

Questions of Inclusion in the New Testament: Opposition to Racism

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Preface

To work as a white male in a study group for “the eradication of racism,” in a group where white males are in the minority, has been an interesting experience indeed. Having been a part of the Unity and Renewal group for some years has helped me to feel at home, but of primary importance has been the friendship and critique of those within the group. Their constant challenges to me have sharpened my sensitivities and granted me new in-sight. I have been particularly intrigued by the limits to my perspectives imposed by my “Eurocentric” background and education, something I long knew theoretically but the consequences of which were newly discovered as I viewed what I said but did not think I really intended. I do not apologize for who I am, no more than I ask anyone else to apologize for who they are. But once I moved beyond protecting my own ego, I found the process of growing insight intriguing. I am thankful I had some community in which to be challenged. I am sure that they will continue to do so. It is also symbolic that the completion of this article took place in Mbeya, Tanzania, while teaching at the Moravian Theological College.

What I wish to present is the need for recapturing a vision of racial inclusivity which is inherent in Christianity and for a while flourished in the civil rights movement. In the process I must call attention to elements in the Judaeo-Christian tradition which both do and do not support inclusivity. Thus to recapture the vision one must critically rethink the tradition. Perhaps others will not agree with the specifics of my rethinking. But I would hope that the issues with which I deal would encourage others to explore the tradition and hopefully to set their sails within the wind of the Spirit to be driven where God would take them. Ultimately this is not just a question of rethinking the past but responding to God’s leading within the context of a society divided on many levels.

Needed: A Vision

The current social and economic context of the United States has altered both the forms and practices of racism within our society. Several current authors point to salient factors involved in these changes. In his influential book *Race Matters*, Cornel West begins his fifth chapter, “Beyond Affirmative Action,” with the words:

The fundamental crisis in black America is twofold: too much poverty and too little self-love.¹ The typical feeling among those who share in the opportunities of the society is that the predicament of those who do not is their own fault. Yet poverty and failure in identity and self-regard rob one of the resources to “get ahead” and belief in its possibility.

West begins his book with the recognition that the difficulties facing the Afro-American community cannot be viewed as problems only for blacks, but for the society as a whole. He argues that we need a new perspective from which to view racism in American society and must recognize that this is an illness which affects us all.

To establish a new framework, we need to begin with a frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us. And we must acknowledge that as a people -- E Pluribus Unum -- we are on a slippery slope toward economic strife, social turmoil, and cultural chaos. If we go down, we go down together.²

1 . Cornel West, *Race Matters*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, p. 63.

2 . *Ibid.*, p. 4

Peter Paris in "Race Relations After 30 Years" indicates that

The face of contemporary racism is mirrored in the fact that white American can flourish without blacks. This is the first time in the nation's history when such a claim has been plausible.... Blacks are dispensable today in ways that they were not even one generation ago. The principal causes of this recent discovery are twofold: first, the post-industrial structural changes in our economy caused by the technological revolution in communications; and second, the rapid growth of a new immigrant class eagerly absorbing domestic and other unskilled jobs previously held by blacks.³

The disenfranchisement of many by the technological revolution, the relocation or decline of heavy industry, and the influx of immigrants as a source of cheap labor, affect not only blacks but others as well, including poor whites and whites dependent on blue collar work. Self-interest often motivates, and Euro-Americans need to recognize that they also have much at stake in our changing society. And yet scarce resources often turn one segment of the underclass against another. One sees this happening all over the Western world in the reaction to the "foreigner."

Ideology and vision must come from somewhere to supply the direction which economic and political self-interest can and will not provide. The nationalizing and internationalizing of business removes its power centers further and further from local influence which might call upon it for an affirmation of values. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights, helpful during the Civil Rights Struggle, no longer offer a comprehensive vision.

The Role of the Church in Fashioning the Vision

Mark Horst, in his *Christian Century* review of Spencer Perkins and Chris Rice's *More Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel*, points out that the civil rights movement which began in the fifties may be regarded essentially as a movement of the black church (which drew in large numbers of Anglo-American Christians) rather than as a political movement.

