

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Inclusion

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

Ronald D. Witherup, P.S.S.

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What Does the Bible Say About Inclusion

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about INCLUSION.”

Introduction

On the brink of his Passion, after washing the feet of his disciples and teaching them his command of mutual love and service, Jesus prays to his Father “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). Jesus’ call for the ultimate unity of the human family with God comes at the culmination of his mission as the Word of God made flesh who is sent to reveal God’s love for the world.

Yet, by any measure, we are a long way from the fulfillment of Jesus’ earnest hope. While every generation may view its own circumstances as singular within the annals of history, there is strong evidence that we are indeed currently living at a time of uniquely severe polarities and divisions. The Covid-19 pandemic (which hit the United States in spring 2020) that brought the world to its knees also required “social distancing,” a self-imposed isolation to prevent the spread of the virus. As some commentators pointed out, a more accurate term might be “physical” rather than “social” distancing, since for family members and friends love and concern could still transcend the physical isolation. However, there are other forms of distancing and isolation not caused by the virus that can tear apart human society, and, in the long run, prove more toxic for human thriving than the biological threat of the virus.

Anyone who follows the news can make their own list of these forms. The sharp divides that mark the political landscape of the United States crested with the violent January 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol in Washington. Ironically, January 6 is also the traditional date of the feast of the Epiphany, Christianity's celebration of the universal scope of the gospel symbolized by the journey of the magi from the east who come to Bethlehem to do homage to the Christ child. The political conflict apparent in the United States is more than matched by long-term conflicts in other parts of the world, such as the chronic tension between Palestinians and Israelis; or between China and Taiwan; or even between England and mainland Europe, which led to "Brexit," an economic and cultural divide whose long-term effects are still to be felt.

Even more pervasive are racial and ethnic divides that plague the human family. In the United States, the tragic and publicly witnessed death of George Floyd under police detention in May 2020 revealed the deep festering and chronic wound of racism in our country, triggering an avalanche of protests and counter-protests. A long history of prejudice, exclusion, and economic exploitation has left a deep mark on our institutions and personal attitudes. And here, too, racial and ethnic tensions are by no means confined to the United States: Turks versus Kurds, Tutsi versus Hutu, Ethiopians versus Eritreans, Myanmar versus the Rohingya, Chinese versus Tibetans—the list is worldwide. Coupled with ethnic tensions are other chronic divides and demeaning attitudes to those different from

ourselves both religiously and culturally, with, for example, both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia on the rise in the Western world. Fear of immigrants and branding of them as potential criminals has led time and again to stringent immigration policies, separation of families, and the building of walls to keep people out, even those fleeing for their lives from desperate situations.

Pope Francis has repeatedly called on Christians and all people of good will to address the deadly economic divides in our world today. We all know that the gap between the very rich and the very poor keeps growing wider. Meanwhile, hunger plagues humanity, causing the stunted growth and even the deaths of thousands of innocent children every year. Even in a developed country such as the United States, nearly 35 million people suffer from hunger or daily food insecurity—a staggering statistic. While many are unemployed or struggle to receive a living wage, the salaries of the super-rich—in sports, entertainment, and the corporate world—have ballooned out of all proportion.

Other divides that cut across the human family are of a more personal but still destructive nature. Growing awareness of sexual abuse and exploitation of women has revealed the social and economic divides between men and women. The #MeToo movement has struck back at the seemingly routine sexual abuse and harassment of women by men in positions of power. Trafficking of young girls for the sexual gratification of men is perpetrated worldwide. Women often find themselves at an economic disadvantage

in the workplace, earning chronically lower salaries than their male counterparts.

Most religions are committed to fostering community and championing respect for human life, yet here, too, divisions and rivalries exist. In Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Christians are often a harassed minority; in India, strife between Hindus and Muslims boils; in France, many Christians view Muslims as disloyal to the State and as a source of violence. Even within denominations, boundaries of suspicion and accusation of heresy are erected—between fundamentalist and mainline Protestant Christians, between traditionalist and progressive Catholics.

