

What is to exclude them?

A sermon on Acts 8:26-40; Acts 10:44-48 & John 15:9-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 May 2018

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Message

Rather than close the book on who can and cannot be accepted into the church, the Bible calls us to follow Jesus on a path of continually expanding inclusion.

Sermon

In most disputes in churches, one of the accusations you will hear over and over is that the other has taken a biblical verse or a passage out of context. It is certainly true that if you just read a verse, or a paragraph or even a whole page, it is possible that had you read more, you might have seen things differently. We are constantly at risk of this, because week by week we gather around the Bible and hear selected extracts read, but we seldom listen to a whole book and hear just how those extracts connect up to one another. So it is hard for us to see the way stories bounce off one another, or build on one another to create a picture that is bigger than any of the bits could convey.

Tonight I want to attempt to preach on a whole book, or even two books of the Bible, because there is an important theme that reaches its climax in passages that we heard tonight and last week. The book known as the Acts of the Apostles is part two of the Gospel according to Luke. The author tells us that clearly. At the beginning of Acts, he says that in his first account he gave us the story of Jesus up to his resurrection and ascension, and now in the sequel he is picking up the story and telling us what happened after that.

There was a question asked in the extract we heard last week that was repeated almost exactly in tonight's extract. Last week we heard someone ask, "What is to prevent me from being baptised?", and tonight we heard the Apostle Peter ask, "Who is to prevent these people from being baptised?"

Now that repeated question might be causing you to prick up your ears because we are currently in the midst of a conversation here about church membership, and how we decide who can be baptised into our membership. But I want to suggest that this repeated question is the climax of one of the main themes that Luke wants us to hear in his two volume story of Jesus and the early church.

And furthermore, I want to suggest that following this theme as Luke unpacks it can teach us a lot about how to read the Bible. Partly because of this thing about not taking bits out of context, but partly too because of the possible responses to the asking of these questions. Each time this question was asked – "What is to prevent me from being baptised?" – it is asked with an awareness that the answer might well be "The Bible."

Luke is telling us that if we are going to follow Jesus, we are going to have to keep following him when he challenges our own biblical interpretations and leads us on beyond the lines that our understanding of the Bible would seem to have drawn.

So let me give you the lightning tour of how Luke leads us up to this question of whether there is anything to prevent these people being baptised, and then I'll focus in on these two passages that we heard tonight and last Sunday.

Right from the beginning of his gospel, Luke keeps telling us stories and highlighting details that disrupt our expectations. We expect an authorised religious book to present us with a clear picture of the kinds of people and behaviours that are and are not acceptable to God. We expect stories showing how good and pure and righteous people are blessed by being placed at the centre of what God is doing. But right from the start, Luke disrupts our expectations.

When the angel appears to Mary, we find our story beginning with a young woman pregnant out of wedlock, chosen to bring God's child into the world. To confirm this, angels again appear at the time of the birth, not to alert the devout religious leaders and biblical scholars, but to tip off a group of shepherds, pretty much the poorest and most disreputable group imaginable at the time. If there was a more disreputable group, then perhaps it was the tax collectors, Israelite citizens who betrayed their own country and collaborated with the hated Roman occupation forces, taxing their neighbours in return for Roman privileges. And sure, enough, Luke tells us that the fourth person Jesus called to follow him as a disciple was one of these despised tax collectors, a man named Levi.

In an era when most people assumed that women were largely irrelevant and that God worked through the example and leadership of men, Luke over and over emphasises the dignity and role of women in the Jesus stories. He names women among the followers of Jesus, and points out their presence at the crucifixion when the men had fled. In passing on the stories of what Jesus did and stories that Jesus told, Luke arranges many of them in pairs, one with a male and the other with a female lead. Luke seems to be building up a theme of previous unimagined inclusion.

Perhaps the most disruptive story in volume one, the gospel, is one of the best known stories that Jesus told, the story of the good Samaritan. To Israelites of that day, holding up a Samaritan as the role model for neighbourly love was as bizarre as making Donald Trump the hero of a story about respecting women. They could have easily told you how godless, heretical and dangerous the Samaritans were, and they could have quoted the Biblical passages (e.g Leviticus 19:17-18 and Deuteronomy 15:7-11) that made it clear that "love your neighbour" meant love your own kin and the citizens of your own land. They would have seen Jesus as messing with the clear and literal meaning of the Bible with this story.

Luke tells us of Jesus doing this again with his story of the great banquet in chapter 14. Jesus tells us that the invitation is extended to the crippled, the blind, and the lame, the same people who the plain meaning of Leviticus 21:16-21 clearly said were to be excluded from "the assembly" of God's people, an assembly of the pure, unblemished, and undamaged.

The inclusion of Samaritans comes up again just before we get to last week's passage in Acts chapter 8. Not just as examples this time, but as converts. Philip preaches in Samaria, and Samaritans respond to the gospel and are baptised. Luke doesn't actually make a big deal of this just yet, but it seems that it was unexpected enough that the Apostles back in Jerusalem sent two of their number, Peter and John, to investigate what was going on.

But then we get to last week's episode and this growing theme hits the first part of its double climax. It is Philip again, soon after his successful preaching tour of Samaria. To make sure that we notice that what is coming is really God's intention, and not just some weird mistake

on Philip's part, Luke starts with an angel again. An angel of the Lord sends Philip out onto a wilderness road in the desert in the heat of the day to meet a most unlikely character riding in a chariot and reading the Bible. This character is identified not by name, but as an Ethiopian eunuch who was an official in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia.

