

WHO QUALIFIES

Third in the Series: Learning Church

Ezra 4: 1-3, Acts 10:34-43; 15:1-5, John 3: 13-17

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Who's up for a little Methodist history today? Actually, that's a rhetorical question because you are going to get some ready or not. I trust it will not be too painful.

When the Methodist Episcopal Church formed in this country in 1784, the denomination officially opposed slavery. John Wesley was very engaged in the anti-slavery movement in England and was appalled by slavery in America. This anti-slavery stand, however, did not mean that race relations were peachy keen within the church. Blacks and whites did worship freely together, especially in the north, but not necessarily in the same pews. St. George's in Philadelphia, for example, one of our earliest and strongest churches, had a growing congregation. They needed to enlarge the sanctuary. They expanded, putting in a balcony. When the expansion was complete, the African-American members were relegated to the balcony. They did not go. Instead they followed Richard Allen and Absalom Jones out the door and, in 1816, joined with other disgruntled African-American Methodists to form the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The A.M.E. church continues as a denomination today.

Although slavery was opposed by the Methodist Church, slave holding was not prohibited, except that clergy were expected not to own slaves. Then in 1840, James Osgood Andrew, a bishop in Georgia, acquired a slave. This caused an uproar, but the General Conference chose not to expel him. In 1844, he acquired another slave through marriage. This time the General Conference voted to remove him unless he freed his two slaves. Well, Methodists in the south were outraged and feared that if the denomination refused to allow a bishop to own slaves and frowned on clergy owning slaves, it was only a matter of time before laity would be prohibited from owning slaves. So, they split from the denomination and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

The two bodies, north and south merged again in 1939, along with the Methodist Protestants, who had also split earlier because they opposed of having bishops, and the three bodies became simply the Methodist Church. This body merged with the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church. The Brethren Churches that made up that body and the Methodist had not united earlier because one body spoke German, the other English.

By the way, if you ever wonder why sometimes you see two or three or four United Methodist churches in one town square or within a few miles of each other along the road, chances are good that once upon a time one was the Methodist Episcopal Church, one the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, one the Methodist Protestant Church, and one the Evangelical United Brethren Church. O.K., that wasn't too bad, was it?

You are very tolerant, but you may be wondering why the history lesson. It is because we are talking over these weeks about issues that faced the earliest church and how they resolved them in hopes that we may learn something about how to be church today. Because the church grew rapidly on the Day of Pentecost, going from one hundred or so participants to over three thousand, then added many, many more as they continued to preach and demonstrate signs and wonders, they had a lot to figure out about being a church. How would they relate to each other and to others outside

the body? Who was in charge? How would they organize for mission? What was their mission? These were some of the early questions.

The most challenging question, which reared its head early on, was who could belong? Who qualified to belong to the body of Christ? I began with some history because our instinctive answer might be that everyone can belong; why is that even a question? I shared some history because I want us to understand that it has always been a question and continues to be. Throughout the life of the church, groups have excluded other groups based on ethnicity, race, gender, language, theology, sexual orientation, and sacramental understanding. I'm sure the list is longer. Never in the body has it been a y'all-come welcome.

There were some dividing lines right from the beginning that made folks uncomfortable. We talked last week about how Greek-speaking Jews were being neglected in the daily distribution of food by the Hebrew-speaking Jews. The Greek speakers technically belonged; they were part of the body, but clearly they were seen as 2nd class or worse and not fully integrated. We talked about how Philip evangelized among the Samaritans. You can bet some did not like that. Jews and Samaritans had a long, long history of dislike. In our lesson from Ezra today, some Samaritans who worshipped Yahweh wanted to help rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem which had been destroyed during the Babylonian captivity. Governor Zerubbabel, priest Jeshua, and the rest of the heads of families told them, "You will have no part with us in building a house to our God." No Samaritans allowed. That was nearly six hundred years earlier. They had animosity toward each other all of that time. Now Samaritans were being invited into the body of Christ? Surely some were not happy about that.

The super big question, though, was what about Gentiles? Up to this point, the whole Jesus, Christian experience had been 100% among the Jews. Oh, Jesus had helped a few Gentiles. But none of the twelve were Gentile, nor any of the other disciples. The apostles were in the Temple in Jerusalem preaching to and recruiting Jews. Jesus, himself a Jew, was understood to be the promised Messiah to the Jews, the fulfillment of the Jewish law and prophecy. Gentiles were considered uncouth, unclean, and undesirable. You might have business dealings with Gentiles. You did not, however, eat with Gentiles, or go into a Gentile home, or socialize with Gentiles. The feelings, by the way, were mutual. So, what were they to do with Gentiles who wanted to be Christian? Was that allowed? Could they belong? It is hard to overemphasize just how important this question was. Just as race and slavery were the issues that threatened to divide the Methodist Church and, in fact, did for nearly a century, so this is the issue that could easily have divided, maybe even undone, the earliest church. A resolution was needed. One was found.

A few things happened that led to a resolution. One is that Peter, the lead apostle, had an experience. He was in Joppa, today's Tel Aviv, when he had a vision. A sheet was lowered filled with animals that were not kosher. He was commanded to eat. He refused, saying that he had never eaten unclean food and wasn't about to now. God's voice spoke. "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." He was also told that Cornelius, a centurion and a Gentile, would be sending for him, and he should go. Simultaneously, Cornelius had a vision telling him to send for Peter. Long story short, Peter did go. He told them he didn't like being with Gentiles but God had made him come. He gave witness to Cornelius and his household. Lo and behold, the Holy Spirit then came upon all – Cornelius and his entire household. Peter was moved and baptized them, bringing them into the body.

