

“All the Families of the Earth Shall be Blessed”

by Robert B. Krushwitz

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.

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 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.”