

## Notes

### The Church as a Global Community

Jerry Truex; Oct 2, 2016

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#### A. Introduction

Today is World Communion Sunday, which is celebrated on the first Sunday of every October. The purpose of World Communion Sunday is to promotes Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation by focusing on Communion or Lord's Supper.

The word "ecumenical" comes from the Greek οἰκουμένη, which means "the whole inhabited world." Thus the ecumenical church refers to the efforts of Christians of different traditions to express their worldwide visible and interconnected unity.<sup>1</sup> The church is a global community without national, ethnic, or racial boundaries.

Ephesians 4:3-6. <sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (NRSV)

Today I will focus on the worldwide ecumenical unity of the church in three steps.

- First I will look at the human problem from the biblical point of view.
- Then I will look at the divine solution, how God restores and heals humanity on a global scale through Abraham and Sarah.
- Third, I will look at how the faith of Abraham and Sarah culminates in Jesus Christ and the emergence of the worldwide, ecumenical church in Acts 2.

#### B. The Human Problem: Alienation and Fragmentation

Genesis 3 to 11 tell a story about *the incursion and the spread of sin*, how humanity becomes alienated from God and each other.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecumenism>

## 1. Adam & Eve

In the earliest chapters of Genesis, we read about how Adam and Eve want to be like God (3:5), which results in their rebellion against God (2:16-17; 3:6). Hence, their relationship with God is broken—they hide from God (3:9-10). Then they have conflict between themselves—they blame each other (3:12). Life is described as painful and difficult (3:16-19). Next they are expelled from paradise (3:23-24).

## 2. The spread of hatred, conflict, murder

They have two sons. One murders the other (4:8). Then he is expelled from the presence of God (3:4:16). More children are born and more violence and murder ensures (4:23-24). It gets to the point that human beings are so evil that God sends a flood to cleanse the earth (6:5-7).

**Gen. 6:5.** The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. (NRSV)

After the flood, we are told that a few humans survive (9:1), but then human evil reignites almost immediately (9:21-26). Eventually, humans conspire to build a Temple or Tower—the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11.

Humans become so arrogant toward God, so contemptuous of God, they try to build a Temple with its “head” or “top” (רָאשׁ; *ro'sh*) piercing heaven itself (11:4). God destroys their Tower and people are scattered throughout the earth (11:8-9).

Genesis 3 to 11 tell a story about *the incursion and the spread of sin*. It is a story about how human beings become alienated from God and how they become hostile and violent toward each other.

The question of history, frankly, does not matter. Whether Adam & Eve were historical persons or whether there was a flood or a certain Tower of Babel does not matter. The story of Genesis 3-11 is true nevertheless. We are the Adam & Eve of our own souls.

- Every day we have the potential to rebel against God.
- Every day we have the choice about participating in the spread of sin.

- Every day we can choose to remain close to God or experience alienation from God and subsequent hate, anger, and violence toward others.

Please note the connections that Genesis 3-11 make. The story tells us that *alienation from God* (our vertical relationship) parallels *human estrangement and violence* toward each other (our horizontal relationships). Our *spiritual relationship* dramatically impacts our *social relationships*.

As Genesis 3-11 tells the story, humans are in a grave state of fragmentation and loss. Fortunately, that is not the end of the story, but the beginning.

## C. The Divine Solution: Restoring and Healing Humanity

### 1. God's plan

When we turn the page to Genesis 12, we are told that God initiates a plan *to restore and heal humanity*, to overcome alienation, hatred, and violence.

It is a plan to restore and heal humanity on a grand *ecumenical* scale, because God is concerned about "the whole inhabited world."

God's plan is to call people back to trusting God and God alone. That was the problem of Adam & Eve from the beginning. And that failure to trust God was the problem of all the generations that followed Adam & Eve. Failure to trust God led to organized crime against God and systemic evil as symbolized by the Tower of Babel.

In contrast to Adam and Eve failure, with Genesis 12, God is going to call Abraham and Sarah to show the world what faithfulness to God means, and how blessings—restoration and healing—come to those who are faithful to God.

### 2. Abraham & Sarah

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram and Sarai to leave Ur and travel (walk about 500 miles) to Canaan .... AND... if they obey, God will not only bless them, but also bless billions of people through them.

