

# Welcoming in the Gentiles

## A Biblical Model for Decision Making

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## Biblical Authority and the Making of Decisions in the Church

At the heart of current debates about the place of gay and lesbian Christians in our churches lies the issue of biblical authority. It is right that this is so. Since Christians appeal to the Bible as our normative story, the question of the role that the Bible plays should be front and centre in our deliberations concerning the direction the Christian community takes. To affirm that the Bible is authoritative, however, begs two questions: In what way is it an authority for us? and, What precisely does its authority look like?

Both of these issues are far too large to be addressed at length

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in this article. However, let me give a brief consideration of both of them, by way of setting a framework for my discussion of a particular New Testament text.

What kind of a book is the Bible? Is it primarily a rule book in which we look up the rules for how to live out our Christian lives? Is it primarily a theological treatise in which we can find handy theological summaries of the nature of reality? Is it primarily a history book, providing a construction of the history of world and the people of God on which we can model our own communities? Or is it a book of heroic examples on which we can model our lives? While these various genres all find their place in the Bible, nonetheless this book comes to us overwhelmingly as a narrative. And as a narrative it has a kind of authority that is unique.

Biblical scholar Tom Wright describes this authority in terms of an unfinished drama. Act 1 is the creation of a good world. Act 2 is the distortion of that world by sin. Act 3 is the calling of Israel to be a blessing to this fallen world. Act 4 is the coming of Jesus, where sin is decisively dealt with. Act 5, scene 1, is the early church, where the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are grappled with and lived out in the lives of the first Christian communities. Further scenes unfold, from the apostolic era, through the patristic period, and so on to the present. Act 6 is the coming consummation, when Jesus will return and we will join him on the new earth at the resurrection of the dead.<sup>1</sup>

Now, what is significant about this drama is that we are in the middle of it. We are still in Act 5, living as the people of God before Jesus comes again. As Wright emphasizes, in order to live faithfully to the drama, we need two things. On the one hand, we need to be *faithful* to the story that has preceded us. Such fidelity means that we do not abandon the story; rather, we live according to it as it has already unfolded, in faithfulness to the God revealed to us in scripture and in faithfulness to Jesus, who died and was raised. But, on the other hand, we need to be *creative* in our living of the story. It will not do to simply repeat what happened in previous acts. This means that we need to discern what such faithful living looks like here and now, in new cultural situations, and in the light of new workings of the Spirit. Christian integrity is found at the

interface of fidelity and creativity. Indeed, as we shall see, this is precisely the struggle that engaged the church as recorded in the Book of Acts, chapters 10 to 15.

This means, moreover, that we do not turn to the Bible merely to deal with difficult issues. If the Bible is our story, the script for how we are to live faithfully in the world, we need to be totally immersed in the text, completely absorbed in the story, our imaginations renewed and transformed in every aspect by the vision that the story sets before us. Some inkling of how our imagination would be shaped in this way is given in Deuteronomy 6:6–9. There, every moment of every day is supposed to be filled with Torah, with the story of who God is and what God has done. This story fills your very being, so that you cannot help talking about it to your children at home and to everyone you meet, no matter where you are. When you are awake, you tell the story; when you are asleep, you even dream in its symbols and metaphors. It is on your hand, so that you see it enacted in all that you do, and on your forehead, so that others see it in all that you think and say. Your home and your life in the public square are to be shaped by it. Such an engagement with the story is, alas, foreign to most Christians in our culture, even in most of our church life. However, at the very least, we need intentionally to try to live out the narrative of scripture in our personal and (perhaps more importantly) our communal lives as a precondition of engaging in discussion of any issue.

There is also the question, however, of what authority looks like in the biblical story. What does this story that we try to live out tell us about authority? I take it as true that the authority of the Bible is rooted in our belief that the Bible is the story of our God, and that God demonstrates to us exactly what authority looks like. God's authority creates. It chooses forgiveness over destruction [see, for example, Exodus 32–34]. It works judgement and forgiveness [see Hosea 11]. It is the story of a shepherd-king who redeems by nurturing his flock, seeking the lost, binding up the wounds of the injured, and strengthening the weak [see Isaiah 40:10–11; Ezekiel 34].

The biblical story culminates in the story of Jesus, and its presentation of God's authority culminates in Jesus as well. In Jesus we

see the true image of the creator [Colossians 1:15], in whom God's redemptive work comes to its fulfilment. In Jesus we see also the one to whom all authority on heaven and on earth has been given [Matthew 28:18]. So what kind of authority is this that Jesus bears?

