

Dismantling Our Assumptions

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Ephesians 3:1-12

"...in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him."

Epiphany

Movement 1 – The Everyone Group

Who is in and who is out? Where are the lines drawn? What are the procedures for membership? Who is in and who is out?

Our culture, our society, our life is shaped, influenced and formed by this question of who is in and who is out. We are joining groups, we are leaving groups, and we are starting groups. We are constantly looking to find people to associate with, people to gather around, people with who we are "in." Those who are "in" are defined in a great way against those who are "out," who are not part of the group, thus even as we claim to be "in" by doing so we are claiming that others are "out." We live in a society of insiders and outsiders. Who is in and who is out?

Kenya is a country that was founded by the British as a sovereign state in December, 1963. A collation of different groups, gatherings and tribes were brought together and formed as a self-governing state. You can imagine the sense of identity of the people beginning to shift from their particular group, gathering or tribe to that of being Kenyans. No doubt there was still a sense of tribal identity, but the national identity began to dominate. For some, group identity shifted from the tribal level to the national level. Those who lived in the country, those who worked the land, who paid taxes, who contributed to the progress of the country, were insiders. Those who lived in Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan, or Uganda were outsiders, part of a different country, a different group. Yet recently group identity has shifted in Kenya. Due to the ambiguity and chaos which emerged out of the most recent election, group identity has shifted from national identity to the tribal identities that preexisted the arbitrary lines drawn by the British. Now the question is if you are in the Kikuyu tribe or in the Luo community. Now the lines are drawn via who you voted for in the most recent election. The question of who is in and who is out has shifted. The group identity has shifted.

We live in a world that defines and shapes and forms groups. From high school cliques of preppies, jocks, freaks and geeks to sports fans following the Yankees, the Jets, the Eagles or the Dolphins, to being a resident of the Main Line, of West Philly, of University City, or Center City we have our different groups with our different characteristics, standards and rules for who is in and who is out. The social theorist Emile Durkheim would call the characteristics of these groups social facts – things that preexist the person and are a part of the group. If you shift from one group to the other, you have to change certain things about yourself otherwise you will never be "in." There are some groups one could never join because of the standards of being "in." For example, I could never be a part of the *Woman's Murder Club* due to certain basic anatomical limitations.

Who is in and who is out? It is like we are flecks of metal being pulled to different magnets, being drawn to different groups. Who is in and who is out? We draw our boundaries; we live with our specific criteria, and exist in our groups. Who is in and who is out?

Movement 2 – Paul’s Walls and Paul’s Scandals

Paul dealt with insiders and outsiders. Paul dealt with this question of inclusion and exclusion. Paul dealt with groups and dynamics and characteristics. Paul dealt with the question of who was in and who was out.

It is important for us to remember some basic facts about Christianity. First, Jesus was Jewish. Jesus was born into a Jewish family, Jesus was raised as an observant Jew, reached out to the Jews; there was very little question that he was Jewish. The apostles were Jewish. They were observant Jews when they followed Jesus and continued to hold to their Jewish roots after Jesus ascended. It was an assumption amongst the early followers of Jesus that the message of Christ was for the Jews. It was an assumption that the ministry of Christ, the ministry that was passed on to the apostles was intended to be spread out to a Jewish audience. It was assumed that Christ’s ministry was to remain Jewish. One would expect that Paul of all people could understand this. One would expect that Paul, the one who studied as a Pharisee, the one who was zealous for the Jews to the point of bringing murderous threats and persecution to the Christians before his conversion would understand this integral part group identity. Christianity was for the Jews, they were in and all those who were not Jews were left out.

I can hear some of the early Christians singing the adapted song from *West Side Story*, “When you’re a Jew, you’re a Jew all the way, as you follow the Lord from the cross to the grave.” It was that kind of mentality. Sure, Christ brought something new, but nothing that would break those boundaries, those connections of Judaism. A Jet and a Shark would never mix. A Jew and a Gentile would never mix. Like oil and water the two would always be separate. The apostles, the early Christians rested in the truth of tradition that they knew. They rested in the identity that was passed on and that was made full through Christ. When it came to Christ, the Jews were in and the Gentiles were out.

