

“Learning from the Early Church about Standards of Membership”

Acts 11:1–18

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I have shared with some of you the story of a teenager who made a profession of faith only to be denied membership in a local church. It was a little over thirty years ago — so, not the nineteenth century nor even the 1960s — in Warren County. A small Baptist church was doing a Backyard Bible Club and a fourteen-year-old girl of mixed-race background came and was so moved by the Jesus story that she made a profession of faith. Those involved, including the pastor, were filled with joy, but when she was presented for membership, the church voted not to accept her because of the color of her skin. The pastor left that church and started a new church that embraced people of all races.

We wonder how any church could be so exclusive, driven by cultural biases and prejudices more than the teachings of Christ when it comes to standards of membership, but this is not an isolated story nor is it a new thing. In fact, as we see in our reading from Acts 11, it is something that goes all the way back to the early church.

The apostles and believers in Jerusalem, all circumcised, which is to say of Jewish background, hear that some Gentiles have accepted the word of God, they have come to believe in Jesus. “Hallelujah!” everyone says, right? Well, no. When Peter, who has been used by God to extend the good news to the centurion Cornelius and some other Gentiles, gets to Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians there criticize him, saying, “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?”

They are not ready to welcome Gentiles, and their resistance is both cultural and religious. They don’t think they are being exclusive. “We’re not racists!” they would insist because they don’t realize how significantly systemic forces shape their decisions. They think they are defending the faith. Peter thinks otherwise.

This isn’t the first time the issue has arisen nor will it be resolved here. But for whom is the gospel intended, just the Jewish people or the

whole world? It is the defining internal issue for the church in the early decades. It may seem obvious that all are welcome, as our hymn of devotion proclaims, but in every generation, there are standards of belonging, beginning with this issue of Jews and Gentiles.

What this story tells us is this is not a new issue. When outsiders come in, not everyone is happy, and the truth is there are reasons why some boundaries might make sense. The Didache, one of the earliest non-canonical documents we have, dated to the early second century, says this about communion. “Let none eat or drink of your Eucharist, save such as are baptized into the name of the Lord. For concerning this the Lord hath said; ‘Give not that which is holy to the dogs (IX).’”

I’m not sure that’s what Jesus was talking about, but the early church’s concern is with protecting both the holiness of the sacred meal and their lives. Becoming a Christian and celebrating its rituals, especially communion, under the Roman Empire, are risky ventures. Many die for their faith. So, the community doesn’t need imposters infiltrating its ranks; it needs boundaries for protection.

Yet, over time, such boundaries have been based on less noble concerns. During the reformation in England, people were not only excluded from the church, they were put to death, for being the wrong kind of Christians. That’s one reason why our forebears came to this land, but in the early days, religious freedom did not exist. Early Baptists were jailed for their insistence on freedom. When Virginia finally decided to allow non-Anglican Christians to get a license to preach, Presbyterians and Methodists got licenses, but Baptists refused to do so, saying the government had no authority over the church!

In various times and places, governments have thought they needed to establish boundaries on faith, decide who is in and who is out, and churches have done so too. From 1868, when this church became two churches separated by race, until the 1960s, our church did not welcome persons of color. The first time we were tested by a person of color who wanted to join, we failed the test, but we passed the next time.

In one of the greatest ironies of all, method of baptism has also been a reason for exclusion in many Baptist churches. I refer to this as

an irony because traditional Baptist theology views baptism not as a saving event or sacrament but as a form of testimony, but in exclusive Baptist congregations, unless you do it our way, you can't belong to our club... that is, church. Thankfully, we stopped practicing Baptist hazing several decades ago. Though we honor our tradition by practicing believer's baptism by immersion for first-time believers, we do not require re-baptism for those who come to us from other traditions.

Most recently, identity has become a barrier to membership and full participation in many churches. LGBT people especially have been excluded, the argument ostensibly being moral, but it is the only moral concern attached to membership. Neither adultery, embezzlement, assault nor murder is a barrier! Again, thankfully, we do not practice this kind of exclusion, but what the early church's experience tells us is that tensions and questions around who is welcome are not new.

But this is not all this story tells us. It also presents a model for how we might engage such tensions and questions. It is a model of open and mutually respectful conversation, thoughtful and prayerful discernment that ends in shared understanding.