It is a movement rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which bears the indelible mark of the black church and its theological vitality: its trust in the undying faithfulness of a just God, the tender compassion of a triumphant Christ, and the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit accompanying Christ's people along the stony road of hardship and tribulation, drawing them on over and through the deepest valleys and the darkest shadows.⁴

We must not forget that this was a vision of the church, for this is a heritage out of which we should live in the present. It is unfortunate that many have lost enthusiasm for this vision of social change and have become fatigued by the difficulties of its implementation. Rice and Perkins see hope in the possibility of building personal Christian relationships across the racial barriers and the rediscovery of a gospel which is not only strong enough to save but strong enough to reconcile.⁵ Certainly building personal relationships by living out the gospel is not sufficient to deal with the complex political, social, and economic dimensions of racism, but it is a start. Christians must at least commit themselves to this obligation of the Gospel. Creating some change on an individual or community level should not be discarded because of the difficulty of resolving the broader issues of our society.

3 . Peter J. Paris, "Race Relations After 30 Years: In The Face of Despair," *The Christian Century*, April 27, 1994, Chicago: The Christian Century, p. 439.

4 . Mark Horst, "The unfinished agenda of the civil rights movement," *The Christian Century*, April 27, 1944, Chicago: The Christian Century, p. 447. Perkins and Rice's book was published by InterVarsity.

5 . *Ibid.*, p. 448.

The Example of Luke

It must be remembered that Luke, after the tragedies of Roman civil war and the Jewish revolt which eventuated in the destruction of Jerusalem, saw the possibility of new social order wherever one received the Spirit and responsibly brought God's Kingdom to expression. The model Luke offered is that of Mary and Jesus who receive the Spirit. Jesus, referring to Isaiah, says that this means he is to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, liberty to the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of Jubilee, or restoration.⁶ Luke was able to affirm this in a tragic world where Christianity had no political power. It would have been so easy to have retreated into a spiritualization of Christianity. In his affirmation of new spheres of God's Kingdom through the Spirit (expressed in persons and Christian communities), Luke courageously affirmed transformation. This did not depend upon how successful it might be in effecting more massive and structural social and political transformation. It was what God wished, and it would be where it could, and it would be where persons would be open to God. Disillusionment will follow programs and visions whose viability depends upon some sort of success outside of the expression of God's reality to which the individual and Christian community is obedient. Although every major Christian body has made pronouncements on racism, seldom have we realized what is at stake. Gladys Moore suggests that our understanding of Baptism is at stake "in the light of the contradictions of white racism that emerge when persons who are acknowledged as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ are still excluded and denied their full humanity."⁷ Letty Russell argues that those with power in the main-line churches limit election for the sake of limiting diversity and preserving unity. She suggests that "unity in Christ is not unity at all when it is a denial of hospitality or a denial of justice."⁸

Finding the Word of God in the Word of God: No Simple Answer for the Church

The churches' understanding of election and inclusion are greatly affected by their interpretation of the biblical tradition, as they should be. However, the Bible contains within itself a variety of traditions and approaches to inclusion, and so to find the Word of God on this within the Word of God is no simple matter. These traditions are partially adaptations of perspectives of the religious cultures within which Judaism and Christianity developed and responses to historic experience and needs. What one should take seriously is a crucial question, but there is no simple answer.

The church's understanding of what makes possible inclusion or determines exclusion needs careful scrutiny because:

- 1) rules for inclusion or exclusion in a religious community are not seen as merely practical or conditioned by issues within a particular historical and social context, but they are given *eternal and transcendent value* and thus become powerful as beliefs;
- 2) because of their power, *religious beliefs can provide strong sanction for inclusion of those who are different and whom societal values might exclude.*

We need to look to the biblical material not only for answers, but also for an understanding of the struggles of the early church with the questions. In viewing its struggle with issues we may find a variety

⁶ . Luke 4:18-19. In Luke the coming of the Spirit is the fulfillment of the promise made to David. Thus David's kingdom is not restored as a political entity but as a sphere which exists in and around those who accept the reality of God (the Spirit) into their lives.

⁷ . Letty M. Russell, "Continuing the Theological Spiral of Action/Reflection," Nov. 1991, a paper of the Unity and Renewal Working Group of the NCCCUSA.

⁸ . Ibid.

of answers and insights into the issues within the struggle. Thus we are informed -- but not by a simple singular answer.

