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 "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it (Psalms 24:1). How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord (Psalms 144:15)."

It is remarkable, when one reflects upon it, how little deference or consideration is given to God by the nations as nations. Somehow their existence is taken for granted, their origins lost in antiquity, their resources and geography as fixed or given by circumstance or nature, and their purpose or destiny, therefore, that of their own choosing and determination. Does this not, at least in part, explain the enormous popularity of the evolutionary view over the creationist? After all, if the earth was an accident, how is purpose to be ascribed to it? Nations then, as individuals, are free to assume their own. As has already been mentioned, it is astonishing to consider that the Creator, Yaweh, the Lord—Jehovah, has purposes for His creation that proud men, assured of their autonomy, preferring an evolutionary—i.e., accidental and hence purposeless explanation for their national existence—can then go about establishing their own! Is this not "the root of all wickedness the wickedness that now pervades the world"? (Introduction to Psalms, p.786, NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, 1986). How much have we, as the church within the nations, considered such attitudes as normative? Most of us have been happy for our ability to function within the nations, and in most cases, except for occasional prayer for national leaders, we have gone about our own business. We might have seen the nation as best left in the hands of secular men for whom we might occasionally pray. Let us not lose the reality that the earth is the Lord's, and that He, "by right of creation and enduring absolute sovereignty...will not tolerate any worldly power that opposes or denies Him. He will come to rule the nations so that all will be compelled to acknowledge Him...overwhelming all opposition and purging the creation of all rebellion against His rule...such will be the ultimate outcome of history" (Ibid., p.786)

Certainly, that was Paul's apostolic and cosmic view as expressed in his monumental address at Athens in Acts 17. Everything begins and ends with "The God who made the world and all things in it" (v.24). This supremacy of God "since He is Lord of heaven and earth" "provides the fundamental perspective in which man is to view himself, the whole creation, events in nature and history, and the future" (Ibid., p.786). The heart of Paul's statement and the basis for "a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness"(v.31), is that:

"He made from one blood, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitations, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us" (vv. 26-27, emphasis mine).

Though I have spoken from this text many times over the years, it occurred to me that the pronoun they does not refer to individuals within the nations so much as the nations themselves as nations and that they should seek after God! Seek after Him, not with regard to salvation, but for the purpose for which their "times and boundaries" were appointed. That men and nations have lived in complete indifference to this God and His purposes for their existence, "God has winked in times past...having overlooked the times of ignorance" (v. 30), but now they should repent "because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed...(v.31)!"

History sadly attests to the outcome of proud nations establishing their own destinies in competitive rivalry with one another. Not only have they chosen agendas for themselves, but often enough have assumed to be God's! It is an ultimate presumption. That deity is invoked in support and justification of their aggressions is more melancholy yet and will not escape the Judge's severity. But what destiny can be supposed that God might have intended? What might nations have learned had they sought God? To what will they conform in the Millennium, to the degree that they survive the Day of His wrath? Is it not their relatedness proximate to the one nation He has chosen as His own inheritance, central to all nations—the nation Israel? Rightly does the author of the NIV commentary write:

"God's election of Israel and subsequently of David and Zion...represent the renewed inbreaking of God's righteous Kingdom into this world of rebellion and evil. It initiates the great divide between the righteous nation and the wicked nations, and on a deeper level between the righteous and the wicked...In the end this divine enterprise will triumph. Human pride will be humbled, and wrongs will be redressed. The humble will be given the whole earth to possess, and the righteous and peaceable Kingdom of God will come to full realization (Ibid., p.786)."