In Mark 10:32–45, the disciples are walking to Jerusalem with Jesus. As they continue along the road, they discover that James and John have just asked to be the Lord's right- and left-hand commanders when they conquer the city! The other disciples are outraged until Jesus interrupts with a radical redefinition of authority. Gentiles use authority for violent control and tyranny, but the followers of Jesus are to exercise a servant authority that even lays down its life for others. This kind of authority is antithetical to every authority of the world. Its nature is to serve, even unto death.

This is the way the story comes to its climax. The creative authority of God in creation, the judging and redemptive authority of God in the exodus and the exile, the forgiving authority of God, the nurturing authority of God who gathers the lambs in his arms, and gives strength to the faint and the weary — all of these come together in the life and death of Jesus. On the cross Jesus redeems his people from all the powers that enslave, and works forgiveness even for those who have crucified him. In his resurrection he is the first-born of a new creation, and in the sending of the Spirit he nurtures and strengthens the small Christian community that proclaims his name.

The point is this: God's authority is ultimately exercised over this world, not in a violent power grab, but through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the sending of the Spirit to empower such a servant community. This is a vision that takes every other story in our culture and turns it on its head, judging it in light of the character of our God, and calling into question every authority that does not submit to the suffering authority of Jesus.

Now, if the Bible is to function as an authority in our life, then its authority must cohere with the authority of the God to whom it bears witness. Therefore, if the Bible is used in ways that deny creation and promote death, then biblical authority is being subverted. If the Bible is used primarily as a text of condemnation

rather than a text of forgiveness, then the scriptures become a word of death, not of life. If the Bible is used to enslave and bind up, rather than redeem and save, then the overall thrust and intention of the biblical story is being denied. If the Bible is used in ways that destroy the weak and faint of heart rather than nurture them, then it is being used to justify the kind of brutal authoritarianism that the biblical story itself condemns. The Bible itself – biblical authority itself – stands in judgement over all such misuses and perversions of biblical authority.

## The Problem

As the story of the early church unfolds in Acts, we see a picture of a community struggling to find its way in new contexts. One of those struggles is recorded for us in Acts 15, where the apostles and elders are confronted with a problem: Under what conditions do we welcome Gentiles into the fellowship of believers? The question, Whom do we welcome? has been central throughout Luke's gospel and Acts. It begins with Simeon's song of God's salvation for all peoples [Luke 2:29–32], moves to Jesus' clear announcement that God's message of liberation from bondage is for Gentiles, which enraged the people of Nazareth<sup>2</sup> [Luke 4:16–30], and is reinforced in Jesus' command to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind into our homes for meals [Luke 14:13]. In the Book of Acts, Luke, the writer picks up the theme once again with the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch [Acts 8].<sup>3</sup> The theme culminates in the decision to welcome the Gentiles without requiring circumcision [Acts 15].

However, the widening of the gospel to include those who were traditionally excluded does not mean that all are immediately welcomed into the Christian community: the rich man who does not feed the starving Lazarus suffers eternal torment [Luke 16:19–31]; the rich young ruler who is unable to sell all that he has and give it to the poor will have difficulty entering the kingdom [Luke 18:18–25]; and Ananias and Sapphira, who lied about their economic contribution to the community of believers, are cut off in the most

dramatic way possible [Acts 5:1–11]. It is clear that some behaviours are *not* permitted in this community.

For the early church, the conversion of the Gentiles was the greatest success and, as it turns out, its biggest problem. For many Jews the turning of the Gentiles to the God of Israel was a good thing only under certain conditions. Gentiles, to put it mildly, did not have a good reputation in Jewish circles. In fact, if the average Jew wanted to describe in a nutshell what the average Gentile lived like, he (or she) might well have used the language of Romans 1. It describes Gentiles as people who by their injustice suppress the truth. They have given up their God-given glory in favour of mere images, and God has given them up to lust and degrading passions. They engage in immoral sexual practices, including temple prostitution, and they are full of covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, and craftiness. They are gossips, slanderers, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, unfaithful, heartless, ruthless. This was standard first-century Jewish diatribe against Gentiles.

