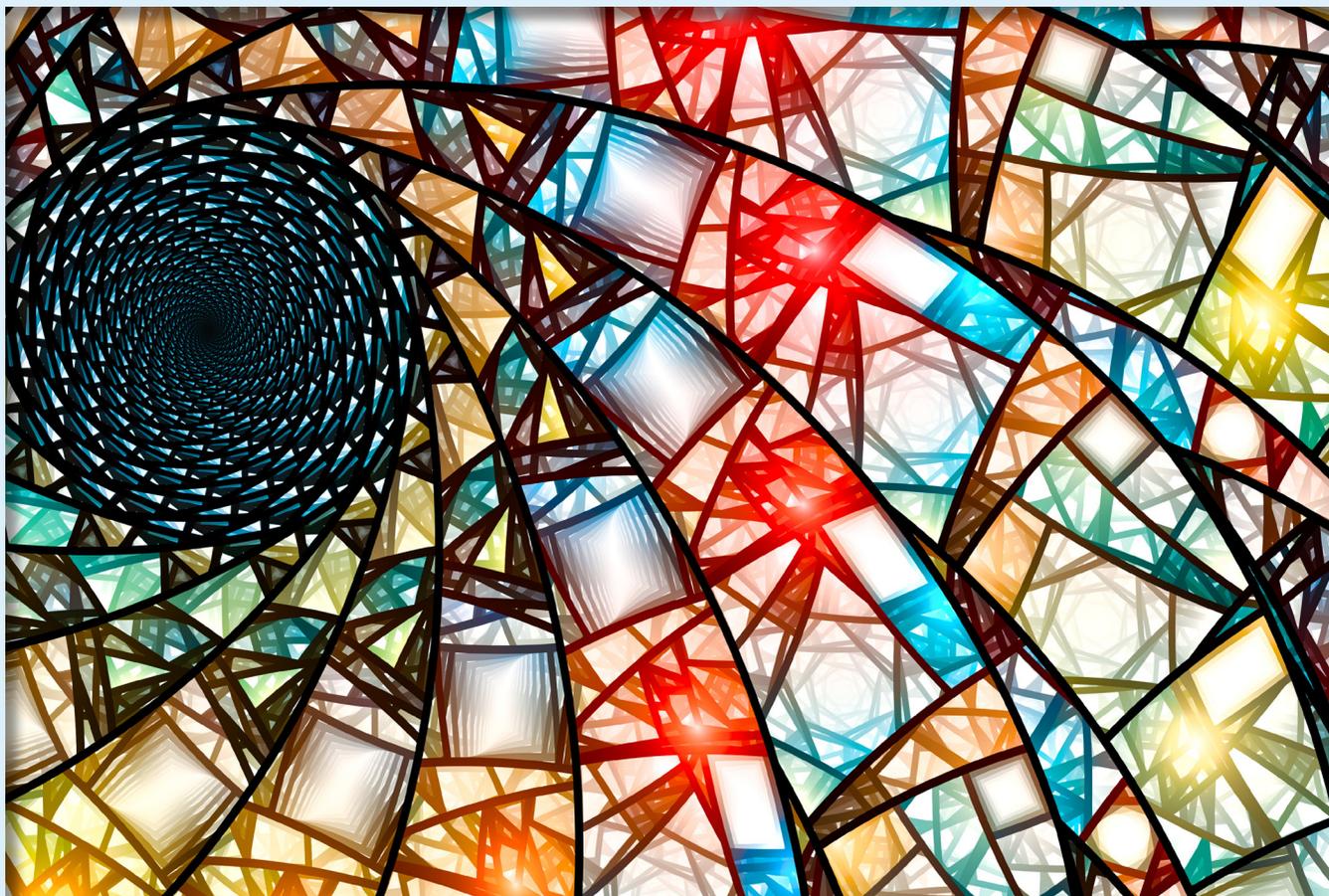


Matthew 25 Bible Study

The Gospel and Inclusivity



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)
Presbyterian Mission

The Gospel and Inclusivity

A Matthew 25 Bible Study

by Rev. Samuel Son

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*
– William Stafford, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other”

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.
– Paul, “Letter to the Galatians”

The big problem that confronts Christianity is not Christ's enemies. Persecution has never done much harm to the inner life of the Church as such. The real religious problem exists in the souls of those of us who in their hearts believe in God, and who recognize their obligation to love Him and serve Him – yet do not!
– Thomas Merton, in “Ascent to Truth”

