar with Jewish/Samaritan hostilities. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, vilifies the Samaritans as half-breeds:

...they alter their attitude according to circumstance and, when they see the Jews prospering, call them their kinsmen, on the ground that they are descended from Joseph and are related to them through their origin from him, but, when they see the Jews in trouble, they say that they have nothing whatever in common with them nor do these have any claim of friendship or race, and they declare themselves to be aliens of another race. (*Jewish Antiquities*, IX, 291)²

Even Jesus’ own disciples shared in this hostility. In the episode immediately preceding the parable, a Samaritan village refuses to extend hospitality to Jesus and disciples. James and John ask Jesus: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54). Their question elicits a sharp rebuke from Jesus (9:55). Later on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus heals ten lepers in the region between Samaria and Galilee. When only one of the ten, a Samaritan, returns to thank him, Jesus responds to the man:

“Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?” Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Luke 17:17-19

In this new Abrahamic community, according to Luke, help was to be received and extended, regardless of ethnic identity.

This same concern to acknowledge and include the foreigner or outsider continues in the Acts of the Apostles. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter declares to his Jewish audience that the

promise of redemption “is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39, NIV). While the reference to those who “are far off” could be a temporal reference to future generations, it is more likely an ethnic designation referring to Gentiles who will now be included in God’s mercies of salvation. (See the similar phrase in Acts 22:21, in which Paul recounts Christ’s commission to him on the

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Damascus road—“Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”)

In the very next scene, Peter explicitly cites the Abrahamic promise, quoting Genesis 12:3 to the people who had gathered to him at Solomon’s Portico: “You are the descendants of the prophets and of the covenant that God gave to your ancestors, saying to Abraham, ‘And in your descendants all the families of the earth shall be blessed’” (Acts 3:25). Peter focuses not on the gift of land or the promise of descendants but rather on the promise that through Abraham’s seed “all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” That the Abrahamic covenant, which was fulfilled in the coming of the seed of Abraham, Christ, now includes Gentiles is also indicated, however subtly, in Peter’s next comment, “When God raised up his servant, he sent him *first* to you” (3:26; my emphasis). The implication is that God’s servant came first to the Jew, but also for the Gentile. Race is no hindrance to God’s salvific mercies.

Peter would be involved later in bringing this good news to the Gentiles and perhaps in ways he could not yet have understood or accepted. But before Peter’s ministry is transformed through the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10-11, Luke reports the conversion of another Gentile, the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. Near the end of the story of the Ethiopian eunuch’s conversion in Acts 8:26-40, the eunuch, having heard Philip’s christological interpretation of Isaiah 53 and seeing a pool of water, exclaims, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). The answer, of course, is that nothing can exclude one who has believed from incorporation into the family of God, not even one who is from as “far away” as Ethiopia and whose body is deemed defective and inadequate by larger cultural norms.

In the very next chapter, Paul receives his commission to be the Apostle to the Gentiles through Ananias:

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man [Saul] is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Acts 9:15-16 (NIV)

The fulfillment of Paul’s commission will occupy the better part of the second half of Acts (chapters 13-28), but it is the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his household that remains the centerpiece for understanding the radical call for inclusiveness in the early church.

Ironically, the story turns on the conversion, or radical re-orientation, not of Cornelius but of Peter. Despite his earlier declarations, explicit and implicit, regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God, Peter’s response to the vision at Joppa reveals he is unprepared to accept all the ramifications of this radical gospel message. In his vision of the sheet filled with clean and unclean animals, Peter hears a divine command to “slaugh-

ter and eat” (Acts 10:13). If the divine voice intends that Peter’s ritual slaughtering of the animals in his vision will render them fit for consumption (see Deuteronomy 12:21-22), Peter misses those allusions altogether, hearing only a command to disobey dietary regulations: “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane and unclean” (Acts 10:14). As the narrative unfolds, the audience (as well as Peter) will be led to conclude that the clean animals were polluted by their association with the unclean animals and will apply that insight to social interaction among persons. At this point in the narrative, though, the point is simply that Peter thinks he knows what is clean and unclean, and he refuses to eat what is unclean. The scene repeats itself twice more. What remains unclear is the subject of this vision. Is Peter to disregard Jewish dietary laws or is something else at stake?

