

People who want to be included

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December 30, 2015

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It is easy to assume a sort of xenophobia among the first-century Jews who sought to exclude gentiles from the “promise in Christ through the gospel.” Paul sets himself up as the good, inclusive apostle, the one who is “to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ.” In reading through his letters, it can seem like he is advocating for inclusion of the outsiders over the hateful intolerance of the insiders.

Here in Ephesians it’s presented as a mystery: that gentiles are fellow heirs with the Jews. I’ve always assumed that the revelation here is that Jews should let the gentiles into the community.

But perhaps the revelation is at least as much the fact that the gentiles want to be included. We think of first-century Jews walking around, turning up their noses at the gentiles, but surely there were plenty of gentiles turning their noses up at the Jews. Maybe some Jews were reluctant to invite gentiles into the emerging community because they assumed non-Jewish people wouldn't be particularly interested in a Jewish messiah.

I find it interesting that only Matthew, the most Jewish of the four gospels, includes the story of the magi, those mysterious strangers from “the East.” People have spent a lot of time trying to figure out where exactly the magi are from, but really that's not the point. All Matthew's audience needed to know is that they aren't from around here. Arabian, Persian, Babylonian, Indian, Pakistani . . . whatever they are,

they are not Jewish. Yet they still care about the Jewish messiah. They still come and bow down to worship the Christ child. And God extends divine protection over them, sending them home to their foreign land by a safe route.

This mystery is two-fold: that God is interested in including gentiles, and that many gentiles are, believe it or not, interested in being included.

I cannot think of a time that I have chosen to keep quiet about God or Jesus or my church because I thought the person I was talking to was not good enough to be included in my faith community.

I do, however, have a friend whose dad was a military chaplain. She's been part of many different conservative churches over the years--Foursquare, Southern Baptist, independent evangelical. When she shared with me how hard it was to find a church she could really feel part of with her special-needs son, I did not jump in and say, "You should come to my progressive, pacifist, Mennonite church." Even though that progressive, pacifist community is a deep gift to me, with my own special-needs son. Even though I'm the pastor, for crying out loud, and it's kind of my job to get people to come to the church. I just figured she wouldn't be interested in the particular good news I had to share.

My friend eventually asked me about my church, and she did visit--once. It probably isn't the church for her. But you never know.

Perhaps it is easier to imagine the first-century Jews as somewhat xenophobic. If they refused to share the good news about Jesus with the gentiles because they were overtly prejudiced, then we are not in danger of being like them.

But if they were merely being polite--if they simply did not think to invite the gentiles into their fellowship because, well, the gentiles probably weren't interested--then maybe we aren't the good, inclusive disciples we thought we were.

It can be painfully uncomfortable to invite someone who you assume doesn't want to be invited. And the nine times out of ten that you are right, the rejection can sting.

But who are we to deny "the wisdom of God in it's rich variety"? Who are we to presume we fully understand "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things"?

Many gentiles were eager to follow the way of the Jewish Messiah. The foreigners from the East sacrificed their time and money--risked their lives--to come and worship the king of the Jews.

You just never know. God's grace reaches out and touches people in ways that are, indeed, a mystery.