Contents

How to Use This Study	4
Section 1	5
Purpose of this Study	5
My Journey of Rediscovering the Gospel.....	5
How Did We Get Here?	6
READING GALATIANS.....	7
First, read the letter of Galatians on your own	7
Secondly, read the letter out loud.	7
Thirdly, read the letter as a whole.	7
Section 2	8
Journey	8
Paul's Self-introduction	8
Galatians 1:1–5	8
Galatians 1:6–9	8
Perversion of the Gospel.....	9
Galatians 2:11–14	9
The Antioch Church	9
Peter's Baptism of Cornelius.....	9
The Jerusalem Council and Its Policy Statement.....	10
Acts 15:28–31	11
Galatians 3:13–14	11
Galatians 3:25–29	12
Today's Church and Call to Return to the Gospel	12
Confronting Racism for the Sake of the Gospel	13
Returning to the Gospel.....	13
Reflection.....	14
Closing.....	14

How to Use This Study

You can do the study alone, but the study can have greater impact when done in a group.

As a group study, I recommend the following:

- 1 Introduce the study in the group by reading Section 1 together, then reading Galatians together.
- 2 Have the group read Section 2 at home during the week.
- 3 Gather and converse around the Section 2 reading and the Reflection question.
- 4 Spend time in prayers of repentance, naming specific things “your” congregation needs to change. You can read out loud the Ephesians prayer at the end of the closing paragraph as the closing prayer.

Section 1

Purpose of this Study

The *Matthew 25 Vision* calls the Presbyterian Church (USA) to engage our world, so our faith comes alive and we are awakened to new possibilities. The 222nd and 223rd General Assemblies (2016 and 2018) exhorted the PC(USA) to act boldly and confront systems and principalities that oppress and prey on the vulnerable: the hungry, oppressed, imprisoned or poor.

We live into the Matthew 25 vision by engaging together in the three works of vitalizing our congregations, dismantling structural racism and eradicating poverty.

These three works, of course, are inseparable. This study focuses on the fundamental connection between the vitality of our congregations and the work of dismantling racism. A congregation cannot be vital without confronting racism; for what is at stake —when racism directs our congregational and community life — is our faithfulness to the gospel.

I (Samuel Son) start this study by sharing my journey of this discovery — that the gospel is about how we do church life that is inclusive. Then I will invite you to study some of the scriptures that made the scales of discrimination begin to fall off my eyes.

My Journey of Rediscovering the Gospel

In early 2000, I was paging through a heavy, 8-point-font job reference book in the local Phoenix library looking for jobs for English majors because I wanted to quit church work. I had joined as one of a four-pastor staff team. In a year, I was the only one left standing. I knew my days were numbered. In a heated congregational meeting, a deacon shouted, “Stop preaching!” as I read a scripture passage to begin the gathering, and an elder threatened excommunication of members who disagreed with the session’s ostracizing of the senior pastor. This experience shattered my faith in the Church. Church is a good idea, until you start filling the pews.

I could not find a job with my BA in English that could feed my growing family of four with another on the way. So, I looked for a “safe” pastorate until I could land a viable job. At that time, the only place I could imagine myself as a leader was in a Korean American church. I began working with Korean young adults in an English Language Ministry while continuing my search for non-church jobs. God had other plans — as God tends to do. People started joining the English Ministry and having their lives transformed. More surprisingly, non-Koreans started joining. We didn’t strategize for it! One white and lifelong cradle Presbyterian said that he came into church while on his way to a Presbyterian church he had googled, which was located farther down the road; but when he saw our sign, the Spirit told him to turn into the parking lot!

As non-Koreans started joining, we at least knew we had to rethink everything we did because a true welcome does not end with a seat in the pews. A true welcome prepares a seat at the highest decision table. At this Korean American congregation, the session was run in the Korean language, so leadership was limited to Koreans, not by policy, but by practice — the unwritten policy. After two years of negotiating, we launched as an intercultural New Worshiping Community.

The deepest impact of this intercultural transformation for me was the fanning of a new excitement for the scriptures. Preachers read scriptures for sermon preparation with congregants in mind. So on Tuesday mornings at Starbucks, when jotting down ideas, in spirit, Gerald, Ernest and Bert, sat around me asking questions of scripture that never occurred to me — questions born from their diverse social experiences. While reading the scriptures with them, I realized that the fundamental question running through all of scripture was: **“What does it mean to be God’s people?”**

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Pentateuch (the first five books from Genesis through Deuteronomy) answers that question for the newly formed nation of Israel by telling the story of creation, the patriarchs, their liberation from Pharaoh, and the covenant they enter into with this slave-freeing God through the receiving and interpretation of laws.

