

## From Archie Bunker To Apostle of Inclusion

Acts 10:9-16, 34-5, 44-48

May 9, 2021

Some of you are old enough to have watched the T.V. show *All In The Family*, with bigot-in-chief Archie Bunker as head of the family.

In one episode he is in the hospital after surgery and has just learned that while he was under anesthesia he had received a blood transfusion from a black person! I can still see the look of horror and consternation on his face.

In another episode he was spouting off in disparaging terms about the Jews. His son-in-law whom he called “Meathead” challenged him and said, “But Archie, Jesus was a Jew!” Archie paused for a befuddled moment, then said, “Yes, but only on his mother’s side!”

And, of course, these were the 60’s and hippies were the scourge of the earth.

Simon Peter had a little Archie Bunker in him. It may be a little unfair to compare them. Peter was only following what he had been taught in church, and what he had caught from his everyday fisherman culture in Galilee. His big issue had to do with Gentiles.

## I

You remember the episode in John's Easter gospel when the risen Jesus appeared to Peter and the disciples who were fishing in the sea of Galilee. After breakfast three times Jesus asked Peter "Do you love me?" Three times Peter said, "Yes Lord, you know I love you." And three times Jesus followed with: "Then feed my sheep."

Well, who were his sheep? And who belonged in the flock and who didn't?

Peter drew the line at the Gentiles. The Jewish prejudice against the Gentiles went deep. It was racial: They were not pure blood Jews. And it was religious: They worshipped pagan gods. They were considered unclean, impure, "common".

Although Jesus had welcomed Samaritans and Gentiles—even Roman soldiers—into the kingdom, Peter was not so sure. One has said it takes a lifetime of conversations to become the new creation God made us to be. Peter was not finished being converted. He had been with Jesus three years yet there were parts of himself the gospel had not reached. Sounds like us.

Our prejudices run deep, some unconsciously. We react almost by instinct and out of cultural conditioning before reason gets a chance, or Jesus.

Peter had a Gentile problem. And the church at large was struggling with the issue: did a Gentile have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian? Did they have to be circumcised, follow all the kosher rules for eating, observe all Jewish rituals?

There was a big conference in Jerusalem (Acts 15) when the church made its first steps toward the full inclusion of Gentiles into the church. Had the church not made these decisions the church would have remained a small sect within Judaism—and we lily-white Gentiles would not be sitting in church today.

Sometimes churches act like a Home Owners Association, guarding who gets in and who doesn't and setting the rules of inclusion. The church begins to die when it becomes a "gated community".

Today's text is a dramatic scene in the opening of the church doors to everyone.

Acts 10 tells the story. It begins with a man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian guard who lives in Caesarea. He is a devout man, a worshipper of God who prays regularly and has been a generous benefactor of the Jewish community in Caesarea. A truly good man. He was intrigued about the God the Jewish Christians were talking about.

An angel came to him in a vision and said to him to send some of his men to Joppa where Simon Peter was living and invite him to come visit him.

While the messengers were en route to Joppa, Peter was praying on a rooftop. He grew hungry and wanted something to eat. Sounds like Sunday morning worship! He suddenly fell into a trance and saw a giant table cloth being lowered from heaven with all kinds of animals on it—many of them “unclean”, the kinds Jews were forbidden to eat. A Voice said, “Peter, get up, kill and eat!” Peter said, “Lord, I will not! I have *never* let anything unclean pass my lips!” You can catch the righteous tone of his voice.

Then the Voice said, “What God has cleansed, you shall not call unclean.”

*Three times* the Voice said these words! What is it about Peter that he needs to hear things three times?! Then the giant sheet returned to heaven.

Peter was puzzled. What could all this mean? Just then the messengers from Cornelius' house arrived, told him all about Cornelius and extended the invitation for Peter to come with them back to Cornelius' house.

Then the gospel began to dawn in Peter's mind. *Unclean animals=unclean people. What God has cleansed let no one call common!*  
Not just animals, people!

Peter said yes. It was forbidden for a Jew to enter a Gentile's house and eat with Gentiles. But Peter was changing his theology, and he invited the men from Caesarea to spend the night at his house before setting out the next morning after breakfast.

When Peter arrived and entered Cornelius' house, Cornelius had invited a crowd, members of the household, family and friends, to hear Peter preach about the God Cornelius had heard about.

Peter began with the new message God had given him. "I truly perceive that God shows no partiality", or in one translation, "that God has no favorites."

Then right in the middle of the sermon the Holy Spirit interrupted the sermon. (I hate it when that happens!) Years ago I was speaking on a panel

about planning worship. I was explaining in detail the step by step process the staff and I took in planning worship together. One fellow raised his hand and asked: “Do you ever plan for *spontaneity*?” I replied, “We don’t plan for it, we *pray* for it!” You may have heard this prayer, “Lord, please help something happen today not printed in the bulletin”.