It begins with the critics raising their questions directly with Peter. They do not complain about Peter to other people; they talk to him. They do not wait and allow their emotions to build and their memories to blur. They talk to him at the first opportunity. All of this is helpful and unlike many church disagreements that don't end well.

After the critics raise their questions, Peter responds by calmly explaining what he has done and how it happened, how God spoke to him in a vision which he felt compelled to follow. In other words, this was not his idea, it was God's, and each step of the way, there was some form of confirmation of this reality. God had spoken to Cornelius too, through an angel. The Holy Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles. "If God gave them the same gift God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ," Peter says, "Who was I to hinder God?"

It doesn't hurt his case that Peter had felt exactly like these Jewish Christians. He had no intention of going to Gentiles. But in this vision, he was told not to call profane what God had made clean. So, he went.

All of this is helpful. Defensiveness never helps resolve a disagreement, but since Peter doesn't feel threatened, he is not defensive.

So, the critics talk directly with Peter, Peter responds calmly, noting God's role. At this point, the text says that when they heard Peter's explanation, they were silenced. They no longer felt critical. They proclaimed, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!" It still sounds condescending — *even the Gentiles* — but the story ends with everyone on the same page. This happens because there is direct communication, Peter remains calm, and his critics *hear* what he is saying, really hear, listen with understanding.

Perhaps this is the missing piece in many contemporary conflicts over issues of welcome and just about everything else. How often do people listen to each other, truly listen, especially on heated topics? We tend to assume we know what the other person is going to say, start preparing our reply, and fail to follow carefully what he/she is saying, and perhaps more importantly, what might be behind his/her concerns.

When I was in seminary, I had a group project for an evangelism class in which we had to talk to the pastor of a church quite different than the one I served about that church's approach to evangelism which involved a lot of door-to-door witnessing. I told my classmates that when he found out which church I served, this would create tension. They thought I was being unfair, but when I mentioned the church, he put up a wall between us that threatened to shut down the conversation.

So, I asked why he was so invested in his church's approach. There are different ways to share our faith, different ways to worship the same God, different paths of following Christ. Had he ever thought about why he believed in this path? He paused, I'm not sure he had thought about this, and then he said he came from a dysfunctional family. Everything changed when strangers knocked on the door and witnessed to his parents who became Christians and healthier people.

It was no surprise, therefore, that he felt strongly about that approach. I was nurtured into faith through a youth group. So, youth ministry is pretty high on my list of priorities. The pastor put the wall back up pretty quickly, but for a few moments we connected, and it began with listening, really listening, wanting to understand him.

Listening with understanding led to shared agreement in our story from Acts. It doesn't always, sometimes we still disagree about many things, including who is welcome in the church, but there is a far better chance of agreement or at least peaceful disagreement when we listen.

But there is one other thing our story tells us, something about the broader trajectory of all disputes over standards of belonging in the church. Outsiders are eventually welcomed in, the trajectory is almost always toward more and more inclusion, because in God's vision of the beloved community, all are welcome. So, as one writer has put it, if we have drawn the wrong lines of exclusion, we may need the big erasers of confession, forgiveness and reconciliation (Sarah S. Scherschlight, *The Christian Century*, May 4, 2022, p. 22).

In the 2021 film *Belfast*, there is a conversation in which Buddy, a nine-year-old boy, is talking to his father about his crush on a Catholic classmate, which is problematic in 1969 in Northern Ireland, the setting of the film. But when he asks his father if they could have a future, his father says, "That wee girl can be a practicing Hindu, or Southern Baptist, or vegetarian Antichrist. But if she's kind, fair, and you two respect each other, she and her people are welcome in our house."

The choice of strange others here is fascinating, but it is a posture worthy of the church, to welcome all, with these minimal requirements — kindness, fairness, and mutual respect. To be part of the body of Christ also requires faith and a willingness to follow Jesus. But no aspect of who people are rules them out. As the voice says to Peter in a vision, what God has made clean, we must not call profane. As Peter tells his critics, if God gives people who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ the same gift of the Holy Spirit, who are we that we could hinder God?

Or as our hymn of discipleship puts it, "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no pride of birth, the chosen family God has blessed now spans the whole wide earth... It is by grace we are assured that we belong to him: the love we share in Christ our Lord, the Spirit's works within... In Christ there is no East or West — he breaks all barriers down; by Christ redeemed, by Christ possessed, in Christ we live as one." Amen!