



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 "All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed"
(*Racism*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 "What Is to Prevent Me from Being Baptized?"
(*Racism*, pp. 48-49)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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"All the Families of the Earth Shall be Blessed"

More than the other Gospel writers, Luke focuses on issues of race. From the Abrahamic covenant he gleans a radical vision of God's people as inclusive of all who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ, regardless of socio-economic standing, physical appearance, or ethnic or racial identity.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 8:26-39

Reflection

When God called Abram to leave his father's family and continue on to the land of Canaan, God promised that through his descendants "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Making "a great nation" in Israel was a major step in fulfilling that promise. However, for Luke the Abrahamic covenant points beyond Israel to the radically inclusive community that forms as Christ's followers share the good news of God's faithfulness with Gentiles. So, when the disciples ask, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom of Israel?" the risen Christ answers, "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

Philip's courageous preaching is a pivotal moment in God's fulfillment of the covenant. When persecution by Saul drives many early disciples from Jerusalem, Philip takes the opportunity to share the gospel with the Samaritans, who were despised for religious and ethnic differences (Acts 8:4-8). He shatters more ethnic and racial barriers by baptizing the Ethiopian eunuch, the first Gentile received into the Body of Christ. The Ethiopian "was from a country widely believed – by authorities like Homer, Herodotus, and Strabo – to lie at the southernmost limit of the earth," Heidi Hornik notes. "Early readers would understand that this man was ostracized for several reasons. First, his skin color was dark. . . . Furthermore, he was a eunuch. This prevented him from entering into the assembly of the Lord; he would have been allowed to worship only in the outer chambers of the Temple." Philip could transcend the prejudice of his own day only through the enabling power of "the Spirit of the Lord" (8:39).

Mikeal Parsons traces, in the central figures in Luke-Acts, Luke's radical vision of an inclusive new Abrahamic community being formed by the work of Christ that continues in the Church.

► *Jesus' words and deeds express the wideness of God's mercy.* In his inaugural sermon in Nazareth, Jesus stresses that God sent Elijah and Elisha to minister to Gentiles. When "all in the synagogue were filled with rage," they try to kill him (Luke 4:28). "This story should not be taken to mean that Israel, in Luke's view, is permanently rejected," Parsons notes. "Stories of positive Jewish response to Jesus' ministry are found throughout [Luke-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." After Jesus sharply rebukes his disciples for asking to destroy



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an inhospitable Samaritan town (9:51-55), he tells a lawyer the parable of a “good” Samaritan (10:25-37). Later on his way to Jerusalem, when Jesus heals ten men with leprosy, only one – a Samaritan – returns to thank him. “In this new Abrahamic community, according to Luke, help was to be received and extended, regardless of ethnic identity,” Parsons writes.

- ▶ *Peter begins to understand the inclusivity of the gospel he preaches.* He tells his Jewish audience at Pentecost that God’s promised redemption “is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). Those “who are far away” are probably the Gentiles (cf. 22:21). In his next sermon he cites the Abrahamic covenant, implying that it extends to the Gentiles (3:25-26). Nevertheless, Peter requires a radical reorientation of heart in order to fellowship with and witness to Cornelius, a Gentile soldier (10:1-33). Later Peter boldly declares to a Jewish audience that God has cleansed the hearts of Gentiles (15:9).
- ▶ *Paul is commissioned to be the apostle to the Gentiles.* Jesus tells Ananias, “Go, for [Saul] is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15-16). Acts 13-28 records Paul’s fulfillment of this commission through tours of preaching in Asia Minor and Greece, and, finally, his imprisonment in Rome, the center of the Gentile world.

“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 we are going to fulfill the Church’s Abrahamic mission today, Parsons concludes, “we, too, must embrace this wonderfully radical vision of God’s people, which includes *everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord.”

Study Questions

1. In *The Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch*, how does Rembrandt capture the momentousness of this event in Acts 8:26-39?
2. How does Simeon’s speech (Luke 2:29-32) *anticipate* the radical inclusivity of the Abrahamic covenant? How is it packed with echoes of Isaiah 40:5, 42:6, 46:13, 49:6, and 52:9-10?
3. In Luke, how does Jesus show that God’s mercy transcends barriers of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic standing?
4. In Acts, what are the key contributions of Peter and Paul in shaping the Church’s mission to the Gentiles?

Departing Hymn: “O God of Creation, We See All around Us” (v. 2)

Christ Jesus, you lived in the same way you taught us;
you welcomed the people that others despised.
You talked and you ate with the poor and the outcast;
you saw every person through welcoming eyes.
Forgive our re-building the walls you have broken –
our making of barriers you came to tear down.
The gift of your cross is the world’s reconciling
with God and with all of God’s people around.