What a calculated humiliation for the great gentile nations to acknowledge God's choice—not as the issue of

ethnicity but of particularity. The mystery of the Jew dispersed in all nations has been a 'burning bush' that the nations have not chosen to look into. It is altogether analogous to the vexation of Joseph's brothers at their father Jacob's preference, and that their sheaves should bow to his. Nevertheless, the despised and rejected brother, sold as a slave and dug from a pit, becomes head over the Pharaoh's house to succor his brethren and all Egypt in the time of famine. Man, by nature, despises the constraints of God which are designed to abase him. Israel only reveals the enmity of the world against that God! Psalm 2 indicates the fierce depth of that enmity:

Why are the nations in an uproar [Why do the heathen rage? KJV] and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed; "Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us." He who is enthroned in the heavens laughs: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall He speak to them in His wrath and terrify them in His fury. "Yet have I set my King upon my holy hill of Zion."

As early as Deuteronomy 32:8 the determination of God to make Israel central to the nations is already indicated:

"When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when He separated the sons of man, He set the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel; for the Lord's portion is His people; Jacob is the lot of His inheritance. [See Ps.147:20; Ezek.5:5,12b and Amos 3:2]"

This cryptic verse seems to suggest that, in the divine ordering of God for the nations, Israel was central in His consideration. May I suggest that there will never be world peace and unity among the nations until that nation is central to their consideration! Evidently there is a divine theocratic ordering that the world has violated with impunity, but not without tragic consequence to itself. Its millennial and eternal blessing rests upon righting the historic wrong (See Isa.66:23 and Zech. 14:16f). As the prophetic church and as Paul at Mars Hill, ought we not call nations to repentance now before the Day of Judgment? If nations as nations will not hear nor bow, will there not now, as there be "certain men who [will cleave unto us] and believe"? Perhaps it takes the recognition of, and the identification with, the enormity of national sins, as it was on the day of Pentecost, to compel men more urgently to "save themselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2:40). It may be that the indictment of nations as nations gives to the gospel message a quotient of power and authority that the church has missed for the lack of it. Here the inherent sin of man is made more manifest, more conspicuously revealed in the conduct of nations than we have perhaps understood it in the conduct of individuals!

Has the church thereby forfeited a fulcrum that would have given to the bringing of the gospel to individuals a depth and penetration to the yielding of greater fruitfulness in the salvation of individual souls whose sin can be seen in the reflection of their nations? To address men outside the context of their nations is to miss a dimension of depth in the proclamation of the gospel itself, that even if the nation does not repent as a nation, individuals within the nations, hearing the message to the nations, will see their own sin writ large, and have more of a disposition for personal repentance—showing there is a practical consequence, even if nations reject it.

But how do we come before the seat of power in our nations? Let us not be intimidated from challenging men of high repute. The Bible is God's revealed Word, and not simply the basis for another 'faith' posture. Will we not be seen as preposterous, narrow, dogmatic, and intolerant? Apocalyptic Doomsday fanatics? Obstructionists to the hoped-for ecumenical world order? Is not such a message calculated to confuse even the church because it can in no way be practically implemented? Will we not be accused of being false prophets for raising it when practicality is made the measure of acceptance?

Clearly it will take a church in the stature of Paul, utterly confident in the soon-appearing as Judge that Man whom God has raised from the dead, and who was alive in that same Resurrection authority and power. The fact that Paul, while in flight from persecution, was unseekingly brought to the place of ultimate confrontation with the highest expression of the wisdom of that world may provide the paradigm for ourselves in last days' realities. Certainly God will Himself bring to such a hill men who can uncompromisingly bring such a message. Though lost to the memory of mankind and even to the consciousness of the church, God's relationship with mankind goes back to the covenant with Noah (Gen.9:11-17). The language of it is all inclusive and affects all successive generations:

"And I establish my covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth. And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant which I am making between Me and you and every living creature with you for all successive generations; I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth...When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature that is on the earth..."

Karl Barth, to whom I am indebted for this insight, distinguishes this covenant with those made with Israel as being "the covenant of God with the whole of humanity before and outside Abraham...it is with the human race as a whole...but no less real and unforgettable than the other...[and] that it will continue despite the apostasy of man" (Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV.1 p. 26).

