

C. Transformation in Christ – the New Humanity

The ancient and enduring promise of the recovery of sacred space has at last been realized in Jesus Christ. This is true first because He is the *God-man*, but also because He is the *Man of the Spirit* and the *Last Adam*.

- God's eternal design was that the creation itself should become sacred space – the divine dwelling place, and this reality finds its focal point in man, the divine image-son. It is in and through man that God determined to be present in His creation, and the accomplishment of this end belongs in a unique sense to the Spirit. Whether considered narrowly in terms of mankind, or comprehensively in terms of the whole created order, the realization of sacred space is the work of the Holy Spirit.
- The Spirit is the agent of re-creation and the Scripture reveals that this creational renewal has begun with man. This is true first of all with respect to the man, Jesus of Nazareth: He is uniquely the Man of the Spirit. And as a human being indwelled, empowered, and led by the Spirit without measure or qualification, Jesus manifested in Himself God's ultimate intention for His image-bearers. Jesus came, not simply as a *new* man, but as *true* man: As True Man and the Last Adam, Jesus is both the origin and destiny of man.

Pentecost testified that the principle of creational renewal which was first evidenced in Jesus' resurrected, glorified humanity has now advanced beyond Him to inaugurate a new race of men tracing their humanity to the Last Adam rather than the first one. As He is Man of the Spirit, so they are likewise men of the Spirit – indwelled, empowered, and led by the same divine Spirit (1 Corinthians 15:12-49). But inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has become the *Spirit of Christ*, the indwelling Spirit is Christ's own presence within His spiritual "descendants." He has come to and abides with His own in the person of His Spirit (Romans 8:9-11).

This understanding of God's purpose and work gives meaning to Paul's insistence that the Spirit is transforming those whom He indwells into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18). They are not becoming clones of Jesus of Nazareth, but are, by the effectual power of the Spirit, being progressively conformed to His consummate humanity. What He is as man, they are becoming.

But there is another crucial aspect to this reality, and that involves the definition and identity of the covenant people of God.

- Jesus is not only the Last Adam, He is the **true Israel**. It is in Him that Israel has at last become *Israel*: Yahweh's faithful son, servant, disciple, and witness.
- And being the fulfillment of Israel, Jesus is also the true **Abrahamic Seed**, since covenant descent from Abraham was the singular basis of Israel's identity and role.

When all of these considerations are taken together, the obvious implication is that now, in the fullness of the times, status as a member of God's covenant household is dependent upon a person's connection with Jesus Christ. If He is the promised Seed of Abraham and True Israel, it follows that He has become the focal point of the definition of God's covenant people.

1. The New Humanity and the Identity of God's Covenant Household

- a. Israel's identity as the people of God was grounded in its relation to Abraham. God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendents, the heart of which was that He would be their God and they would be His people (Genesis 17:7-8; cf. 17:19; Exodus 6:2-8). At the same time, membership in the covenant household was not a matter of genealogical descent per se, but possession of the sign of the covenant, namely *circumcision*. Obedience to the covenant meant fulfilling the sign of circumcision, and God instructed Abraham that he was to apply it to his entire household (Genesis 17:10-13).

Later, the nation of Israel was formally constituted the corporate covenant seed of Abraham through Yahweh's great act of redemption. Circumcision continued as the sign of the covenant, but the covenant community was now further identified as the company of Yahweh's *redeemed* (cf. Exodus 3:1-17, 6:1-8, 20:1-2). Accordingly, God made Israel's redeemed status a permanent identity marker by instituting the annual Passover ordinance. The nation was to associate its "birth" with Yahweh's redemption (Exodus 12:1-2) and, as His covenant people, was to be fastidious in observing the annual festival and communicating its meaning to successive generations (12:14-28). The intent of this prescription was that every Israelite would find it impossible to conceive of himself or his nation apart from the Lord's redemption; Israel was an elect son born of Yahweh's redeeming hand.