Yet Paul challenged this assumption. Paul pushed this assumption and began to reach out to the Gentiles. Like Tony reaching out to Maria, crossing the sacred lines drawn by ethnic identity and gang fidelity, Paul reached out to the Gentiles and offered them the gospel, the news of Jesus Christ.

A scandal! It was seen as a scandal that Paul would disgrace the purity of the Jewish tradition. It was a scandal that Paul would neglect the rich history of the prophets and mix the holy with the unholy. It was a scandal that Paul would bring into Israel riff-raff, untouchables, unholy Gentiles. It was a scandal.

The biblical scholar Phem Perkins described Paul’s actions as one of great courage looking to change a deep and ingrained system. Like a breath of fresh air, like a great wind swirling a house of cards, Paul’s actions challenged and threatened the identity of Christianity. Paul questioned the notion of insiders and outsiders. Paul challenged the idea of who was in and who was out. Paul changed the system.

Movement 3 – The Conforming Walls of the Church

The church today is a culture of insiders and outsiders. The church is a group with its characteristics just like every other group. Today we read of Paul’s ministry. Today we study and think of Paul’s work and perhaps take what Paul did for granted. Perhaps today we hear about what Paul did, and now say, “Yes, yes, the church is open for everyone.” Perhaps we say today that everyone is welcome in the church and the doors

are not closed to anyone. Yet what we say and what we do may be two different things. We may say that everyone can be an insider in the church, but do we engage in such a practice? Do our actions reflect our sentiment, generations removed from the sentiment of the apostle Paul?

Zion Baptist Church in Ardmore was started in the 1895 because the membership of First Baptist Church of Ardmore was not comfortable with the increasing number of African-Americans worshiping with them. They helped to start Zion Baptist because many of the members did not want them inside their own church. Insiders and outsiders. We were instrumental in founding Saints Memorial Baptist Church, a traditionally African-American church here in Bryn Mawr, and the history is vague concerning the circumstances. There is a good chance that our motives were pure but I think we should always wonder if it was a question of insiders and outsiders.

Many churches target specific groups for evangelization, and these tend to be groups that would give strength and stability to the church. Young families with children are the golden ones in church growth – they are the ones so many want in. Why do we not target the poor, the addicts, the convicts or other outcasts of society for church growth? Why do we not look to plant churches in places that have a discernable need rather than places that have discernable growth potential? There are some who we want to be in and others we want out.

Maybe the church is open, maybe the church is inclusive, but in a conforming way. I remember leading a seminar about Generation X and Christianity. I was talking about the music, the piercing, the tattoos, and the different cultural paradigms that many Gen Xers carry into Christianity. One older gentleman said he would welcome Gen Xers into the church if they would only dress appropriately, lose many of the piercings, and adapt to the music that churches were used to. They would have to become insiders. Many Jews said the same thing about Gentiles. They would be welcomed into the Christian movement if they would adopt the rites and rituals of Judaism. It is a conforming inclusivity.

Who is welcome? All are welcome. Who can belong, some? Only the saints can stay in the church. Only the ones who conform to our expectations, our standards can belong to the church. In the 5th century Christians were engaged in what was called the Donatist controversy. It was a question of who could belong to the church. Could a Christian who slipped in his or her faith still be a part of the church? Could a Christian who renounced his or her faith in light of persecution still be welcome into the church? Was the church to be purely a place of saints, or was it to be, as Augustine said, a mix of saints and sinners? Are we inclusive in an open way, or in a conforming way? Is the church simply a factory that takes people and forms them into the shiny happy Christians that we all expect to see? The late youth pastor Mike Yaconelli said that the church is a place of messy spirituality, yet we work hard to clean it up. He said that the church is a place where people can be raw and honest, yet we have made it into a place where one must be reserved and appropriate.

The church is a culture of insiders and outsiders. We have named and labeled our own Gentiles. We have drawn our own lines, and if we let the outsiders in we require change and conformity to a core identity that we have designed. The church is a culture of insiders and outsiders.