**Genesis 12:1-3.** <sup>1</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation [gôy] and I will bless [barak] you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families [mishpěhōt] of the earth shall be blessed." (NRSV)

### 3. "I will make you a great nation (gôy)"

Notice that God promises that Abraham and Sarah will be the beginning of a "great nation." What is remarkable is the use of the term, "nation" (gôy). The term "nation" refers to more than one ethnic group, more than one people group ('am); more than just Jews. It is an inclusive term.

### 4. "I will bless (barak) you"

Next God promises to "bless" (בָּרַךְ; barak) Abraham and Sarah. Blessing refers to prosperity, peace, well-being, long life, wealth, good harvest, and children. This is the restoration and healing that humanity needs.

As a result—"so that you will be a blessing" (v. 3)—many different ethnic or national groups will be blessed through faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah.

Those who imitate the faith of Abraham and Sarah will be blessed; they become the offspring of Abraham and Sarah.

**Gal 3:6-7, 9.** <sup>7</sup> Just as Abraham "believe God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," <sup>8</sup> so, you see, those who believe are the descendants of Abraham... <sup>9</sup> For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed." (NRSV)

This is a very important point. When we imitate the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah, we are their offspring—we are not their *biological offspring*, but their *spiritual offspring*.

People who trust God, who exhibit the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah, become the "great nation" that God promised. People who are faithfully obedient to God,

who have obedient faith, will receive the restoration and healing that God promised to the children of Abraham and Sarah.

### **5. "In you all the families (*mishpēhōt*) of the earth shall be blessed"**

Here is an important expansion of the previous promise, using a different word: "families, tribes, or clans" (הַקְּבָּשָׁמִים; *mishpēhōt*).

This seems to suggest that every people group—every type of person, every type of family, tribe, ethnic group, or nation—can receive blessing, can receive restoration and healing, if they exhibit the faith of Abraham and Sarah.

This suggests that the church and the mission of the church is *ecumenical*. The church in mission is concerned about *the whole inhabited world*, every type of person, every type of tribe, ethnic group, and nation.

### **6. The faithfulness of Jesus**

Now we turn to Jesus. We have seen that the mission of the church is to promote the faith of Abraham and Sarah, but now, from the NT perspective, that faith is exhibited supremely in the faithfulness of Jesus.

**Rom. 3:21-22.** <sup>21</sup> ... the righteousness of God ... has been disclosed- <sup>22</sup> namely, the righteousness of God through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe. (NET)<sup>2</sup>

The "righteousness of God" refers to the saving action of God toward Israel and the nations, which refers back to the "Abrahamic promises and blessings" expressed in Genesis 12:1-3.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:21-22 tell us that God's righteousness has been manifested through the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ" (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ), which is a subjective genitive reading, rather than the more common objective genitive, "faith in Jesus Christ." The translation and meaning is debated among scholars, but those that read it as a subjective genitive include: John E. Toews, *Romans*, BCBC (Scottdale: Herald, 2004) 102-3, 375-79; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 59-62; A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Know, 2002) 37-8; Joseph Shulam with Hilary Le Cornu, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 1997) 137; Michael F. Bird and Preston M. Sprinkle, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Pistis Christou Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2009).

That means that the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah—exemplified in the faithfulness of Jesus—is for all who believe; everyone who trusts the God of Abraham and Sarah, who believes in the God of Jesus Christ. The Abrahamic promises and blessing are for the whole world, not just one ethnic group or nation.

**Rom. 3:28-30.** <sup>28</sup> For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised [i.e., Jews] on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised [i.e., non-Jews] through that same faith. (NRSV)

Who, then, are the people of God?

- Anyone who has faith in the God of Abraham and Sarah.
- Anyone who imitates the faithfulness of Jesus.
- This faithfulness has no borders.
- This type of faith is exhibited by people worldwide among all people groups.
- There are no national boundaries... no ethnic or religious boundaries... or is God the God of Christians only (cf. Rom. 3:29)?

