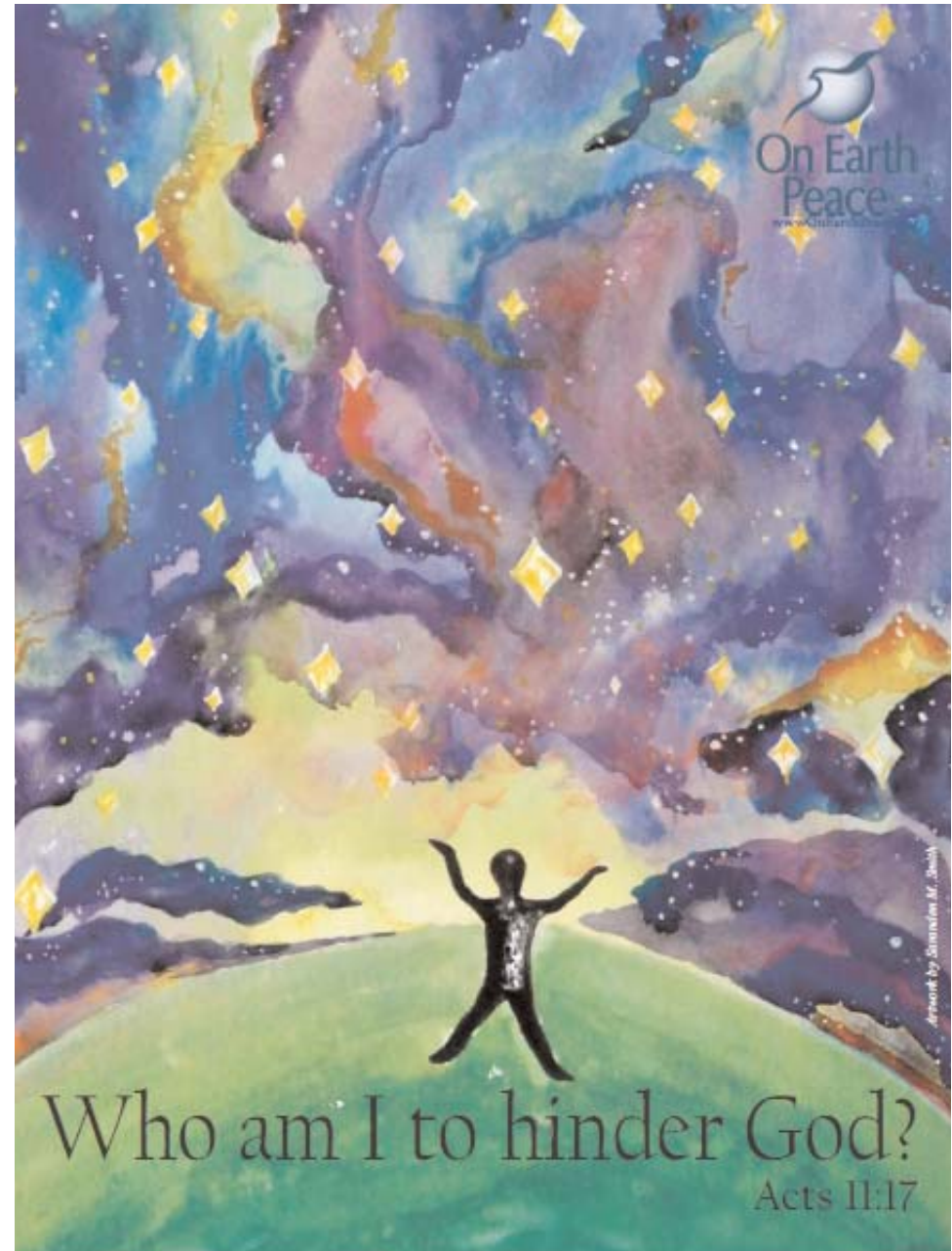




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A Biblical Basis for Inclusion: A Pastor's Journey



A Biblical Basis for Inclusion: A Pastor's Journey

Irvin Heishman

“Who am I to hinder God?”

Acts 11:17

Recommended Reading
Acts 10, 11, and 15

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I was formed spiritually in a family of faith which placed a high value on authority of scripture. For years traditional understanding of that authority left me ambivalent regarding the inclusion of the LGBTQ community. My pastoral instincts leaned toward compassion and acceptance. Yet I was reluctant and uneasy not being able to articulate a compelling biblical basis for inclusion. Like many in the church who feel conflicted about this, I wanted assurance that my pastoral practice and views were solidly grounded in the New Testament and in tune with God's Spirit. During a time of sabbatical study following overseas missionary service, my eyes were unexpectedly opened to the striking relevance of the Apostle Peter's experience to today's questions of inclusion.

