

"Who Can Be Saved? Conflicts of  
Authority and Scripture, Part II"  
Galatians 1:13 - 2:15a, selected verses  
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*Before Scripture:* In our series, "50 Stories We Can't Live Without," last week we studied a crucial moment in early Christianity: the moment when Peter had a vision to eat both clean and unclean foods, and Peter understood that God was also welcoming "unclean" people – the Gentiles – into God's family. This was a radical departure from what Jesus' followers expected. Jesus was a fully Jewish Messiah who said that he came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The inclusion of Gentiles into the promise was completely unexpected. But Peter was open to his vision from God, so when the Gentile Cornelius came to him, and the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his household, who was Peter not to include a man whom God had clearly welcomed?

What was the big deal? Let me try to explain. Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile – one of many who were attracted to the Jewish faith but who could not bring themselves to be circumcised ... to undergo this not only painful but also medically dangerous and socially stigmatizing procedure. But circumcision was a quintessential sign of being a Jew, of belonging to the tribe of Israel, of being marked as one belonging to God. Circumcision was the mark of the covenant ... a mark that God himself had commanded Abraham. Peter's vision that inspired him to baptize Cornelius overturned 3000 years of Jewish law and tradition.

So it shouldn't surprise us that one person's vision didn't necessarily convince a whole community – nor should it have! When Peter went back to Jerusalem and told the others what happened, they were astonished. But did not reject the possibility that God was doing a new thing.

But the issue was far from resolved. As is often the case, a decision made one moment is tested over time ... and frequently the decision is revisited over and over again. That was the case with this momentous change.

The conflict over this issue lasted for decades. Later in the book of Acts, in chapter 15, we learn that approximately fifteen years after the first Gentile baptisms, some of the leaders elsewhere in Judea were teaching that, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Interestingly, it was not Peter but Paul and Barnabas who had, it says, "no small dissension and debate with them" – so Paul and others went back to Jerusalem for another debate. In Jerusalem, there were a number of faithful Christians who were deeply convinced that following Christ was a way to fulfill the law of Moses, not to supplant it. But Peter

got up and made an impassioned speech in favor of welcoming Gentiles, and thus the first church council – The Council at Jerusalem – voted with Peter “not to trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God.” So Paul and Barnabas were sent to the believers at Antioch with that message.

But even then the issue was not resolved. We pick up the debate in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where Paul begins by reviewing the history of the disagreement. A reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians:

“You have heard of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church and trying to destroy it. ... But God was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among Gentiles. ... After three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas (that is, Peter), and stayed with him fifteen days, and also saw James the Lord’s brother. Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and when the leaders in Judea heard of my work they said, ‘The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me.

“Then after fourteen years I went again to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus and laid before the leaders the gospel that I proclaim to the Gentiles. Even Titus who was with me was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. And though dissenters were there (the so-called circumcision faction), when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor by collecting money for the people in Jerusalem, which I was eager to do.”

Would that our reading ended there. But Paul goes on to say:

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face. For until James’ people pressured him, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy (no doubt including John Mark), even Barnabas was led astray. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I challenged Cephas before them all.”

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This reading from Galatians reminds us that we are not the first Christians to enjoy heated debate over issues in the church. Paul introduces two essential matters that the church has revisited over and over again: first, whether the church can afford to expand the boundaries of inclusion to everyone whom God has given the gift of the Spirit; and second, how the church can maintain unity with those with whom we disagree. Let's deal with them in that order.

First, Paul is crystal clear that the boundaries of God's community need to include everyone who has been blessed by the Holy Spirit. But Paul isn't erasing the boundaries altogether. Boundaries of any community are important – no less so for the Christian community. Even Paul does not condone “anything goes” – he condemns, for example, an incestuous relationship someone was flaunting in one of his churches.

