

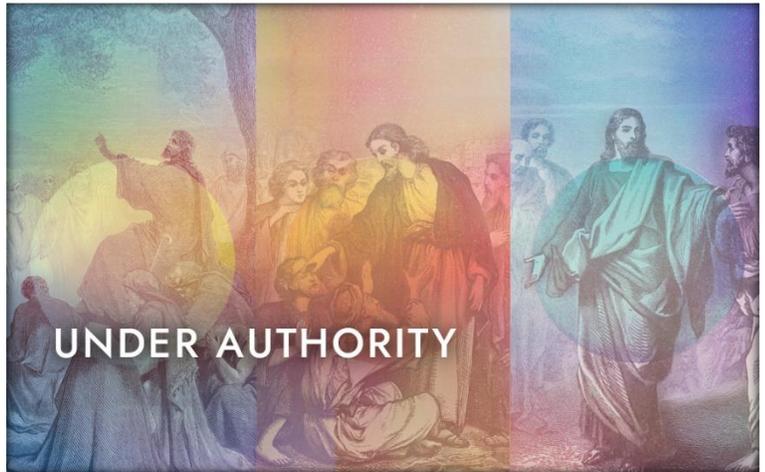
“Gentiles – Under Authority”

Genesis 12:1–3; Matthew 8:5–13; Matthew 15:21–28; Ephesians 2:14–16

The true story

Jesus’ ministry was focused on the Kingdom of God. He announced its arrival in Nazareth. He taught his disciples about life in the Kingdom during the Sermon on the Mount. His healings were enactments of the Kingdom of God. But all that leaves open the question, “For whom is the Kingdom of God?” So, we

now turn to that question, and we see that the answer begins long before Jesus with a promise made to a man named Abram and his wife, Sarai.



There are four gospels, and each is its own portrait of Jesus. Every gospel writer tells the story of Christ in his own way, making his own proclamation of the good news that he wants to share with the world. For us, it can all be a bit overwhelming. There are so many stories and so many moments, that we can become lost, unable to connect any of the bits and see the larger themes.

If we step back, we can see that from the beginning Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated the arrival of God's Kingdom. He announced it in Mark 1:15 and Luke chapter 4. The Sermon on the Mount is a long block of instruction about living in the Kingdom and the nature of God's Kingdom (Matthew 5-7). Jesus's healings were far more than mere acts of compassion, they were enactments of the Kingdom of God. For in the Kingdom, there are no blind and no crippled.

We are still faced with this question, “Who will inherit this kingdom, who will participate in it?” Is it only for the Jews? After all, Jesus is Messiah, a totally Jewish idea and title. He was and is the Anointed One of Israel. And by Jesus’ day many 1st century Jews had a very strong sense of ethnic privilege, believing that when the Kingdom of God arrived it would be for them. This was understandable, as they had long been oppressed by the Gentiles. One pagan empire after another. So, surely, they thought, when the big day arrived, it would be for them, the long-suffering people of God. And all the world would see that they had been right all along.

When the Jews fell into a sense of ethnic privilege, they forgot their own story, the very promises God had made to their ancestors, beginning with the father of the tribes, Abraham.

“All the families of the earth”

It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of today's passage from Genesis. God's call of Abraham sets the stage for all that follows. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, perhaps more importantly, “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” through Abraham and Sarah. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material wellbeing, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the “outsiders” they meet.

Abraham is not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. The book of Ruth tells the story of a young Moabite woman who, through her Jewish mother-in-law, is blessed by God and incorporated into God's people. This Gentile woman becomes the great-grandmother of King David, from whose family the Messiah would come.

Of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Micah 4:1-5). It was tempting for them, as it is tempting for us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as “outsiders.” But Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the “light to the world” (Matthew 5:14-16). They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. But Jesus not only said the words, he brought them to life. As we see in the two healing stories above, Jesus brought the kingdom to the Gentiles. He enacted the kingdom among them in these healings and others and he invited to share in what was happening in and through him.

A Roman Centurion and a Canaanite Woman

There are many aspects of these healing stories that we could examine, but what binds them together is that each involves a Gentile. The first, in Matthew 8, is a Roman Centurion with a desperately stricken servant. The Roman comes to Jesus, acknowledging this Jewish teacher's authority and pleads for help. Notice what the amazed Jesus says to him. Jesus can't find anyone of such faith in Israel, but people will come streaming from all directions to eat with Abraham in the kingdom of God. But the supposed "heirs of the kingdom," namely Jesus' fellow Jews will not share in the kingdom. Why? Because they will reject Jesus and miss entirely what is happening. It is all very remarkable and plain as day. The kingdom of God is as much for the Gentiles as the Jews, looking back to Genesis 12:3. All is all.

In the second passage from Matthew, Jesus and his disciples head northwest to the coast and the Gentile lands of Tyre and Sidon. A woman rushes out her door, pleading for help, even calling Jesus, "Son of David." The disciples want nothing to do with her and, at first, neither does Jesus. But she engages Jesus and he relents, healing her daughter. The point? The Jews may see the Gentiles as "dogs," but the kingdom is for them as well.