As a result of his own vision, Cornelius sends messengers to summon Peter; they find Peter “still thinking about the vision” (Acts 10:19). When he learns of Cornelius’ request for an audience, Peter agrees to return with them on the next day. Peter takes his next step toward conversion and correctly interpreting his vision when he sees the crowd of Gentiles gathered in Cornelius’ house and says: “You yourselves know that it is inappropriate for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (10:28a). This view conforms to that expressed in the second-century BC pseudepigraphic writing, Book of Jubilees: “Keep yourself separate from the nations, and

do not eat with them; and do not imitate their rites, nor associate yourself with them” (Jubilees 22:16a). But Peter’s view is changing: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone [common] or unclean” (10:28b). Through reflection and subsequent interaction with these Gentiles, Peter realizes that his vision was about more than clean and unclean foods: it involves

proper social interaction with persons. The logic of his statement can be drawn out in the following parallelism: the Jew who is defiled by association with a Gentile is “common”; the Gentile by nature (expressed in diet and lifestyle) is “unclean.” So, Peter claims God has revealed to him that he is to refrain from calling any Jew “common” for associating with Gentiles or calling any Gentile “unclean” because of lifestyle. Peter moves from food to persons. Not only has God cleansed the Jew who by all rights should have been defiled

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by association with Gentiles, so that Peter should no longer refer to them as “common,” but God has also cleansed the Gentile, so that Peter should refrain from calling them “unclean.” Just as it will be important for the Jewish believers to hear that they are not defiled by associating with Gentiles, Gentiles in this passage hear Peter declare that Gentiles are no longer to be considered unclean.

Later he will make the very bold move of declaring before a Jewish audience that God has “cleansed the hearts” of Gentiles (see Acts 15:9). In so doing, Peter aligns himself with other first-century Jews who claimed that “righteous Gentiles” had a place in the “age to come” as *Gentiles* and without having first to become converts to Judaism.³ What separates Peter from these views is his understanding that in this new Abrahamic covenant the Gentile, like the Jew, is deemed worthy of salvation by God’s redeeming grace and not by any act or deed on the person’s part. Peter declares that inclusion into the community regardless of racial identity is ultimately rooted in God’s own character: “God shows no partiality” (10:34). God does not discriminate (cf. Deuteronomy 10:17-18; Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25; Ephesians 6:9; Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 6:1), and it is wrong for humans to do so (James 2:1, 9).

The scene ends with Cornelius and his household receiving the Holy Spirit and being baptized (Acts 10:44-48). Nothing hinders the Gentile from entering the “age to come,” although for a while the Jewish church will require Gentiles to observe certain dietary restrictions in order to facilitate Jewish-Gentile social interaction (cf. Acts 15). Eventually, this restriction will also be dropped.

For Luke, incorporation into the Abrahamic covenant was no longer based on genetic descent, but rather was open to anyone who followed Abraham’s example of believing and being reckoned righteous by God. John the Baptist has put it this way: “Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Luke 3:8). There are no restrictions on God’s redeeming mercy, not in terms of race, gender, or socio-economic status. The poor, bent woman of Luke 13 is a “daughter of Abraham” (13:16), just as rich Zacchaeus is a “son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). And so are the lame man (Acts 3), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), and all those Gentiles who respond to the gospel message declared by Paul and his companions.

Grounded in the authority of Israel’s Scriptures, the words and deeds of Jesus, and ultimately the very character of God (who shows no partiality), Luke has radically redrawn the map of who is in and who is out. For Luke, God’s covenant people can be a blessing to the nations only by overcoming the walls of separation and division made with human hands. If the Church today is to fulfill its Abrahamic mission to be a “blessing to all the families of the earth,” then, we, too, must embrace this wonderfully radical vision of God’s people, which includes *everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord!⁴

NOTES

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2 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, Books IX-XI, Loeb Classical Library, translated by Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937), 9.291.

3 Josephus reports of the Gentile king, Izates, that circumcision was not judged a necessity because of his monotheistic views (*Jewish Antiquities* 20.2-46; see also *Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin* 13.2).

4 This article draws on my research for Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

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