Scriptural Models of Inclusion and Exclusion: A Painful Search

My intent is to explore New Testament materials to point up areas and issues which deal with inclusion into the *Christian community*, and exclusion from it, and thereby contribute to the overcoming of racism. However, in our pluralistic society it is also important to consider inclusion from the perspective of *the church's attitude towards the world*, those outside the Christian community for whom inclusion within it is not a question. The question of the relationship of Christians to non-Christians and non-Christian religious traditions has become a very important question in our time. Its application to racism should be self-evident.

Whenever I argue that biblical materials not only provide meaningful answers and a Word of God to us, but also in some ways can be harmful; whenever I argue that the early church was on the way to finding answers, sometimes following blind alleys, rather than offering an eternal answer to every contemporary question; whenever I argue that the living God does not abdicate God's active role to Scripture written long ago in a different culture, the conservative and evangelical part of me feels uncomfortable, as though I had betrayed someone or something. As a Bishop of my Church I must also be sensitive to others' forms of faith which are very similar to the position from which I started. And yet I believe that Jesus himself used a critical methodology with regard to his Scriptures, the Hebrew Scriptures, which was theological-critical in nature, not historical-critical. God's call to justice and Jesus' practice asks that we explore critically how our biblical interpretation could foster perspectives which are harmful to others.

A Biblical Paradigm: I Peter

I Peter is a favorite letter for me. It presents a model from which to approach inclusion. It is a letter written to help the Christian churches in Asia Minor work out their identity in the face of a society that did not hold their values. If Peter is behind it, as I understand him to be, it represents a tremendous personal transformation of one who resisted dealing with the same issues at his confession of Jesus.⁹
Exiles for the World

The Prescript to the epistle reminds the Christians of Asia Minor of their identity. The Greek text is clearer as to the intent of the author than most of the English translations. The letter is addressed to the "elect exiles of the Dispersion". Usually elect and exiles are separated in the translation, but they are intentionally together in the Greek to indicate that what elects one also exiles one. For the sake of simplicity I will leave out the Roman provinces mentioned in the address to the churches so that it is clear how the following prepositional phrases qualify "elect exiles":

Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ
to the **elect exiles** of the Dispersion (of the listed provinces)
according to the foreknowledge of God the Father
by the sanctification of the Spirit
for obedience to and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ

To understand the language it is important to recognize that behind the last prepositional phrase there is the covenant ceremony of Exodus 24: the pledge of obedience and sprinkling with blood. Each prepositional phrase qualifies "elect exiles." One becomes an "elect exile" by the knowledge and intent of

⁹ Peter in his confession seems to have understood Jesus as a traditional Messiah, one who would apply God's power against Israel's overlord, Rome. Jesus' treatment of his suffering causes Peter to object, and Jesus identifies him with Satan, the prince of the world and the origin of its values. See Mark 8.27-33.

the Father, by the setting apart action of the Spirit, and the purpose of this is obedience to Christ and the establishing of the covenant bond in his blood. What is to be clearly noted is that *the same action of God which elects one also makes one exile within his/her world*. The letter is clear that this means that one derives one's values from God, not the world. In the section on Christian citizenship in 2:13-17, the state is not divine in origin as in Romans 13, but a human creation to which one subjects oneself, not because of the state but "for the Lord's sake."

That the Christian is exiled within his/her world is further made clear by the opening prayer (1:3-5):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Christians' Primary World

Peter calls us to *awareness of our primary world, which is God's*, and a critical appraisal of our secondary world which has ways of ordering life that may not reflect God's values and may be used by evil. *The same act of God which elects us to God's world exiles us within our historical cultural context*. Those who are included within God's world, and therefore the Christian community, are those whom God has set apart. God's action is the basis for inclusion. Yet those so included, exiled from their secondary world, cannot reject their responsibility for this secondary world. The Household Code in I Peter 2:11ff is the only one in the New Testament that is primarily focused on the relationship of the Christian to the non-Christian world. The gist of this code is that the church must live redemptively for the world as did Christ, so that the world might be brought to God (see particularly 3:18). This meant much more than the evangelism of the world. To bring the world to God involved the living of God's life in relationship to others and drawing them into this life. Above all it meant to "honor" or respect all humanity (2:17):

Honor all, love the community in which we are brothers and sisters, reverence God, honor the emperor.¹⁰

Thus *Christian freedom from the world is a freedom for the world*

Inclusion and Exclusion Within the Christian Community

I Peter provides a striking model in which God-given identity calls the Christian to the *inclusion into community of those similarly called* and to *the inclusion of the world and all humankind within God's redemptive concern*.

