

Discerning the Will of God through Inclusion and Affirmation

By Cain Hope Felder

Reciting ancient creeds in the church can be a disservice to the memory of Jesus of Nazareth. Too frequently Christian creeds affirm only Jesus' birth and death. "He was born of the Virgin Mary"... "and suffered under Pontius Pilate," suggest that the only significant reference points in the career of Jesus were that he was born and that he suffered a cruel death. Such creeds of "civil religion" unwittingly blur the depth and content of Jesus' ministry to the poor, the outcast, the down trodden. Outsiders -- including those marginalized ethnically, by gender, or by sexual orientation -- are often today treated as outcasts in our society and in our churches specifically.

Jesus spoke truth to power and became the incarnation of a redemptive, inclusive love for everyone, no matter what was perceived as a character flaw, spot or blemish. Many persons, who are otherwise quite spiritual, are quick to forget that it was Jesus who found enough goodness in a condemned man to forgive him on the cross!

Our nation and our churches share a great legacy, appreciating the ideals and rhetoric of freedom and "justice for all," but we often miss so many opportunities to put these ideals into actual practice! Instead, a harmful intolerance, fully described within the Old and New Testaments, is an ancient evil that still bedevils us today. **Rejection, of Jesus or our would-be neighbor, all too easily becomes ejection from our fellowships today as a result of the politics of difference.**

Yet, discrimination and intolerance, and the fear that precipitates both, can be overcome with an outstretched hand of welcome, a warm smile, and a sincere willingness to expand the range of those who Christians see as acceptable "neighbors." We are nearest to Jesus when our once perceived enemy -- or yesteryear's stranger or alien -- enters upon the threshold of becoming our fellow Christian friend and neighbor. We have such a painful history of using religion to brand, burn, persecute, hate, and condemn. Jesus was indeed rejected by the authorities and many contemporaries in his time. Yet, today many church-goers virtually eject those who do not look, dress, talk, or act like them. In Mark 11:17, Jesus reminds us that, "My house [the church] shall be called a house of prayer for all people."

Making room at the table is never as difficult for us if we make the same room for others as Jesus has made for us. There simply are too many today who want to preempt God's own prerogative to judge, forgetting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount mandate, "Judge not, that ye not be judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measure to you again" (Matt. 7:1-3; compare James 4:11-12).

The new millennium provides us with an opportunity to associate Christian faith more consistently with a jubilee of love. The hallmarks of Jesus' ministry were openness, inclusion, and compassion for those shunned and despised by the world. As the incarnation of justice, **Jesus was engaged in a ministry that sought to end domination, senseless violence, economic class distinctions, and all types of exclusive behavior.** Both society and the church are at their best

when they become homes for the homeless and fortresses of tolerance in a world of bias, prejudice, and hate. Christ's church is always a stronger witness when all believers affirm, heal, and accept the mosaic of difference among God's people. Jesus Christ inspires the Church not just to tolerate difference, but to affirm the talents and gifts of each human being, and to then celebrate the rich diversity among God's people **with** justice and mercy for all. By affirming that we are made in the image of God, we also become the bearers of all the dignity that God affords to all humanity—no exceptions.

The Gospels consistently remind us that Jesus of Nazareth listened when God spoke. Jesus listened in a manner that enabled him to reach out, teach, and heal. He made no distinctions based on bias or prejudice against others; but **rather chose to act on the transforming virtues of love, kindness, humility, peace and patience**. Jesus was impartial! The Apostle Paul frequently reminds us that God shows no partiality, and the Epistle of James candidly and explicitly admonishes, "Do not hold the faith of Jesus as you show partiality" (Jas. 2:1). Such partiality or prejudice against others is usually based on outward appearances (age, gender, economic status, ethnicity or sexual orientation). The 21st century witnessing church should rejoice in welcoming **all**, because the God who spoke so eloquently to Elizabeth, Mary, Jesus, Paul and James is still speaking the gospel of inclusion and affirmation.

Questions for Thought, Discussion and Action

1. How do we devise feasible strategies for a church that is relatively homogeneous to partner with a church that is more diverse, or different, in terms of race, ethnicity or sexuality?
2. How can the church provide stronger leadership in analyzing the various dimensions of the politics of difference? Through what church sponsored programs can the church courageously engage subjects that traditionally many have considered taboo, such as race, ethnicity, sex and sexuality?
3. What programmatic activities could your church implement to help members see the the world through the eyes of the "other?"



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