In the books of the prophets, like Isaiah and Amos, the prophets posed that question to a nation that was unraveling by internal political conflicts and external threats. The prophets saw the national instability as a symptom

of a nation that had forgotten its identity as God's people. So, the prophets nagged them, often at the expense of their own lives, to return to their roots. The exilic prophets, like Ezekiel, were wrestling with how one can still be God's people without the Temple while living in a foreign land.

Paul takes up the question of identity when the definition of the people of God was blown up again, when non-Jews started confessing a Jewish messiah, Jesus, as their Lord and Savior. When Paul takes up the question — “What does it mean to be God's people?” — he was participating in his ancestors' work, only now he was convinced that he got the final clue which previous generations were not privy to, the central revelation that made sense of it all:

"In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." (Ephesians 3:5–6). Christ was the revelatory key. Christ's life revealed that the identity of God's people has always meant To include every nation, tongue and tribe.

Transforming from a Korean-American English Ministry into an intercultural community was difficult work with lots of setbacks. It was exhausting; but it was exhilarating. For we were wrestling with what Paul and the early church were wrestling with! All of scripture suddenly came alive because all of scripture was talking directly about what was happening in our tiny church in North Carolina, discovering the power of a gospel that includes all in the fellowship and in the adventure of being God's people — God's agents of reconciliation in the world through a fellowship of reconciliation!

The call to become intercultural is different for white churches and for congregations of color. Throughout history, marginalized communities have often created congregations for their people and in their language precisely because their experiences and contributions were not affirmed in the institutions of the dominant culture. For them, to worship and do theology through their cultural expression is an act of trusting Christ's grace, much as the Gentiles were believing that Christ's grace was enough when they did not succumb to the pressure of following “Jewish laws.” In midst of a dominant culture, there is need for Korean speaking congregations, black congregations, and other marginalized communities.

As for my 2nd generation Korean-American congregation that was conducting worship in English, becoming intercultural was not about becoming a more white church to appeal to non-Koreans, but a church where our bi-cultural experience was affirmed while creating space for affirmation of other marginalized communities.

How Did We Get Here?

Eighty percent of American churches are monocultural. In our denomination, 89 percent of our congregations are predominantly white. I had accepted this segregation as an unfortunate but effective means of doing church. Why let cultural differences get in the way of the work of the church? It was more pragmatic to reach out to people culturally like yourself. As long as we recognize other cultural congregations as churches too, we are fine just taking care of our people. In a 1963 speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said the fact that Sunday at 11:00 a.m. was the most segregated hour in America was “a tragedy.” I never disputed the fact that on Sunday morning, we all drive to churches that have our type of music and people. But I heard Dr. King's interpretation as inordinately harsh. Now, I share Dr. King's sense of sadness and urgency.

Our segregated worship is a true tragedy for it is a contradiction of the gospel. We did not get to our segregated congregations by mere happenstance. We chose segregation by rejecting people to maintain our cultures and privileges. White congregations explicitly rejected people of color so they could remain mostly white. Preston Hogue says, in his Atlanta Studies article “The Tie That Binds: White Church Response to Neighborhood Racial Change in

Paul takes up the question of identity when the definition of the people of God was blown up again, when non-Jews started confessing a Jewish messiah, Jesus, as their Lord and Savior.

Atlanta, 1960–1985,” that when African-Americans in transitioning neighborhoods began to visit white churches, most white churches voted for closed-door policies. Conservative churches like Kirkwood Baptist voted to “request our Negro friends to attend services at their own churches.” Progressive churches like Capitol Avenue Baptist made the unwelcome official: “This church is not integrated and there are sufficient Negro churches in the community where they could worship.”

Paul’s letter to the churches of Galatia showed me that any type of fellowship exclusion contradicts the gospel. In the following pages, I invite you to hear this letter anew, as it would have been experienced by its first recipients. This study will not go through the whole letter, but spend most of its time in the first two chapters. Nevertheless, this deep dive always has the whole letter in mind. Understanding what is happening in the first two chapters (why Paul wrote the letter) helps us understand the rest of the letter (Paul’s arguments).

READING GALATIANS

Before we take this journey through Galatians, I want to offer some preparatory instructions.

First, read the letter of Galatians on your own.

Things I point out will make better sense once you have read the whole letter yourself. My words are like a movie commentary. They point to details in the movie that you might have missed, but which once they are pointed out will help make more sense of the movie. However, the commentary cannot make up for the movie. More importantly, if you read the text first, it is a safer bet the comments will not influence your viewing. I always watch the movie before I read any reviews because reviews skew my experience of it. Likewise, I read the scriptures before I reach for a commentary from my library.

