David Meiklejohn
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What do God's People Look Like?

Romans 15 v 8-13

Introduction

Genetics is a fascinating study. We all contain genetic code that determines how we develop, what we look like and how we function. Each strand of that code is a long string of connected chemical blocks. There are just four types of chemical block, but there are so many blocks in a strand of what we call DNA, that they hold enough information to build a person.

Our DNA comes from our parents. It's a mixture of parts, some from our fathers and some from our mothers. And it means that we look like our parents. "He has his mother's eyes" isn't just a vague description, it's a biological truth. We inherit looks and traits from our parents.

We also inherit faults. I'm colour blind. That's because my mother had a fault in her DNA that didn't affect her, but she passed on to me. My daughter isn't colour blind, but if she has a son there's a 50/50 chance that he will be.

We look like our parents. We learn to behave like our parents. But we also pick up our parents faults.

What do God's people look like?

Background

Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome. Rome was filled with people from all walks of life. Having built a great empire that spanned a huge area across Europe, Asia and Africa, Rome will have been home to a hugely diverse group of people. And the gospel message had spread through all walks of society. Paul talked about witnessing in Caesar's household. He also spent time with slaves. The church in Rome has rich and poor, men and women, free and slave, Jews and Gentiles. The gospel breaks down divisions, and it's this last division between Jews and Gentiles that Paul is trying to emphasise to the Roman Christians has been broken down by Jesus.

What do God's people look like?

The Jews and Gentiles had different perspectives on the answer to that question. For the Jews, they are God's chosen people, children of Abraham. The whole of the Old Testament scriptures are about God's interactions with them. They have seen the culmination of God's promises - Christ came to live among them and gave himself for them. So they certainly had an identity. They are ethnically similar, they dress in a certain way, and they're now being faced with an influx of new Christians from other peoples, with different looks, different clothes, different habits. You can understand why they felt that these Gentile Christians should become like them.

For the Gentiles, they have been introduced to a new reality. Many would have been polytheists before they came to Christ, worshipping many Gods. To be told there is only one God, that he took on flesh, then sacrificed himself for his people, and that they can be part of that people, must have been a lot to take in. There would be some aspects of their lives that they would have to cast off now that they were Christians. But do they really have to become just like the Jews to be proper Christians?

For the Jewish believers Christianity is a continuation of a long development of God's plan.

For the gentiles it's being suddenly grafted into an ancient vine and amazingly being given the same status as the other branches.

We have already thought about differences in eating habits, observation of holy days, and other things we called the debatables. Paul urged them to go with their consciences on these things that weren't vital to the faith, to consider others and not cause them to stumble, and to welcome one another as Christ had welcomed all. With all these differences, the Christians no longer looked like a coherent people group. They all dressed differently, cut their hair differently, had different customs, spoke differently.

Relevance of the Scriptures

So with all these differences, what do the people of God look like?

The Jews can turn to the scriptures to find out their history, their traditions and how God has shaped them as a people. Are the scriptures relevant at all to the Gentiles? Or are they an afterthought, a recent addition to God's plan?

Paul explains how the scriptures are relevant to both. First of all to the Jews:

> *For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs*
>
> *[Romans 15 v 8]*

I always find it difficult, when looking at Jesus' statement that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, to explain what he means by the Truth. The Way is easy enough - he is the only way to God. "No man comes to the Father but by me". The Life is easy too, He is the source of new life which we have through the second birth. But the Truth is harder to explain, until you come to this verse in Romans. Jesus showed God's truthfulness by fulfilling the promises he gave to the patriarchs.

Jesus was born of a virgin, from the line of David and in the city of David: Bethlehem. He was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, was silent before his accusers, his hands and feet were pierced and he was buried with the rich, only to rise again the third day and ascend into heaven. All these things were prophesied in the Old Testament.

Jesus didn't replace the Old Testament scriptures, he proved them truthful. He fulfilled the promises of God, right back to the very beginning, when God promised Eve that a son of hers would bruise the serpent's head.

And so also the Jews who followed Jesus didn't need to replace the scriptures. Instead they could treasure them, as they understood how they spoke of the saviour. The Old Testament gains clarity when we realise it points to Jesus.

What about the Gentiles, then?