Naturally, if this is what Gentiles were like, then permitting them to enter the believing community could cause huge problems for a community that was committed to a very different way of being in the world. The Epistle to the Romans and other Jewish writings trace these kinds of behaviours to their roots in idolatry, in worshipping not the creator but the creature. Furthermore, these vices demonstrate an attitude to community life and sexual relations that is rooted in instant gratification, consumption, and division. These are the results of most of the items on Paul's list in Romans 8:29–30 (covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, gossip, slander, insolence, boastfulness, rebellion, ruthlessness), and a sexuality of consumption is demonstrated in Paul's description of a sexuality rooted in lust and degrading passion [v. 24ff.], which is faithless and heartless [v. 32]. In Colossians the link between this sort of sexuality and covetousness is explicitly made [Colossians 3:5]. Throughout the New Testament, idolatry creates divisions in community life, and such divisions are rooted both in the list of social sins summarized by malice, envy, strife, and gossip, *and* in the sexual sins of consumptive

passion and sexual immorality. In the eyes of most Jews, therefore, Gentiles were irretrievably rooted in a lifestyle of instant gratification, consumption and division, rather than commitment, nurture, and edification.

You can see the problem here: What guarantee did the leaders of the early church have that the Gentiles were going to leave their idolatrous way of life behind? They knew one way of making sure: by requiring circumcision. What circumcision symbolized was not just a commitment to the God of Israel, but also a commitment to keeping the whole of Torah. And one could not keep Torah and continue to follow the practices of idolatry.

The individuals who came to Paul and Barnabas in Antioch as recorded in Acts 15:1 were on good, solid biblical ground in insisting on circumcision. So were those Pharisees who responded to Paul and Barnabas when they first arrived in Jerusalem, “It is necessary for [the Gentiles] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses” [Acts 15:5]. They were right: there was nothing in scripture to suggest that Gentiles could become part of the community without keeping the law and without circumcision. This law had been laid down by Moses and had never been challenged anywhere in any biblical tradition, not even by Jesus. All the texts that speak of the Gentiles joining themselves to the house of Israel also envision that these Gentiles will keep Torah. There was no hint that this requirement would ever be overthrown; there is *absolutely no biblical precedent* for welcoming in Gentiles without being circumcised and following Torah. The Pharisees who opposed Paul had both scripture and tradition on their side.<sup>4</sup>

And so the debate at Jerusalem came down to this central issue: Whom do we welcome into the believing community, and by what criteria do we decide, especially when we don’t think the people who want in are morally up to standard?

## The Story

Before we look at Acts 15, however, we need to briefly consider the narrative in Acts 10 to 11 that leads up to it, the story of Peter's dream and the baptism of Cornelius.<sup>5</sup> Central to this narrative is the importance of friends and hospitality. When Peter finally reached Cornelius, he knew who Cornelius was from conversing with his friends on the way to the house. In breaking scriptural law in order to eat with Cornelius, Peter established a relationship that then enabled him to testify on behalf of Cornelius to others [Fowl 1998, 117–18]. It is evident from the story that eating with Gentiles was the charge that Peter faced upon his return to Jerusalem [Acts 11:3]. It was also the only means by which he could discern the work of God's Spirit in Gentile lives so as to defend himself against the charge of breaking the law. We need to remember as we read Acts 15 that the whole decision-making process was preceded by the sharing of both stories and meals together.

## The Process

And so we come to the discussion of Acts 15. The apostles and elders met to consider the matter, says the text [v. 6]. As we have noted above, the Pharisees argue the theological basis for the necessity of circumcision. There was much debate [v. 7]. Perhaps the Pharisees recounted how this commandment was given to Abraham and is central to Torah; perhaps they discussed the prophetic texts that speak about Gentiles; perhaps they appealed to the tradition of the fathers up until the present day; perhaps they referred to the questionable morality of these Gentiles.

What is striking is that Peter discussed none of these issues. Instead, he witnessed to what God had done with the Gentiles. God had "testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit," he said, "and in cleansing their hearts by faith" [vv. 8–9]. Peter appealed to his experience of the Gentiles, to the way he saw the Spirit moving in their midst, and to their renewed hearts. Considering contemporary evidence of the Spirit was, for Peter, of central

importance in discerning what decision should be made. Luke Johnson describes Peter's story as a narration of God's work in the world: that is, it is the *doing of theology*. "Peter's interpretive narrative of his experience places the issue on properly theological grounds. Can one recognize God's work in the world? Yes, and once the recognition is made, the church's decision should follow" [Johnson 1996, 102].