And after a conversation with Philip about the meaning of scripture and the story of Jesus, it is this character who asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptised?" And Philip answers the question by baptising him immediately, in a mysterious waterhole that they suddenly found beside the road in the desert!

Now if you read the major commentaries on this passage, you will find most of them saying things like how noteworthy it is "that the first non-Jew to come to faith and baptism in Luke's great story is a black man from Africa" (NT Wright, *The New Testament for Everyone, Acts 1*, p. 136). Now that's true, and it will be more the point of the second part of the double climax, but I reckon it is at best a clumsy reading of this story. You see, this character is identified at the outset by three identity labels. He is an Ethiopian, a eunuch, and a royal court official. Luke could have used any of those three as the shorthand identifier for the rest of the story, and if he had kept referring to him as the Ethiopian, then I reckon those commentaries would have got the emphasis right. But he doesn't. Every single time for the rest of the story, five times in total, Luke refers to him as the eunuch.

Clearly the thing that Luke thinks is most significant about the identity of this person is his sexual or gender identity. He was a person regarded in that era as being of ambiguous gender. And when he asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptised?" most devout Bible believing Jewish Christians would have had no trouble answering that what prevents him from being baptised is the clear and literal teaching of Deuteronomy 23:1 which says that "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

Now Luke is not breaking entirely new ground in challenging this reading of Deuteronomy, because the prophet Isaiah has already done so just a little further on from what Philip and the Eunuch were discussing (Isaiah 56:3-8), but most religious Israelites then and many many Christians even now would still be doubtful about the possibility of sexual minorities being accepted by God. But it is his sexual identity that Luke names repeatedly as he illustrates the conclusion that there is nothing to prevent him being baptised.

We only heard a little bit of the second climax in tonight's reading, but we got the bit where the Jewish Christians were shocked and stunned by the evidence before them that God was pouring out the Holy Spirit on people who weren't even Jewish. In our day and age, it is difficult for us to comprehend that this might have been an even bigger shock than the inclusion of sexual minorities. The Samaritans who have already been mentioned were ethnically Jewish, but with a heretical religion, so when they converted to a true faith, they were seen as being restored to the fold. But the people in this story, Cornelius and his household, were utterly foreign to the fold. They were not just gentiles, they were hated oppressive invaders. Cornelius was a Roman army officer, a symbol of the biggest present threat to the Jewish nation and religion.

It took another visiting angel and a strange vision repeated no less than three times to get the Apostle Peter to even go into Cornelius' house, let alone conclude that there was nothing to

prevent him from being baptised. He says, to his own surprise, “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.” (Acts 10:28)

Now this is so unprecedented and unexpected and revolutionary, and so important, that Luke includes repeats of this story twice more in the book of Acts (Acts 11 & 15) by having Peter retell it in testimony to a Council of the church leaders in Jerusalem as they struggle to come to terms with the idea of gentiles becoming baptised followers of Jesus without becoming religiously Jewish. “God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”

Now obviously for us, almost none of whom are Jewish, the idea that gentiles can follow Jesus without converting to Judaism is no longer the least bit controversial or unsettling. In the wider church, the inclusion of people with minority sexual or gender identities is currently hugely controversial, and it is not a settled debate for everyone in this congregation either.

But I want to suggest that the bigger question for us is not just what we conclude from these stories about the specifics of each question, but what we conclude from them about how we use the Bible in these kind of issues. You see, there are two main possibilities.

One is that we conclude that the Bible is a closed book that has corrected its own errors, but which is now the definitive Word of God for all time. The purpose of true religion remains as regulating our behaviour and carefully defining who is good and who is not, who is in and who is out. And we simply need to correctly interpret the plain and literal meaning of what the Bible now says and obey it rigorously. But if that’s it, then we’ve got a Bible that functions a bit like the last will and testament of our dearly departed God.

The other possibility is that it is not the Bible but the risen Jesus that is the definitive Word of God, and that what the Bible does is help us to recognise the trajectory on which Jesus is heading and calling us to follow. If Jesus is the ultimate word of God, and Jesus is risen from the dead and mind-bogglingly alive, then Jesus is still active in the unfolding mission of God, pressing on into uncharted territory and calling us to follow him.

That doesn’t render the Bible obsolete. Far from it. The Bible becomes a crucial witness to where Jesus has been and what direction he was heading. The patterns that emerge from his handling of old bits of exclusionary law in order to bring to fulfilment previously unrecognised truths about God’s all-embracing love and mercy become meaningful signposts that help keep us on track with him. Paying attention to those stories and the patterns that emerge from them enables us to more readily judge whether changes and breakthroughs we are seeing now are in recognisable continuity with the trajectory Jesus set.

If you are not sure which of those two possibilities is really what Jesus thought, then you need go no further than what we heard him say in tonight’s reading from John’s gospel. Jesus doesn’t say, “If you study every commandment in the Bible and rigidly stay on the right side of all of them, then you will abide in my love.” Instead he says, “If you keep MY commandments you will abide in my love, and this is MY commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Not avoid sin and shun sinners, but love one another.

And as I hope you can see from this lightning tour of Luke’s depiction of the trajectory that Jesus sets, that call to follow him in loving one another is a call that just keeps on breaking

through all our conventional assumptions about its limits and reaching out to embrace yet more; me, you, them, and on to the ends of the earth.

Acknowledgement

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