Movement 4 – Personal Church Existential Crisis

It is a culture that can cut into our own perception of our existence. When we start becoming a church of who people expect Christians to be we will start to exclude some of our own people. When we become a church that sets strong expectations of who we are supposed to be, we will begin to question our own people, and eventually ourselves. Hawthorn's *The Scarlet Letter* speaks to the standards of a Christian, Puritan community and the way it excluded individuals. Hester, an adulterous woman, and Pearl, her daughter are excluded from the church, the community because of the sin she committed. Later, Dimmesdale, the minister and Hester's lover begins to punish himself and exclude himself because he knows that he is also guilty of sin for which Hester is accused. The expectation of perfection leads to the exclusion of even the minister of the community. Dimmesdale could no longer see himself as a part of the community; he was no longer in. The Ephesians were wondering if they could see themselves as a part of the Christian community because of the allegations and assumptions that Christianity was only a Jewish movement. The culture led to a self-doubt and sense of exclusion.

Today I talk to many people who will not go to church because they feel it is only a place of saints. I talk to many people who feel they will not be welcomed because of their own brokenness, their own faults and failings. In creating a perception of who Christians are supposed to be we have excluded those who cannot be. A good friend of mine, a friend who has a deep love for God, and for Christ is not willing to make that transforming step and give his life to Christ because he claims that he cannot be perfect. He worries that he will not be able to live up to the standards that he sees in Christianity. It is a culture that cuts into our own existence.

The expectation of conformation and perfection eventually drives us to a place of self-reflection. It leads us to a place of self-doubt. We find ourselves wondering if we can still go to church because we have recently gone through a divorce. We wonder if we can still be a part of the church even though we enjoy a bit of the drink from time to time. We wonder if we can still be a part of the church because we get angry from time to time. We wonder if we can still be a part of the church because we are selfish from time to time. Our faith wavers and we feel that we are no longer in, but are now out. Doubts enter into our mind, unrest moves our spirit and we think that we can no longer participate in the prayers. How many times have I heard people shy away from church because they don't feel worthy? How many times have I worked with individuals who stop going to church because they do not feel holy? The church is a place of insiders and outsiders, and as the expectations increase, as the pressure of conformity increases the church will become smaller and smaller until it is only a church of one holy, pious, self-absorbed individual. We can all question if we deserve to be here. We can all see ourselves as Gentiles, outside of the tradition of purity, the tradition of holiness and perfection. We all fall to that place of existential doubt and despair and question our own insider status as a Christian.

Movement 5 – Redemption Mystery of Christ

Yet Christ calls all to come in. Christ calls all to be insiders. Christ calls all to be a part of the family, a part of the church. Christ calls all to come in and be transformed and redeemed by his grace.

This is the message that Paul brings to the church. It is a challenging message to the Jews and an encouraging message to the Gentiles. It is a message of hope to the Ephesians. Paul speaks of the mystery which has been revealed to him. It is a mystery that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs and now share in the promise of Christ Jesus. Paul claims that this message, this grace reaches back to creation, it is a part of God's plan, yet not revealed until now. He is not shirking tradition but continuing it. He is not neglecting and rejecting the work of the prophets who spoke on behalf of God, but is continuing that work by listening to the Holy Spirit. Paul is sharing the plan, at once hidden but now revealed for all that the boundless riches of Christ are offered to all. Paul brings the message of inclusivity to all.

The gates of the church are open to all and all can enter regardless if he or she has the stature, the intelligence or the external blessings. The person who we think is beyond redemption can be redeemed. The person who we think is beyond God's reach is reached by God. The gates of God's church are open to all.

And the power of this plan, the wonder of this miracle is that it is done on God's terms. The Gentiles do not have to conform to Jewish customs. They do not have to convert to Jewish ways, but only follow Christ and allow Christ to lead them to glory. They are not converted via the terms of the apostles or the fathers of the church, but via God's terms.