In my first full-time pastorate the deacons would come into my office and pray for me before the Sunday worship service. As a young green-horn pastor I appreciated it. One day an old railroad man prayed, ‘Lord, Brother Steve has probably prepared his sermon. But if You have an ad-lib to give to him, give it to him!’ He was praying for some Holy Ghost ad-libs.

Well, there in Cornelius’ house mid-sermon the Holy Spirit descended upon everyone there; a little Pentecost began to happen. Some spoke in tongues; the house was filled with praises of God. Some of the Jews who had come with Peter from Joppa were amazed to see the Holy Spirit fall on these *Gentiles!* And they hadn’t been baptized yet! Or been vetted by the membership committee!

Peter said, with the new freedom of the gospel ringing in his voice:

Can anyone withhold water for baptism from these who have received the Holy Spirit as we have?

So, he didn't phone into headquarters in Jerusalem for permission. He baptized them on the spot! Joy filled the house. I have been so touched through the years to witness the immense spiritual gifts of LGBT people as they have been increasingly welcomed into the church. It has been clear the Holy Spirit was at work in them!

### III

The church has been trying to keep up with Jesus and the Holy Spirit ever since. The radical welcome of Jesus has been hard to emulate in a church too often and too much captive to its own culture.

In the 1960's during the Civil Rights Movement, churches in the South devised different schemes to keep black people from coming to worship or joining the church. One church had a buzzer placed in the foyer that a deacon would push when a black person came into the church which alerted the pastor at the pulpit so that he could quickly pronounce the benediction and all would go home.

Some churches changed their membership policies. It was good Baptist custom that if a person came down the aisle during the Invitation Hymn to join the church, the church would vote to welcome them on the spot. *All in favor say "Aye", all opposed say "No"*. But now in some churches new members had to be voted on by the Board of Deacons at their next meeting in order to be received as a member. I guess the Invitation Hymn became the Semi-Invitation Hymn or Provisional Invitation Hymn.

In the 1960's Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, where I later served as pastor, was thrust into a crisis of conscience. As the church was next to the seminary it had many seminary students. Now young African students—products of foreign missionaries—were coming to Southern Seminary to be trained as ministers. Would the church welcome black persons? They made the courageous and right decision, but not without some controversy and some weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Peter's conversion to become an Apostle of Inclusion helped pave the way. Jesus has been loosening the bonds of racism and prejudice ever since.



In our day the issue of the full welcome and inclusion of LGBT persons has been an important issue, a litmus test of the kind of church the church wants to be. When it says, God Loves All People, does it mean *all*?

When I was the pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, in the 1990's, a young gay activist named David began worshipping at the church. One day he said, "Would you have any objection if I came down the aisle to join the church?" "Of course not", I said. "I would welcome you fully into the church."

In early December he came down the aisle during the final hymn and presented himself for membership. By church by-law now in force, he could not be an official member until the deacon's voted him in at the next meeting. Later in December, the *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram* ran a front-page story about the difficulties young gay persons have during the holidays when they came home. Should they come out to their parents or not? David was prominently quoted in the article.

A murmuring began in the congregation. By the time of the January Deacons Meeting sides had begun to form. Some deacons were furious with me that I "let" David come down the aisle and so put them in an uncomfortable situation.

The meeting was one of the hardest I have endured as a pastor. After long and painfully agonized conversation, a “compromise” was reached. We would accept him under what we called “watch-care membership”—a category designed for college students while they attended college nearby and those “seasonal” worshippers who came every year at a particular time of year. Not of course designed for someone they weren’t willing to accept fully as a member. One person said dryly about the decision: “There’s going to be a lot more *watching* than *caring!*”

I hated my call to David to tell him about the Deacon’s decision, and he gradually drifted away from a church not yet ready to welcome him with open arms.

About a decade later the church voted to welcome fully LGBTQ persons into the church—again, not without some controversy and some weeping and gnashing of teeth. But the truth of the gospel had become more fully received. And how the church has been gifted with the spirit-filled lives of gay people.

The “truth of the gospel”, as Paul put it, that God loves all people, that grace is for all, is something we almost glibly say, but there are moments of truth in a church’s life when the truth of the gospel is at stake.

## V

How is the Holy Spirit nudging us these days at Grace? Can we more fully love those in the church who are different from us theologically, politically, racially, sexually or culturally? Can we fully welcome people into our church who are not like us. Some churches', real message is: "Come Join Us and *Be Like Us!* We'll accept you if you become like us!" Not Be Like Christ! Be like Us! What we should say is "Come join us and help us be like Christ".

Sometimes instead of welcoming people we "other" people, that is, treat them as "other", different, lesser. I think what Jesus taught us was that there was no such thing as an "other".

I remember the episode in John when some opponents came to Jesus and accused him of what people were saying, "Are you demon possessed and are you a Samaritan?" Jesus answered no to the demon-possessed part, then let the other question hang in the air. For Jesus there was no one "other".

We are all part of the same God-beloved, be-jeweled, rainbowed, redeemed human race. This is the gospel we believe in, live and witness in the world.

Amen