The Apostle Peter was a man completely yielded and committed to God. His values had been formed in the faith of his birth family and deepened through years of training under Jesus. He thought he knew what the Lord required. No doubt for this reason he felt a sense

of disbelief as he was ushered by the Holy Spirit into a disorienting shift in understanding. Yet that is exactly what happened in the astonishing story recorded in Acts 10-11. Through vision and confirmation, the Spirit overturned what Peter thought were long-settled and biblically sacrosanct understandings. No doubt, Peter was as shocked as those who criticized his new views. But what was he to do in response to the Spirit's resolve?

In his bewildered response, we sense Peter's relinquishment and complete acceptance of God's authority: "Who was I that I could hinder God?" As one who had given

his heart to God, following the Spirit was a given, no matter how unexpected the journey.

Like Peter, we who have given our hearts to God may feel disoriented by questions we face these days. Central to our identity is our formation as people of the New Testament. The founders of the Church of the Brethren wanted to recapture the spiritual energy of radical discipleship found in Jesus and lived out so well among the early Christians. Thus, the New Testament became their rule of faith and practice. As heirs of this rich spirituality, we can't contemplate the incongruence of having our New Testament Church step outside the stream of New Testament teaching. Yet astonishing shifts in understanding are coming to light. So we look to the scriptures for assurance that our responses are in tune with God's Spirit as we ask a most daunting question: What is a New Testament Church to do in response to a growing call for inclusion of believers who have been excluded by traditional understandings of scripture?

The story told in the book of Acts, chapters 10-11 and 15, likely challenges our tradition as it provides needed guidance. This foundational story is part of a larger narrative celebrating how the Spirit brought the first disciples out of fear and hiding at Pentecost affirming their place in God's work. Then the Spirit took initiative again insisting that the disciples make dramatic adjustments in community norms to include even more previously excluded people into God's reconciling work. The response of the apostles to this initiative of the Spirit provides a foundational biblical model for addressing similar questions today. A most compelling biblical basis for inclusion is therefore grounded in Spirit's initiative to advance Christ's mission of reconciliation.

If the early church had not listened to the Spirit we Brethren may have remained "aliens... and strangers to

the covenants of promise” (Ephesians 2:12). That is because we would have been seen as gentiles whose inclusion in the early church was opposed on the basis of biblical law. Indeed, if the Schwarzenau eight¹ had lived in the first century, they might well have been named the Gentile Baptist Brethren.² As marginalized gentiles, they would have found themselves on the sidelines of the church watching the insiders engage in a hotly contested controversy about whether to include them.

Remembering this strong opposition to our inclusion as gentiles helps us appreciate anew the saving work of God in Christ freeing us and others to be “members of the household of God” (Ephesians. 2:19). Over the years, Brethren have made room to invite others into this saving grace by adapting core values of the church for changing local and international mission contexts. These changes were not accomplished without struggle which included tragic moments of division. Still, we see from the story told in Acts that adapting core values is part of the saving work of the Spirit, a faithful spiritual practice, consistent with the example set by the apostles.

Peter and Paul started welcoming gentiles into the church without requiring strict adherence to biblical law. This generated a complex, fierce, and contentious debate in the early church. These changes were difficult, but imagine how diminished the church would be today if the apostles had failed to convince the church to let us gentiles in.

¹That is the eight women and men who baptized one another in the Schwarzenau River in Germany in 1708. As these followers of Jesus came to understand scripture in new ways, they felt the Spirit leading them to challenge church-state authority which forbade adult baptism. Their baptism birthed the Brethren movement.

²Prior to the division of 1881, all Brethren were known as *German Baptist Brethren*.

The Jerusalem Council Minutes recorded in Acts 15 show the extreme difficulty of the debate. The voices urging the exclusion of the uncircumcised gentiles based their position on scripture. They said, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1) and again, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). In saying this, perhaps they were thinking of the words of God recorded in Genesis:

This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you... *So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant* (Genesis 17:10-11, 13).

