

# Inclusive and discerning? Unpacking "inclusivity": Unpacking "inclusivity"

by [Douglas Jacobsen](#) in the [April 21, 1999](#) issue

There was a time when exclusivity was more or less the rule in America's churches. Churches were unembarrassedly particular in identity, and this was often expressed in ethnic terms. German Lutherans and Irish Catholics, for example, were proud of their old-world national identities, and their churches reflected that pride. Those from other ethnic backgrounds were regarded as tolerated minorities or curious friends.

Today, while talk of inclusivity has increased, the practices of America's churches have not advanced all that much. Though we have moved beyond the days of ethnic exclusivity, many churches, whether by choice, habit or demographics, are still exclusivistically middle class or white or English-speaking. What's more, many churches (even many "progressive" churches) continue to find it difficult to incorporate women fully and equally into all facets of church life. The term inclusivity these days also refers to the need for churches to be "open and affirming" of different gender orientations. We even see the odd spectacle of "exclusive inclusivity"--those who are deemed to be not inclusive enough are ostracized by those who consider themselves more inclusive.

I believe that we need a larger framework for talking about inclusivity, one that will help us to speak more openly and honestly to each other than we do now. To begin with, we must acknowledge that inclusivity is not an issue that Christians can avoid. The subject goes right to the heart of the gospel, the basic message of which is that in Jesus Christ God has made a way for us to be reconciled both with God and with each other. A restored vertical relationship with God is not possible without a horizontally restored, or inclusive, relationship with the rest of humanity, especially with those closest to us.

In the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We pray, with Jesus, "that they may be one as we are one." We believe, with Paul,

that the mystery of God's will for the world is that all things will finally be made one in Christ. And in James we read that it is impossible to bless God and curse our neighbor. In each of these passages the social is inseparably linked to the spiritual. We do not receive salvation alone, but in the company of all others whom God is drawing to Godself. We are saved by being included in God's ever expanding kingdom--a kingdom that seeks to include everyone, for "it is God's will that no one should perish."

Inclusivity is not, however, merely an "internal" characteristic of the church. It is also an "external" sign of the gospel to others. The Catholic charismatic chorus "We Are One in the Spirit," which was popular in the '60s and '70s, begins with the affirmation that God has made us one, but ends with the outwardly directed refrain: "and they'll know we are Christians by our love." Inclusivity is essential to the church's witness in the world. We are not simply to be kind to our friends (the Bible tells us anyone can do that); we are also called to love our enemies. We are called to reach out to those from whom we are most separated and most distant. We are to demonstrate, precisely in those situations, the power of the gospel to overcome all human divisions of sin, shame and pride. A concern for inclusivity should shape all our actions as churches, both those concerning the internal dynamics of the church and those directed externally in evangelism and service.

My wife, Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen, teaches a class on the relationship between social science and faith, and she has her students read Robert Coles's *The Spiritual Life of Children*, in which Coles recounts stories of faith he has heard from children around the world. In one assignment, my wife requires her students to go out and talk to young children about their views of God. One student recounted his experience: "A grade school child I talked to said, 'God is like my principal.' I immediately thought, 'How sad that this child thinks of God as the final enforcer of rules.' But the child continued, 'She [the principal] goes around the schoolyard at recess, making sure everyone gets a chance to play.'"

That account presents, perhaps more clearly than any theological treatise I've read, the breadth and nature of God's inclusive love for the world. As Christians, we are called to imitate that love in all we do--making sure everyone gets a chance to play, caring for the world and all the people in it in the same way God would care for them.

Though inclusivity must be at the very heart of our churches, it is not by itself a sufficient guide for Christian practice. Rather, inclusivity needs to be joined to its opposite virtue to ensure that it remains a healthy guide for our life together as the church.

The idea of the pairing of "opposite virtues" comes from the writings of Blaise Pascal, who said, "I do not admire the excess of some one virtue unless I am shown at the same time the excess of the opposite virtue. A person does not prove his or her greatness by standing at an extremity, but by touching both extremities at once and filling all that lies between them." This sense of balance makes eminent sense with regard to the ethical rules by which we live. Anything taken to excess can threaten the delicate balances of life that define healthiness in an organism or social organization.

Before returning to the specific issue of inclusivity let me illustrate what this pairing of virtues might look like in another context. One rather simple example is frugality and its opposite. Frugality is surely a virtue, but in Pascal's terms frugality is a thin virtue if left all by itself. It needs to be thickened and balanced by its opposite virtue, which is not "spendthriftiness," but generosity. Frugality without generosity can turn into miserliness.

On the other hand, generosity without frugality can easily make one a profligate benefactor, likely to go broke before one has had a chance to do much good. But a person who is both frugal and generous is a model human being. The two virtues combine to strengthen each other, even though the natural impulses of each point in decidedly different directions.