Though God is portrayed here as inclusive, there are other standards of exclusion and inclusion within the Judaeo Christian tradition, such as righteousness and holiness, which are in paradoxical tension with this portrayal of God's desire to include. These standards at times are debated within the tradition and Jesus himself seems to have challenged some of them.¹¹ Thus the question needs to be raised as to how much these standards represent God's intention or how much they are derived from cultural influences, human

¹⁰ Author's translation and italics.

¹¹ . Ahn Byung-Mu has a very powerful article on "Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark," in R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, London: SPCK, 1991. Byung-Mu gives special attention to the social character of Jesus' audience, analyzing Mark's use of the term "crowd/s." In his last paragraph he states:

Jesus proclaims the coming of God's Kingdom. He stands with the minjung, and promises them the future of God. The God whom Jesus presented is not like Yahweh of the Old Testament who manifests a tension between love and justice. God's will is to side with the minjung completely and unconditionally. This notion was not comprehensible within the framework of established ethics, cult, and laws. God's will is revealed in the event of Jesus being with them in which he loves the minjung. (p. 102)

misunderstanding or institutional interests. However the church understands standards of inclusion and exclusion, the church must consider two things:

- 1) *The Gospel is for all* and its embodiment in baptism is for all who would receive it. Thus in Christ all other distinctions pass away or are minimized (Gal. 3:27). The standards of inclusion-exclusion can only be considered *after* one has remembered that *God's grace has been given prior to the raising of issues related to the standards*.
- 2) One must look for the direct action of God in persons' lives where God's involvement would seem to indicate some type of inclusion, even if it presents a challenge to the standards which limit inclusion.

The standards of inclusion-exclusion establish a perspective on Christian community which has broad consequences and may encourage the failure to be racially inclusive. I would like to illustrate this by discussing the standards of righteousness and holiness.

Righteousness and Holiness

Righteousness and holiness are biblical standards often used to determine inclusion or exclusion. To choose to take seriously parts of the Bible which advocate these as standards of inclusion/exclusion means that these standards determine the Christian community's willingness to embrace or exclude. Though righteousness and holiness may be explicitly described, it is important to recognize that these standards of acceptability are not always based on what is explicitly described, but have become part of the deep structures of the unconscious and so present us with feelings and intuitive responses to others which we confuse with a reality external to our subjectivities. Thus when others are not as we are, the way they are excludes them and makes them less human than we.

Righteousness

Righteousness biblically has to do with behavior: it is the life and conduct which God requires of those who are in covenant Paul in Romans 1-3 and Galatians 3 indicates that humans cannot meet God's conditions for righteousness, and so God declares one's righteous as a generous gift, though in some New Testament traditions this is not well understood or valued. Matthew calls for a righteousness greater than that of the Scribes and Pharisees, perfection as God is perfect (Matt. 5:17, 48) involving even control of the inner dynamics of lust and anger. Thus Matthew tightly draws the boundaries of righteousness and therefore inclusion/exclusion.

Holiness in Hebrew Scriptures

While perceived standards of righteousness often have been used as a way of determining inclusion/exclusion, the concept of holiness lends itself to this even more so. Holiness in the Bible is the character and nature that all takes on when it belongs to God.¹²

Holiness makes something essentially different. It has a power and glory which affects whatever it touches and can be disturbed by the profane and common. The primary discussion of holiness in the Old Testament is in the priestly book of Leviticus. Israel is called upon to "...distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean..." (10:10) To be holy as God is holy (11:44-45) is then to allow oneself to become a part of the reality which is God's, to belong to God's sphere of existence, and to separate oneself from every possible contaminant to this holiness. Anyone who profanes a holy thing of the Lord should be cut off from God's people (19:8). One cannot approach the holy things dedicated to the Lord when one has an uncleanness (22:3). "An outsider shall not eat of a holy thing"(22:10). Anything dedicated to the Lord cannot be sold for it is "most holy to the Lord" (27:28). Too intimate a contact with God's holiness is overwhelming and could produce death (16:2). In Jesus'

¹². Holiness has its parallel in cultural and political attempts to claim uniqueness and to exclude others as dangerous to the society's well-being. Such was the case with National Socialism in Germany during the Hitler period.

day there were signs posted between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women in the Temple warning any non-Jew of death who went beyond that point and intruded into the holy areas of the Temple. In Deuteronomy holiness is a primary description of God's people, and their holiness of necessity separates them from what is not holy.