Most striking is the statement that this is to be an “everlasting covenant.” As such it appears to be permanently binding, its requirements crystal clear, and undebatable. Yet the Jerusalem Council decided not to enforce the requirements of this covenant as necessary for salvation. The council decided not to “cut off” (i.e. exclude) the uncircumcised from God’s people. This decision seems to be in complete violation of scripture.

Nevertheless, Peter challenged those who demanded obedience to such requirements saying, “Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to

Peter challenged those who demanded obedience to such requirements

bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (Acts 15:10-11). In spite of Peter's influence, there was "no small dissension and debate" about this (Acts 15:2). Remarkably, in the end there was give and take on all sides and a compromise was reached. The Jerusalem Council agreement established guidelines for the gentiles based on the covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:4) while generously setting aside the prohibitive requirements of the covenants with Abraham and Moses:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you [gentiles] no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well (Acts 15:28-29).

Paul would later go on to make this bold statement, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). In frustration, Paul went on to say, "Why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!" (Galatians 5:11-12). In another context, he warned the church saying, "Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!" (Philippians 3:2).

How could Paul take such a strong stand against those urging compliance with this biblical teaching? Wasn't circumcision the sign of the everlasting covenant with Abraham as ordained by God? How then could the apostles teach that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (Galatians 5:6)? Didn't the

Bible clearly teach that the uncircumcised "shall be cut off from God's people" (Genesis 17:13)? On what authority then did the church base its decision to set aside some of the biblical requirements of the covenants with Abraham and Moses?

The answer lies in the work of the Holy Spirit interpreting the teaching of Jesus. The Holy Spirit was moving the church in an exciting, new direction toward reconciliation and inclusion of all people responding to the call of Christ. In God's mercy, people previously excluded from this opportunity have been brought near, the dividing wall has been broken down, and a new humanity created.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called "the uncircumcision" by those who are called "the circumcision" — a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands — remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. *He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances*, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace... (Ephesians 2:11-15).

Incredibly, this new work of the Holy Spirit involved "abolishing the law with its commandments and ordinances" (Ephesians 2:15). Making peace meant setting aside some centuries-old, well-established understand-

ings based on biblical teaching. This is deeply unsettling for those of us who hold a high view of biblical authority. It was unsettling for Peter. The Holy Spirit had to speak to him three times in a vision to convince him that it was okay to eat foods forbidden in scripture. This implied acceptance of people who ate such food. “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). Earlier, Jesus himself had said the same thing but the disciples had failed to grasp its implications. As Mark’s gospel clarifies, “Thus (Jesus) declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). This means Jesus himself declared that some biblical restrictions needed to be set aside. Repetition of the message in this vision prepared Peter to welcome Cornelius, a gentile, into the faith community. This was extraordinary because as Peter himself said, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

Remember as well the testimonies of Barnabas and Paul as they told the council “of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12). As the evidence mounted, gradually more and more church leaders were becoming convinced that God had “looked favorably on the gentiles” (Acts 15:12). The time had come to fulfill the promise to Abraham, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). This promise took precedence over strict adherence to the Law of Moses.

There is then within the witness of Jesus and the scriptures themselves strong precedent for setting aside some restrictions in biblical teaching in order to widen the welcome of the church. This re-centers the church in the values which are key to the larger saving work of Christ in the world. John 3:17 affirms that “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but

in order that the world might be saved through him.” Colossians 1:19-20 also summarizes this saving work of Christ beautifully, “For in him [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.”

The remarkable decision of the early church to pursue this peace of Christ by setting aside some long-held biblical understandings (i.e. those regarding gentiles, circumcision, and dietary laws) is instructive for the church today. Some have been concerned that those calling for inclusion of LGBTQ persons are stepping outside the parameters of biblical teaching. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) shows us that the Spirit’s passion to include all who have chosen to follow Jesus has been at the heart of the church movement from the very beginning. The remarkable expansion of the early church was made possible by a major Spirit-led renegotiation of traditional understandings and expected norms. The New Testament gives witness then to the value of Spirit-led change which invigorates, renews, and expands the outreach of the church by adapting the faith so that all might be welcomed to follow Jesus.

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The Jerusalem Council was not leading the church down a slippery slope as some feared. The council action was consistent with the teaching of Jesus who challenged Pharisaic laws and restrictions which burdened and excluded people from the community of faith. Thus the New Testament builds on the call of Jesus for a

radical re-ordering of life and old understandings.