But Paul also trusts that boundaries shift over time. Last week I made the comment that “God's will changes,” and that bothered some of you. I want to clarify what I mean by that. God's nature doesn't change – God's always the same loving, just, and sovereign God for eternity. But human nature and needs change, and so God's will for us changes with human development over time. Let's use the analogy of parenting. As a Mom, my love for my daughter never wavers. But my will for her changes as she grows up. When she was 15, I wanted her to learn to drive and get her license when she turned 16. But when she was two, I sure as daylights didn't want her behind the wheel of a car! God's will for the boundaries of our behavior shift over time. So according to his gracious will, he chose Abraham and his descendents to be a covenant people through whom God would bless the world. And according to his gracious will, God blessed the Israelites with the gift of the law for them to follow – not as a punishment but to form their identity as his special people. And according to God's gracious will, at the right time he sent his Son to be Messiah and Savior – not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles. God extended the boundaries.

The boundaries always seem clear in retrospect. But when the society is reeling from social change, the boundaries within the church are just as murky, and often vociferously debated. As long as slavery was being debated in American politics, blacks were not allowed to join a vast majority of American churches. The Presbyterian Church split in the mid 1800s over this issue, and didn't reunite until 1983. As long as women's suffrage was being debated in halls of power, women's leadership in the church was marginalized. The church split somewhat over this issue; the Presbyterian Church in America was formed in protest over the ordination

of women. Today the boundary America is debating concerns homosexuals. It should not surprise us that the boundaries within the church are still quite murky ... and that we and many other mainline churches face the possibility of split within the denomination.

Paul is very clear: the boundaries of God's community need to include everyone who has been blessed by the Holy Spirit. But it is also clear from the early church that it is not unusual for it to take decades for clarity to come. And it is not a mark of faithlessness that we are wrestling hard with these issues.

Paul's second point is this: His biggest frustration with Peter is that Peter had extended the right hand of fellowship to him, had welcomed Gentiles without circumcision, had negotiated and blessed the decision of the council of Jerusalem ... and then he had reneged under pressure. Paul is incensed, and rightly so: he thought it essential in the life of the church that we maintain unity in Christ, and extend the right hand of fellowship to those with whom we disagree.

The church has not always been very good at this. In two weeks our denomination will meet again for our biannual General Assembly. I'll be there, so that I can report back to you first-hand not just what was decided, but how debate was conducted and whether Christian fellowship was maintained. I have every confidence in the leadership of the PC(USA) these days – one of my best friends from Hinsdale, Linda Valentine, is in her second year as Executive Director and she's doing a fabulous job. But we are clearly facing difficulties and tensions. And the question, even as we debate who's in and who's out is this: can we maintain unity and extend welcome to those with whom we disagree? We're not always good at it. But we don't have to be elitist or sophisticated to "get it." In fact, some of the simplest people may be the ones we need to learn from. Let me tell you a story -- a story from my friend Michael Lindvall's book *Leaving North Haven*.

Like all the pastors in the Presbytery, David Battles, the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in North Haven, was expected to take his turn at pulpit supply at the First Presbyterian Church of tiny Carthage Lake. There was, of course, never a Second Church; by now, Carthage Lake had been reduced to "seven weathered frame houses, only five of them inhabited, plus the church."

It was only the second time in ten years that he'd been invited to preach at Carthage Lake, and the first time, he'd had to turn them down, so he had no choice but to say yes, he'd be honored, even though it meant a 50-mile dash after preaching

in North Haven. Arriving five minutes late wouldn't matter to the faithful remnant, led by elder Lloyd Larson, and the organist, Lloyd's sister-in-law Agnes Rigstad.

Inside the church that morning were twelve people, finishing the lesson Lloyd was "slowly reading from the denomination's adult-education program leader's guide about the development of medieval, Reformation, and modern theories of the atonement. He was just finishing reading through the discussion questions, all five straight through without a pause for response in between," when David arrived.

The class dismissed and took their long-ago designated places for worship, scattered around the sanctuary. "One very old lady in what was obviously a wig slightly askew on her head mounted the chancel steps and went to the organ bench to the right of the pulpit," David recalls. "She looked my way and presented me with a broad and surprisingly toothy smile.