The place of the Gentiles

All this prepares us to understand the apostle Paul's insistence, that the Gentiles were to be accepted in these new communities of believers -- without having to, in essence, adopt Judaism first. For in the mid-50's AD, some of the churches that Paul founded in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) were under attack from false teachers and he pulled no punches in responding.

Not surprisingly, one of the biggest issues that faced the early church was the struggle between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Because Christianity began as a movement within first-century Judaism, many Jewish-Christians believed that in order to become a Christian, a Gentile must live under the law of Israel. For male converts, this would mean circumcision. For all converts, this would mean keeping the Sabbath, obeying the Jewish dietary laws, and so on.

In all his writings, Paul is clear that Christians are marked out only by their faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 3). Paul taught that even the Old Testament heroes, such as Abraham, were reconciled to God by their faith (Romans 4) -- not by the visible "works of the law," such as Sabbath-keeping or dietary laws.

Further, Paul taught that this faith is received by God's grace alone and that it eliminates all traditional distinctions before God -- "for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:26-29, NRSV).

In the early church, Paul's teachings carried the day, and were endorsed in about 50AD by an important council of Christian leaders in Jerusalem. Christians could keep the Jewish law if they wished, but it was not to be required.

Nonetheless, false teachers had come to Galatia preaching that both faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the law of Moses are needed to be reconciled with God. Paul is profoundly disappointed that these churches have succumbed to false teaching (yes, heresy!) and he is very combative in his letter to them. In contrast to Paul's letters to other churches, there is no general word of thanksgiving for the churches in Galatia. Instead, Paul quickly sets the stage for the rest of the letter -- "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ." (Gal 1:6-7, NRSV)

Finally -- Who are we?

I pray that my answer to the question, "Who am I?," is that above all else and before all else, I belong to Jesus, that I find my identity in him. This is one of the key points in today's passage from Galatians with the emphasis in the very first few words falling very much on the "all." What Paul has to say in these few sentences is for the body of Christ. Richard Hays, one of the foremost scholars on Paul in our lifetime, provides the following thoughts on the question of identity in these verses:

Our identity is given to us fundamentally through our union with Christ. Paul saw this union as figured forth and enacted in baptism. In baptism we "put on" Christ; we enter into union with him in such a way that all other markers of status and identity fall away into insignificance (3:27-29). Centuries of the practice of infant baptism in the culture of christendom have obscured the dramatic symbolism that the early Christians saw in baptismal initiation. In baptism, the person being baptized confessed the lordship of Jesus Christ over all creation, disobeyed to signify the putting off of an entire way of life, was immersed below the water as if undergoing burial (Rom

6:3–5), was raised to a new life, and was clothed in new garments symbolizing the transformation that had occurred. Baptism was a symbolic participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, and no one could undergo it without realizing that one life had ended and a new one had begun. . . . Identity derived from faith is different from all others if and only if the death and resurrection of Jesus really are—as Paul proclaimed—the singular event through which God has chosen to redeem the world. Otherwise, the gospel is merely one more religious system that will serve human pride and ambition. The character of our faith is determined by that decisive event to which it looks.¹

Why is it so hard, even for us self-professed Christians, to find our identity in Jesus and look past all the superficialities that drive so much division?

In the end, there is only one answer: sin. Our commitment to the divisions of the day and our blindness to such injustice is evidence of the sin that afflicts us all, this deep, ineradicable darkness that lurks in every human heart. We should never underestimate the hold that sin has on us. Indeed, Christians above all others should be able to see clearly the darkness in the hearts of us all. That is why it so seldom that “all means all.”

Sin is real and its presence explains a great deal about us and our world. Sin is whatever separates us from God. Sin is whatever diminishes the image of God in us all. Sin is whatever keeps us from functioning as God intended. Sin is our brokenness . . . and we are all broken . . . and we are often too blind to even know it. Sin is what pushes us to see skin color before we see the person.

Adam, Eve, you, and I were all created by God so that we might love God and one another. When we give in to bigotry and injustice in all its manifestations, we are separated further and further from God. Adam and Eve, giving in to their pride and desiring to be like gods themselves, chose to follow their own way rather than God’s way. They ran from God, causing a tragic rip in the relationship between God and humanity. It is as if their bad choice passed on to us a flaw in our moral DNA, a flaw that we cannot fully heal ourselves, but must be healed by God. It is this flaw, shared by us all, that we can call Sin. That’s why it can only be in Christ and by the power of his Spirit that any of us can hope to genuinely embrace the truth that “all means all.”

So . . . Jew/Gentile, Male/Female, Black/White and so on. All the distinctions that drive our tribalism are washed away in the kingdom of God. It really is that simple.

¹ Hays, R. B. (1994–2004). The Letter to the Galatians. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 11, pp. 274–275). Nashville: Abingdon Press.