

Gospel Continuity

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[0 : 00] you belong in the church of Jesus Christ. That though this church might have started out in a small unnamed village just outside Jerusalem, it was always God's intention that Jesus should be Lord of all, and therefore that salvation should be for all.

Not just for Jew, but for Gentile also. In fact, to all those who, unlike Zechariah, should believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And even if that means that you've got to break the man-made traditions of your forefathers, if you have faith in Jesus Christ, you belong here in the church that bears his name.

You know, it's really hard for those of us who are rightly taught, rightly taught to respect those older than us, to realize they might have been wrong about certain things.

You belong. That's the central message of Luke Acts and the central message of this passage, Luke 1, 5 through 25.

[1 : 14] All those who turn to the Lord God, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, whatever you're from, whatever your background, whatever language you speak, you belong.

You might not be from these shores. You might not share our heritage. You might not share our skin color. You might not share our traditions. But what comes first, first is your identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Well, for the remaining time this morning, I want to highlight a few areas of continuity, discontinuity in this passage, while all the time emphasizing its central message.

You belong. So say that in your mind right now. I belong. Okay. First of all, continuity. Continuity.

Consider first, those God chooses as the heroes of this story. Those God chooses as the heroes of this story. They're a childless couple, and they're well advanced in years.

[2 : 24] Does this sound familiar to you at all? There's continuity here. Think of Abraham and Sarah, and how even though Sarah was old and barren, God gave her a son.

The son was Isaac. And then think of Elkanah and Hannah. And even though Hannah was barren, God gave her a son, and his name was Samuel.

So the fact that this barren, childless couple would conceive again in their old age, reminds us that the God of the Old Testament is at work again.

He's doing what he does. He's fulfilling his promises to his people. Our heroes are described in verse 8 as righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.

They are keen observers of the Torah. And yet we learn by way of continuity that Zechariah did not believe the words of the angel.

[3 : 36] Verse 20, Behold, you'll be silent, unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words. Again, does that sound familiar to you? Abraham's wife, Sarah, did not believe the words the Lord spoke to her about the birth of a child either.

God's not changed. His words still trustworthy. Our response is to be faith, belief. Consider also, our heroes are ethnic Jews.

They can trace their family tree all the way back to Abijah the priest on Zechariah's side and Aaron the priest on Elizabeth's side. It doesn't get much more Jewish than Luke 1, 5 through 25.

It begins with Herod, the king of Judea, although he was half Edomite, it's written in a style that wouldn't be out of place in the Old Testament. It's describing events that happen in Jerusalem, the capital city.

It mentions the Hebrew prophet Elijah. There are Jewish ceremonies. There's Jewish people. There are Jewish prayers. Yes, there's even a Hebrew angel called Gabriel.

[4 : 46] So there's continuity here with the Old Testament. Over the centuries, many Christians have suggested that we should ignore the Old Testament.

It's got nothing to teach us. Building on their arguments, today's evangelical atheists want to insist that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are different.

The God of the Old Testament is full of wrath and anger. The God of the New Testament is full of love and compassion. Luke wants us to recognize that there is continuity between the way God worked in the Old Testament and the way he works in the New Testament.

He is the same God he has not changed. One, but still as righteous as ever, still as loving as ever. A God who uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise.

God did not use the mighty, proud king Herod to prepare a people for the Lord. He used the barren womb of an old lady called Elizabeth.

[5 : 55] God still uses people who struggle with their faith like Zechariah did to move his kingdom forward. He still does extraordinary things with ordinary people like us.

And yes, I suppose there are some of us here this morning who think that they have outlived their usefulness to God. Think again. Zechariah and Elizabeth thought they could have outlived their usefulness to God, but they'd have been wrong.

God does the most unlikely things with the most unlikely people in the most unlikely situations. or perhaps there are some of us here today who are filled with doubts and think that perhaps God can't use me and that God must lose his patience with me.

Think again. For all Zechariah's unbelief, God still used him to serve his purposes and bring salvation to his people. The message is this, and listen carefully, what God has done before he can do again because he is the God of continuity.

You belong. You belong. Even though you think you are useless to God. You belong. But consider with me not only the heroes God chose, but the message that God chose to be proclaimed.

[7 : 26] Again, we want to turn to our central verses, verses 16 and 17. He'll turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord, their God, and he'll go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedience to the wisdom of the just to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

Again, there's continuity here, right? For example, consider the message John the Baptist will proclaim is one of turning, of repentance.

The word turn is used twice in these verses, that word which we could just as easily translate as repentance. John's message will be very similar to that of the Old Testament prophets.