Though David dutifully had his secretary call in the Scripture and hymns ahead of time, there was no bulletin. He was to announce when it was time for a hymn. So after the call to worship, "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," David looked back to make sure Agnes heard him, and invited them to sing together hymn 204. Agnes "smiled her gleaming smile and launched into a hymn. She had not played a measure before [David] realized that she was not playing "Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart," though it took him a minute to recognize 'What a Friend We Have in Jesus' ...[which] they sang pretty well for eleven old people and one young man."

Having shouted out the New Testament lesson to this mostly deaf flock, how Jesus wanted his sheep to love one another as he had loved them, he launched into his sermon about "love and...the Spirit abiding among those who [practice loving] each other well." Then he announced the middle hymn, "Love Divine, All Love Excelling," a carefully chosen hymn (which, of course, all of ours are, whether you can sing them or not). David swears he announced it "very loudly and rather too pointedly...Agnes smiled back before diving at the organ keys and launching into 'I Love to Tell the Story.'" After the prayer came the closing hymn, at which point David leaned over to Agnes and "asked loudly in her ear, 'What are we going to sing?' She smiled her denture grin, said not a word, and began to play, 'Just as I Am, Without One Plea,'"

After the service, everyone greeted David warmly, and Lloyd stopped to introduce the young man, his grandson, Neil Larson, moved here from Texas, and to

apologize for not telling David about Agnes. After the last organist left sixty years ago, Agnes learned to play, but she only learned to play three hymns. “We like those hymns well enough, and we know ‘em by heart,” Lloyd explained, and almost defiantly added, “and she is our organist. You want some coffee, Reverend?”

While Lloyd went out to this truck to find a thermos of coffee, the young man, Neil spoke up. “You have to understand about Agnes. She’s...Lloyd’s baby sister. Agnes has never been quite right. ‘Don’t have both oars in the water,’ is the way Lloyd puts it. He means it kindly. She never says more than a few words, and usually the same words. But she learned to play those three hymns in one week sixty years ago...[and] she hasn’t been able to learn another one since. Playing the organ...means the world to her. Sometimes I think it’s mostly for her that they keep the church open.

By this time, Lloyd was standing in the doorway of the church with a Thermos and paper cups, letting Neil talk to [David] alone.

“They asked me to play, of course.,” Neil said. “They had to ask. But Grandpa knew I’d say no. I remember how he sighed with relief when I said no. Then he slapped me on the back.”

“You’re an organist?” David asked.

“Eastman, class of ’84. I’ve had some big church jobs, the last one down in Texas, big Baptist church in the Houston ‘burbs. Brand new Cassavant, 102 ranks...Then I got sick. I’ve been HIV positive for six years, but it wasn’t till last fall that I got sick. The personnel committee...figured it out, the weight loss,...the sick days, not married. They told me it would be best if I were to move on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven’t spoken since I was nineteen. I’m on the cocktail, not sick enough for hospital, but I’m just too tired most of the time to work. I actually had nowhere to go. My grandfather said I could move in with him and Agnes. To tell the truth I kinda feel right at home in a town of eighty-eight-year-olds.”

Neil looked David straight in the eyes and said, “You know, Pastor, that was a fine sermon, but I think that they got it a while ago...” ... they got it awhile ago about loving each other.

“They keep Agnes, and they took me in. And since I moved up here, most every night either Lloyd or old man Engstrom from down the road opens up the church for me. If it’s cold they lay a fire in the woodstove. And I play the organ. It’s a sweet little instrument, believe it or not. Lloyd’s kept it up. These last weeks, it’s been almost warm in the evenings, so they leave the doors and the windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they listen to me play Bach, Buxtehude, Widor, Ruger, all the stuff I love. And they clap from their porches, even Agnes claps.”

Agnes claps. Agnes claps and we extend the right hand of fellowship to those with whom we agree, and to those with whom we disagree, because God has made us family. Until things become clear, which one day will happen, our job is not to vote ourselves into conclusion. As one man put it, God’s will is not about democracy; God’s will is about discernment. And God wills -- we know this much -- that we should be one family, baptized with the mark of Jesus Christ, baptized and made one. For we are God’s beloved children. All of us. Amen.