Secondly, read the letter out loud.

This simple practice is the most important tool for interpreting scripture. Unfortunately, the tool often sits unused and collecting dust in the back of our toolbox as we read most texts with our eyes only. When we are voicing a text, we are making decisions on what the text means. Where you put the emphasis is a decision on the meaning and tone of a sentence. So, reading out loud first makes the intention of the author clearer. Words are like notes on a staff. You have a sense where it is going, but how it really sounds can only be heard when it is sounded.

Secondly, reading out loud is like a mirror: you get to see yourself. Silent reading is like trying to guess how you look without a reflection. When you cannot see yourself, then what others say about your visage will become your self-image. When you cannot hear yourself reading, other voices will become your voices. Silent reading leads to lots of assumptions, and those assumptions were probably filled with other people’s words. The difference between reading out loud and reading silently is as vast as watching a movie — we are staying with the movie metaphor for a while — with sound and watching it without sound; yes, you can make educated guesses about the dialogue from visual interactions, but they will not be accurate.

Thirdly, read the letter as a whole.

When we study scripture in sections, we lose the continuity of thought of the author. In such disjointedness, other patterns creep in. Read it as a whole. If possible, read it as a whole in one sitting. Galatians is divided into six chapters so it should not take more than 30 minutes. Reading section by section is like watching an hour-long movie in 10-minute clips. Our memory being shoddy as it is, we will misinterpret the whole movie. Or even if we know the plot, we will not feel the emotional punch at the end — which is the whole point of the movie. As we do not dare to slice up our movie intake, we should not slice up scripture verse by verse or even chapter by chapter. We should experience the satisfaction of hearing the letter as it was meant to be heard, as one complete letter.

One more thing about how this study quotes scripture. When there is no need to refer to specific verses or passages quoted, I removed the verse numbers, because even such a subtle thing as verse numbering affects the meaning. Poets devote a lot of time scanning their poems (where to cut off a line) because spacing directs the reading. Verses suggest artificial divisions of thought. Most scriptures we quote here will have no verse marks.

Now, let us pause here. Whether on your own or as a group, read Galatians out loud and in its entirety.

Now that you’ve read it out loud, let’s talk about the letter.

Section 2

Journey

Paul's Self-introduction

Let's reread Paul's introduction of himself and the subject he wants to address:

Galatians 1:1–5.

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God's family who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

As usual, how Paul introduces himself prepares the reader for the subject he wants to address. In Romans, he says he was “set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures,” (Romans 1:1) because he will be taking the Roman church through many of the respected prophets' words in the Hebrew Scriptures to show that Jesus' inclusion of all people into the family of God was not an original idea with Jesus, but was foretold by the prophets. Similarly, in Galatians, Paul establishes his authority outside of church leaders because his main criticism will be laid on them. He will be challenging Peter, so he wants to make sure everyone knows that Peter was not the one that appointed him. Otherwise, Paul would have no ground to stand on to voice his criticism.

Paul begins most of his letters with a thanksgiving. Even the scandal-ridden Corinthian church got a bunch of “thank you” messages from Paul before he got to the business of their letter. But in his letter to the Galatians, Paul skips the perfunctory “thank you” section and quickly dives into the main point of his letter in verses 6–9. This signals urgency! So Paul does not waste any time getting to the issue with the churches of Galatia because the issue at hand was the very heart of the gospel. Galatians were not just backsliding; they were turning to the *wrong gospel!*

Galatians 1:6–9

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Paul begins with serious accusations. Pay attention to the verbs Paul shoots out.

- *Deserting* Christ (v. 6).
- *Turning* to a different gospel (v. 6).
- *Perverting* the gospel (v. 7).

Paul's anger at the Galatian churches does not stem from meanness but deep concern. He is not fretting over the perversion of the gospel out of fear of doctrinal impurity, such as espousing a wrong statement about the divinity of Jesus. Paul is worried about the perversion of their life together. The issue was how they organized church.

Additionally, the heat of his anger is directed to those who are misleading the Galatians. To those instigating this confusion, these preachers of the false gospel, Paul pronounces anathema on them — not just once but twice!

Perversion of the Gospel

So, what is this perversion that got Paul so riled up?

Paul does not want to leave his readers guessing as to what this “other gospel” looks like. The issue is too serious to leave room for misconstruing. So, Paul provides a concrete example of what that perversion looks like in the life of the church. In fact, he calls out the behavior of a public figure that practiced this false gospel. And that person turns out to be none other than Peter, or as the letter refers to him, Cephas.