The Longing for Inclusion and Unity

The list of hostile divides and exclusions is long and numbing. Yet even amid so many boundaries and divides, the human thirst for unity, reconciliation, and harmony persists. At the inauguration of American President Joseph Biden on January 20, 2021, only a few days after the display of violence and mayhem at the very same Capitol steps, a young African American woman, Amanda Gorman, captured the hearts of millions with her eloquent poem calling for mutual respect, for unity, and for reconciliation that can heal our wounds:

We are striving to forge a union with purpose,
to compose a country committed to all cultures,
colors, characters, and

conditions of man.

And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us
but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know, to put our
future first,

we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:

That even as we grieved, we grew;
that even as we hurt, we hoped;
that even as we tired, we tried;
that we'll forever be tied together, victorious,
not because we will never again know defeat,
but because we will never again sow division.¹

Her words harmonized with the inaugural speech of President Biden himself, whose call for national unity and reconciliation struck a chord in the hearts of many Americans across political divides at that moment.

In the face of division, we still long for unity. Excluded and isolated, we earnestly seek inclusion. It is that longing for *inclusion* that will be the focus of this study—

not just “inclusion” in an abstract sense but inclusion as a value and precept of our biblical and Christian tradition. Present society values, at least in principle, the notion of “inclusion”: inclusion in the political arena, inclusion within educational and economic opportunities, inclusion within the dominant culture and structures of society, and, yes, inclusion within our own religious communities. The experience of exclusion or isolation, of being “left out,” can be destructive to human beings, whether within the family circle, among fellow students and would-be friends, or when seeking opportunities and resources vital for human thriving.

The Road Ahead

It is the challenge of inclusion and acceptance of the “other”—a challenge that lies so close to the heart of the gospel—that we want to explore in this book, reflecting on this challenge in the light of our Scriptures. Obviously, within the span of this brief study we cannot deal with every kind of inclusion possible—not only because of time and space but also because of the evident limits of your author in understanding all that is involved in some current issues of identity and inclusion.

But there are some challenges familiar to us all that we can reflect on in the light of our biblical heritage: issues such as the racial and ethnic divides that cause such tension and conflict today, or the economic and social divides

that spill over into the relationships of the sexes, that also dominate the news and are the focus of so much attention from moral leaders such as Pope Francis. Likewise, many of the outbreaks of violence in our world take place because of tensions about borders and national identities and aspirations. Over the past several years, the United States itself has been embroiled in questions about immigration. The attempt to build border walls to keep out those considered a threat to our national identity and safety is a source of hot debate.

The question of our collective responsibility for the care of the earth and the well-being of the universe itself is also a point of tension. Some believe that we need to transcend the false boundaries that wholly separate humans from all other creatures and the earth we inhabit together, which can lead to the human exploitation and destruction of our natural world, while others consider this a baseless issue and believe no restraints should be put upon human needs for resources.

And finally, we find exclusion and toxic divides within and among the religions of the world, including Christianity in all its variations. Very often boundaries between religious groups and their exclusive claims of legitimacy have led to tension and violence—or at least have been used as surrogate causes for other forms of divides within the human family.

These are some of the issues we hope to engage in the course of the study that follows. Each of them involves

tensions between identity and inclusion. And each of them needs to be illumined by the wisdom of our Scriptures. It is to that task we now turn.

Before getting underway, I want to thank Fr. Ronald Witherup, P.S.S., for first inviting me to be part of this series and for guiding my work to its completion. He is a good friend, a remarkable biblical scholar, and a church leader, all at once!

Chapter One

"That All May Be One" The Ideal and the Real

Our first task is to understand what we mean by *inclusion*, an idea that is more complex than it might seem at first.

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines inclusion as “the act or practice of including and accommodating people who have historically been excluded (as because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability).”² While this is a straightforward and accurate definition, inclusion is a virtue or value that cannot be properly understood simply on its own. In the corporate and educational worlds, inclusion is often linked with other essential conditions such as *diversity* and *equity*. *Diversity* recognizes that in any social grouping of people there needs to be an acceptance of differences among individuals, such as physical or psychological needs, personality types, ethnic and racial backgrounds, or political and religious convictions. The failure to recognize or accept such diversity makes inclusion impossible.

Also essentially linked to inclusion is the value of *equity*, that is, offering acceptance, respect, and equal access to resources for all the members of a group or institution. Without equity, inclusion would be meaningless—if, once the person was included in a community, they were shut

out from the resources offered to other members of the group.