We should note, however, that Peter's narrative here did echo a scriptural tradition. He began by saying, "And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them..." [v. 8]. This appeal to God who knows the human heart is deeply rooted in the Psalms, where the psalmist appeals to God because of persecution. It is usually part of a plea in which the psalmist asserts that, while others do not consider him to be faithful, God knows the heart. These Old Testament echoes reverberate through Peter's words. The overtones are unmistakable: we might think that we can judge these Gentiles, but God knows their hearts and has testified on their behalf with the Holy Spirit. Who then are we, asks Peter in verse 10, to judge their suitability and insist on a moral code that we have also been unable to bear? Thus, in telling a story that is suffused with the vocabulary of the scriptures, Peter places that story in the larger context of God's work throughout scripture.

Paul and Barnabas then take up the narrative by telling more stories of what God has done among the Gentiles. Given the theological sophistication of Paul's letters, we know that he was as capable as any of theological discussion based on Old Testament texts. We know that he could have drawn on the tradition, talked about Abraham, and made a strong textual argument against circumcision. In fact, he did just this in Galatians. But he didn't do that here. Instead, he and Barnabas appealed to their experience among the Gentiles, to the signs and wonders that God had done.

Only after the stories had been told of God's work in the present did James appeal to a biblical text. Note, however, the unusual introduction he gives to the citation: "The words of the prophets agree with this" [Acts 15:15], *not* "this agrees with the prophets."<sup>6</sup> Scripture is seen to agree with the contemporary working of the Spirit, not the other way around.

James acknowledges that God is doing a new thing, and he reads scripture as if it confirms that new thing, as indeed it does. But let's be clear here. There are many scriptural texts that could be used to make a case *against* admitting the Gentiles who do not follow Torah. Some texts speak not of welcoming Gentiles, but of defeating and crushing them. Others insist on the need for circumcision for those Gentiles who want to join the community of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, there are no texts that support the position of welcoming the Gentiles without circumcision. So what did James do? He quoted a text that did not address the situation directly, but which could be made to fit the circumstances. James has made the remarkable move of allowing the Old Testament to be illuminated and interpreted by the narrative of God's activity in the present [Johnson 1996, 105]. Moreover, this text still does not assert that circumcision is unnecessary for the Gentiles to be welcomed. That is an interpretive move that James must make himself.

Our contemporary debates about homosexuality are often preoccupied with a very small number of texts that appear to condemn homosexuality. However, if we were to use scripture in the way that James does, we would draw attention away from those texts and ask ourselves whether the experience of the Spirit in the lives of gays and lesbians in our community produces a new reading of the scriptures as a whole. How do we allow scripture to be illuminated by the narratives of God's activity in our present? At the Jerusalem Council, the witness of the Holy Spirit in believers' experience was confirmed by scriptural witness *as the scripture was reinterpreted in light of that experience*. When the Spirit of God is working in people's lives, we don't use the scriptures to inhibit the work of the Spirit. Scripture is for the building up of a Spirit-filled community, not for tearing it apart. Discerning where the Spirit is moving also legitimately influences our interpretation of scripture, as it influenced James who, in light of the Spirit's work, ignored all the texts about the Gentiles that could have led him to a different decision. Scripture here is read through the lens of the Spirit's work, rather than vice versa [Fowl 1998, 114]. We shall return below to what this might look like in our deliberations about homosexuality today.

But there is another important lesson that needs to be learned from how the Jerusalem Council's decision was made. Stories are told about the Spirit's work in the lives of others, "by those who are already recognized as people of the Spirit" [Fowl 1998, 115]. In Acts 15 Peter is describing God's work in the lives of others. As Stephen Fowl puts it, "To be able to read the Spirit well, Christians must not only become and learn from people of the Spirit, we must also become practised at testifying about what the Spirit is doing in the lives of others" [116]. As we shall see, this requires a community where such narratives can be nurtured and sustained.

## The Parameters

The Gentiles were to be welcomed into the community without circumcision. But that does not mean there were no concerns about their morality. So some stipulations were set. As Gentiles, and especially as Gentiles who did not want to follow Torah and be circumcised, these believers would have been tarred by faithful Jews with the same brush as unbelieving Gentiles. The polemic of the first chapter of Romans was believed to apply to all Gentiles; if they did not worship the living God, they could not be anything but idolatrous and, hence, immoral. And James's decision addressed precisely this question of morality in asking them to abstain from things polluted by or sacrificed to idols, and from sexual immorality, and from whatever has been strangled and from blood [vv. 20–21, 28–29].