Galatians 2:11–14

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Notice the words Paul uses to describe Peter’s action

- “Stood self-condemned” (v. 11).
- Acted in “hypocrisy” (v. 13).
- Was “led astray [with others] by their hypocrisy” (v. 13).
- Was “not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel” (v. 14).

These words are meant to remind the reader of the words of alarm that Paul raised at the start of his letter. Peter’s actions are exactly what Paul is warning the Galatians against doing.

To understand the danger of what is happening here, we need to understand the context.

The Antioch Church

First, notice the city where this face-to-face confrontation occurs— Antioch.

What do we know about Antioch? It was a city 300 miles north of Jerusalem. The Antioch church was started by Christians fleeing the persecution that fell on them in Jerusalem. It was the place where followers of Jesus were first called Christians because the church had a huge influx of non-Jews. The word “Christian” might have started as a derisive term, but the Antioch church co-opts it to express how their commitment to Christ is more central than a specific tradition or history. The diversity of the congregation made it inaccurate to call it a Jewish renewal movement. That diversity went all the way up to its leadership whose roster included non-Jewish names, like “Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler” (Acts 13:1). This Antioch church was doing things the Jerusalem church, which was strictly Jews, did not look favorably on. One of them was the mingling of Jews and Gentiles during meals.

We see that Peter, “until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles.” This inclusive fellowship meal was a regular practice in Antioch. And Antioch was not the first place Peter ate with Gentiles. His first meal with a Gentile was in Caesarea with Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10).

Peter’s Baptism of Cornelius

God had to loosen Peter a bit to get Peter to enter Cornelius’ home. God started with a trance. Peter was hot and hungry, a great combination to induce a food hallucination. The Mediterranean heat wave started turning the heavens into an undulating sea until it split open and a huge canvas descended containing all sorts of animals. Peter was probably hungry enough to eat any of them, but his upbringing made him revolt against it because they were meats a good Jew should never taste in his life. God’s voice urges him to eat, and Peter — maybe thinking this was a test from God — disobeys and proudly reminds God that “I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14). God replies, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). This happens three times so Peter cannot dismiss it as a bad dream instigated by hunger. He is pondering the lesson, but he cannot figure it out on his own, so the Spirit finally gives him a direct order: “Three men are here, go with them without hesitation!” Without that vision and instruction, Peter would not have gone into Cornelius’ house. God knew how much it would take for Peter to overcome his upbringing. His fear of being contaminated by eating with Gentiles was instilled so perfectly in him that it was not just a mental issue, but a physical issue as well. His stomach could not digest next to a Gentile.

Way before Peter finishes his sermon, the Gentiles, including Cornelius, begin to speak in tongues. Here is a person Peter had believed practiced impurities he avoided all his life, the unclean Gentile who could not become one

of God's family. But this "unclean" person was experiencing the same spiritual power Peter and his "clean" friends experienced on the day of Pentecost. The next logical thing was baptism, which was not just a spiritual ritual, but a social ritual. For Jews, it was a receiving of a person back into the community. In this case with a Gentile family, it was welcoming new people into the community. After that, it was time to eat. So, when Cornelius begged Peter to stay, Peter stayed for several days. I am sure he was not fasting for those days.

Peter got a lot of flak for eating with Cornelius. Rather than celebrating and welcoming these new followers of Christ, the "circumcised believers criticized him, saying 'Why did you go to the uncircumcised men and eat with them?'" (Acts 11:3). Though Peter does not make an argument to change the current church policy, he sticks to his story, telling them about the trance, the voice of God and the Roman occupier speaking in tongues just as they did.

Peter's courageous testimony before his critics makes this cowardly act in Antioch a bit of a head-scratcher. He was the first to eat with the Gentiles. He did not regret breaking bread with Cornelius. He was not struck by lightning after that intercultural lunch or run out of leadership by the church board. In Antioch, he was only practicing this newfound freedom. So, what makes him go back on that hard-earned spiritual lesson he got from direct experience? He knows it is God's desire for the church to become an inclusive family where

people bring their own dishes and eat together. But suddenly, he gets up and separates himself from the Gentiles as if he were ashamed to be seen next to them, as if the Gentiles had become "unclean" again.

Paul thought Peter cowardly and confronts him to his face. But before we wag our fingers and "cancel" Peter, let us understand the pressure Peter felt. After all, even Barnabas also crumbled under pressure, got up and left his lunch unfinished. Barnabas is another person you would not expect to exhibit this cowardly behavior of segregation. He vouched for Mark even after Mark left them in the first trip when the missionary life didn't turn out to be as glamorous as Mark dreamed. Barnabas is not one to abandon a vulnerable person. But here's Barnabas abandoning his vulnerable Gentile siblings.