But like the covenant sign of circumcision, redemption as an identity marker wasn't limited to Abraham's biological descendents. Israel was a redeemed people and their participation in the Passover ordinance testified to their identity. This being the case, one would assume that only Israelites had the right to celebrate the Passover. But God declared to Moses that the Passover was open to any and all non-Israelites *as long as they received the sign of circumcision*. There was to be one definition and prescription for all, Israelite and non-Israelite alike (Exodus 12:47-48; cf. Numbers 9:9-14.) From the beginning, membership in Abraham's covenant household wasn't limited to his biological offspring; all who received the sign of the covenant had a place in it. The participation of circumcised Gentiles in the Passover was simply an extension of this truth. *If circumcision was the criterion for membership in the covenant community, then it also afforded access to the ordinances by which the community was identified.*

In the time of preparation, the "people of God" were determined by connection with Abraham and the Abrahamic Covenant through the covenant sign of circumcision. Stated differently, Abrahamic identity through circumcision defined the *particularism* and *universalism* of the covenant household: Only those who were connected to Abraham through circumcision were covenant sons, but all such individuals were included in that community. (Later, the Mosaic Covenant elaborated upon that definition: Whereas the Abrahamic Covenant defined who the covenant sons of God were, the covenant at Sinai showed those sons what their sonship entailed and required of them.)

Even though this definition of the “people of God” existed from the time Yahweh made His covenant with Abraham, over the centuries the Jews had come to view the concept in a more ethnic and cultural way. By the time Jesus was born, the Jews defined the covenant community in the Israelite categories of Abrahamic descent and possession of the Law of Moses. While they recognized “God-fearing Gentiles” and non-Israelite proselytes to Judaism, the privilege of covenant election and status belonged uniquely to the house of Israel (cf. Matthew 3:7-9; John 5:45-47, 8:31-41, 9:13-34, esp. vv. 26-29; cf. also Acts 10:1-28, 11:1-3). A Gentile might convert to Judaism, but he was still regarded as a non-Israelite.

This Jew-Gentile distinction wasn’t without biblical basis, for the Scriptures everywhere distinguished between the two. The prophets had promised a global salvation flowing out of the presence and work of Yahweh’s Servant, but this involved the salvation of Israel *and* the nations. Though the Gentiles would be granted a share in Yahweh’s spiritual redemption, they would do so in distinction from the house of Israel (cf. for example Isaiah 11:1-12, 19:19-25, 49:1-6).

b. The Old Testament scriptures declared that, with the coming of the Servant, status among the covenant people would be determined by one’s relation to Him; so it is that, in the fullness of the times, union with Christ has become the *basis* and *substance* of a person’s membership in the covenant community. But, as before, this membership began with Abraham’s biological descendents and moved outward to the Gentiles. The first converts to Christ were almost entirely Jewish; only later did the gospel begin to draw in the Gentiles. This widening of God’s people had been predicted by the prophets and wasn’t unexpected by the early Jewish Church; *what the Scriptures hadn’t prepared them for was how to relate to and interact with the Gentiles who were coming to Christ.*

- In former times, Gentiles had come into the covenant community of Israel by converting to Judaism and conforming themselves to the prescriptions of Israel’s covenant. Because the Law of Moses defined and prescribed every facet of Jewish life (cultural and practical as well as religious), a Gentile’s conformity to the Law effectively meant his becoming a Jew.
- That being the case, it was perfectly natural that the early Jewish Christians thought of Gentile believers in the same way. Expressive of their entrance into the covenant household, shouldn’t Gentile Christians have to adopt Jewish practices associated with the Law of Moses?

This was precisely the quandary that led to the Jerusalem counsel (Acts 15:1ff). As more and more Gentiles were being saved, it became increasingly evident that the Church needed to address the problem of Gentile “obedience”; yes, the Gentiles were saved through faith in Christ, but didn’t their place in the covenant community imply their obligation to the practices of that community? *Shouldn’t Gentile believers also have to receive the Abrahamic sign of circumcision and conform to the covenant definition provided by the Law* (vv. 1-5)?

This context is pivotal within the book of Acts and crucially important to its message and meaning. Acts provides an historical account of the early Church, but Luke wasn't interested in an historical documentary; *his intent was to record the salvation-historical transition from the old order to the new one that has come in Christ*. It is noteworthy that, as the account of the Jerusalem counsel comes at the book's midpoint, it arguably serves as the main theological hinge within it.

- Preceding this context is Luke's account of the primarily Jewish Church and the beginning of the Gentile mission.
- The balance of the book is pointedly focused on the reality underlying the need for the Jewish Jerusalem counsel, namely the influx of Gentiles into the Church. And as the Gentile presence in the covenant community increased, the Jewish one decreased such that the overall Jewish relation to the Church became one of hostility and opposition. Thus Luke closes his account with Paul's capstone indictment of Jewish unbelief (28:16-28).