“New wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved,” he said (Matthew 9:17). The goal is to expand the welcome of the church to match the mercy and saving grace of God.

Thus the New Testament itself models the importance of setting aside obstacles, even biblical requirements, if they have become a barrier to faith. As Peter put it, we must not place on others “a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). At the same time, by affirming adapted guidelines, the early church modeled how to continue valuing and benefiting from the deep wisdom of the scriptures in new contexts. Indeed, the church had a profound global impact for good as it appropriately adjusted core biblical values for the realities of the gentile world. This brought the wisdom of God’s word and the blessing of God’s holy and saving work to people throughout the world.

Acts 15 shows us how to respond to the Spirit’s welcome of all those who choose to follow Jesus. Yielded to God and standing in the stream of biblical guidance we know the Spirit may take us in directions that are unsettling, but that is God’s prerogative. We may resist the

leading of the Spirit but we will not withstand it. That is Peter’s testimony. As we observe how the Spirit is at work in the lives of LGBTQ persons, we may find ourselves as surprised as Peter was when he discovered that the Spirit was already present among the gentiles. So he asked, “Can anyone withhold

the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47). Peter’s

openness to the Spirit’s leading is instructive.

Still, skepticism is understandable in times of change. Looking back to the time of the early church, we see the wisdom of skeptics like Gamaliel who trusted the Holy Spirit to show the way forward. Gamaliel was skeptical of new directions taken by the apostles when they first began to proclaim the good news of Jesus and the work of the Spirit, and yet he said, “Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men... let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” (Acts 5:35, 38-39). Gamaliel was aware of the spiritual danger of inadvertently opposing God by not allowing space for discernment of new directions the Spirit might want to take.

I hope the church will allow space for that discernment. The Acts scripture shows us that a faithful New Testament church can indeed consider such matters. I see convincing signs that the Spirit may be urging today’s church, just as it urged the early church, to include all who choose to follow Jesus. It would follow then that full inclusion of LGBTQ believers is an important component of our faithful response to the Spirit’s resolve as revealed in Peter’s vision. The vision was told (Acts 10) and retold (Acts 11) to underscore the importance of Christ’s all-inclusive mission of reconciliation. This foundational scripture demonstrates that full acceptance of all believers is not only consistent with the reconciling work of Christ; it is an essential part of that work. Consequently, just as the Spirit did not allow Peter to rest until he responded to the vision, I believe the Spirit will not let us rest until all are reconciled to God and to each other, thus completing the creation of a new humanity in Christ (Ephesians 2:15).

Reflection Questions

1. The question of inclusion has been framed in our time as an unfortunate choice between upholding the authority of scripture and standing for justice for marginalized persons. What if we were to look instead for signs of the Spirit's direction?

a. What visions, signs, and testimonies of the Spirit's leading would indicate that God is moving the church in a new direction? How do we understand being "filled with the Spirit" as a sign of God's favor? How might Acts 10:47 apply to LGBTQ persons who choose to follow Jesus?

b. Do we trust the Spirit's power to shape the church as God desires it? Are we open to be led in unexpected directions as Peter was when he said, "Who am I to hinder God" (Acts 11:17)?

c. How did the early church frame the question of inclusion in Acts 10, 11, and 15? Does this provide a biblically based model for how to move forward together in the Spirit?

2. The Jerusalem Council praised God, saying, "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). What do you think this repentance consisted of, given that it didn't involve conversion to Judaism or obedience to the Law of Moses? How does this inform what should be expected of both heterosexual and LGBTQ persons who have chosen to follow Jesus?

3. In Acts 15, the church set aside prohibitive requirements of the Law of Moses to enable gentiles to become full members of the faith community. Note Peter's question:

Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:10-11).

Are we "putting God to the test" today by asking the LGBTQ community to bear the "yoke" of celibacy, a special calling that most heterosexual people can't attain? (see I Corinthians 7)

4. The early church did not leave new believers without moral and ethical guidance. Revised standards of conduct were established for the expanded community. If the Church of the Brethren were to welcome same-sex couples, what updated and adapted ethics and standards would be important to establish in order to help all believers build healthy relationships and form stable families committed to Christ? What is essential for membership in Christ's Anabaptist/Pietist community of faith?

5. What are the broad ramifications of this study for helping congregations rediscover Christ's all-inclusive mission of reconciliation? Does that mission not only call us to faith and community with LGBTQ believers but also with immigrants, persons of color, women, and others who have been marginalized by church and society?