Turn away from your false gods. Turn away from your false religion. Return to the Lord your God. As we go through Luke's gospel, as we pass it into Acts, we're going to discover the centrality of a call to repentance in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This message will also consider in verse 17 be exactly the same as that of Elijah the prophet. John the Baptist, as he'll later be called, that child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, shall go, we read, in the spirit and power of Elijah.

[9 : 02] We're going to learn that John the Baptist not only self-identified as Elijah, dressed like Elijah, he also preached the same message as Elijah.

Just as Elijah preached a message of repentance to King Ahab and the other people of his day, so John the Baptist will proclaim a message of repentance to Herod and the people of his day.

You see the continuity here in Luke 1, 5-25? both in the flawed heroes God chooses to use but also the message he chooses to be proclaimed.

You know that message hasn't really changed. Repent and believe the good news. And those heroes haven't changed.

There's still flawed men and women whose doubts sometimes get the better to them. Jew or Gentile. What is of first importance is not your ethnicity where you come from but that you've turned to God in faith and believed his message of repentance.

[10 : 26] That's truth as old as the hills. Repentance is a word which is most definitely out of fashion in today's church.

The preaching of today's church avoids talking about sin and unbelief and transgression. Nothing is off limits to today's liberated Christian.

You can live any way you like and still call yourself a follower of Jesus. but according to Jesus himself not so not so any faithful proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ must contain the commandment not just to turn from but to turn to not just to turn to Christ but to turn away from sin.

Are you living a repentant life? Are you putting sin to death in your life while pursuing deeper faith and greater Christ likeness?

This isn't just the Old Testament way. This is the timeless way of faith and salvation. Faith evidenced by repentance and repentance unto faith.

[11 : 56] One without the other is unthinkable to Luke the New Testament Christian or to Elijah the Old Testament prophet. So you see this passage contains many continuities.

It's the connection as it were between Old and New Testaments and even in its continuities its message to you is this anyone who has turned to Jesus Christ away from their sin to Jesus Christ belongs in his church anyone you belong home.

But then secondly there are discontinuities there are discontinuities these may not at first glance seem quite so apparent but their presence in this text shakes us out of our self satisfied contentment as western Christians even as it shook those first Jewish Christians out of their xenophobia toward their Gentile fellow Christians the Gospels after all are the first four books of the New Testament not the last four books of the Old Testament the first discontinuity I want to set before you is that God is directly speaking to his people for the first time in hundreds of years hundreds of years the first the final three books the final three books of the Old

Testament were written in the fourth century BC at the very latest which means that there's at least a 300 year gap between God speaking through the prophets of the end of the Old Testament and God speaking through the angel Gabriel to Zechariah go back 300 years from now we have the act of union between that made up the United Kingdom that that's how long that's how long that time gap is for 300 years God other than speaking through his word has been silent but now he speaks again through his angel Gabriel God did not speak to Zechariah father in the same way he spoke to Zechariah because for over 300 years God has been silent but now he has spoken the intervening 300 years had been very eventful for the people of

Israel they had been subject to a variety of invasions and empires they had won their freedom through a charismatic messiah type figure called Judas Maccabeus his name means Judas the hammer a military leader whose tactics led to the emancipation from a fearsome enemy religiously the nation had divided into many different cults ranging from the hyper Jewish conservative sect of the Pharisees to the pro Greek liberal sect of the Sadducees these aren't events and movements which the average Christian knows much about because they're not recorded in the Bible because for all those hundreds of years God was silent now he speaks since the end of Malachi he's been silent now he speaks in fact since then he's not stopped speaking he no longer speaks through angels he sends from heaven but by the enduring word of his son

[16 : 06] Jesus Christ he speaks and it's our delight and our duty and our responsibility to listen and to respond from heaven he speaks through spirit and word and he speaks to us all to Jew and Gentile are you listening this morning as the God of heaven and earth speaks to you by his spirit through his word consider secondly with me the knotty problem the difficult problem and the central kernel of this sermon of how it is that John the Baptist message will turn the hearts of fathers toward their children turn the hearts of fathers to their children as you see in verse 17 after all throughout the old testament the most that the command is most often that children return to their fathers that the sons and daughters of

Israel return to the faithfulness of David and Solomon and Moses and Samuel so why here does the angel reverse the order let's go back to the intertestamental history of Israel you must feel as if I'm delivering a lecture on Jewish history rather than preaching a sermon from this passage but you need to know these things if you are to understand why Luke says the things he does during those 300 years before the end of the book of Malachi and the beginning of the gospel of Luke Jewish religion had become fixated with traditions with laws with ethnic purity with nationalism and xenophobia the Pharisees whose name we think means the pure ones were taught to hate the