Some educators refer to this triad as “DEI,” that is, diversity, equity, and inclusion. For example, special needs children are truly “included” only if they are fully respected as human beings and offered the equivalent resources and support that all students need for a sound education.

In fact, from the outset the call for inclusion presumes that some individuals have been denied access to a group or community; they have up to this point been *excluded* from it, consciously or unconsciously. In other words, inclusion involves a willingness on the part of an existing group or community to welcome new and different members on an equal basis.

And here another important reality must be brought into play, namely the question of a group or community’s “identity.” While it may be incumbent on a group to be accessible and to welcome new members on an equitable basis, are there legitimate expectations on the part of the receiving community that those seeking inclusion must adhere to? If a community is legitimately formed on the basis of a common purpose and shared values, then “inclusion” requires a commitment on the part of a new or prospective member to share those essential values. Inclusion, in other words, is not an absolute virtue on its own but only in tandem with other values and virtues. For example, is a church or synagogue or mosque obliged to offer inclusion or membership to someone who has shown

contempt for the values of that community? Does a group committed to civil rights have to include a white supremacist who demands access to the group's deliberations? Would a school committed to the protection of children ever be justified in hiring someone as a teacher who has been proven to be a child molester? Would a group espousing nonviolence have to open its doors to someone carrying a gun?

Many of these examples are self-evident. In an extreme form, the requirement to offer free and unqualified entry to anyone seeking inclusion could effectively threaten or destroy the legitimate identity of a group. This leads to the question of the legitimacy of a group's "entry requirements" or defining values. In some instances, the group's "identity" is inadequately or even falsely conceived. For example, "we are a Catholic parish but we are not comfortable with people of color joining us." "Our country club welcomes new members but screens out those of a particular ethnic, economic, or religious background." "Our corporation seeks talented people in management but subtly excludes those whose sex or religion does not 'fit' our corporate culture." Examples like these demonstrate that true inclusion must be linked to the values of legitimate diversity and equity.

Yet there are also legitimate instances when inclusion in a group or institution can be denied or limited. For example, in organizations of Swedish or Polish Americans or veterans of the Vietnam War, those who are not of Swedish or Polish ethnic background or those who are not

Vietnam veterans cannot demand “inclusion” on the same basis as those who do bear these identities or experiences. Various peoples and cultures and families develop a “way of life”—values and celebrations and customs that help bind a people, a community, or a family together and give that community its unique identity. Anyone seeking inclusion in such a group may have to first demonstrate that they share the group’s values or are open to developing them. People seeking to join a religious community, for example, often first have to go through levels of preparation or formation to demonstrate their free acceptance of the values and purpose of the community.

It is also important to note that inclusion of a new participant or member of a group is not a one-way street. Very often giving legitimate access to a new member will call for openness and flexibility on the part of the receiving community and may lead to some changes in the community’s perspective and customs. The infusion of new and different members can be a blessing for a group or community—bringing fresh energy and valuable new perspectives. In all instances, accessible and inclusive communities need to deal with the question of how to accept new members in a spirit of respect, hospitality, and openness.

The Bible and Inclusion

These brief introductory comments on “inclusion” show that it is not a simple matter. Being in favor of inclusion, as

many contemporary groups and movements demand, calls for careful reflection on all that is at stake. The goal of this series is to view issues such as inclusion from the vantage point of the Bible and our Christian faith. What do our Scriptures, a fundamental guide for the values we hold as a Christian people, tell us about inclusion? I am writing from the standpoint of the Roman Catholic tradition but hopefully what I offer will be of use across the Christian spectrum.

For Catholics and all Christians, the Scriptures offer a foundation on which to base our beliefs and our practice as people of faith. The wisdom communicated by the Scriptures, we believe, finds its ultimate source in God's own Spirit. Various Christian denominations have different ways of interpreting and living out the Scriptures, but surely there is common ground on some of the basic truths proclaimed by the Word of God. In many ways, the Scriptures have a profound impact on our identity as human beings and as a Christian people or "church." Thus, the questions of access and identity that we have sketched out above are certainly in play in the Scriptures and in our Christian experience.

Our intent here is to view some specific issues of inclusion in the light of the Scriptures. As we will see, both ancient Israel and the early Christian church struggled with questions of identity and inclusion, as we do today.

The opening chapters of the Bible in the Book of Genesis reflect on the origin of the human race and the