

Reaching the Nations: Unity, Diversity, and Hope in the Gospel
Various Passages

*"Worship is the fuel and goal of missions...in missions we simply aim to bring **the nations** into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the **gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God.**"¹*

Introduction: Old Testament stories are compelling. They can captivate the imaginations of the young and persuade the minds of the old. We know of course, that these stories are not just make-believe fairy tales, but are all part of God's unfolding plan of redemption, pointing to the sacrifice and Lordship of Messiah, Jesus Christ. Take, for instance, the well known and beloved story of Jonah and the big fish (you can say 'whale' if you want to, you'd just be wrong). It makes for a great Sunday school story for kids (what's life like in the belly of a fish for 3 days? Ships, storms, man overboard, fish puking up prophets! That'll all teach!), but truly the story of Jonah and Nineveh tells of God's heart for the nations, the heart of partiality that people have toward other cultures (James 2:1), and the stubbornness of God's own people to understand their role. Let me try to frame the story of Jonah the way it is written.

Nineveh was the capital of Assyria and it was famous for its **cruelty**, particularly in warfare with Israel and Judah. In fact, it is Assyria who would deal the final blow against Israel, the Northern Kingdom, in **722 B.C.** This enormous pagan city was representative of the entire empire, and the Jewish people and nation as a whole despised it. If God had called Jonah to call out judgment (Jonah, go tell them fire is going to rain down from heaven and they are going to BURN!), he would have found the fastest ship, making a direct line to the city. But God rarely lives up to our expectations. Instead Jonah was to give a **warning and call to repent**, which he rejected, and thus tried to run from the presence of God (Jon. 1:3), much like Adam and Eve.

But Jonah did not just have a problem with the savagery of the Assyrians, he held a sense of **spiritual superiority over them**. Israel and Judah were God's people, and who were these pagans with their weird culture, religion, look, and way of life! No, Jonah knew God was good on His Word. He knew God would spare this people if they repented, and he could not live with that, until after he had to wipe off the gastric juices of the fish. And, of course, God did the impossible as the **people of Nineveh believed God** (3:5), and the king of Nineveh miraculously lead a call to the people to repent of their wickedness and to call out for mercy (3:6-8). God did this to show **His great mercy**, but also to shame Israel by using a stranger to the city with a simple message, "**Yet 40 days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.!**", to bring a nation to repentance, when Israel refused to do so even after prophet after prophet had preached repentance. This left Jonah **exceedingly displeased and angry** (4:1). Why? Why was he so upset?

In our modern times, we might classify Jonah as exhibiting **ethnocentric² pride, xenophobia, or outright racism**. Our culture likes to slap definitions and classify peoples actions. Since sociologists can make up terms, I like Voddie Baucham's definition of "**Ethnic Gnosticism**" in which he explains the phenomenon of people believing that somehow because of ones

¹ John Piper, "Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions." p. 11

² Ethnocentric pride - an evaluation of other cultures according to preconceptions originating in the standards and customs of one's own culture

ethnicity that one is able to know when something or someone is racist.³ Whatever label and definition you put on it, it is clear that Jonah struggled with the same thing that we do today: ***Loving people who are different than us, having mercy on those who've harmed us, seeing other cultures as objects of God's love, and seeing others as having surpassing value greater than ourselves*** (Phil. 2:3). When Jesus called out the Pharisees in **Matt. 12:38-42**, he cited Jonah as a means of shaming them. They not only had failed to reach the nations around them (they HATED the Samaritans - Jewish half-breeds - even more than they hated non-Jews), but they, like Israel of the OT, refused to repent at the prophets' preaching. ***"The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. (41)"*** They missed the fact that Jesus is greater than Jonah and would be raised from the dead after 3 days and nights (40), but His offer of repentance broaches ALL the nations, bringing mercy to those who deserve judgment, pitying those who don't know their right hand from the left (Jonah 4:11).

This morning we want to start looking at the Great Commission we were left, beginning with the scope of the call and next week looking at the substance. When we understand God's heart for the nations and the work of the gospel in our own hearts, we will better understand the **mission and makeup of the church**, as well as allowing us to repent of any partiality we would show toward others.

