

God is still speaking, the “Ejector”

Ad
By Walter Brueggemann

In these ads, the United Church of Christ bears witness to a deep evangelical impulse that is already rooted in the commandment of Sinai: “Love your neighbor.” Of course there are, in the Bible and beyond the Bible, endless wonderments about the identity of our neighbor. There is no doubt, however, that the deepest impulse of the Bible is toward inclusion, that all of God’s creatures be accorded dignity, respect, safety, and a sense of belonging. That deep biblical impulse gives the church its primal mandate, a summons reflected in these ads.

The issue of inclusion is not only disputed among us; it is also urgent. It is urgent because we U.S. Christians live in a society that is profoundly exclusionary in ways that debilitate. While we popularly celebrate the large vision of democracy among us, it is the case that the reality of socio-economic-political power works primarily to divide and exclude, to distinguish between “haves” and “have-nots” so that the “haves” always have more and more and the “have-nots” have less and less.

The same exclusionary propensity in our society is evident in the fear of “immigrants,” even if we maintain our ambiguous response because the fear of new immigrants is curbed by the usefulness of cheap labor. On issues of race, ethnicity, and class, there works among us a vision of a safe society that consists only in people “like us,” a phrase that most often refers to the ruling class of white Euro-Americans.

That same exclusionary propensity that violates both “the American dream” and the gospel is now alive and well in the U.S. church, albeit with a kind of moral ferociousness that is not matched in the civic community. The fear of “the other” in the realm of U.S. religion now pertains not only to race, class, and ethnicity, but also to sexual identity; as the church practices God’s holiness, it finds that *sexuality* is in odd and deep ways linked to *holiness*.

In the face of such an exclusionary inclination rooted in fear and in inchoate anxiety, a church faithful to the gospel is summoned by the Lord of the church to challenge such exclusion and to practice an inclusiveness that is as broad as humanity and as deep as God’s generosity. In the current “battle for the Bible,” biblical texts and themes that witness to God’s generous inclusiveness are not much known or cited among us.

In *Isaiah 56*, the prophetic poem reflects an argument about inclusion and exclusion. The prophet witnesses to inclusion by insisting that foreigners and eunuchs—“others” in an ordered Jewish community—are to be welcomed precisely because the community gathered around God is “for all peoples”:

**Do not let the foreigner joined to God say,
“God will surely separate me from God’s people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”
For thus says God:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off. (Isa 56:3-5)**

The New Testament church early faced the same issue as it moved beyond its Jewish origins to include all those loved by God, even Gentiles who were for some the *abhorrent* “other.” Thus it is reported in *Acts 10* that Peter—that great stalwart of the proper church—was visited by God in a dream and urged to accept what his community had regarded as “unclean.” We may imagine that the dream from God was deeply upsetting and that Peter found the mandate shocking:

**The voice said to him again, a second time,
“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” (Acts 10:15)**

But Peter obeyed! And since the time of Peter, the church in its faithfulness has refused fearful, societal categories and has been open to this practice of God’s graciousness.

Alongside Peter, Paul became the great missionary for evangelical openness, recognizing—against his own fearful tradition—that none can be ejected from the church because they threaten us and are unlike us. Paul draws the conclusion:

**For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same
God is sovereign of all and is generous to all who call on God.
(Rom 10:12)**

The Jewish church had to make room for the very Gentiles it recognized it had categorized as “impure.” So in our day, conservatives must make room for liberals and, in a harder challenge for our church, liberals must make room for conservatives. And all must make room together for those whom society dismisses as “impure.”

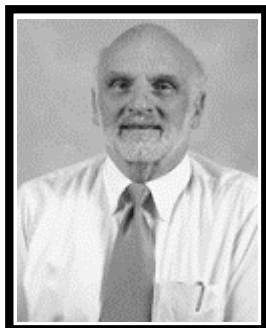
Out of Paul’s new awareness there came an inclusionary trajectory in the church, not uncontested but eventually accepted. We are offered, *in the letter to the Ephesians*, a new characterization of holiness that is not related to race, ethnicity, or any other category of uncleanness, but rather to participation in a community of grace, tenderness, forgiveness, and generosity:

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. (Eph 4:30-5:1)

Such a practice, in an exclusionary religious scene amid an exclusionary society that is fearful of the other, is an enormous challenge to the church. A bent toward inclusion runs great risks, but they are risks faithful to the gospel. In the long run such risks serve the kingdom. In the short run, they are the requirements of fidelity among us. Such fidelity will every time override fear and every time subvert anxiety. In doing so we remember that he said, “I tell you, do not be anxious.”

Questions for Thought, Discussion and Action

1. Read Acts 10. Almost everyone has something we “used to think.” Ask the group to share examples of things in their lives about which they now think in a different way. Are there things your local church has come to see in a new way?
2. Reflecting on Romans 10:12, Dr. Brueggemann suggests, “So in our day, conservatives must make room for liberals and, in a harder challenge for our church, liberals must make room for conservatives.” Discuss how paying attention to this might be a reality in your church. Someone once said that children often share about 90% of their parents’ values, but most family fights are over those 10% of values we hold differently. How high a percentage of agreement must there be in the church?
3. We are encouraged “to practice an inclusiveness that is as broad as humanity and as deep as God’s generosity.” Discuss whether people in the group would prefer that God gave us what we actually deserve. How is the church called to reflect God’s loving generosity in your church’s community?



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