All of this, I believe, is subsumed by God in His relationship with nations irrespective of their willingness to hold this covenant in their memory. What shall we expect of the Gentile nations when Israel itself has forgotten its Maker—despite the extraordinary and exclusive revelation of Himself again and again in their history? (See Deut.4:7-9f.). We are put in mind of the dictum ascribed to Freud, that forgetting is a willful activity. We, as believers, are obligated to reckon by God's understanding and not man's; indeed, to make His understanding known before the judgment that will come upon all nations for the rejection of it. John Stott, in his book on Romans, pp. 67, writes:

“The most irresponsible action of a doctor would be to acquiesce in a patient's inaccurate self-diagnosis. Our Christian duty is rather, through prayer and teaching, to bring people to accept the true diagnosis of their condition in the sight of God.”

Barth calls the Noahic covenant “the free and utterly unmerited self-obligation of God to the human race which had completely fallen away from Him, but which as such is still pledged to Him” (p.27, my emphasis). Here, perhaps, the assured condemnation of unbelieving mankind in Romans chapter 1 makes a greater sense where:

“[T]he wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...for even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (vv.18, 21).

The evidence of the judgment is their abandonment by God to a litany of despicable traits that have characterized the nations since time immemorial: “wickedness, greed, evil, murder, strife, deceit, malice...untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful inventors of evil” (vv.29-31)! John Stott sees the essence of sin as:

“[T]he attempt to get rid of God and, since that is impossible, the determination to live as though one had succeeded in doing so...We cheapen the gospel if we represent it as a deliverance only from unhappiness, fear, guilt and other felt needs, instead of as a rescue from the coming wrath” (Ibid., p.72, 88).

Nations, whose boundaries and purposes for being are with the God who created them, are not autonomous entities unto themselves, determining their destinies and purposes independent of Him who made them for Himself. And what are nations, but the collectivity of those who make them up and share either in the blessing or judgment for which they are themselves culpable. Rightly say the pundits, that “every nation gets the government it deserves” and that our individualistic silence does not lessen our blame. Perhaps, then, it is in the context of our national guilt, that our individual sins, so much if not identically the substance of the same, can be more readily seen and more authentically be repented of.

Summary

Gerhard Von Rad in his brilliant commentary on Genesis writes:

“[In this] winning of fame, a naive desire to be great...the underlying motive of anxiety...the basic forces of what we call culture. But in them...is rebellion against God, a concealed Titanism...A humanity that can think only of its own confederation is at liberty for anything, i.e., for any extravagance. What the narrative portrays is something thoroughly primeval; it shows how men in their striving for fame, alliance, and political development [invariably and necessarily] set themselves against God...The [present] multitude of nations indicates not only the manifold quality of God's power but also a judgment, for the disorder in the international world, which our narrative regards as the sad conclusion, was not willed by God but is punishment for the sinful rebellion against God” (pp. 149-152 - emphasis mine).

If this be so, there is little consideration today among the nations that their fundamental and underlying distresses, which their own attempts at resolution often only compound and make worse, are the continuing result of judgment for primeval sin never recognized nor repented for!

“[But now] the transition from primeval history to sacred history occurs abruptly and surprisingly [in Gen.12:1-3]. All at once and precipitously the universal field of vision narrows; world and humanity, the entire ecumenical fullness, are submerged, and all interest is concentrated upon a single man...the particularism of election begins. From the multitude of nations, God chooses a man, looses him from tribal ties, and makes him the beginner of a new nation and the recipient of great promises of salvation. What is promised to Abraham reaches far beyond Israel; indeed it has universal meaning for all generations on earth. Thus the difficult question about God's relationship to the nations is answered, and precisely where one least expects it...With this firm linking of primeval history and sacred history the Yahwist indicates something of the final meaning and purpose of the saving relation that God has vouchsafed to Israel” (p.154 - emphasis mine).

Walter C. Kaiser concludes:

“The theological factors found in each crisis which perpetrated the judgment of God were the thoughts, imaginations, and plans of an evil heart. But God's salvific word was equal to every default...the blessing of the good news offered to every nation on the face of the earth (Gen. 12:3)...The promise, then, was universal and limited in its participation only by the response of faith even as it was so limited for Abraham's participation” (Toward an Old Testament Theology, Zondervan, 1978. p.82).