"Go therefore and make disciples of ALL NATIONS..."

The Nations Defines the Scope of Making Disciples (Matt. 28:18-20)

"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

When Jesus commissioned His disciples before His ascension, He gave a tremendous gift to them and to the church. He promised **His authority and presence to fulfill the mission**. He gave clear instructions as to WHAT we should do: *make disciples* (which we'll unpack next week). He directed as to what disciples should do: get baptized and learn to obey. He defined the timeframe of this mission, which will extend to the **"end of the age"**, which means there is a **finite amount of time** in terms of obedience to this mission, and it will conclude with His return. Finally, He gave us the scope of reach in making disciples: ***"Panta ta ethne"***, all nations. For those who are wondering what the vision for the church is in a modern culture, here it is. We have a clear mission assignment for our time on earth, regardless of location, timing, outbreak, government, or technological advancement. This is our mission. The question is: are we faithful and effective in it.

We want to focus on this phrase, however, ***"panta ta ethne"*** this morning. "Ethne", or "ethnos" can mean people(s), nations, or *gentiles* in Scripture. What we will see is that God has designed His Kingdom in a way that has a diverse makeup of tribes, tongues, people, and nations. God is glorified when all nations, a beautiful tapestry of cultures and people groups, come together to worship Him in unity. ***"Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous works among the peoples! For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods."*** (Psalm 96:3-4; 96:10). This does not mean that ALL PEOPLE will be saved, but people from all people groups will be part of His Body and Kingdom. This is not a new concept but embedded *redemption*, starting back in Genesis.

³ Voddie Baucham, "Ethnic Gnosticism." sermon, founders.org

- **The Call of Abraham to Bless "All Families"**

After sin entered the world and Adam and Eve were graciously but definitively expelled from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:22-24), sin began its corruption of the Creation. Cain jealously murdered his righteous brother (Gen. 4:8). Lamech went a step further to a revenge killing of someone who wounded him (that's the Chicago way - he brings a knife, you bring a gun!) and then wrote a poem about it. (Gen. 4:23-24). The earth got so corrupt that every intention of the thoughts of mankind's heart was only evil continually, so God exercised judgment by a worldwide flood, saving a small, faithful remnant to begin again (Gen. 6:5). After a time of repopulation, with the whole earth using the **same language** (Gen. 11:1), the population of the earth tried to consolidate its power, make a name for itself, and stay together in uniformity (Gen. 11:4). This was man's plan to glorify himself, not glorify God, so God **confused their language, dispersed them, and began what we know today as different tribes, tongues, and nations** (Gen. 11:7-9). Much like Adam and Eve having to leave the Garden to experience redemption, the post-flood generation had to disperse to line up with God's plan for the nations.

God's plan of redemption through the seed of Eve (Gen. 3:16) was realized through the person of **Abraham** (or at the time of his calling, "Abram"). God chose Abram, out of nowhere, and decided to use him to bless him, make his name great, and from him create a **great nation** (Gen. 12:1-2). We know that nation would become the Jewish Nation, or "Israel", named after Abraham's grandson Jacob. Then God promised this: "*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Gen. 12:3). The word for families (*kol mishpahot*) can be, and usually is, used in terms of something smaller than a tribe, more like a "clan". This will be significant in a few minutes, but for now, we see that through Abraham, He would bless every "tribe" or "clan" through Abraham and his offspring. *How does that happen you might ask?* I'm glad you asked.

Who was the true offspring of Abraham? It was none other than Christ Himself. "*Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'and to offsprings', referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring', which is Christ.*" (Gal. 3:16). How are the families of the earth blessed? Through placing their faith in Abraham's promised offspring, Jesus Christ. "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us --- for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.' ---- so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles (ethnos), so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*" (Gal. 3:13-14). This means that anyone who now believes in, follows, and is IN CHRIST by faith is a recipient of this Abrahamic blessing (Gal. 3:16, 29). Redemption, restoration, and true unity of the nations will only be found in the Person of Jesus Christ, AND we know that this promise extends to all peoples and clans of the world.