Gentiles because they were impure their philosophies were corrosive the rabbis and the scribes of the Pharisees drew up thousands of laws and traditions as a means of interpreting the Ten Commandments the heart of Israel's piety was no longer the devotion of people's hearts to God the heart of Jewish piety became their outward conformity to rabbinic teaching tradition and law so these are the so called fathers spoken of in Luke chapter 1 those who are pursuing external and ethnic purity according to the rabbinic law as I said earlier the children in Luke chapter 1 are believers in

Christ they're Christians they're declaring their loyalty to the grace of God in Jesus Christ who saw in Jesus Christ the coming of God in the flesh and realized that the heart of a man's religion lies in the religion of a man's heart that the kingdom of God doesn't recognize ethnic or national boundaries it is relatively unconcerned with external appearances so you see when John the Baptist's mission is described as being to turn the hearts of their fathers to their children the blessed angel Gabriel is describing how John's mission will be to turn Israel away from the hypocrisy externality which lay at the heart of rabbinic regulations traditions and laws and to turn them to the piety of the righteousness of faith in

Israel's Messiah Jesus Christ it's to turn them away from thinking that they're obedient to God and their works and their conformity to the man-made regulations of the rabbis could earn a seat for them in heaven the idea that a man can work his way to heaven by his obedience to a set of man-made rules is as old as the hills we even have a name for it we call it religion religion whatever it is might not be rabbinic regulations traditions or laws you'll hear this in churches up and down our city and up and down our country today they'll say do this do this and live do this and live be like me and live perhaps perhaps that was drummed into us as children just a little bit too much be a good person behave yourself then you'll be okay but against this idea

[21 : 27] John the Baptist followed by Jesus himself tells us that it's not what we do that saves us it's what he does for us it is not what we do for God that saves us it's what he has done for us it is receiving salvation through faith not earning our salvation through works which is the consistent message of the New Testament and also the old do you get it do you understand it that these Gentile believers in Acts they were justified before God through faith in Christ whereas the ethnic Jews of our previous generation were wrong before God because they thought they could earn their salvation by their rigid observance to the traditions and regulations of the rabbis that's what it means for John to turn the hearts of fathers to their children to turn them away from from a dead works based religion and toward a living faith in a living

Messiah and his question today to us all is this are you still walking in the ways of the fathers thinking that somehow by obeying a set of man made regulations you can earn your salvation or have you listened to Jesus and rather than trust in your good works to earn your way to heaven trusted in him well there are many other discontinuities in this passage for example if you should think of Zechariah and Elizabeth as the pattern of the faithful remnant what Elizabeth says in verse 25 takes on new meaning the Lord has looked upon me to take away my disgrace the coming of Christ will take away Israel's shame and bring glory to God's people also as we'll look at in a couple of weeks the Holy Spirit is spoken of as filling John from his mother's womb we're going to discover the amazing role the

Holy Spirit is going to play in the Christian church and in our discipleship as followers of Jesus but the final discontinuities and in many ways the most obvious is how the mission of John the Baptist will be I quote verse 17 to make ready a people prepared for the Lord to make ready a people prepared for the Lord after John will come one who is here called the Lord the Lord being the Old Testament name for God kurios kurios this is telling us something about John the Baptist mission to prepare through the proclamation of repentance the way for the Lord among a people who were previously in bondage to the traditions and regulations of the rabbis but it's telling us something even more John's role is preparatory he's the warm up act and after him is going to come the real deal the real

Messiah the real Lord really and truly this is telling us more about the Jesus who was coming than the John who was born it's telling us that after all these hundreds and thousands of years of waiting for the Messiah he is finally coming and the world will never be the same again and he's telling us even who this Messiah is the Lord kurios kurios God in the flesh listen if I was alive in the days of John the Baptist I'm glad I wasn't because there was no NHS back then for all the world I wouldn't want to go back to the ways of their fathers to the harsh and merciless man made legalism who looked down on anyone who wasn't ethnically Jewish called them impure dogs I want to look forward to the coming days of the Lord where God himself will demonstrate his love for sinful men and women like me of whatever ethnicity and background by dying as their sacrifice on the cross and by rising victorious on the grave

I want to look forward to days like these in Glasgow City Free Church where Jew and Gentile male and free by faith in Jesus Christ I can belong to this church which bears the name Christian the only requirement therefore for you to belong it has nothing to do with your background nothing to do with your culture nothing to do with the food you like to eat your gender the color of your skin your chosen native language your ethnicity nothing to do with that at all the only requirement for your belonging is your faith in Christ that is the only requirement that and no other so tell me do you belong do you belong your you oh