

**“Learning from the Past”**  
**Acts 11:1–18**  
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In his book *Friends Divided* historian Gordon Wood tells the story of the complicated relationship between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. It is a fascinating exploration of two founders of this nation who were often at odds; in fact, they were at times political enemies; but who maintained a relationship that seemed to warm up in their later years. As many of you know, they died on the same day, July 4, 1826, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

The details of this relationship alone make the book worth reading, but it also provides a much-needed reminder about the texture of our national history. We have a tendency to romanticize our beginnings, to think principles like the equality of all people have always been embraced and the founders were all on the same page.

The truth is even phrases like “all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...” were the result of intense debate and a willingness to compromise. And while ultimately agreeing on the cause of independence, the key figures disagreed on a long list of substantive matters. It took the complicated mixture, and at times hostile disputes, of people like Jefferson, Adams, Hamilton, and Franklin to birth a nation that could endure. If any one of them had gotten his way on everything, we wouldn’t be here today.

But it is not only national history that we have a tendency to romanticize. We do the same thing with the beginning of the church. We tend to think that core principles like God’s love for all and the calling to share the Gospel with the whole world were embraced from the start and that the early church was so on fire for Jesus and brought together by the Spirit that the people knew a kind of unity we never will. The truth is they fussed and feuded over many issues, the most significant of which was whether the Gentiles should be included in the life of the church. So much for God’s love extending to all!

We see these dynamics playing out in our reading from Acts 11. This isn't the first time these issues surface in Acts, nor will it be the last, but we certainly see them on display here. Peter has had the audacity not only to take the Gospel to a centurion named Cornelius, a Gentile, but to enter his home and break bread with him.

It's not as if this is Peter's idea. He is an old-school righteous man who embraces traditional teachings about keeping the sacred and the profane separate. Gentiles are clearly off-limits! But then he has a vision in which he is told not to call profane what God has made clean. And so, he goes where the Spirit leads, to Cornelius; the Spirit falls on the people with him; and Peter has them all baptized.

As we join the story today, some circumcised believers in Jerusalem, that is, Jewish Christians, criticize Peter, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" It's bad enough that Peter associates with the people at all and shares the Gospel with them, but that he does something as intimate as breaking bread with them is outrageous! So, Peter has to defend himself.

He does so by telling a story about why he has done this, the same story we can read in Acts 10, with two additions. Peter notes that six brothers go with him to see Cornelius, six witnesses to what happens, and he adds a detail from Cornelius' heavenly vision, noting that the message Peter brings will lead to him and his household being saved.

In the end, Peter convinces his critics, a more inclusive perspective prevails, at least for now. The matter is not entirely resolved. But the church will eventually embrace a broader, more inclusive view of Christian faith in which Gentiles are included, which is good news for us since we are pretty much all Gentiles. But it is not a given that this will be the case from the beginning, and not everyone agrees right away.

So, what is the message for us in all of this? For one thing, we see the value of an open exchange of ideas, honest conversation and vigorous debate, a willingness to engage conflict rather than pretending it does not exist. Many churches want to preserve a superficial kind of peace partly because of a misunderstanding of what "unity" is and partly because of a desire to avoid conflict, but doing so is misguided.

We don't create differences by talking about them. They are already there. We simply create the possibility of deeper understanding, reconciliation, sometimes compromise, and often a better option than had been considered previously. Most communities benefit from a diversity of ideas and perspectives in addition to robust debate.

I am not saying such discussion is always productive. I have known a few processes like this to go sideways. But with careful guidance and a few boundaries established, healthy communities benefit from an honest exchange of ideas and input from everyone. Furthermore, giving everyone a voice is a very Baptist thing to do.

I think of two lively discussions in the church I served in Richmond, Virginia. One took place before my time. A predecessor I greatly respected led an effort to purchase an old home next to the church and use it for a halfway house for men coming out of prison. It was a proposal I would have supported, and it received a great deal of affirmation. But, as you might imagine, there were many who opposed the effort for various reasons, some more noble than others.

In the end, the church decided to use the property not as a halfway house but as a missionary furlough residence. While disappointed, my predecessor accepted the church's decision and remained pastor.

A second lively debate occurred in my time when we proposed using a portion of our property as a community garden. The goal was to grow food for people in need while building community among ourselves and involving children from a nearby housing project, thus getting them out of a concrete world and into the land. It was an idea I thought would be universally embraced, but I must have forgotten I was serving a Baptist church — AKA, a holy bunch of independent thinkers!

One man I knew had a garden and I thought he would love the idea but he spoke against it, saying we could buy cans of snaps for less money. I should have remembered that he had told my search committee, of which he was a member, that no honest vote is unanimous. So, if the committee agreed on a candidate for pastor, he would vote against that person! He didn't follow through on his threat. He voted for me, but his desire for honesty was noted, and in the end, he came around and supported the work of the garden which was approved by the church.