We recognize a similar need to join opposite virtues together every time we speak of "servant leaders" or "tough love" or "civil disobedience." And it is not a mere coincidence that all of these terms have arisen in a Christian context. The gospel itself contains the same kind of wedding of opposites. Judgment and mercy come to us in the same divine word. God's wrath and God's love come to us together, breaking us down and building us up at the same time.

What is the opposite of inclusivity? Not so much *exclusivity*, I would argue, as *discernment*. Discernment is a virtue mentioned by Paul, who instructs us to "test the spirits" to see whether they are from God or not. We are to discern the deeper meanings of the situations in which we find ourselves and not make judgments

merely on the appearance of things.

Discernment is the opposite of inclusivity in that it requires that we judge the actions of others and, according to Paul, this judgment can lead to exclusion in some cases. A simple and singular emphasis on discernment can also, of course, easily devolve into judgmentalism, in the same way that an emphasis on inclusivity that admits every idea and value that comes its way can undercut any distinctive sense of what it means to be a Christian. We need both virtues, as one keeps the other in check.

The goal of Christian inclusivity is to involve everyone in the redeeming realm of God's grace. The goal of Christian discernment is to reflect on what such inclusivity requires, both of those doing the including and those being included. Inclusivity directs us to accept and welcome anyone truly seeking to be a follower of Jesus; discernment emphasizes that Christian discipleship is not a glib undertaking. Inclusivity reminds us of the wonder of God's open-armed grace; discernment reminds us that grace is not cheap. We need to keep hold of both "extremities" in this pair of opposite virtues.

We may ultimately decide that *inclusivity* is not a helpful term. It has become a "buzz word" that antagonizes some people while it warms the hearts of others. It is also a "big" word, an important word with clout and authority. It is abstract, pointing to a general concept that encompasses all the "little" specific activities that make us truly feel included.

*Inclusivity* is not alone here. The modern world has produced a rash of other "big" moral concepts like justice, peace, freedom and democracy. All of these words direct us toward very important areas of moral concern, ethical zones of reflection that are foundational to everything we do. But the very largeness of these concepts sometimes makes them almost useless as workable guides for ordinary life.

Focusing only on one big word gets us into fruitless arguments, and it allows us to ignore the many smaller moral mandates that are wrapped up inside of it. What we have to do is go back to basics. We have to start over, in a sense, by trying to describe what inclusivity looks like in actual practice. We have to ask ourselves a host of very basic questions about what we mean by the concept. In the process, we will discover that inclusivity has something critical to say to us, and is not merely a platform from which to judge the moral failures of others.

The words and phrases from the first five or six verses of Hebrews chapter 3 express a set of concerns that will help us pursue the goal of inclusivity more effectively. Among other things, this passage exhorts us to act toward each other in mutual love, to be hospitable to strangers, to remember those in prison and those who are being tortured, to be faithful to our spouses and to be free from the love of money.

Each of these terms focuses on a different aspect of our connectedness to others. Are we really acting toward each other in mutual love, or are we lopsidedly drawing on the love of others and giving little or nothing back? Are we truly being hospitable to those who pass our way, making them feel welcomed, honored and at home, or are we so buried in our own schedules and routines that we simply cannot be bothered to lavish attention on anyone else? Do we really remember those who suffer out of our sight, or do we willingly numb ourselves to the hidden pain of those in prison or those being tortured? Does our unquestioned faithfulness allow our spouse the security and energy to reach out to others, or does our lack of marital faithfulness sap the energy of our spouse and cripple his or her outreach to others? Do we really care for others or, at bottom, are we more in love with money and the things it can buy than the people around us?

This list of concerns does not give us a full picture of inclusivity, but it points toward some of the constituent parts of what it would mean for us truly to be a welcoming people of God. We are to cultivate these qualities and more if we want to reflect God's own inclusive love in our lives.

Inclusivity does not mean telling other people to accept into their fellowship folks whom we happen to know and like but they don't. Inclusivity means seeing the world through God's eyes of love and acting toward all others in the same way that God acted toward us--i.e., with self-giving love. Such inclusivity will be costly. It will require us to change. That process of change is something that we cannot avoid as Christians, however, for it is part and parcel of the holiness of life to which we are called.

In the end, inclusivity is not about politics, churchly or other. It is about being Christians. Inclusivity cannot be blind, but neither can it be made an optional undertaking. We cannot paraphrase "discerning inclusivity" into the short, catchy phrases of a bumper-sticker morality. Instead, Christian inclusivity asks each of us to do precisely what the gospel requires: Love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, and our neighbors as ourselves. If that Golden Rule guides our lives, issues of inclusivity will take care of themselves.