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth. (14:2; see also 7:6, 26:19, 28:9)

Holiness in the New Testament

In the New Testament the theme of holiness as the character of God's people is picked up primarily in I Peter where the theme of Leviticus is quoted:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1:14-16)

In I Peter the emphasis is primarily ethical, but there are other implications, such as the separation of the Christian from the society as an exile. Yet for Peter this holiness also means that one must be for one's world, for this is the character of God's holiness. Thus holiness does not have to be protected from foreign contaminants and persons who by their previous life could be regarded as unclean, nor does holiness need to separate one from others in the world. In Paul it is even implied that holiness may have a redemptive character, for an unbelieving spouse or one's children may be incorporated into God's holiness through the believing partner (I Corinthians 7:12-16). This is quite different from Revelation 2-3 where the line is clearly and firmly drawn between those who belong to God and those who do not.

I Peter and I Corinthians 7 indicate that holiness may be regarded as more than a "state of being" to be protected from others. Here it rather becomes active: God's turning towards the world and reaching out towards that which is *not yet holy but needs to be hallowed*. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, in their famous translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into German, which sought to preserve the idiom of the Hebrew, used "hallowing" instead of "holy" to translate the active implications of the Hebrew *kadosh*.¹³

"Holiness" indicates a *state* which separates the one who is holy from others who are not (as indicated in the Levitical approach) while "hallowing" indicates a *transformative outreach* towards the world which does not separate the world into sacred and profane. It does, however, indicate that all that to which holiness reaches out needs transformation, but true holiness reaches out rather than withdrawing. The

¹³ . As Maurice Friedman comments about the Buber-Rosenzweig translation:

Kadosh does not mean a state of being but a process: that of hallowing and of becoming hallowed. Moses stands before the thornbush not on holy ground but on the ground of hallowing. When Aaron is consecrated as a priest, he is clothed in the garments of hallowing and anointed with the oil of hallowing. The Sabbath is a festival of hallowing, and the sons of Israel are called by God to become people of hallowing (not a holy people).

This rendition at one stroke changes the whole meaning of the relationship of God to the world and of the sacred to the profane and lays the groundwork for Buber's later characterization of Hasidism as regarding the profane not as an antagonist of the holy but as the not-yet-hallowed, the not-yet-sanctified. No separate spheres of sacred and profane insulated from one another by taboo can endure before the onrushing *Geistbraus* of the God of spirit *and* nature. If we apply this change to the translation of a familiar Hasidic tale, the power of this understanding of hallowing the everyday or sanctifying the profane becomes unmistakable:

The rabbi of Kobryn taught: God says to man, as he said to Moses: "Put off thy shoes from thy feet" - put off the habitual which encloses your foot, and you will know that the place on which you are now standing is ground of hallowing. For there is no rung of human life on which we cannot find the hallowing of God everywhere and at all times.

Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*, NY, Paragon House, 1993, p. 169.

same active meaning is given to God's righteousness in some passages in Isaiah which comes to mean God's reaching out in salvation (Isaiah 43:5-6, 45:8; cf. Romans 3:21-26).

Parallels to Racism

The parallel to the issues in racism is the question of whether one can incorporate into relationship a person who is regarded as different not only because of tradition, culture, and behavior [the person's right(eous)ness or unright(eous)ness], but also because of the person's being or essence [holiness or non-holiness]. Similar to the way holiness affected the acceptability of one's person, so racial distinctions are often asserted to portray the other as different in being. Each racial group often regards its biological form, traditions and culture (its way of being) as constituting the identity which makes one really human and of ultimate value. We sanctify our way of being by claiming for it divine or religious sanction. Thus we give blessing to our separation from others for whatever reason (fear, economics, gender, race). By this we prevent *our* way of being from being challenged by the differences of others. Moreover, because we view our way of being as holy or incorporated into God's way of being, this does not just grant us identity in God, but identity *over against* others whose being is not so incorporated and blessed.