## C. People from every nation (Acts 2)

### 1. Peter's preaching

In Acts 2 we find Peter preaching about the significance of Jesus to people in Jerusalem. Peter is shouting out to the crowd, reminding them that Jesus of Nazareth had demonstrated "deeds of power, wonders, and signs" among them, but the jealous authorities had crucified him. Nevertheless, God vindicated Jesus by resurrecting him (2:22-24, 32) and made him "Lord and Messiah" (2:36).

The people shouted back and asked Peter what they should do and, as we know, Peter invites them to repent, to be baptized, and to receive the Holy Spirit (2:38). Now, it is recorded that 3,000 people joined the Jesus movement that day. But who were they? Were they only Jews or what?

## 2. A gathering from every nation

We are told that people *from every nation* were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost.<sup>3</sup> We are given a list of fifteen different nationalities (2:10-11).

**Acts 2:7-13.** <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs-- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

The point is, the list of nations is representative. It represents the world. The world has come to Jerusalem and God's promises to Abraham are being fulfilled. People from around the world have accepted the faith of Jesus.

As the Prophets predicted, the nations would stream to Jerusalem and God would be Lord of all nations; there would be one God and one people (Micah 4:1-4; Zech. 14:9). In Acts 3, Peter says:

**Acts 3:25.** <sup>25</sup> 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.' (NRSV)

The picture of all the nations streaming to Jerusalem demonstrates that *God's love has no borders*. God does not favor one nation or ethnic group over another.

- a. *God's love knows no boundaries*, no borders; there are no walls or fences in the Kingdom of God. Acts Two tells us the Spirit was poured out on every possible people group in the known world.
- b. *There is no privileged class*. Acts Two stresses that all people—male or female, young or old, free or slave—have the same intrinsic value; no race,

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<sup>3</sup> As many as 180,000 people would gather in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost with as many as 120,000 pilgrims from other lands. Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts, Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Scottdale: Herald, 1993) 41.

no gender, no ethnic tribe, no individual person (rich or poor), is better than any other.

- c. *There is no privileged, exceptional nation.* Clearly, one language or culture is not superior to another; when the world came to Jerusalem, they were not forced to speak the Galilean tongue of the disciples.

### **3. Acts Two reverses Babel**

Notice that the gathering of people from every nation *reverses* the catastrophe of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9).

Recall the story of Babel. People conspired against God by building Tower so high that it would intrude into heaven itself. The Tower builders were arrogant. They blasphemed God. As punishment, they scattered throughout the world.

Now, we see the reverse of Babel.

- At Babel, God *scatters* people all over the world.
- At Pentecost, God *gathers* people from all over the world.
- At Babel, people travel into confusion and conflict.
- At Pentecost, people understand the most profound mystery of all.

Acts Two shows God beginning to restore and heal the world. People are coming to faith and trust in God, which is the antidote to the sin of Adam & Eve.

### **4. Jesus Lord and Messiah (Acts 3:36)**

Along with the claim that God's promises to Abraham are not restricted to one nation, ethnic group, or tribe, is the claim that there is only Lord and Messiah. As Peter said:

**Acts 2:36.** "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (NRSV)

"Lord" and "Messiah" are political titles. It is the claim that Jesus is Lord, not the Caesar Augustus or any other Emperor. It is the claim that Jesus is Messiah, which means "the anointed," the term used for Jewish Kings. So it is a claim that Jesus is the King, not Herod or any other earthly king.

To declare Jesus to be Lord and Messiah is a pledge of allegiance. It is a pledge to Jesus and to God's One, Unified, Worldwide *Ecumenical Realm* without borders above and beyond any earthly political realm or social group.

No one who has the faith of Abraham and Sarah can put one's country or political party above God and Christ.

As you can see, I cannot give ultimate allegiance to the United States. Even though I value and contribute to American people and our society through work, service, and paying taxes, I do so only insofar as it does not conflict with my ultimate allegiance to the God of Jesus Christ.

As the Saint Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men," when there is a conflict between the two (Acts 5:29).

#### **D. Conclusion**

We can be the Adam & Eve of our own souls ... or we can imitate Abraham and Sarah.

If we chose to imitate the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah, we also imitate the faithfulness of Jesus and we become offspring of Abraham and Sarah and recipients of the Promises of God.

The Abrahamic Promises and Blessings are not just for us. We share them with the people of Abrahamic faith and make visible our solidarity with them in communion, especially today on World Communion Sunday.