Despite our secular presumptions, and our own too willing eagerness to separate the divine from the secular:

“[I]t is history that is the miracle, the miracle that reveals Yaweh at the same time that which is His work and

that which unveils and reveals His essence, plan and will. The nations are the tools of revelation, whether they know it or not” (Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God*, Oxford, 1960. pp.36-37).

And they are just as inextricably bound up with Israel. God cannot deal with Israel and omit the nations. By necessity the one is contingent upon the other. Therefore, no nation is exempt from inclusion, and must consider its course relative to Israel especially in that final sifting of Israel through the nations (See Amos 9) by which the nations themselves are sifted and their eternal disposition affected (See Matt. 25:31-46).

Hendrikus Berkhof in his epochal book, *Christ the Meaning of History*, writes:

“Thus the real Exodus is still to come. However, this concerns not only Israel, but all nations. Israel’s journey through time has world-wide purpose. Rest for Israel will mean peace for all nations. The goal is not reached until all nations halt their wars and go up to Zion to learn the law of Yaweh (Isa. 2:1-5 and Micah 4:1-5). God has set Israel apart...in order that she may become the centre of a world in which all nations will belong to God (Isa. 19:23-25). This mighty vision did not live in all periods, and certainly not for all men; but it is the last unfolding...The person and work of Jesus Christ cannot be understood apart from this...the nation was set upon a road that should end only when a refined Israel shall be the centre of a world of nations from which all blessings will flow and above which the Lord’s glory would shine” (pp. 39-40).

Addendum: The Primeval Origin of National Sin?

“Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. And it came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly.” And they used brick for stone, and they used tar [slime] for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build for ourselves a city [state] and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name [reputation, fame]; lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth” (Gen.11:1-4f).

In this Book of Beginnings, we are given the prototype of national sin-or the sin of nationalism-that characterizes the ecumenical political and religious unity of mankind under Antichrist at the end! This section of Scripture reads as the ‘fall’ of nations as analogous to that of Adam and Eve in the garden. Having been established after the Flood in the Noachite covenant, and being descendent from the sons who survived that ecological disaster, and established in the divisions of the earth that God had already performed through Eber (Gen. 10:25), these tribes coalesced into a rebellious confederacy and chafed by being restricted, and strike out in their own independence to seek their own place and autonomy! What is described by one commentator as “a premature attempt at centralization” gives us the pattern for all subsequent sin that has its final expression in a rebellion against God through antichrist at the end!

Note the constituent elements that will comprise the last days’ reiteration of the rebellion of the nations: In the man-made use of bricks (‘burnt thoroughly’ rather than typically sun-dried) in their anxiousness and haste which Claus Westerman describes as the “arrogant abuse of technology”; in the occultic religion implied in a tower stretching into the heavens for astrological use, who already were worshipping the host of heaven, having already forfeited the glory of God! Having lost the unity of the spirit in departing the living God, their ‘unity’ was predicated on the commonality of language, a fortress-city and tower brought to a height of human exaltation that would make for themselves a name!

“The fact that they were afraid of dispersion is a proof that the inward spiritual bond of unity and fellowship [as well as] the oneness of their God and worship, but also [that of] brotherly love was already broken by sin...Pride, selfishness and vain glory were the ruling motives [as the] spirit of true religion was extinguished in the heart of men who deliberately adopted and persisted in a course of action designed to defeat or defer the divine intention” (Jamieson, Fausset, Brown, *A Commentary*, p.122, emphasis mine).

The commentator of the NIV Bible rightly summarizes:

“If the whole human race remained united in the proud attempt to take destiny into its own hands, and, by its man-centered efforts, to seize the reins of history, there would be no limit to its unrestrained rebellion against God. The kingdom of man would displace and exclude the kingdom of God” (Footnote, Gen.11:6).