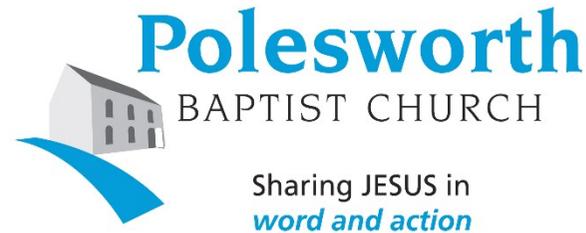


If you would like to explore this more deeply I recommend Christopher J H Wright's book: *The Mission of God. Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Published by IVP. 2006. ISBN [paperback] 978-0-8308-5213-0.

It's has been my source book for this reflection

Nick



July 26th 2020
Reflection One
on Acts 15:1-35:
Living God's Mission
and His holy nation.

Last week I spoke about Mission, stressing that we do not have our own mission but are called to join with God in His mission. God has chosen to effect His mission through people. Not any people but specifically through Israel, rooted in Abraham, to whom God promised He would bless the world. This as Paul explains in Galatians is finally rooted in Jesus Christ.

That's why Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James, and others oppose the proposal that the Gentiles must be required to be circumcised and to obey the Law of Moses. Such an idea downgrades the truth of who Christ is, and His sovereignty, subjecting Him and His people to the rule of Moses and his law. And its not based in experience: as Peter points out God has shown His acceptance of the Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, purifying their hearts by faith. Nor is it based in scripture as James observes which states that Israel [David's fallen tent] will be rebuilt, that the remnant of men may seek the Lord and all the Gentiles who bear His name. [Acts 15:8 and 16-17] Nor does it have practical value for why put on the neck of Gentile disciples, a burden Israel was not able to bear? [15:10]

Having said that, the Council decides to identify 4 concerns which the Gentile Christians are advised it would be wise to avoid. The justification seeming to be that they should tolerate certain aspects of Jewish understanding since these have been long taught to the Jews.

It's probably helpful to pause here and remember that the church is trying to work out what it means to be a Christian. Their only scriptural reference is the Old Testament – the New has not yet been written, it has not yet been lived by those who will write it. Some things only become clearer over time. In this time context that the Church suggests that the Gentile believers should avoid: food polluted by idols, the meat of strangled animals, blood and sexual immorality. Over time, out of these 4 things the one which persists and is unwaveringly stressed. [eg Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:13b; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1Thess 4:3-8; 1 Peter

4:3 and Revelation 22:15]

In terms of the Old Testament a major theme is that God chose Israel and appointed her to be His 'Kingdom of priests and holy nation'. [Exodus 19:6] With that appointment went a calling 'if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession.' [Ex 19:5] As Abraham's response to God's covenant with him was a faith exercised in obedience, so also Israel was to respond.

Consider Israel as a holy nation. That didn't mean she had to have some special piety. It's main meaning is that Israel was set apart from the nations of the world to belong to God. But not living apart from the nations in splendid isolation, rather she was called to live amongst the nations. Israel would be visible to the eyes of the nations and so how she lived would either be a credit or a disgrace to the Lord.

Through Christ the identity of Israel is extended from the biology of those who are born in the line of Abraham to the theology of those who are born again in the faith of Abraham. [to paraphrase Paul's thinking in Galatians 3:15-29] Gentile and Jewish believers are joined together in His church, which as Peter tells us in his first letter, now forms God's chosen people, His royal priesthood, His holy nation.' [c2 verse 9]

As God called Israel out of Egypt to live differently from the people around them so He calls His Church people out of the world to live differently from the people of the world. As Paul will later write, Christians are taught with regard to their former, ie pre-saved way of life, to put off their old self and put on their new self, which is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness and to imitate God. [Ephesians 4:22-24 and 5:1]

Our state as God's holy people is both a gift from God and a task for our lives, for as God's holy people we are meant to live lives worthy of the calling we have received [Ephesians 4:1 and Colossians 1:10]. For since Jesus is the Lord of our lives, our lives must reflect Jesus. We are named Christians because our lives are meant to represent Him. We are living expressions of God's mission in Christ to bless the world.

But as Wright suggests the Church, like Israel, faces two constant threats.

The first is that we simply forget the laws of God. Hence we see Paul and Barnabas and others staying on in Antioch to teach and preach the word of

the Lord. Without knowledge of what pleases God how can His people live lives that please Him. Of course this means that His people need to be willing to be taught and be willing to make the time for the teaching.

The second threat is that God Himself is forgotten by His people in the enticement of going after other gods [and/or worldly delights.]

If we forget God and His laws we lose what it is to be His holy nation; we lose the power to be His witness to the nations, and we lose God's blessing. That is what happened to Israel. Led by her leaders, ignoring the prophets whom the Lord sent, Israel time after time after time disregarded God's laws and fell into worshipping other gods. She broke the covenant, and lost her calling as God's kingdom of priests and her status as His holy nation. That resulted in the devastation of the 10 tribes by the Assyrians, and the destruction of Jerusalem, and the temple, and the cutting off of the Davidic kingship as the 2 tribes were overrun and exiled by the Babylonians.

Our covenant with God is sustained by our obedience to God. And its in living lives which meet the Lord's requirements for how His people should live, that we are both blessed by God and become His blessing to the nations. A major difference between the requirements God places on us and the burden of the Law is that the yoke of Jesus is easy and His burden is light. God the Holy Spirit is with us. In living in accordance with the Spirit we will have minds set on what the Spirit desires not what our fallen sinful nature desires. [see Romans 8] We cooperate with the Spirit, no longer living lives which conform to the pattern of this world, but instead letting ourselves be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And we do that so we will then know what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will. [Romans 12:2].

Knowing it not for information but for application. This is what pleases God, this is what is required of God's royal priesthood, His holy nation, His chosen people and this then is how we are to live. This includes our sexual behaviour. As Christians we are to be as visible to the nations by the quality of our moral lives as Israel should have been. And the purpose of that visibility is to bring the nations to glorify God. [see eg Matthew 5:14-16]

Before we go further let's pause in the Lord and sing: Take time to be holy.