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (2010)

Tune: ASH GROVE

“All the Families of the Earth Shall Be Blessed”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how, more than other Gospel writers, Luke focuses on issues of race.
2. To consider how Luke draws out the radical inclusivity of the Abrahamic covenant.
3. To discuss how Rembrandt depicts the momentousness of Philip’s baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Racism (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. The departing hymn “O God of Creation, We See All around Us” is sung to the familiar melody ASH GROVE, which can be found in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

The Gospel of Luke opens with intertwining narratives of the divine announcements to Zechariah and Elizabeth and to Mary, the births and circumcisions of their sons, John the Baptist and Jesus, and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple by his parents. Beautiful psalms of praise punctuate these narratives – not so much to reveal the personal take of grateful parents, adoring angels, and amazed prophets on the holy events, but to tune our hearts to take in the major themes of God’s work in Christ Jesus that continues through the Church.

The prophet Simeon sounds a central theme – the radical inclusivity of God’s covenant with Abraham’s descendants – when he encounters the infant Christ in the Temple (Luke 2:29-32):

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*.

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

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to tune our hearts to welcome all people who profess the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 8:26-39 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study reviews Luke’s treatment of issues of race in his two-part work, the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Mikeal Parsons shows how God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:3) to bless “all the families of the earth” through his descendants, “provided for Luke the scriptural warrant for the Gentile mission and the radically inclusive covenant community resulting from that mission.” Use Rembrandt’s etching *The Baptism*

of the *Ethiopian Eunuch* (on the cover and p. 48 in *Racism*) and Simeon's speech about the infant Christ (Luke 2:29-32) to introduce the theme of the new inclusive Abrahamic community. If time permits, explore the Lucan stories about Jesus, Peter, and Paul that develop this theme.

Study Questions

1. "The *Baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch* is a study that [Rembrandt] executed before his oil painting of the same name," writes Heidi Hornik. "The print, being devoid of color, helps viewers transcend the ethnic boundaries that are etched so deeply into this pivotal event. Just as Philip could see past the stereotyping and prejudice of his own day to be a witness to this man, so the print medium allows us to bracket the boundaries of race and focus only on the faithfulness of this God-fearer..." The Ethiopian eunuch, who kneels in prayer beside the pool of water, wears a simple robe undergarment. A young attendant holds his royal attire. While the animals—a dog and the horses—look this way and that, the royal guards are absorbed by the unfolding event. Symbols of earthly power—spears, a sheaf of arrows, and the carriage parasol—become mere pointers to the kneeling figure in the foreground.
2. Assign small groups to explore the five Isaiah passages in context, looking for phrases that are echoed in Simeon's speech. Isaiah 40:5 foretells that when God ends the people's exile and restores Jerusalem, "all people shall see [the glory of the LORD] together." Isaiah 42:6 describes the Suffering Servant as "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." In Isaiah 46:13, God says, "I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory." In Isaiah 49:6, God says to the Suffering Servant, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." Isaiah 52:9-10 promises the exiles, "The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God."
3. Mikeal Parsons mentions these events: Jesus highlights in his inaugural sermon that God sent the great prophets Elijah and Elisha to bring healing and salvation to Gentiles (Luke 4:16-30); Jesus tells a parable about a good Samaritan who exhibits God's love more than a priest and a Levite (10:25-37); Jesus rebukes James and John when they want to punish an inhospitable Samaritan village with heavenly destruction (9:51-56); Jesus commends the faith of a Samaritan man whom he healed from leprosy (17:11-19); Jesus says that the poor, bent woman of Luke 13:10-17 is a "daughter of Abraham," and the rich Zacchaeus is a "son of Abraham" (19:9). Encourage members to mention other words and deeds of Jesus that show how God's mercy transcends barriers of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic standing.
4. Parsons notes that in Peter's sermons delivered during the Pentecost festival (Acts 2:39) and later at Solomon's Portico (3:25-26), Peter emphasizes God's concern for bringing salvation to the Gentiles. In support of Philip's preaching in Samaria, the church in Jerusalem dispatches Peter and John to share the Holy Spirit with the new Samaritan believers (8:14-25). After Peter's ministry is radically reoriented toward the Gentiles by a heavenly vision and the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10), he brings "the apostles and believers in Judea" to understand that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (11:18). Later at the Council of Jerusalem called to set the ground rules for the Gentile mission, Peter boldly tells his Jewish audience that "in cleansing [the Gentiles'] hearts by faith [God] has made no distinction between them and us" (15:9). This is the last appearance of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles.

The Lord appoints Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles in Acts 9:15-16. The church at Antioch sends Paul and Barnabas preach in Cyprus and southern Asia Minor (Acts 13-14), and controversy regarding their ministry to Gentiles leads to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). Paul's further missionary work among Gentiles is chronicled in Acts 16-28.

Departing Hymn

"O God of Creation, We See All around Us" can be found on pp. 37-39 of *Racism*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.