When we say yes to Christ, we then follow Christ and no one else. We do not follow what one person says we must do, but what Christ says we must do. We do not let the standards and the expectations of a group of people lead us, but the standards and the expectations of the Holy Spirit lead us. We do not let someone tell us if we are in or out of the church, but let Christ call us into his church. The gates are opened and we are all invited in by Christ.

The missionaries of the 19th century went out into the world with expectations of how one was to be a Christian. They went with a conforming understanding of the church. They went to make people into the Christians they expected them to be. These missionaries, riding the imperialist wave carried with them a blond hair, European Christ to share with the world. They carried with them a Christ that conformed to Victorian sensibilities. These missionaries went expecting to force the "savages" to go through rites and rituals of purification.

Yet what has happened is that people became the Christians that God wanted them to be. What has happened is that different pictures of Christ emerged. The mission movement now is one of reciprocity. The mission movement now is one that recognizes that Christ's boundless grace is open for all in the way that Christ sees fit. The mission movement today recognizes that perhaps God's plan is greater than any plan which can be formed or forced by humanity. The insiders and outsiders created by the people in the church were not the insiders created by God and the outsiders called by God.

The church is a mix of saints and sinners. The church is a mix of people who do not look alike, think alike or even act alike and all are a part of the Kingdom of God. There is a place for you in the church to follow Jesus. There is a place for me; there is a place for us all. No matter what you have done, no matter where you have come from you are still welcome and called to be a part of God's church, as you are. As Paul says in Romans, what can separate us from the love of Christ? Neither "death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor

depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” not even the standards, the expectations and the assumptions of church members themselves can keep us from the love of Christ. We are welcomed in as we are. We are called in as we are. Christ has called all to come in.

Movement 6 – Following the Holy Spirit

We are called to trust the Holy Spirit and enter into God’s holy community. A community of mixed people, of diversity can be a scary community to be a part of. It could be a community when individuals disagree with each other. It could be a community where individuals argue with each other. It could be a community where worship styles could be different, where approaches to prayer could be different, where even the way people dress, the way people think and view God could be different. Now, as a church, we could do two things. We could fall into the status quo, we could avoid being this dangerous kind of church and send people who seem a little different than we are to a church where they may feel more comfortable; a church that has people who look, act and think the same way they do. We could look for a church where we are surrounded by people who look like we do, think like we do, act like we do and become a mass of individuals who all look the same, talk the same and become the same. This would be safe, this would be easy.

Or we could strap ourselves into the roller coaster that is the church led by the Holy Spirit. We could follow Paul’s example and trust, really trust the Holy Spirit. Paul knew that his ministry would make him a prisoner for Christ, literally and existentially. Paul knew that the Spirit was leading him down a dangerous path, but followed the Spirit anyway. Can we do the same?

Can we stay open to the movement of the Holy Spirit and try to be a church that truly welcomes all of God’s children? Can we follow the Holy Spirit and try to be a church that is diverse in so many ways that people will tell us that it will never work? It is scary, like sailing with Columbus, with Magellan and others into uncharted territory. They were going out on a hunch, on an idea that the world might just be round, but did not know what they might encounter. Can we enter into the scary, uncharted waters? It is like walking a plank, blindfolded, trusting only the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit. Can we trust the Holy Spirit?

This means letting the Holy Spirit, letting the mystery of God dismantle our assumptions of who is in and who is out. This means letting God challenge and change our assumptions of what the church is supposed to look like. In the Baptist movement there has always been a desire to leave room for the voice of dissent. The voice of dissent is the voice that disagrees with the majority. It is the voice that suggests we go a different way. It is a voice that challenges and prods and pushes the community. Life would be easy without dissent, but we would be forcing the actions of the Spirit. Paul was the voice of dissent. Christ was the voice of dissent. The prophets were the voices of dissent. We need that voice which dismantles our assumptions and brings us back to the Lord. Then, all are in.

Let us listen to the Lord, let us trust in the Lord and follow the Lord. The mystery of the Lord is revealed to us today, and will continue to be revealed to us. May we hear it, see it and follow it all the way to the Kingdom and to the Glory of God.

AMEN