A New Perspective

Biblical concerns for both righteousness and holiness must be looked at in terms of the perspectives they encourage and the ways in which they legitimize separation from others. According to Acts 10 it took a vision from God to convince Peter that "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." And this had to happen three times before Peter was finally convinced (Acts 10:15-16). Peter never seemed to find it easy to change his perspective. This action of God as portrayed in Acts (on behalf of the inclusion of the Gentiles) and I Peter's emphasis on God's holiness (indicating not only separation from the world's values but God's being for the world) both call upon Christians to interpret holiness and righteousness as moving the Christian towards the world rather than away. *God is the God for whom no ontological otherness can create separation from others or diminish their dignity. Then if God is for the world, is God not also in this world? And if God is in this world, is it not also in some sense holy?*

The Boundaries are God's

To whatever extent we feel others may not fit our standards of righteousness or holiness, to whatever extent we are uncomfortable with others' differences, one ultimately must raise the question of *who sets the boundaries for inclusion.* We may very well admit that in the final analysis this is God. Yet often this means God's boundaries as understood within the Bible or within the established traditions of the church, not as determined by the *contemporary action by God who now accepts and includes and whose actions in the present must therefore be discerned.* Much of the literature in the New Testament is uncomfortably clear that *God continues to play a significant role in the ongoing life of the church* rather than just turning it over to its leaders.

It is true that those responsible for the on-going life of the church and the preservation of its institutional and spiritual life do have to deal with boundaries, but there is always the question of how our boundaries relate to God's boundaries and how we will come to terms with those whom we would exclude but God would include. The biblical assumption is that God's action and gift of relationship is foundational to the process which constitutes the church. The constitution of the church was never delegated to the church itself, for God no more took a rest after God's saving action in Jesus than God did after God's creative action in Genesis (John 5:17). The action of God in the Spirit (described in Acts 1-15) including the Gentiles in a church that was up to that point largely Jewish, continuously drove the church beyond its boundaries. God's words to Peter in his vision are profound in their implications: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." (Acts 10:15)

The Church Struggles with Boundaries

The church in the New Testament seems to be engaged in a struggle to define boundaries. Space does not allow an examination of the various solutions of different early Christian authors and communities. It is important to note that Jesus in Mark 7-8 forced his disciples into a mission in Gentile areas which included a Feeding Miracle for Gentiles (Feeding of the 4,000). In Mark 8:14-21 Jesus discusses with his disciples the meaning of their experience. "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." This is, like so many passages in Mark, not explained, and one must assume that the community for which Mark was written understood the meaning of such passages which today are enigmatic to us. A guess at the meaning of this would be that each leaven was a perspective which would produce certain consequences. Therefore: *beware of the leaven of the Pharisees who present the way into God's kingdom as very narrow and exclusive, and the leaven of Herod who in compromise with contemporary culture would have few limits to inclusion and would lose what is essential.* If this interpretation is correct, it is very relevant to the subject with which we deal. How do we provide breadth for the way into the Christian community and its life, and yet preserve what is essential?

In attempting to define boundaries, the church also narrowed its perspectives by including and excluding stories about itself. The book of Acts, for instance, is the only history of the Church included in the New Testament. It is essentially a story of Paul and his mission as he moved from Palestine to the north and west toward the center of the Empire at Rome. Luke's concentration on Paul's movements ignores the spread of Christianity to the east and south, and much of the story is left untold, excluded. One result of this decision by the church is that Christianity has been seen as European rather than Palestinian, Indian or African. In so doing, the church set conceptual boundaries whose existence still plague us in the late twentieth century and serve as the basis for much of the racism found in theological and biblical scholarship. We must remember that the original question regarding inclusion was whether the east should include the west, not the reverse. Randall Bailey deals with some of these issues in his article in this volume.

Inclusion of the World

In the earlier discussion of I Peter as a model I indicated that Peter found a way of including the world, even though Christians were separated from the world. In a pluralistic and secular society, and with more intimate contacts with the rest of the world, we are confronted with the need to do this. Though we may wish to draw lines which separate us from those who are other, God is not separated from the world and calls upon us for a type of worldly inclusion.

Our difficulty in doing this as Christians lies in the particulars which constitute us, before which we often place the word "**only**." This is especially true of the church's assertion that salvation is only through the Gospel, only through Christ, and for some even only through the church. This leads to the invalidation of other religious experience and other religious traditions - and the invalidation of other persons in a type of Christian imperialism.

