

The Last Act

Part 2: The New Basis for the Second Half of the Final Chapter—Jesus

There were many foreshadowings of “one who was to come (Jn 11:3).” Yet, while He was expected, nevertheless, in advance, His role and ministry were scarcely clear and are being pondered to this day. Yet, thousands of books filled with awe and wonder have been written about Him. Global history has seen no greater impact from any other person. Virtually everything that is happening today in the entire world is either different because of Him or is best understood through His eyes.

The Bible of the early church, the *Septuagint*, which had brought millions closer to God, would now, because of Him, be accompanied by an additional book written not so much by Jews in the diaspora as by the direct impact of the life of Jesus. Half of it would consist of careful accounts of his ministry. More than half would be written by the Gentile, Luke, the physician. All of it would owe its existence to the widespread embracing of Him by those outside of the ethnic Jewish lineage.

In just a few decades the followers of this person, born in a tiny village near Jerusalem would be given the huge Lateran Palace in Rome for their headquarters—the former “White House” of the Emperors. In a few centuries time would be counted from his birth date. In a few more centuries populations enlivened by the Christian movement would conquer almost every square foot of the earth’s surface, and then give it back to the original inhabitants, not without permanent change.

How did this all get started? The first 2,000 years of the Abrahamic Mandate would see genuine Biblical faith expand in a Jewish ethnic vehicle into the whole of the Roman empire and in the form of tiny enclaves to the very ends of the earth.

In a few short years, following the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, totally different ethnic vehicles would carry that same Biblical faith into all the earth in a much larger and more influential movement.

The four Gospels lay out the story of the disturbing discrepancy between the meaning of the Bible and religious configurations of Jesus’ day. The rest of the New Testament describes in some detail just how that faith flowed beyond Jewish ethnic boundaries.

We note genuine believers in Jesus as Lord both in Jewish and Greek cultural traditions.

We note “Judaizers” who determinedly denounced any abandoning of the Jewish “garments” of the Gospel, wanting Greeks to undergo an extensive “proselytization” process in order to be acceptable to God.

We note Greek followers of the faith who sneered at Jewish believers who maintained their cultural traditions.

We note a major spiritual tension arising as both Jesus and the leaders who followed him underscored a theme basic to the Old Testament, which demanded heart faith not just outward compliance with religious forms. Emphasis on faith then appeared to some as a reason for ignoring all outward obedience.

This same tension would arise again and again down through history whenever the faith would flow from the forms of one cultural tradition to another. True faith always is evidenced in true obedience, but the form of that obedience is always cultural.

This was the basis for the hostility aroused against Paul by Jews. It presages the opposition that may arise every time the Gospel takes on new cultural clothing.

It involves a confusion which we see in the Lutheran Reformation’s superficial categorization of the Old Testament and the New Testament as domains of “law and grace.” Both faith and obedience are expected in both testaments, the NT phrase, “the obedience of faith” in Romans 1:5 and 16:26 (improperly translated in the NIV) displaying the words as two sides of the same coin. For the Protestants to choose faith and the Catholics to choose obedience rendered them both heretical.

Thus, it is important to realize that the passage of the Gospel from Jewish to Greek clothing is not stated in the New Testament as a mere description of what happened but as an example of what would happen over and over again. Almost always the two sides cannot understand the other, what is called disimilation.

Probably the least recognized example of this kind of disimilation is the 7th Century AD event in which an Arab leader forged new clothing for the faith out of Arabic garments. Christianity by that time was totally identified with the political and military power of Rome. As Rome’s power weakened, so did the allegiance of many of the former empire’s minorities. It is no surprise that those who for any reason did not want to be iden-

tified with Rome were eager to accept a non-Roman form of Christianity which, of course, was not called Christian but Muslim. This movement included the Roman-oppressed peoples of North Africa and even Spain for seven hundred years. Islam became a major inheritor of the Mediterranean civilization while Christianity became more and more a phenomenon of the tribal societies of what we now call Europe. This handed Islam a huge advantage. Art, literature, science, medicine and politics were far more advanced in Islam than in the tribal societies of Europe, as valiantly as Charlemagne tried to drag them up into civilization.