Peter stopped eating with the Gentiles when people associated with James come up for a visit. They were leaders from the Jerusalem church. They probably came under the pretense of encouragement, but their real motive was an audit. They came to see if the Antioch church was living up to their agreement. Their judging eyes stole Peter's spine (and his freedom in Christ!).

The Jerusalem Council and Its Policy Statement

There was a previous agreement between the Jerusalem and Antioch churches. It was a monumental agreement made by the first church council which historians call the Jerusalem Council. The leaders gathered to decide what to do with Gentiles who were speaking in tongues, like Cornelius, and praying to Jesus and proclaiming his resurrection. The early church never strategized to reach non-Jews, but non-Jews were coming anyway. So, what was the early church to do with them? Shouldn't circumcision be a requirement to join the church? "The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter" (Acts 15:6). They listened to scripture, retold the stories of Jesus and his teachings, and discerned the Spirit manifesting in the experiences of its members. They concluded that Gentiles don't have to go under the knife to be recognized as God's people.

Circumcision was not just a matter of cultic ritual. It was a decision on whether a Christian must first be a Jew to become a Christian. Removing circumcision as a requisite for membership was giving space for Gentiles to be Gentiles. They don't have to change anything physical about themselves, and they don't have to change anything cultural about themselves. It was a bold decision. The document was received as a liberating document. The first church that received this decision was the church at Antioch; and after they read it, they high-fived and celebrated.

God knew how much it
would take for Peter to
overcome his upbringing.

Acts 15:28–31

“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

However, this document didn't give the full liberation of the gospel. Often, one doesn't know the implications of a policy until one lives with it for a while. This is what happened with this document. Circumcision was the main topic, so with attention riveted to that specific issue, another cultural imposition snuck in. It was couched in religious language, about abstaining food sacrificed to idols. Compared to the act of circumcision, that felt minor and reasonable. But the policy line of abstaining “from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled” was a way to impose a Jewish way of life. This issue was already settled in Peter's vision where God declared “call nothing unclean what God has declared clean.” But this seemingly harmless little line was doing exactly what God forbade: “to declare some things unclean.”

This mandate made membership and discipleship dependent on one's culinary habits. And where does our culture express itself most powerfully and regularly than in what and how we eat? By requiring Jewish theology on food, it was imposing its culture on the Gentiles. It was a policy difficult to live by. Paul addresses this very issue in Romans, between those who refuse to eat food sacrificed to idols and those who eat such food by a theological jujitsu move that doesn't see “idols” as living beings, thus doing away with this Jerusalem Council injunction. Paul didn't think the food prohibition was a gospel inspired mandate; so in Romans, he agrees that those who don't see any problem eating meat sacrificed to idols eat without sin.

The Antioch church was already living freely from this mandate. Peter was eating with the Gentiles and enjoying what was put on his plate without question. He ate with them the way he ate with Cornelius.

So, when James' people showed up for a surprise visit, Peter remembered the food policy and he stepped away. Barnabas followed Peter, because as far as the letter of the “law” was concerned, they were in the wrong.

In this light, we empathize with Peter. Most of us want to stick with policies we all agreed upon, whether explicitly or implicitly. This historical context makes Paul's action even bolder. Paul knew that policy. He had delivered it himself to the Antioch church. But experiencing how it played out in the real lives of people, he disregarded it. And here we are reminded of Paul's self-introduction. He never saw himself authorized by the Church, but by God. That was his source of authority and boldness. So, Paul confronted Peter, by which he was confronting James' people and the policy.

Paul was not a contrarian. He wasn't a “rebel without a cause.” His position wasn't taken to cause controversy. He came to it after a lot of prayer and reflection. The rest of Galatians is Paul's theology that undergirds his strong stance. In fact, most of Paul's letters are basically him working out theologically the understanding that Jesus Christ totally changed what it means to be God's people when by Christ's sacrifice, Christ welcomed all people to God's household. Paul's theology is always pragmatic in this way. Paul is thinking about how what is happening in the church is all rooted in what Christ did.

By reading the rest of Galatians under the light of this confrontation, one will see that Paul's theological argument isn't theoretical or abstract. He isn't interested in the relationship between “law” and “grace” simply because they are two different systems of salvation. He's interested in the law because through the law segregation was enacted, and he saw that Christ removed any “law” that gave a specific group power over others in the household of God. Read the following passages out loud in the light of the new context we've just learned.

