

Do you have God All Figured Out?

A major crisis in the early church was how to handle outsiders. The primary followers of Jesus were Jewish. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, his followers began preaching the Gospel and soon non-Jewish people (Gentiles) were attracted to Christianity. To see the full impact of this, we must understand that Judaism perceived Gentiles as outside the possibility of salvation. They were perceived as pagans who lived by their genitals (hence the word "gentile"). Sometimes they were referred to as "dogs". In Acts 11 we can see the challenge the church faced:

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'

Not only did he visit these pagans, he ate with them, which was an act of acceptance and warmth. So, Peter was called on the carpet and had some explaining to do. He shared with the apostles a vision he had where a large sheet descended from heaven containing animals the Jews considered unclean. God told him to slaughter and eat, but Peter said, "No way God! Nothing unclean has ever entered my lips." And God said to him, "What I have made clean, you must not call profane". Then he heard the Spirit say, "Make no distinction between them and us." To further drive home the point, Peter explained that while he was preaching, "The Spirit descended upon them, just as it had upon us. If God gave them the same Spirit when they believed in Jesus, who was I to hinder God?" When the others heard this, they were silenced. They praised God and said, "Then God has given, even to the Gentiles, the repentance that leads to life."

Without the expansion of the Church to the Gentiles, Christianity would have never gotten out of Palestine. The church is continually faced with the challenge of being open to the world or turned in on itself. Is church about maintenance or mission? Perhaps both, yet, too often we get caught in the maintenance mode focusing on taking care of ourselves with little serious thought about reaching out to others. Like the early church, "gentiles" make us uncomfortable. Yet, Jesus commands us to reach out in love to others, especially those on the margins of society. That's where he spent much of his time.

Pentecost can become a festival with little fanfare and too often the Holy Spirit becomes the forgotten person of the Trinity. Pentecost is primarily about mission. Without mission, the Holy Spirit makes little sense. We pull out a banner with a white dove, wear red on Pentecost Sunday and then what? Where is your faith calling you to reach out in mission to others? Who are the "Gentiles" in your life that you are being challenged to accept? When have you been led by the Holy Spirit into places you would rather not go?

One hundred and fifty years ago, slavery was the topic on the table. It was splitting churches and society and people on both sides were using the Bible to support their position. During this time, a pastor could have been thrown out of the pulpit for advocating the abolition of slavery and the full inclusion of African American people. Now the ownership of slaves is repugnant to our society.

On the table for discussion today are equal rights in the church and society for gay and lesbian “Gentiles” and again there is intense division in church and society. Like the slavery issue, people on both sides are quoting the Bible to support their position. At this point in history, the cost is very high for pastors if they speak out in favor of inclusion. The Roman Church and other fundamentalist churches are hindering the inclusion of these Gentiles in the same way they hindered the equal rights movement for women a hundred years ago. The primary leadership for the abolition of slavery also came from outside the Roman Church and Christian fundamentalism. Those who thought they had God all figured out were on the wrong side of these important issues.

Do you have God all figured out? Can you open your heart to the Gentiles of our day? Are you able to move out of your comfort zone? Are you able to enter into mission in today’s world?

Our church is at mission when you feel the spiritual emptiness of your soul being stirred, when you go into your prayer corner desiring nothing but God, and when you kneel at the communion rail hungry for far more than bread. Our church is at mission in the many ways we reach out to the poor and marginalized in our society. Our church is at mission when you find yourself, like the apostles in Acts 11, surprised by God, or at least, yearning to be surprised.

Does God really have control over your life or do you have God all figured out?

~ Henry