

Acts 10:44-48 - Jesus Christ for all nations

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In the 1970s I was member of a Baptist church in The Netherlands where we would regularly have American Baptist preachers over for a week or so of teaching and preaching. Those were always *exciting* days for me as young Christian.

These preachers would sometimes bring their *wife* along. I remember that with some of my friends, I sat at a table, discussing those Americans. The preachers were fine. But their wives... Look at the layers of makeup. For us, that was absolutely a sign of worldliness. If you are a real Christian, how can you do that? And while we discussed this incredible issue of the multicolored face of the pastor's wife, we would ask the waiter to bring us as another glass of beer. And another one. And another one. Cold please.

The Christian faith expresses itself differently in different cultures. The examples I used are rather petty, but *very real* for all people involved. The apostle Peter had a much bigger problem of cultural and religious interpretation when he baptized the gentile Roman army officer Cornelius; we have just read part of that story.

1 Peter's problem

Peter was a faithful Jew who had been raised within the safe borders of all the laws and regulations of Israel. He *knew* that a good Jew should not enter into the home of gentiles, he does not eat with them, or touch them, because they were unclean.

Throughout the centuries, Israel's theologians had come to define the laws of the Old Testament in terms of national laws, regulations for their nation only; these laws, expressed in heaps of unique cultural and religious habits, functioned as high fences that distanced Israelites from all other people.

Israel *often* used their laws as a mark of distinction. But in their own scriptures, prophets called the nation, in an ever-increasing refrain, to realize that God had called Israel to be a city *on a mountain*, a light *for the nations*, *open* to the world.

The prophet Isaiah, for instance, envisioned God's glory filling the earth - not Israel only. He said:

[One day] there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria. The Assyrians will go to Egypt and the Egyptians to Assyria. The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth. The LORD Almighty will bless them, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance". (Isaiah 19:23-25)

Isaiah sees how Israel's archenemies, Egypt and Assyria, worship God together with Israel - for God is a God *of all nations*, and not of Israel only.

In the time of the New Testament, Israel was occupied by Roman armies, and Israel's culture was more and more influenced by Rome, and Athens. So many theologians tried to separate, segregate, build high cultural walls, to make the people of God not lose their distinct traits.

The rules for the Jewish Sabbath were strictly implemented, and, food laws, and dress codes. Most rabbis did not even allow their followers to enter the homes of non-Jews, because that would make them unclean. Eating with non-Jews, touching them, all that was taboo.

Interesting is that in spite of this *very negative* view of the other nations, there were *still* many gentiles that were attracted to the Jewish religion. The great mystery of the worship of one, invisible God, was very special for many who were tired of their own outdated religions. So throughout Israel and the Roman Empire there were millions who in one way or another believed in the Jewish God.

For those gentiles, it was possible to participate in the worship of the one God - *but only from a distance*, at best as tolerated guests. The temple in Jerusalem has a special court for these gentiles. They could not come close to God, but there was some space for them. These people were called *Fearers of God*.

But if someone wanted to *truly* become participate in worship of God - then one had to *first become fully part* of the Jewish nation. Romans, or barbarians from England, or Germany, or Egypt, could become part of the Jewish nation, by dying to their original nationality and culture. They would have to be *circumcised* and *baptized* to symbolize that they were cut off from their original land and family, their unclean background, and that they had risen in a new life - as an Israelite. They then had to follow the complete load of Jewish laws, including all the typically cultural ones.

So they had to reject their own nation and culture. *Is God against our culture?* Is he against the many great and beautiful cultures of this world? *Does God prefer steak to pork? Does he listen to a prayer in Hebrew but not one in Arabic?* Does he like Egyptian culture more than the culture of Yemen? Does he prefer Fairuz over Umm Kulthum? Does God sing hymns of Charles Wesley or can he also enjoy the cultures of the

Islamic lands that developed in the Middle East the last 1500 years?

2 Jesus' approach

After the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, his apostles did not immediately break out of the boundaries of this old nationalist paradigm. Their *main* interest was to stay in Jerusalem, and preach the Gospel to the Jewish nation. The Temple continued to play a central role in their worldview.

Jesus had *already* laid a bomb under this ethnocentric approach. We have heard in the Gospel reading that he gave his followers the commandment to love God and other people as the heart of all laws. So while many theologians in Israel made belonging to the nation of Israel the precondition for being approved by God, Jesus preached a different message.

He spoke, for instance in the Sermon on the Mount, of the meek, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the pure in heart. He said that those people should inherit the earth and see God. Nationality and cultural background is irrelevant in God's relationship with men and women. Faith in God the Father, and a lifestyle that is imbued with love, that is what counts.

Jesus was prepared to even trespass publicly against the laws of Israel for the sake of people. He touched lepers, he touched unclean women, and he had dinners in the homes of people who were rejected by the religious leaders of Israel as unclean.

Love for these people overrode all national or cultural rules for Jesus. And his love for people went beyond love for the nation of Israel only. He said that he had other sheep, not of the stable of Israel, which he wanted to gather into his fold, to create one flock under one shepherd.