Paul shows them that the scriptures are relevant to them too:

> *and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.*
>
> *[Romans 15 v 9a]*

The gentiles were outside of the old covenant. They did not know God, and when they looked at the scriptures they found a holy God who would not bear sin, and a chosen people that they were not part of. So when they came to know Christ, how much greater a mercy was it that God was willing to bring these outsiders into his kingdom? What a surprise that the Gentiles also could be saved!

But it wasn't a surprise really. It was all part of God's plan. And Paul takes them on a tour of the scriptures to show them that they were always in God's mind. He says "As it is written" and then quotes 4 old testament passages:

> *"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,*
>
> *and sing to your name."*
>
> *[Romans 15 v 9b]*

This is a quote from David's victory song in 2 Samuel 22, which we'll come to soon in our Sunday evening series. He had been fighting the Philistines, including the giants related to Goliath, and God had given him the victory. David is not keeping the praise of God contained. It will be heard by the nations that God is the mighty God, the true God.

> *And again it says,*
>
> *"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."*
>
> *[Romans 15 v 10]*

Here he quotes from Moses' song in Deuteronomy 32. Depending on your translation verse 43 reads "Rejoice, O ye Gentiles", "Rejoice, O ye nations", or "Rejoice with him, O heavens". The point is that Moses calls on those outside of the nation of Israel, to rejoice with Israel, because of the supremacy of God.

> *And again,*
>
> *"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,*
>
> *and let all the peoples extol him."*
>
> *[Romans 15 v 11]*

The shortest Psalm, 117, calls upon all the nations to praise the Lord. They are included in God's creation, and included in his plan of salvation.

Finally:

And again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse will come,

even he who arises to rule the Gentiles;

in him will the Gentiles hope."

[Romans 15 v 12]

This quote is from Isaiah 11 v 10 (from the Septuagint translation into Greek - it reads a bit differently in my ESV Bible) and it goes further than the previous ones. Not only will the Gentiles praise God, but the saviour, the root of Jesse, will be their king and their hope. Paul is saying this verse points directly at God's plan for salvation for the Gentiles. They were always destined to be part of his people.

So the scriptures aren't relevant only to the Jews. For the Gentiles they show God's great plan to bring salvation to the world. You and I read the Old Testament, and we find so much that is good, useful and a blessing to us.

God's people were always intended to include both Jew and Gentile.

Like the Father

So what do God's people look like?

They are Jews and Gentiles. They grow their beards or are clean shaven. They wear all sorts of clothing. They eat only certain foods or they eat anything. They observe certain holy days or they treat those days as just another day. They welcome one another as equals, no matter what walk of life they come from.

All this variety, but for the observer there is one thing they have in common:

They look like the Father.

Verse 13 explains it to us:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

[Romans 15 v 15]

Paul calls God the God of hope. And he prays that his people would abound in hope. Earlier on in verses 4 and 5 he calls God the God of endurance and encouragement. And he wants God's people to be people of endurance and encouragement. Look at those verses:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus,

[Romans 15 v 4-5]

Why does he want this for them?

that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[Romans 15 v 6]

He wants the whole world to hear the voices of his people, Jew and Gentile, joined together in glorifying the Father.

It is from the Father, by the Spirit and through the Son, that they share the same spiritual DNA. They are like each other, as they are like the Father: people who are full of endurance, full of encouragement, full of joy, full of peace, full of hope. Together glorifying God.

Conclusion

And so should we be. We are a church made up of Africans, Asians, Europeans, Americans. We physically look quite different. We have different dress sense. Or no dress sense in my case. We have different cultures. We speak different languages. Some of us are very outgoing, while others are more reserved. Some of us are very young and some are fairly old.

What do people in the houses round about us think? "You get all sorts in that church"?

Or do they see what they should see? Paul tells the Colossians he has heard they are known as people of faith, and people who love the saints. Here he tells the Roman Christians they should be people of endurance, encouragement, joy, peace and hope.

We can't get these traits by trying. They are first of all inherited from the Father when we are born again. And secondly they grow as we practise them in our walk with Jesus.

At the start I said that I inherited my colour blindness from my mother. All our flaws are human, we are born with them. But what we inherit from the Father is flawless. And that's the part of us we need to let shine in our lives. As Paul said:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.

[Romans 15 v 15]