All of these stipulations revolve around the issue of idolatry: the Gentile believers are being asked to put off precisely those things that are central to a life of idol worship in the Roman empire. Just as in Romans 1, which sees idolatry as at the root of the depravity of the Gentile life — the sexual immorality, the slander and gossip, the envy and covetousness, the deceit and unfaithfulness — so the Jerusalem Council discerned that idolatry was at the heart of the worship that the Gentiles now had to abandon.

So the Gentile believers were called, first of all, to abandon all

that has been sacrificed to idols, or polluted by idols. In the ancient world this would mean no longer going to the theatre, no longer attending any sort of civic celebration, no longer being a part of celebrations in honour of the emperor or his rule. All of these events would have been consecrated by sacrifice to idols and preceded by prayers for the empire. No more of such involvement, says the Jerusalem Council.

Second, they were called to refrain from sexual immorality. The Greek word used here, *porneia*, often translated by the word fornication, actually had a wide variety of overtones: adultery, sex for hire, temple prostitution. All of these ways of behaving betray a sexuality rooted in the idolatrous practices of the empire, a sexuality characterized by promiscuity, instant gratification, and consumption. Instead, the Jerusalem Council called these Gentile believers to a sexuality rooted in commitment and faithfulness, a sexuality that creates and builds up community rather than tearing it apart.

Third, they were called to abstain from meat that had been strangled, and from blood. In the ancient world, the main slaughterhouses were the temples; priests (and this goes for Jewish priests as well) were basically butchers. They spent a large part of their time killing, butchering, and sacrificing meat. Jewish priests were very particular about how meat was butchered; following Levitical law, the animal was slaughtered with a knife and the blood was drained entirely from it. Meat with blood in it would have been slaughtered (probably strangled) by a Gentile priest, and would have been killed as a sacrifice to idols. Since meat was generally consumed only at the time of a festival or as a result of a special sacrifice, the consumption of meat was always linked to the worship of some god, whether the God of Israel or an idol. So calling the Gentiles not to eat meat that was strangled or with the blood in it meant that the eating of idol meat was prohibited.

Even the way meat was eaten was linked to idolatry. In the Roman Empire, such meat was eaten in the service and worship of the emperor. At all imperial meals, where sacrifices were offered in honour of the emperor, the social divisions and hierarchies of the empire were rigidly enforced. Those men at the higher end of the

social ladder received the best bits of roasted meat, and women, children, and slaves received much less meat that had been boiled and was likely cold. The Jerusalem Council was calling the early Christian community to put off eating practices that were in the service and worship of the empire.

By contrast, a sign of the early Christian community was that they practised an alternative meal, where all ate together, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female. The Jerusalem Council was calling the Gentiles to become part of a community that worshipped the living God, not idols, and that practised mutual service, not the reinforcement of division.

James summed up the basis of his decision when he wrote the following to the Gentiles in Antioch [v. 28]: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials.” And when the believers in Antioch received the letter, they rejoiced.

## The Implications

The narrative of Acts 10 to 15 highlights a number of other dynamics involved in making the decision to include the Gentiles in the church. One is the central importance of hospitality. It was enabled by the requirement that Gentiles refrain from meat offered to idols. Fowl describes the importance of this theme in this way:

Throughout this narrative the offering and receiving of hospitality always seems to be in the background supporting and enabling the sorts of friendships that allow Christians with different convictions to listen together to the voice of the Spirit [Fowl 1998, 118].

Peter is asked in Acts 11:3: “Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (This was an accusation, of course, that echoes the charge made against Jesus in Luke 15:2: “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”) Peter’s acceptance of

Cornelius's hospitality makes it possible for him to hear the story of what God has done in Cornelius's life. And, as Fowl points out, "Peter's relationship with the various parties he confronts in Jerusalem affects the way in which his testimony is received" [118]. Those relationships enable him to relate the stories of what God has done in the lives of Cornelius and others. In short, this story describes the type of community that the church must be in order to go about the hard process of making difficult decisions. Such a community is characterized by the sort of friendships that enables the patience necessary for the hard work of discernment. Such friendships are rooted in gracious hospitality.