Listen to what Peter said during this experience. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Peter,

who had been taught his whole life to be disgusted by Gentiles had his heart and mind changed. He did a 180, baptizing them and bringing them into the body. He would share that experience and new understanding with others later.

The other thing that happened is that others, who did not care about this issue, were busy evangelizing among the Gentiles. This was especially true of the church in Antioch in Syria. This was a strong church and a congregation that did have a y'all-come attitude. Key leaders in that church, by the way, were Barnabas, and a helper he recently brought to help from Tarsus, the former persecutor Saul, now known as Paul.

Well, some folks in Jerusalem heard what was going on and hightailed it to Antioch to say cease and desist. They got in heated arguments with Barnabas and Paul. Finally, all the parties involved showed up in Jerusalem, for what has become known as the Jerusalem Council, to resolve this question about Gentiles once and for all. In one way, the decision had already been made. Gentiles could be included. That cat was out of the bag. The real question was – did they have to become Jewish first? In other words, did they have to be circumcised, eat kosher, follow the law and customs, etc.? Again, it is hard to overemphasize how important this was. If this could not be resolved, the church may well have split. Antioch, for instance, would not have gone along with a prohibition. It may have even collapsed, because it would have remained very local and parochial and eventually would have been no more than a small sect, if that.

Instead, James, the leader of the Jerusalem Church ruled that the only requirement was for the Gentiles to abstain from Gentile worship practices such as eating meat sacrificed to idols and participating in temple cultic prostitution. Everyone accepted that and the church was off and running. (By the way, we are all Gentiles, so yeah for that decision.)

That issue was solved but it did not stop division between believers or groups excluding other groups. The Eastern and Western churches had many disagreements that set them down different paths. They remain on different paths to this day. During the Reformation, the leaders of different factions were often literally burned at the stake – all over theological issues. We have all heard of the inquisition. Today, if you want to join some churches, you will need to sign that you acknowledge and fully accept a particular creed. In some you are not invited to take communion because you do not belong to the one true church. There are churches that refuse to be part of any ecumenical work with other Christian churches because they do not consider the others to be Christian. Why? Because other churches may ordain women, or do not teach Biblical inerrancy, or don't emphasize speaking in tongues. The list is long.

In our own denomination today a battle is being waged over the inclusion or exclusion of those with a sexual orientation other than heterosexuality, those identified in the LGBTQ categories. Our Discipline, set by the General Conference, says that all persons are of sacred worth and all may belong to the church, including those in the LGBTQ communities. They cannot, however, be ordained, nor marry. Many say that is as far as the church should go and, if it goes further, such as allowing ordination or marriage, they will leave. Just as many say this is a terrible exclusion and, if we do not eliminate it, they will leave. The Western Jurisdiction this year consecrated a bishop who is in a same-sex marriage. The Southwest Jurisdiction took that to the Judicial Council, our church court. Many clergy are openly conducting same-sex marriages. Other clergy are taking them to trial seeking their orders. Some clergy are surrendering their clergy credentials saying they will not be part of a church that excludes. Others are trying to require what amounts to a loyalty oath.

It is a mess. It is sad. It is upsetting to all. It is not, however, new. It reminds me of the Jerusalem Council with the Antioch and Jerusalem churches butting heads. It reminds me of the horrible atrocities during the Reformation. It reminds me of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones having to walk out of their church to form a new one, and of the 1844 General Conference that split the church north and south. It reminds me of when we once said to women, you can belong but you cannot be ordained. This changed for us in 1955. It is still that way in many churches. Ask nuns who cannot be priests.

Over all of these centuries, these battles have been fought under the umbrella of the best known text in Christian Biblical writing: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Ah, the Church has forever parsed the word everyone, trying to say just who everyone is – who actually qualifies to be Christian.

I understand the history. I understand the issues. I understand the different perspectives and can respect the different perspectives. I believe, though, that there is a caveat to which every Christian, regardless of position, needs to pay attention. That is, it is a slippery slope we start down when we start qualifying who belongs and who does not.

You know, throughout history, people on every side of all of the issues we have discussed, and many more, have quoted the Bible to give credence and support to their position. Fine. We should be looking carefully at scripture. But what stands out to me is that, in all of the conversations, now or in any time in history, I have yet to hear anyone quote the Bible in a way that excludes them. It is only quoted to exclude others. Honestly, it would be more compelling to me, more convincing, if people looked carefully at the parts of scripture that call into question the ways they are living. There is plenty in scripture about how we are to use our money, about marriage, about how we are to dress, about how we are to treat each other, about how we are to think and act. No one lives up to all of it, which means that quoting scripture pretty much disqualifies everyone sooner or later. We should be careful, then, when we read it only to exclude others. Others may well quote it to exclude us.

The other thing is, it seems to me, that the one thing that shines forth in the gospel of Christ, the gospel of grace, is that ultimately, the only qualification is belief – belief in Jesus the Christ as our Lord and Savior. For here is the thing. We all fall short of the glory of God. We are all sinners saved only by the grace of God, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, never by our qualifications. We start down a slippery slope whenever we try to qualify God’s grace.

Our bishops are in deep prayer and discernment right now in an effort they are calling a way forward. The Jerusalem Council found a way forward two thousand years ago and the church is a worldwide church today because of it. We are looking for a way forward now. Pray for our bishops and for our church and for the Church, that the Church Universal will not necessarily agree on everything, for that will never happen, but that we will conform to the will of God and God’s desires. Then the gospel can be authentically preached, and Lord knows, in our world the gospel needs to be preached. And that, it seems to me, is more important than using our time and energy to figure out who is in and who is out.

Guide us, O God.
Amen.