- **The Call of Israel as a "light to the nations"**

The thread of the seed of redemption came through Abrahams line and culminated in the formation of the nation of Israel, who were given the land of Canaan as an inheritance where they would set up a United Monarchy, to not only be a place of worship and strength, but give the display to the world around the THEIR God was the only true, real God. **Isaiah 49:6 says, "It is too light a thing that your should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."** Israel, as a nation, never lived up to its end of the bargain, but God did, and when Paul went to the Jews in the NT, when they AGAIN rejected, Paul reminded them that God had turned to the Gentiles, or non-Jews (Acts 13:46-48 - quoting Isa. 49:6). God called Israel to be a light to the nations AS a nation, and in their rejection, God turned to the nations with salvation.

- **The Call of the Church to make disciples of "All Nations"**

So the call for the church, or where we find ourselves in the timeline of redemptive history, is connected with God's plan from the beginning. We are called to reach all "peoples" or "nations", meaning that we are called to reach people groups and clans, not necessarily EVERY individual. Here's what I mean by that. When Paul was converted, he was called immediately to suffer and to bring the gospel to the Gentiles (ethnos) and to kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15). When Paul wrote in **Romans 15:17-21** he said that he was called to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles (18), and that through the power of signs, wonders, and the Spirit of God, and from Jerusalem to Illyricum (Northern Greece and Macedonia), *"I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ."* He did not evangelized or make disciples of EVERY person along the way, but the gospel had gone out in the areas from Jerusalem to the known world. However, he also realized that since the work had already been started in these areas, and that there were churches planted, disciples to make disciples, and teachers in these areas, he wanted to branch out to places where **"Christ has not already been named."** (Rom. 15:20). This compelled him to go to Spain (Rom. 15:24), which was outside of his three missionary journey's . To make disciples of all nations is a venture to reach all people groups, all nations, all tribes, and all tongues, not necessarily every person. This sets the scope of making disciples for us.

- **God is glorified in diversity, which produces unity in the gospel**
- **God has called all nations to be a part of His kingdom, so that should shape our view of disciple making**
- **The nations are both "out there" and "here"**
- **The mission of making disciples should unite us in our love for others rather than ethnocentric cultural pride - we do not have a corner on this mandate, but all churches, everywhere, are called to do this.**

Where do these expressions of God's redemption through Jesus play out? In His blood bought, called out, set apart, holy church.

The Nations Reveal the Mystery of the Church

The gospel of Jesus Christ not only ends the hostility between man and God, bringing peace through the blood of Jesus, but it brings an end to the hostility between ethnic and cultural differences. In the OT, a non-Jew could become a follower of God (like Rahab the harlot in Joshua 2), but to do so, they'd have to become a proselyte, becoming *Jewish* to become part of YHWH's kingdom. But when Christ came, lived, fulfilled the law, died, and rose again, something amazing happened with someone becoming a God-follower: *we ALL came to God the SAME WAY, not by becoming part of a nation, but becoming something NEW IN CHRIST:*

"This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (Eph. 3:6)

Jews, non-Jews, Dutchmen, those of mixed-ethnicities, men and women all come together, IN CHRIST, in this mysterious entity called the church, through the **unsearchable riches of Christ** (Eph. 3:8). We are leveled at the cross, because we are all sinners. We are lifted up by Christ, since it is by His grace alone that we can believe. No work, no upbringing, no affiliation, no amount of skin pigmentation, no amount of education, or amount of good works that we've done can save us, but only Christ alone through His substitutionary work on the cross.

