

## **Breaking Down Legal and Traditional Barriers**

### **in Order to Welcome People to Christ**

**based on Matthew 10:40-11:6 and Romans 14:1-6, 13-23, David Jahnke, 7/2/17**

So I am going to start by reviewing Paul's setting and a component of this theology influenced by it. Paul believed his Jewish brethren's basic sin was not living into God's promises that they would bless all the nations of the world and draw them into faith in the God of Israel. And he thought that the Old Testament Law was largely responsible for this since it demanded that gentiles convert and obey it; and in particular, get circumcised and restrict their diets. Adult male gentiles were not interested in either and did they also did not think that the Jews had a monopoly on morality and how to live a good life. Greeks and Romans had quite a long and rich legal and ethical tradition of their own.

So demanding conversion and obedience to the Jewish Law was a stumbling block and it meant Jews and Gentiles would remain separated, despite Christ coming to unite them and Gentile openness to Him. Paul therefore demanded that there be no stumbling blocks to Gentiles coming to faith in the Messiah and the God of Israel; not even the Law of God which had meant everything to Paul.

This coheres wonderfully with the mission of Jesus to the unclean among his own Jewish brothers and sisters. Again, these were people whom God intended to bless but who were slighted because of their sinful Way of life according to the Law. Or because of presumptions about their way of life due to their circumstances. Lepers and the blind, the deaf and otherwise disabled were condemned as unclean due to their condition and a presumption that their own or the sins of their forefathers led to their condition.

So Jesus, instead of obeying cleanliness Laws and bearing a spirit of judgment which would exclude them, reached out to them and was God's blessing to them. Neither their lifestyle nor the Law would get in the way of God's Compassion restoring them in mind, body and spirit.

So the first thing we have to think about is whether we put up any legal, religious or cultural barriers which hinder non-Christians and us from growing in Jesus' love and peace. Because I think that most people are open to believing in a God revealed by Jesus, just as many Gentiles were open to the same. Why wouldn't they be? Jesus shows them a God who loves them no matter what; a God who forgives sins; a God who calls us to love and forgive accordingly. I think deep down people know how central both of these are to a better life and a better world.

Jesus also reveals a God who calls them not into strict Jewish or Presbyterian or Liberal or Conservative thoughts and ways but into Kingdom of Heaven Thoughts and Ways which are beyond them all, includes the best of them all and are the common and shared ways and thoughts among them.

Imagine the blessings of this approach to others; a personally humble and other-affirming and everyone-challenging approach. And how much easier and effective it would be to share good news-- news that the goodness and love and justice and truth that people feel and seek and want more of are real and alive; that they are calling and leading us all into new life and a new world. And how we know this because all of these things were shown to the whole world in Jesus.

Now if no offense is taken at the name Jesus, the Abrahamic blessing is received, according to Jesus. And generally speaking, Muslims and Buddhists take no offense. Most humanists do not take offense at Jesus' teachings. Jews are taking much less offense due to Spirit-led Jewish-Christian dialog and scholarship over the last few decades which has revealed the deep Jewishness of Jesus, especially when we acknowledge the wrong done by Christians to Jews in the name of Jesus.

This approach honors an incarnational God who fills all peoples and cultures. It honors the breadth and richness of God's love, mercy and truth. And it is so much more graceful and unifying than every exclusive ideology or religion which exalts one into a place of righteousness because of one's beliefs and which, therefore, does not understand how great God is and how broken humans are and how this impacts all worldviews.

And yet, just as all fall short of the glory of God due to sinful actions contributing to wrong-headed beliefs and wrong-headed beliefs contributing to sinful actions; as if we might separate these two!%? And yet...the grace and the righteousness of God freely given in the person of Jesus Christ have come to you and me; and they have saved us. We dare not presume they have not come to others or that they only have them if they meet a new written code of ours.

Because while the surest sign of the coming of this Spirit is a living faith in Jesus; another sure sign is faithful living in and according to Him-- a pattern of living which which implicitly professes faith in Jesus.

Jesus, after all, said that anyone who welcomes a child of God welcomes Him and His Father. And anyone who gives a child of God a cup of water will receive their reward. Why is it so hard for many Christians to understand that God's salvation is ahead of, behind, filling and blessing every kind and loving thought and deed?

Now while God fills and blesses every good, another really important thing is realizing how great and entirely different from all of us God is; that He is beyond all human comprehension and worldviews. Such a realization moves us beyond whatever limits we try to place on God. And, ironically, the primary means by which we place limits on God is our religion. But here again, Paul and Jesus are our example as they both transcended their own religion in order to bring more and more people into the fold. We must do the same.

I started watching the wonderful new musical La La Land. And an excellent jazz musician who is an old school purist is invited to join one of his old classmate's new groups. At the first rehearsal the new guy turns from his guitar to some electronic looping machines-- very new school-- to modernize the sound. And the purist slowly stops and looks up at his friend who tells him later:

"I know...I know. It's different. But you say you want to save jazz. How you gonna save jazz when nobody's listening? Jazz is dying because of people like you!...playing to 90-year olds down at the club. But where are the kids? You are obsessed with Kenny Clark and Thelonious Monk. These guys were revolutionaries. How you gonna be a revolutionary if you're such a traditionalist. You're holding onto the past but jazz is about the future."

My initial inclination is to identify with the purist. I mean who doesn't appreciate Miles Davis and John Coltrane more than Kenny G. This is why we admire the forefathers and mothers of the Christian and the American revolutions. It's why we love the powerful and moving traditions in which we have been raised. And we must hold onto them and let them inform us. But how are we gonna save people when they ain't listening? Where are the young people? Traditions can never keep us from Christ's revolution in the present.

And on this Independence Day weekend, remember that our American forefathers and mothers understood that no one's point-of-view is divine or should be kingly; that instead a variety of points-of-view should be respected and listened to; and that we need to pursue the truth and the happiness that transcends us all.

I want to close with a witness from a member of this church with a gift for evangelism. Dr. Sharrett was at a public event a few years ago. He started up a nice conversation with a professional Hindu woman. And after enjoyable conversation, he smiled and said to her, "You know what? I see Jesus in you." And she smiled back and said, "And I see God in you as well." That is gospel and that is fellowship in the Spirit.

So like Dr. Sharrett, transcend. I want you to transcend and stretch beyond the thoughts and ways and words you are comfortable with; get past any judgments of others' morality, politics or religion which would inhibit you from sharing the Spirit of Jesus with them. Get past any fear of others judging your religion, morality or politics! Through transcending in this way, you will become the Abrahamic blessing God always wanted you to be and you will personally find the fullness of blessings God always wanted you to have.