By recounting the debate and outcome of the Jerusalem counsel, Luke was able to show the fundamental ways the new order differs from the old one. This, in turn, provides an explanation for the Jews' unbelief and the resultant movement toward a predominantly Gentile Church as recorded in the balance of his treatise.

At the heart of the resolution of the quandary is James' interaction with the prophecy of Amos (15:13-18). The section James cited focuses on God's promise to restore David's fallen tabernacle and the purpose for that restoration.

- Like his prophetic counterparts, Amos spoke of the coming desolation of the two houses of Israel, and this implied the destruction of David's throne and kingdom. Jeremiah added that David's dynastic "house" was also to be thrown down by the severing of his royal line of descent (22:24-30).
- But desolation wasn't Yahweh's final word, for He had made a covenant with David in which He promised to build and establish David's house, throne, and kingdom forever.

It was precisely this covenant oath that Amos had in mind. Yahweh had promised to restore David's fallen "house," and James regarded this promise as having been fulfilled in relation to Christ. Recalling that the covenant promise of a Davidic "house" looked first to a coming seed, the foundational point of fulfillment was Jesus' resurrection and enthronement. ***God had raised up David's dynastic "house" by raising David's Son, and now that Son was continuing the work of restoring David's house by building a house for Yahweh through His work of ingathering.*** Even as David's house had consisted of the twelve tribes of Israel, the eschatological house of David's covenant heir was now being constructed from a remnant of Israel together with men drawn from all the nations of the earth (cf. again Acts 1:1-8 and 2:17-18, 37-39 with Isaiah 11:10-12; 1 Peter 2:4-10).

James discerned in the salvation of the Gentiles the realization of Amos' prophetic promise, and the wording he chose to quote that prophecy (reflecting the Septuagint reading) provides insight into how he understood its fulfillment. *Most important is the recognition that James regarded that particular fulfillment as answering definitively the question of Gentile conformity to Jewish practice.*

- In the context of the prophecy itself, Amos saw the restoration of David's fallen tabernacle as directly facilitating the conquest of the Gentile nations. Yahweh was going to rebuild David's house for the express purpose of enabling Israel to "*possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations.*" This future outcome was consistent with David's own reign: He had brought the Israelite kingdom to its Abrahamic extent by conquering the nations from the Euphrates River in the east to the Nile in the west (cf. Genesis 15:18 with 1 Chronicles 18:1-13; 1 Kings 4:21).
- David's conquest of the nations surrounding Israel fulfilled God's land promise to Abraham. This circumstance, in turn, was intended to facilitate the corresponding Abrahamic promise of global blessing. As Yahweh's chosen son-king and epitomizing Israelite (seed of Abraham), David was to mediate the knowledge of Israel's God to all the families of the earth; instead, his great failure as king was that he gave occasion to the nations to blaspheme Him (2 Samuel 12:7-14).
- It is also crucial to note that these conquered nations weren't annexed so as to become a formal part of Israel. *The Gentiles within the Abrahamic boundaries came under David's dominion and served him with their allegiance and tribute, but they weren't grafted into the nation of Israel.*

James understood this, and interpreted Amos' prophecy of a future "possession" of the nations in the same way: The restoration of David's royal dynasty in order to again "possess" the non-Israelite nations meant their subjection to David's covenant Son. Once more, in the fullness of the times, the true boundaries – that is, the global boundaries – of the Abrahamic kingdom would be established by the Abrahamic descendent who is the promised Davidic Seed. Like His father, this King would take possession of the Gentiles and bring them into His kingdom by binding them to His rule and service, *not by transforming them into Israelites.*

The answer to the Gentile question lay in understanding the fulfillment that had come in Christ and the new order He had instituted. The Abrahamic kingdom (the kingdom of God) and its promise of blessing are conveyed upon the Gentiles – those called by Yahweh's name, not by their becoming Jews, *but by their being brought under the lordship of the true David.* What this means is that Gentile believers are not obligated to submit or conform to Jewish practices. Being bound to serve David their Prince, their only obligation is to refrain from practices associated with idolatry. Like believing Jews, they are sons of Abraham: God is their God and they are His people (cf. 15:19-20 with Leviticus 17:7-14, 18:1-30).