

Romans 4:9-12

Renewal

The ingathering of the gentiles

Replacement theology

King David cried out, *Create in me a clean heart, and renew a steadfast spirit within me* [Psalm 51:10]. But what does renewal look like in practice? Catholic priest, Peter Hocken, who was involved in renewal in the 1970's says,

It was in October 1971. That was the first time I met people who were involved in Renewal. I went to my first prayer meeting the following week and started to experience the work of the Spirit almost immediately. The first effect I noticed was a joy and delight in the Lord. But also the experience of the Lordship of Jesus – what was especially strong for me in the beginning was that Jesus is the living Lord today. He isn't just Lord theoretically, but He is Lord today – which means He rules today, He acts today, He is at work today and He's at work through His servants and directly in people's hearts. So first, the aspect of the Lordship of Jesus came alive to me.

Renewal is a work of the Holy Spirit, which transcends all denominational boundaries. It is a blessedness which begins when we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Paul describes the same thing in Romans 5:1-2. This blessedness is a peace that passes understanding and a joy unspeakable. Faith doesn't depend on experience; and emotions go up and down; but if we believe we ought at some point to experience the blessedness of which the Bible speaks.

But when we read Romans, we need to remember that the context for the early Christians was very different to ours. The big question concerned the place of the gentiles in God's purposes. So Paul asks,

Romans 4:9 *Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised?*

With centuries of a gentile majority church, this has become for us almost a non question. But for a Jewish majority church in the first century, the answer wasn't obvious. In reading Romans, we should remember first that Paul was writing mainly to gentile Christians (e.g. Romans 11:13). Although Paul was an apostle to the gentiles, his mission strategy was to preach the gospel to the Jews first, then the gentiles (Romans 1:16). This is why, when he entered a city, he would always make a bee line for the synagogue (e.g. see Acts 17:1-3). It seems clear that Paul worked within the context of the synagogue structures. Starting a new religion in the Roman Empire would have been very dangerous because it was illegal. But Paul wasn't interested in this anyway because he understood Jesus as the fulfilment and establishing of the law/Torah, not the abolishing of it (Romans 3:31).

The synagogues weren't just places of worship, but they were also legal entities which came under the umbrella of the larger synagogue structure, a bit like modern denominations. Unlike modern denominations, they had much more influence on the Jewish community. Their responsibilities included courts with certain powers, education, end of life issues and collecting taxes. Their privileges included exemption from Emperor Worship and civic cults, and military service. The individual synagogues were theologically diverse, so there would have been room for Jesus believing synagogues within these structures. Paul called them ecclesia; we know them as churches. It would

have made sense for the early Christians to remain within these structures, not only theologically, but also for their own protection (Romans 13:1).

There were already gentiles associated with the synagogues, probably gentiles who were disgusted with the depravity of pagan practices, and who looked to monotheism for higher standards of morality. They were called God-fearers (cf Acts 10:2). Some would convert to Judaism, and others were perhaps on the way. But when they started responding in high numbers to the gospel, Paul's main point was that they didn't have to convert (to Judaism.) Rather, the ingathering of the gentiles was fulfilment of prophecy (Acts 15:14-18), taking place within the context of the restoration of Israel, i.e. preaching the gospel to the Jews first. Although church and synagogue later split, at the time of writing Romans this hadn't happened, and Paul wasn't keen that it should happen.

In Romans 4:9-12 Paul now looks to Abraham to argue for the inclusion of the gentiles, without having to be circumcised. He points out that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised, i.e. as a gentile. Circumcision was simply a sign of the covenant. It is the same for our baptism. Baptism is nothing in itself, but when undertaken as a sign of being put right with God by faith, it can be a powerful and faith strengthening step to take.

So Abraham becomes the point of union to all who believe both Jew and gentile. Both have equal access to God through Jesus Christ. This was the mystery made known to Paul by revelation (Ephesians 3:2-6). Through the gospel *the gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* [Ephesians 3:6]. This doesn't say, as is so often taught, that the church has replaced Israel, or is the new Israel, or is the spiritual Israel. The theology that says that the church has replaced Israel is called replacement theology. But no one has replaced anyone else in God's purposes. To quote again from Peter Hocken,

What the Lord does in Renewal is to bring people back to the very centre of Christian faith in Jesus. The renewal of the church means that in all aspects of the church's life, we have to go back to having these central truths about Jesus Christ at the absolute centre of the way the church lives and acts ... This is where Renewal connects very easily with the Jewish question because the Scriptures are really the books of Israel ... Practically all parts of the Christian world believed that for centuries, that because the Jews had not believed in Jesus, therefore God had rejected them. Therefore, they were no longer God's chosen people, and the church had taken the place of Israel. This is called replacement teaching. More and more Christians and churches have now recognized this teaching is false.

We can see replacement theology in Islam also: Islam believes Christianity replaced Judaism and Islam replaced Christianity. Unfortunately replacement theology can create an environment for oppression and persecution.

The reason Paul insisted that the gentiles didn't need to be circumcised and convert fully to Judaism wasn't because God had finished with the law (Torah), and therefore effectively finished with Israel: the reason was because they were gentiles. To insist on conversion of gentiles (to Judaism) would have compromised the Oneness of God (Romans 3:29-30). The ingathering of the gentiles was understood at the Jerusalem Council to be a fulfilment of biblical prophecy (Acts 15). And Paul shows in Romans 4:9-12 that since Abraham was justified by faith as a gentile, he is *the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them* [Romans 4:11]. God promised Abraham that he would have many descendants, as many as the sand on the sea shore. This promise was ultimately fulfilled, and is being fulfilled, among those who share the faith of Abraham, who look to Jesus the Messiah and Redeemer (Romans 4:23-24). Father Abraham had many sons. I am one of them, and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord! Amen.