Now, this means that the church is designed to have a great amount of **unity in the midst of diversity**. If we look at the similar passages of **Colossians 3:11** and **Gal. 3:28**, we see the **diverse makeup of the church:**

Greek and Jew	(2)	Slave and Free	(2)	Circumcised and Uncircumcised
		Male and Female		Barbarian and Scythian

Note a few things: 1) Both groups are both "all one in Christ" and "Christ is all in all" 2) These are as diverse of pairings as you can get - Barbarians and Scythians were derisive terms and groups of uneducated and uncultured, especially in Greek culture. 3) The distinctiveness of this group did NOT go away after Christ, but rather all rivalry, pride, and condensation would. Slaves and freemen would have the same dignity, respect, and ranking in the church. This means that in the church, where we express supernatural love (1 Pet. 1:22) and humility (Phil. 2:1-4) that we have in Jesus Christ, is where the world can see a healthy, yet imperfect, picture of the nations uniting together. By definition this is NOT uniformity, where there is a homogeneous makeup, but unity in spite of our great differences. This did not mean a Jew had to become a Greek, just as a man did not become a woman, but all learn to love each other, appreciating the differences and leveraging those differences to accomplish our mission. This is a messy, difficult, stretching, sometimes awkward challenge which means mistakes will happen, assumptions made, sins committed, in which case we come back to the gospel to **admonish, repent, seek and give forgiveness, all because of the lavished grace of Christ that we have poured out on us.**

My mom used to make quilts for every nephew/niece born into our family (and I have 20 cousins on my moms side!), and I loved watching the process. She would make these independent squares of different shades and patterns of fabric, which to my untrained eye seemed like it wouldn't fit together. But sure enough, as she began to stitch and connect, this beautiful tapestry and pattern would appear, coordinating together in a beautiful array of color and symmetry. This is a picture of the nations in God's church. The other part of a quilt is the backing. Before the final backing would be sewn, if you turned it over, you'd see what can only be described as a gnarled bunch of thread, stitches, and web like knots. It had to be covered up by a backing so that the beauty of the front could be enjoyed. This is Christ's love and forgiveness in the church. Not covering it up, but covering it, as love does. The church is a beautiful mosaic hung on the wall, not just a tan sheet.

The Nations Display the Glory of Redemption in Heaven

Finally, we know that the beauty of diversity of God's kingdom and reaching all nations is God's **intended and eternal design** as we look at a picture of heaven.

In **Revelation 5:9-10**, John received a vision of heaven, complete with a Lamb standing receiving worship from the elders, and they sang a new song,

***"Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation (ethnous),
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on
earth."***

This not only **INFORMS** us of our mission, but gives us assurance of it. We see this same picture throughout Revelation (7:9-10; 14:6-7; 15:4 - panta ta ethne), and ultimately in the culmination of the eternal kingdom, where **Christ will dwell eternally with us, those of every people (laoi - peoples, not laos - people)**. Notice that there is **STILL** a diverse makeup of people groups, not a bunch of same color, same language, same looking people. But the point **IS NOT IN THE DIFFERENCES**, but in the object of what brought them all together, which is Christ who is **worthy to open the seals and purchased a people for His possession by His blood.**

What are the implications of this?

We memorialized a dark day in American and world history yesterday at the 20 year anniversary of 9/11. We remember how many innocents lost their lives at the hand of the confused, zealous, and wicked men who followed a demonic form of religion. This is a good thing to remember, especially as we enjoy freedoms that may or may not last. But I

remember that there was much anger toward people who looked like the terrorists, who practiced a different version of their religion, but still were treated with hatred. We must remember that it is often those, like Jonah, who we may harbor anger in our hearts toward that God has called us to reach. *Is there any partiality toward a people group that you harbor in your heart? Is there anyone that if God called you to reach, like Jonah, that you would be upset? Is there anything we need to deal with and repent of?*

This church is going to be healthy and effective when we continue to reach those drowning in their sin in Simi Valley and send people out from here to reach those who are drowning in other cultures around the world. We should reflect the growing diversity of Simi Valley and Southern California, and we must prayerfully embrace the fact that **God is bringing the nations to this area! What an opportunity! This is not the time to run but the time to reach, helping those drowning in their sin and self-focus to worship the living and true God, seeing them come into the church and creating a growing Mosaic, living building, and healthy Body.**

"The final goal of God in redemption is NOT to obliterate the distinctions of the peoples but to gather them all into one diverse but unified assembly of peoples"

John Piper, "Let the Nations Be Glad"