Twenty years later, the apostle Paul wrote:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups [Jews and gentiles] into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances. (Eph 2:14-15)

This was the goal of Jesus: to create one new community of people from all sorts of backgrounds, not all with similar cultural habits but all loving and serving his Father.

The first followers of Jesus, the initial twelve that he appointed, had to face this crucial issue. They were from a nation with high fences, but Jesus sent them into the world, to announce the Good News of forgiveness of sins to all nations.

3 The Apostle's turn

How do you do this, if you have grown up in a culturally and religiously separate nation? How

can you invite outsiders to become followers of Jesus Christ if you are not even supposed to touch them? How can you go to them, how can you receive them in your own home?

The apostle Peter was in Jaffa, praying on a rooftop – at the time when many pious Jews said one of their three daily prayers. During his prayers he saw in a vision how a sheet full of animals descended from heaven – animals that were unclean according to Jewish law. And a voice from heaven said: *'Get up, Peter, kill and eat.'*

Peter refused: *'Surely not, Lord, I have never eaten anything impure or unclean!'* But the voice said: *'Do not call anything impure that God has called clean.'* So we can eat pork, or rattlesnake, or cockroaches if we desire to do so. In the eyes of God, this is simply irrelevant. He has no preference for the *cuisine* of any particular culture.

Three times Peter saw this vision, and then the doorbell rang. Three men stood there, inviting him to come to the house of the Roman army officer, Cornelius, a gentile *Fearer of God*. Cornelius wanted to speak with Peter about salvation.

And Peter understood that the vision he had had, was to prepare him to say 'yes' to this invitation. He went into the home of Cornelius, a home full of gentiles - unclean people. I can just imagine all the questions he had. *'What to do!'* This was a totally new thing for the followers of Jesus. Here was a large group of Gentiles interested in the Gospel of their Messiah!

Peter explained them first, that this was a paradigm shift for him. As if he was preaching at himself:

You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. (Acts 10:28)

Peter then preached the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that: "...everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins." (Acts 10:43)

Everyone. Not Jews only, but *all people...* Peter had not even finished his sermon when the Holy Spirit fell on all these gentiles who heard him speak. They all praised God. And Peter and the Jewish believers who had come with him from Jaffa, were all astonished. *This was shocking!*

The Holy Spirit of God descended on these people, God is touching gentiles. *If God speaks to people who are so different from us, how can we then consider them outsiders?* God himself adopted them wholeheartedly into the community of the followers of Jesus Christ, the church – so how could Peter not do the same, and baptize them immediately? So that is what he did.

Mind you, this baptism was important because it happened immediately. These gentiles did not first have to be circumcised.

God accepts people, all people, and they do not have to become like us first. They do not have to adopt all of our cultural habits. Maybe they will never become exactly as we are... All people can worship God through Jesus Christ in the context of their own culture, and the basic core law for such new Christians, as for all of us, is: love God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – and love people.

For the early church, this was a most radical decision. This is why the church today is not a small Jewish sect, but it is found in all 200 countries of the world; and in each country it expresses itself in different forms, and theologies, and styles of worship.

The church is an organism that is not based on cultural or social uniformity, but on allegiance to Jesus Christ, and with love for God and love for all people as the central moral law. We do not try to make all people just as we are. We are allowed to be different, to be ourselves, to appreciate the culture we were born in. You are invited to follow Christ, love all people, and be yourself.

We are lucky that we do not have detailed descriptions of Jesus and his lifestyle. I guess that if we had precise descriptions of what his beard looked like, of with what sort of wood he cleaned his teeth, or what sort of sandals he wore, we would be very tempted to imitate. We would be tempted to follow the *Sunnah* of Jesus. Then being a Christian would destroy cultures and enforce one culture on all Christians.

We are left in reality with a rather brief, bare-bone description of Jesus and of what he said – so that we focus on the essentials, and have the freedom to interpret and unpack those in our own cultures.

Conclusion

In the societies and churches we come from, we all have our own do's and don'ts that we consider important, and because we want to live together as one church of Christ, we are forced to wonder which of those habits are of primary importance, and which are really culturally defined, and secondary.

Focus on love for God, and love for the other. Sometimes have to give up on things that are truly important for us – for the sake of others.

The style of the sermon, its length, the songs we use, and the prayers we pray, the matters that we care about as a church? We must certainly make sure that we do not let our own cultural interpretations of the Gospel create walls of separation between us.

Allegiance to Jesus Christ and love for God and one another is the best basis for our own life, and also for our community life. If we practice that, we will experience that differences do not have to divide us.

Let me end with a quote from St Augustine, from a sermon he preached on the part of the Gospel of John that we have read from. He said:

Where there is love, what is lacking? And where there is not, what is there that can possibly be profitable? (St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 83.3)

If the Gospel and the love for God and for one another motivates us, then we can enjoy our diversity – the diversity of a great, attractive, colorful bouquet of people – that exists thanks to God and for the glory of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; AMEN.