



One Body without Distinctions

Acts 11:19-30

How often do we think of one or another group of people as alien to ourselves? We divide the world into classes and categories of people, so as to distinguish those who are our people and those who are not. Partly, we do this to distance ourselves from one or another class of people. Partly we do this so that we do not feel compelled to understand and help others. Partly we do this to protect ourselves from the inconvenience of the gospel calling us to care for all as though they were our siblings or children. Is it really possible to treat all as though we were only one body, even when there are people who are so different from ourselves?

The book of Acts recounts, according to Luke, what Jesus continued to do through the Holy Spirit. Luke tries to retell the history of the church in its expansion from Jerusalem throughout the whole of the Roman Empire, or as we might say, the entire known world of his time. He had already dealt with the questions of Jesus leaving the world physically. He had already described the initial development of the gospel in the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding areas. He had described how the gospel arrived in Samaria and how Peter had taken the message to God-fearing Gentiles like Cornelius.

At each point of transition, there was some conflict or disquieting, as one or another barrier was crossed, leaving some uncomfortable. On incorporating some new group, the culture surrounding the gospel suffered transformation. There were conflicts between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews within the Jerusalem church, which gave way to electing the first deacons to supervise the distribution of food. There were worries about the arrival of the gospel in Samaria and more problematic considerations when Peter decided to go to Cornelius, who was not a Jew. It broke with rules of Jewish tradition that did not allow him to enter and eat with people not of the chosen nation. Now in Antioch, another transition came before the church. The gospel was being announced to Gentiles who lived far from Jerusalem.

It was a time of discomfort for many. How would the gospel develop outside the molds of its firm foundation in Judaism? Cornelius was no Jew, but he had come close to Judaism in his search to know *Yahweh*, the God of Israel. In Antioch, there was no limitation on announcing the gospel to God-fearing Gentiles on the edge of Judaism. It was being opened to those who had no direct contact with the Jewish heritage regarding God. To some people, this was very worrisome. Such Gentiles did not have a background in the traditions and Hebrew Scriptures to control their interpretations and application of the gospel. They lacked the moral basis of Judaism. How could they understand the gospel of Jesus Christ without this essential panorama for grasping the basics of living before God?

As of yet, there was no New Testament. The Twelve in Jerusalem guarded Jesus' teachings. They maintained the parameters of the gospel and acted as an approving council to oversee the practices and teachings of others. They sent Barnabas to Antioch, for the twelve wanted to be sure that all was going well in the development of the gospel among the Gentiles. Barnabas was pleased to see the gospel preached in a worthy manner that God was blessing. He was heartened and joined in ministry with those who were announcing the gospel in that region. Then he took another step. He sought out help.

He located Paul in Tarsus, calling him to go to Antioch to assist teaching the gospel to Gentiles of that region. For a year they worked together to give the Gentiles a foundation to better help them understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. They taught the Scriptures. They taught the words of Jesus.

They taught the grace of God, as well as God's love for all. The time came, however, to teach something else. They taught that there were no distinctions within the church, but all were and are one people under the grace of Christ Jesus.

Paul and Barnabas' teaching was such that people began calling the converts in Antioch little Christs, or Christians, the followers of Christ. It was mockery, but it characterized this group of persons as living in a different manner to that of others. They followed the teachings and the example of the Jesus they called the Christ, the anointed of God. Their manner of being set them apart from others and transformed their lives from within, such that the community saw them as different.

Some prophets arose, announcing that in Jerusalem there would be a famine. Such an event would be disastrous for many, but especially in that region of Jerusalem. The Jews made pilgrimages to Jerusalem at least once in their lifetimes. Many times this meant they arrived in Jerusalem at the end of their lives to die there. Very often this meant the presence of many widows with little economic resources to support themselves in their latter years. This was the issue that had occasioned the election of the first deacons of the church. Among the Jewish believers, food was distributed among these widows in need.

It would have been easy for the believers in Antioch to say this was not their problem. It would have been simple to say they were not their people and not their responsibility. It was the problem of others who did not take care to adequately provide wisely for their families. For Paul, however, it was a good opportunity to teach something of the parameters of the gospel. He taught these Gentiles that on accepting the gospel that caring for others is an essential element of this gospel. He taught that to live with Christ is to recognize that under the gospel we are all one people without distinction.

Perhaps sometimes we think they took an offering for the Judean poor as a good public relations venture before the church in Jerusalem. It was much more than this. Remember that the prophets said there would be famine in that whole region of the world, not just in the area of Judea. Paul and Barnabas taught these new Christians their responsibility for the whole body, even when they themselves would also be suffering.

It would have been tempting to make a distinction between the church out of Jerusalem and the church from Antioch. Each could then have its administrative center, its zone of influence, its form of organization, and its ministerial emphases. This was not, however, a pattern that coincided with the gospel Paul preached. This did not recognize the greater reality these recently converted Gentiles in Antioch needed to understand. They were part of one body. There were no distinctions to make between the Jewish and Gentile church. There were but one people following one Lord and with only one gospel. This meant that when part of the body hurt, they rest accepted responsibility to help.

Today as well we are one body. We are one church, even when we gather in diverse places and worship God in different languages. It is in the unity that Paul preached that we should live and apply the gospel of Christ Jesus. As those of Antioch, we are not someone else's ministry, but we are part of the larger body of the church of Jesus Christ. It is our charge to act according to whole of the gospel, until the community around us sees such a distinction in us that they call us followers of Christ, living according to the fullness of the gospel and the example of our Lord.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*