Such discernment is truly *hard work* for these communities, because *not all* narratives are accepted. The hard work of discernment will involve substantial disagreement, as we saw in Acts 15:2, where it says (dryly) that "there was no small dissension and debate." But what would such discernment look like? What kind of criteria would assist a community in determining whether a narrative is truly the work of the Spirit?

Paul's major emphasis through his letters is to teach and encourage a Christian way that is for the *edification* of the community. The language that Paul uses most often is that of "building up" the community of believers.<sup>8</sup> But what does this building up look like? Johnson describes it this way: "That edifies the church which builds it up in holiness" [Johnson 1996, 122]. Such *holiness*, moreover, is marked by the sign of the cross [129]. The cruciform life is shaped by a lowliness that looks to the service of others, seeks a mind that is in Christ Jesus [1 Corinthians 2:15; Philippians 2:5], and undertakes self-emptying obedience [Philippians 2:5–11]. Such a life bears the burdens of others [Galatians 6:2; Romans 15:1–3], forgives others [Colossians 3:13], and walks in self-sacrificial love. Because we follow a crucified saviour, a church marked out by holiness lives out a life of self-sacrifice.

This gives us a criterion by which to discern the work of the Spirit in a narrative: a narrative of faith that reflects the character of Christ has a certain *christological density* [Fowl 1998, 159]. Just as Paul describes his own life story as following the crucified messiah,

so the narratives in which the church seeks to discern the work of the Spirit should manifest the Christ-like pattern of self-sacrificing love.

The Christian community is called, therefore, if it follows biblical precedent in struggling with the questions around homosexuality, to listen with welcoming hospitality to the stories that its members tell about gays and lesbians in our midst. At the very least, as Fowl points out, listening to the stories of God's work in the lives of gays and lesbians is necessary before any discernment about such stories can take place. And, following the precedents set in Acts 10 to 15, such stories should take place over a meal. "Christians have no reason to think they understand how the Holy Spirit weighs in on the issue of homosexuality until they welcome homosexuals into their homes and sit down to eat with them" [122]. And once the stories are heard, then the work of discernment begins, for "the Spirit of God, when truly at work, leaves traces in our story. The church does have a way to discern the Spirit's work, but only if the fruits are made available by narrative" [Johnson 1996, 138].

This fruit, the traces of the Spirit's work in the story and the holiness in the lives of believers, is described by Paul in a number of places. The best known of these is Galatians 5. If the lives of gay and lesbian believers display the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control [Galatians 5:22-23], then the church needs to acknowledge the work of God in their lives, as such work was recognized in the lives of Gentiles in Acts. If, on the other hand, the lives of these believers are filled with sexual immorality, impurity, licentiousness, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like [Galatians 5:19-21], then it is clear that the body of Christ is not edified by them. The only way to discern these things, however, is first to hear the stories in our midst.

Another criterion was established in Acts 15 [referred to in Galatians 5:20], when the Jerusalem Council called on Gentile believers to reject idolatry together with the sexual practices and eating practices that followed from it. For the believers in Jerusalem

the question of discerning who should be welcomed was answered in the following way: We welcome those in whom we see the Holy Spirit working, those whose hearts have been cleansed by faith. We welcome those who rejoice at the chance to put idolatry behind them and all that idolatry leads to. We welcome those who practise a sexuality that is not rooted in promiscuity and instant gratification and consumption. We welcome those who eat in ways that do not reinforce the hierarchies and prejudices of the world that tear community apart. We welcome those whose long-term commitment, truth, faithfulness, and service to all are rooted in following Jesus. We welcome those who want to be part of a community where the leaders serve the least and all gifts are shared equally with all.

These criteria resonate with those of us trying to live holy lives today. We too live in a culture where sexuality is pimped for consumption and instant gratification. We too live in a culture where an ethos of idolatrous corporate consumption creates ever widening gaps between those who eat at Mövenpick and McDonald's or the soup kitchen. In such a culture, our communities too need to be places where faithful sexual commitment is honoured, and where mutual sharing and service, especially among those who have least, is encouraged. Our communities should be places where *all* who confess that Jesus is Lord are welcomed.

## The Stories

It is precisely the contention of many in the church today that the lives of gay and lesbian Christians demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit, commitment, faithfulness, and Christ-shaped service. Ironically, the issue that has caused the most division in Canada around homosexuality, the desire of gay and lesbian Christians for their unions to be recognized as a blessing, is rooted in this desire to practice a sexuality that is committed and covenantally based rather than the promiscuity common in our culture among people of every sexual orientation.