Lively discourse, everyone has input, a decision is made — this is how the early church proceeds, it is how healthy churches function today, and it is how this church works. It doesn't always go the way we like, but we work together, seeking to discern the guidance of the Spirit, and we support the decision the church makes. In our recent Mission, Vision, and Values document, the “nurturing” value says this.

First Baptist Church values and invests resources in spiritual formation and maturing faith for all ages. We strive for an environment that is open to questions, that responds in love and recognizes that each of us is on a journey. When confronted with issues that are difficult, this community's response is to listen, discuss, pray, contemplate, and then discern a way forward.

That sounds like good church!

But while the reading from Acts 11 tells us something about the value of an open exchange of ideas, it also tells us something about the nature of God's love — it is all-inclusive. In the reading from John 13, Jesus gives his disciples what he calls a new commandment, that they love one another, as he has loved them. Some argue that he is talking about placing a priority on love for other believers, but this flies in the face of the rest of Jesus' ministry where everyone is included. The newness of this teaching is that our love is to be like his, all-inclusive.

The reading from Acts echoes this theme. Previous categories of separation between sacred and profane, at least in regard to people, are dismissed. As Galatians 3:28 says, in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. All are one in Christ Jesus!

Of course, it's not the “all” part of this we find difficult. It's some specific people. In the early church, it is Gentiles. We forget that the church begins with only Jewish people. It is not a given that non-Jews will be included, and even if they are, that new converts won't have to become Jewish first and then Christian. Paul is *the* missionary to the Gentiles, but Peter is a critical supporter of this expansion of the church's mission because he has previously opposed it.

But this specific form of broadening our love is part of a larger trend. Eunuchs were excluded from the community (Deuteronomy 23) and then included (Isaiah 56). Women had limited roles and then became equal partners with men. The pattern is always to expand love further and further, but it seems like there is always another challenge in each generation – gender, race, identity, ability, nationality.

We struggle intensely to love those we have fought a war with or felt threatened by – the Germans and Japanese after World War II, Muslims or people of Arab ethnicity after 9-11, immigrants for anyone feeling insecure, LGBT people because we don't understand them or view them as inherently sinful. Yet God's love includes ever more people. We may at times seem to become less inclusive, in the church and our culture right now, but God does not. God embraces all.

I have shared with some of you a story about artist Paulo Veronese being called before the Inquisitors. He was commissioned to do a painting of the Last Supper by a Venetian monastery and completed it in 1573. Rather than portraying only Christ and the twelve disciples at the table, Veronese included roughly fifty figures, and among these were not just the rich and famous but the poor and common. Worst of all, the scene included clowns, dwarfs, dogs, and German soldiers, the latter being offensive because this was when the Roman Church was struggling with the Lutheran Reformation in Germany. The following is an excerpt from the exchange (*Arts and Ideas*, William Fleming, p. 262).

Inquisitors: Did anyone commission you to paint Germans, buffoons, and similar things in that picture?

Veronese: No, milords, but I received the commission to decorate the picture as I saw fit. It is large and, it seemed to me, it could hold many figures.

Inquisitors: Are not the decorations which you painters are accustomed to add to paintings or pictures supposed to be suitable and proper to the subject and the principal figures or are they just for pleasure — simply what comes to your imagination without any discretion or judiciousness?

Veronese: I paint pictures as I see fit and as well as my talent permits.

Inquisitors: Does it seem fitting at the Last Supper of the Lord to paint buffoons, drunkards, dwarfs, and similar vulgarities?

Veronese: No, milords.

Inquisitors: Do you not know that in Germany and in other places infected with heresy it is customary with various pictures full of scurrilousness and similar inventions to mock, vituperate, and scorn the things of the Holy Catholic Church in order to teach bad doctrines to foolish and ignorant people?

Veronese: Yes, that is wrong; but I return to what I have said, that I am obliged to follow what my superiors have done.

Inquisitors: What have your superiors done? Have they perhaps done similar things?

Veronese: Michaelangelo in Rome in the Pontifical Chapel painted our Lord Jesus Christ, His Mother, St. John, St. Peter, and the Heavenly Host. These are all presented in the nude — even the Virgin Mary — and in poses with little reverence.

As the exchange continued, the artist made his points, but the verdict was that he had to make changes. Rather than comply, he renamed the painting “Feast in the House in Levi” which rendered the work less offensive, and Veronese lived to paint another day.

It is an old question for the church, one that is much easier to engage from a distance and with a bit of humor. Who is welcome at the table with Jesus? Who is welcome in the church? Over time the answer has always been more and more people, never less, because in the end, God welcomes everyone, which is good news for us because this means we are included!