

God of Nations

by David Orton

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From one man he made every nation ...

Acts 17:26

God is a 'world person'. Without his creative fiat the world, nor the nations, would exist. In fact, he is not only the initial cause, but also the *sustainer* of all that exists.

Every fibre of creation is impregnated with who he is. His decree, "*Let there be*", echoes throughout the time-space order, resonating not only with the human spirit, but with all that is, holding all things in place. The prophetic power and pure energy of his voice pulsates throughout creation, sustaining and directing all things from the smallest atom to the greatest constellation of stars (Heb 1:3).

The divine *intention*

And so, the whole created order throbs with divine intent. Speaking out of his own nature, the great creator-God declares, "*Let us make man in our image*", reflecting his desire for intimacy. He reveals himself as a plurality; in fact, as the triune God, who in himself is a 'sweet society', creating all things to one end: that he might commune with his creation. Man, created in his image, was made male and female. Mandated to go forth and multiply, they were designed to bring heaven to earth through intimacy—the intimacy of an open, transparent relationship with the creator-God and, thus, with one another.

However, sin intervened. Violence was done to the divine intent. Communion with God and with one another was interrupted, and a new start was demanded. And so, Christ was not only sent as the *last Adam*, terminating sin and death, but also the *second man*, ushering in a new order of righteousness and life (1 Cor 15:45-49). A new era of God's glory was inaugurated, filling the earth, even as the "waters cover the sea".

Fulfilled through *nations*

This brings us to Paul's message before Athens' pagan philosophers and councillors at the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34). His argument moves from the unity of the one creator-God (v 24-25), in contrast to the pantheon of gods worshiped by the Greeks, to the unity of man, descended from one progenitor made in the image of God. And, this unity was expressed through diversity—the diversity of nations (v 26). Adam's original creation mandate to fill the earth and to rule it under God now clearly involves nations.

The creator, as the "*Lord of heaven and earth*", has "*determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live*" (v 26b). And so, the nations are not only created by him, but also governed and sustained by him. Contrary to human understanding, their geo-political boundaries and their time-frames in history are determined exclusively by God (Deut 32:8). He does not consult with man. He is God and does what he likes on earth (Ps 115:2-3). He raises up one nation and brings down another (1 Sam 2:6-8; Ps 75:6-7; Dan 2:21; 4:17; 5:20).

The purpose of *nations*

But we may ask whether this is purely arbitrary? Is God capricious in his dealings with men? No, he cannot do anything contrary to his own nature. For example, he is the God "who cannot lie" (Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18). This would violate who he is—for he cannot deny himself (2 Tim 2:13). Therefore, nations are raised up or brought down in accordance with his nature—in harmony with his desire for intimacy.

Paul explains why God raises up nations: "*God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him ...*" (v 27a). Nations exist for one purpose – to seek after God – to know and worship him. To the degree they do this – fulfilling the divine intent – to that degree they experience the blessing of God in their longevity and prosperity (Deut 28:1-2,

15).

And so, through creation the echo of eternity resonates not only in the individual heart, but also in that of corporate cultures and people groups; they were created by God for God. Despite our pagan idolatries and backslidings, impregnated within every human culture are the hidden hues of the divine.

This should not be a surprise, for as Paul said on Mars Hill, quoting one of their own Greek poets, "*We are his offspring*" (v 28). We are his, first by creation, and only then by redemption. All things have come from him through creation, and will return to him through redemption (Rom 11:36). The unique outshining of the creator-God in every culture will be redeemed nation by nation, as his Spirit is poured out on all flesh, until the human family stands again under its one head, Christ. The diversity of nations will ultimately find unity again in "*the administration suitable to the fullness of times, the bringing together of all things in heaven and on earth under one head, Christ*" (Eph 1:10).

This is the purpose of history and, therefore, of nations: to fulfil the creation mandate, filling the earth and subduing it through Christ's redeeming power (Gen 1:28; Rev 5:9-10).

Foreshadowed in Daniel's prophecy

This is powerfully foreshadowed in Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream (Dan 2). The massive image from the head to its toes, representing ensuing kingdoms and nations, shows the unfolding of human history from Babylon to its culmination in Rome when a stone, cut without hands, strikes the feet and toes of iron and clay. At this, the whole image crashes to a heap. Commentators universally agree that these feet represent the Roman Empire, and the rock, Christ.

Referring to the feet and toes, Daniel prophesied that,

In the days of those kings [the feet and toes], the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed ... It [the stone cut without hands] will crush all those kingdoms [head, chest, arms, thighs and legs] and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.

Daniel 2:44.

This is none other than the kingdom of Christ inaugurated, through his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father, in the days of the Roman emperors. This is God's decisive act in history: the divide between the old order of sin and death in Adam, and the new order of righteousness and life in Christ and his kingdom.

The new kingdom order

And this new kingdom order is "*righteousness, peace, and joy, in the Holy Spirit*" (Rom 14:17). It is "*in the Holy Spirit*". Poured out at Christ's coronation on the day of Pentecost, and in every subsequent revival and refreshing, the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit is the agency by which this kingdom advances. It is not the power of guns and rockets, but the power of God; nor is it the wisdom of men, but the foolishness of the cross; nor the power of the messianic state, for it is "*by my Spirit, says the Lord*". Every human pretension to the throne – whether political, ecclesiastical, or military – will run headlong into the awesome majesty of the creator-God, who alone stands supreme over the nations. He is the source of all authority and power: every other authority is delegated, and must be exercised under God (Rom 13:1-2). If not, there will be a reckoning both in history and in eternity (Ps 2; Mtt 25:31-46).

This new kingdom order is pre-eminently a people movement—a new humanity; in fact, a race of king-priests mandated by God to populate the earth and disciple the nations (Gen 1:28; Mtt 28:18-20; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 5:10). Christ, as the first born of the new order, has blazed the trail in his humanity, perfected through suffering (Heb 2:10; 5:8-9). His life of obedience to the Father is now the life that he lives through us in full resurrection power (Gal 2:20).

And therefore, in church and state, the one to whom the Father will look is the one who is "*humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at his word*" (Isa 66:2).

And so, in this fullness of times God is giving us a revelation of who he is—the sovereign ruler of the nations:

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

Psalm 22:27-28 NIV

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