Galatians 3:13–14

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Galatians 3:25–29

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Law (circumcision) wasn't being used to exclude the Gentiles from membership, but law (food sacrificed to idols) was still being used to create segregation. The Galatians knew they didn't have to be circumcised. Still, feeling like they weren't fully accepted because of what they ate, they felt that they actually had to change themselves and become like Jews if they were going to be fully accepted. If the Galatians felt that becoming a Christian meant to become like a Jew, it meant Jesus' sacrifice wasn't as important as Christians claimed. The gospel message became a meaningless one since its full implication to the community wasn't being followed through. To believe in the gospel of Christ was to live in the age of grace, that all are now one family, which means each are accepted as they are and not by conforming to the law/practice of any culture. When we practice segregation, we are practicing the legalism that contradicts the gospel. When we make a person feel less than welcome because of cultural differences, then we are putting cultural values over Christ's sacrifice.

When we practice inclusion, when our communities become intercultural, when different dishes are on our fellowship table, when different languages are used to sing to God, when diverse voices read scripture, when people with different cultural names serve on the session, we have submitted the "laws" of our cultures under the grace of Christ. We are experiencing the freedom and power of the gospel!

Today's Church and Call to Return to the Gospel

If Paul visited us, he would have penned a letter to the American church that starts with the same warning and urgency as the Galatian letter. He would see the segregated Sunday services as the very evidence that we have the words of the gospel but not its heart.

How did we come to accept the segregation of our churches?

Consider the issue Martin Luther raised with the practice of indulgences. An indulgence — the practice of paying to lessen a relative's time in purgatory — was a common practice in European Christianity. Some Christians thought some "bad apples" abused it to fatten their pockets; so the system of indulgences just needed better monitoring. Luther believed it had to be scraped altogether because the practice was in contradiction of the gospel.

Have we accepted our segregation the way Medieval Christians accepted indulgences, not quite aware of how segregation is an antithesis of the gospel?

The American church has, as William E. Stafford's poem puts it, followed "a pattern that others made" and we are "following the wrong god home."

For the segregation we live in now is a result of decisions made from racism, a judgment of humans and communities based on color. Racism is the prevailing pattern of the American church.

From the downtown Birmingham church that blocked Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from attending worship with a line of ushers who had pistols in their holsters, to many churches that closed in transitioning neighborhoods to plant suburban churches, to churches who voted and said, "This church is not integrated and there are sufficient Negro churches in the community where they could worship," something other than the gospel of Christ drove those decisions. The current segregation of our cities and churches is the result of those decisions of discrimination.

Most of Paul's letters are basically him working out theologically the understanding that Jesus Christ totally changed what it means to be God's people when by Christ's sacrifice, Christ welcomed all people to God's household.

Our segregation is a tragedy and requires nothing less than the same type of theological and spiritual renewal of our first Reformation. Luther believed the corruption of the church stemmed from its replacement of the simple gospel story of Jesus with other traditions. His 95-theses argued against the church practice of indulgences that fleeced the poor by showing that the doctrines justifying indulgences were not grounded in the gospel.

We face a daunting task before us, much like Luther did. Many couldn't imagine another way of doing church. Although we elevate Luther when talking about the work of the Reformation, that historical transformation was not shouldered by Luther alone, but sparked and carried in various places of Europe by people who boldly refused to follow the established pattern. Even if there was no clarity to the path forward, they wanted to be faithful to the gospel.

It will take Christians who will go to their congregations, as pastors and lay leaders, to challenge their current way of doing church, and to preach and living out the gospel that pronounces a definite “No” against discrimination and say a clear “Yes” to Christ and the gospel.

Confronting Racism for the Sake of the Gospel

Peter and Paul model for us how we should confront racism – and other forms of discriminations. Paul shows us that sometimes we must waive off decorum and decency for the sake of truth. Surely some who were witnessing Paul calling out Peter in public like that were disapproving, wondering why Paul had to make a scene. “Paul should have waited,” some must have whispered, “take Peter to the side after the dinner and tell him his wrong privately and spare Peter the shame.” If Paul had done that, the damage would have been irreparable. Peter was a leader, so his behaviors became culture and unspoken policies. Peter's apologies, no matter how fervent, could not revoke the culture he created with his behavior. As Peter's cowardly discrimination was a public act that created a normative, it had to be confronted in public. To remove racism in the church and society, we have to call it out wherever we see it. How often is truth compromised for the sake of civility and protection of social comfort?