It may be suggestive to hear the Pauline presentation of the role of Christ in I Corinthians, a letter accepted as genuinely Pauline by most. Here the church is the church of God, not Christ, and God is the source of the church's life. It is the Lord (God) of whom we should boast. It is just as problematic to say that we belong to Christ (without recognizing the source of our life *in God*) as it is to say we belong to Paul, Cephas, or Apollos. (I Corinthians 1) In I Corinthians 15:20-28, Paul points out that while the resurrected Christ plays a significant role in the interim before the End, in the End he will deliver over everything to the Father so that God may be all in all.

Romans implies similar ideas. In 1:1-7 the Gospel is the Gospel of God, concerning his Son, and the church is God's beloved. The Gospel is the power of God (1:17). In 3:21ff Paul indicates that what God

did in Christ was to set forth *publicly* what God had been previously doing. In Galatians 4:6 it is the work of the Spirit of the Son (the resurrected Christ) to help persons to utter "Abba, Father," doing as he did historically when he taught his disciples to pray "Father." Paul's recognition that Jesus called persons to the Father would seem to reflect the way Jesus' message is presented in the earlier Synoptics, as being theocentric rather than Christocentric.

There is no simple solution for this for many Christians, but Christians today are called to reflect on how the world is God's and God is present to and for the world. Thus religious traditions outside Christianity, as well as the world itself, deserve some type of inclusion after the pattern of God's presence to the world. Our ability to include other religious traditions is also an ability to include persons of other races often identified with these religions. I think in sadness of the long hostility of Western Christianity to the Muslim world and consequent estrangement from Africa.

An Inclusive Vision of the Church

If inclusivity is to be determined primarily by the action of God, then the person in whose life God works and whom God calls to Christian community must be included in some way, not allowing personal differences, racial differences, sexual differences, differences of intellectual capacity, differences of moral development or spirituality, to exclude those whom God seems to include. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, Afro-American, Euro-American, Asian American, or Native American, but all are God's children.

Ultimately, only God can determine inclusion. The church which is able to be inclusive can provide a welcome place for those who are on spiritual journey and whom God is drawing to God's self. Thus its ability to do evangelism is enhanced. The church which is able to be inclusive can call upon the creativity and devotion of persons with varied gifts and of varied backgrounds and races. Thus its inner life and ministry is enhanced. The church which can be inclusive will seek to provide the life, love and fellowship which God offers to humanity, and thus it can be the place of God, the body of Christ, and the hesitating start towards a new humanity. In such a church there will be conflict, but the conflict which is part of relationship and difference, not the conflict which by its very nature seeks to divide, exclude and destroy. In such a church there will be human imperfection, but also persons who are struggling with growth and responsibility. In such a church variety will feel at home, as will the sacred obligation to live with difference and with love and with God. Such a church cannot be a "homogeneous unit", a community of the like and similar. Any human community could be that. *God's community is more.* The Pentecost experience called together "devout persons from every nation under heaven." (Acts 2:5)

If inclusivity is determined primarily by the action of God, then the world and those "other" than us outside the church must in some way be included (if we take seriously our experience of and the biblical witness to God's action on behalf of this world). This does not mean the sacrifice of Christian insights and traditions. There must be an inclusion which does not diminish the honoring of others, their spirituality, and their identities. Perhaps the best word for the church's inclusion of the world is *hospitality*. This is not condescending, for it recognizes the value of the other. The church also needs to receive the hospitality of the other, with graciousness and appreciation. Certainly there will be tension and difference with the other in the world as there is with the other in the church.

With those inside the church Christians will usually sense the sharing of something common in spite of differences, but in the case of those outside the church the other is more fully other and often seems "strange." And yet God calls us to be for this world, and if God is in this world, then God is also being there for us. *By receiving the other we may in some way receive God.* Perhaps the strangeness of the other is a paradigm of the strangeness and difference of God from us, a God who in strangeness is present to us.

Suggestions for Study:

1. What have I experienced in the church which supports racism and which seems to overcome racism?
2. How does the model for Christian life presented in the first epistle of Peter strike me?
3. How does my church, how do I, set boundaries which include or exclude persons?
4. What is your vision for the church of the future and the society of the future? What can be done to change racism? What are some simple and practical steps that you might take?