The stories our communities need to hear are stories of what Johnson calls “homosexual holiness” [Johnson 1996, 148] — stories of Christ-shaped lives in which the fruits of the Spirit are evident. The principal burden of telling those stories does not rest on the shoulders of gay and lesbian Christians themselves, but on the shoulders of those in their communities who have witnessed such fruit, who can testify on their behalf, and who believe that the Spirit is truly working in the lives of their gay brothers and lesbian sisters.

To that end I would like to end this chapter by briefly indicating what some of those stories sound like. If I were to relate the working of the Spirit in signs and wonders among the gays and lesbians in my community, as Peter related the signs and wonders he had witnessed among the Gentiles, I would include stories like these: Marj is a nurse who retired early to spend her days binding up the wounds of the many homeless people who come through her church doors each day. Jim and Amy patiently teach young children the stories of the Bible each week in Sunday school. Daniel, a crown attorney, has for five years nurtured the youth group as they attempt to discern what it is to be faithful Christians in the difficult terrain of urban adolescence. Jennifer and Wendy faithfully gave their goddaughter her first Bible and read to her out of it whenever they give a break to her frazzled parents. Michelle and Bonnie opened their home and adopted a child living in foster care. David uses his intellectual gifts for the upbuilding of Christian education in his parish, and his organizational skills to run the fair trade coffee group. Harley personally welcomes newcomers to his parish by cooking most of a special lunch for them. Chris has quietly held many fractious children through many a eucharist. Natasja’s quiet work of community building has united the student body in her graduate program. Abigail’s academic gifts are exercised consistently in the service of her church. Fred volunteers on the board of his local social justice group, and Jack, a teacher, stuffs envelopes as a volunteer at the same place. Linda gives free reflexology treatments to a man ill with cancer. John’s choices of songs that are theologically rich and biblically faithful rival the best sermon on a Sunday morning. These are just a few of the gay

and lesbian people I know whose stories are deeply shaped by the cross of Jesus, whose lives bear the fruit of the Spirit, and who with their partners demonstrate a commitment to faithful relationship that challenges the promiscuity and consumption of our culture.

“The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,” writes Paul in Ephesians 4:11–12. In my community these gifts have been given to members who are gay and lesbian, for the upbuilding of the body of Christ. Who are we to deny the gifts of God? As I write this, I am astounded by the stories and overwhelmed by the blessing that these people have been in my life and community. Is my experience unusual? For some yes, for others no. It all depends, I suspect, on what kinds of people are welcomed around the table of the Lord.

It is only in the telling of such stories in our communities that we as a people will be able to live out the story of our faith in ways that are both faithful to the witness of scripture and attentive to the new working of the Spirit in our midst. And when we live lives of such creative fidelity, then we will be a people for whom the Bible is not merely a rule book, but a living and authoritative word.



## Notes

1. Although I am indebted for the model of the unfinished drama to N. T. Wright, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991), 7–32, my description of that drama in terms of six acts follows J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern World* (Downers Grove: 1995), 182.
2. This is the relevance of his references to the widow of Sidon whom Elijah helped, and to Naaman the Syrian army commander whom Elisha helped (vv. 25–27). Both of these Gentiles were assisted when there were many Israelites in need as well.
3. Although the eunuch was probably Jewish, it is important to note that he was a eunuch and therefore could not be allowed into the community of the holy according to Leviticus. As a result he would have been excluded from table fellowship by both the Pharisees and the Qumran community.
4. Luke Timothy Johnson points out the theological weight and respectability of the Pharisees' position here, in *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: 1996), 101.
5. Unfortunately my treatment here must remain brief. I refer you to the excellent discussions of this passage in Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment*, 61–108, and Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Massachusetts/Oxford: 1998), 101–127.
6. By using the latter translation, the NRSV loses the force of James's introduction, in addition to misreading the Greek.
7. Exodus 12:43–49; cf. Genesis 34. A foundational text for the covenant between God and Israel was, of course, Genesis 17, where circumcision is given as a sign of that covenant. This text was foundational for the importance of circumcision in Judaism.
8. See 1 Thessalonians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 10:8, 13:10; Ephesians 4:12; cf. Romans 15:20; 1 Corinthians 3:6, 9–11; Ephesians 2:2.

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