On the other side, Peter shows us what to do when we are at the receiving end of the confrontation. No one likes to be called out like that in public. Peter could have retaliated since he had seniority – he was one of the original twelve apostles who were hand-picked by Jesus – and he had, of course, the Jerusalem Council's policy at his side. Though we are not given Peter's immediate response to Paul's confrontation, we know that Peter, amazingly, embraced all of Paul's ministry. Peter could have taken the confrontation as a personal insult and lashed out against Paul, hiding his personal vendetta behind organizational and theological reasons. We know from the Corinthian letter that there was growing factionalism in the Church, that some people were aligning themselves with Peter and saw it as a clear differentiation from those siding with Paul. There were people ready to rally by Peter's side if Peter simply provided the rhetoric for them. Peter could have bad-mouthed Paul and called into question his apostleship. Peter had weapons to derail Paul's work. But Peter does the opposite. Peter stood up for Paul. In his second letter, Peter even compared Paul's letters to scriptures saying, “That is what our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you with the wisdom God have him—speaking of these things in all of his letters. Some of his comments are hard to understand, and those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted his letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16). Though Peter made an unflattering cameo Paul's letter to Galatia-- his discrimination memorialized as a lesson of what not to do for posterity-- Peter still warns others from dismissing Paul's letters. Peter shows us that no matter how close we are to Christ and how long we have served the Church, anyone of us can discriminate and act hypocritically. Peter also shows us that when our hypocrisy is exposed, fragility and defensiveness are not the Christian responses. We must own the shame and guilt then take up the responsibility of reforming ourselves by trusting that Christ's love is powerful enough to transform us. Like Paul, let us call out racism and discrimination wherever we see it. Like Peter, let us repent when it is called out on us.

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Returning to the Gospel

The downtown Birmingham church, which refused entrance to Dr. King and his friends, led a public worship of

1. cmalliance.org/life/the-church-with-the-rusty-steeple/

repentance on September 15, 2018.¹ They recognized that the only way they could be a church is to first repent when they were not being a church. The public repentance followed with many acts bearing the fruit of repentance. They implemented acts of reconciliation with the African American community. They wrote a letter of apology titled “To Our African-American Brothers and Sisters in Birmingham” and published it in two of Birmingham’s newspapers. They built an ongoing supportive relationship with a local black university. They sponsored a series of public forums titled “Let’s Talk” where they addressed issues of race and immigration. They are choosing to let the gospel chart their path.

Reflection

- Consider what are some of the “wrong gods” and “a pattern that others made” that have led to our segregated congregations? Why are we segregated as an American Church? Why are Presbyterian churches segregated? What are the patterns in your own congregation? Why is your congregation segregated?
- What are some policies and laws, written or not, that we use to create segregation, ways in which we make people different from us feel “unwelcome” in our gatherings and at our leadership tables?
- What are the practices in your church that create this type of discrimination?
- Worship bulletin and worship order.
- Sermons and sermon style.
- Sermon topics and illustrations.
- Small group creation/subjects/method of conversation.
- Building visuals.
- Other cultural practices.
- When have you seen racism and called it out? Or not called it out? What was going through your mind and heart?
- Have you been called out on racism? How did you respond? Why do you think you responded in that way?
- Paul models for us how to call our racism. Peter models for us what to do when it is called out. How do their lives and behaviors challenge you? Challenge your community?

Closing

This is the beginning of the journey — the journey to become a Matthew 25 church that dismantles racism in its own life by practicing gospel inclusion. Openness to diversity and inclusion means openness to the unexpected. It will also be challenging. Our differences become more trying the closer we live together. Diversity at a national level, where we meet infrequently as segregated congregations, is easier than a diversity that makes demands in my daily life. Worshiping with different people regularly is more difficult than worshiping with different people for a three-day conference. And the tensions one feels in trying to love in the midst of our differences are signs that in our life together we are also confronting some large powers. The intercultural transformation is nothing less than the gospel challenging the powers of this world. That would be a study of Ephesians for another time, but it will suffice to say for now that the challenges of intercultural transformation are a sign that we are doing some serious work of Christ that is challenging the false gods of our societies.

There’s also joy in all this challenge. There is the joy of seeing new things, learning new ways, tasting new foods and making new friends. But more importantly, there is the joy of being part of God’s grand plan. Paul ends his letter to Ephesus by singing the joy he feels to be part of God’s masterplan even if that masterplan led to his imprisonment. We close with that praise and celebration:

*Now to him who by the power at work within us
is able to accomplish abundantly far more
than all we can ask or imagine,
to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus
to all generations, forever and ever.*

Amen.

Ephesians 3:20–21



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