

Creating Authentic Community: Utopian Dream or Do-able Reality? How Jesus' Apostle Paul Can Help Us

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by

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Part One: *The God of the Bible Seeks to Create a Radically Inclusive Community*

Primary Data Base: Exodus 20:2-17. Isaiah 58. Jonah 1-4. Matthew 3:1-17. Galatians 3:27-28; 5:22-25. Ephesians 2:11-22.

1. Clearing the Air: the sloppy use in our culture of the terms "family" and "community"

- 1.1. Can you give me some examples of what I mean?**
- 1.2. What is the potential of these terms that leaders and advertisers seek to exploit?**
- 1.3. What are the values that you associate with each of these words?**

2. Starting at the Beginning: God and God's Intention in Creating Human Beings

- 2.1. When you use the word "God," what values and purposes come to your mind?**
- 2.2. The "red thread" that ties together all the diverse views of God found in the Hebrew Bible: God is Community-Forming-Power.**
- 2.3. The God of the Israelites was primarily concerned about how this God's people treated each other---not whether they built altars and temples.**
- 2.4. See the "Ten Commandments": according to the first commandment, in astonishing contrast to the usual view that Divine Power supports the dominant social and economic structures, this God is the God of the underdogs, freeing his people from slavery and oppression. This God rejected human kingship in principle; Moses was not made a king but had to lead by his seeking the welfare of all the Israelites. Then according to commandments five through ten, God cares most about how his people treat each other, about their interpersonal relationships: honoring one's parents, not killing each other, not cheating on one's sexual partner, not stealing, not bearing false witness against one's neighbor, and not coveting anything that belongs to your neighbor. Note: there is no mention of building temples, priests, altars, or making animal sacrifices.**
- 2.5. See Isaiah's brilliant critique of those who by ignoring these commandments have rebelled against God and shamefully relied on their private religious practices (fasting) while fighting with each other and oppressing all their workers (chap. 58).**

3. This is the view of God that both Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus, as heirs of Abraham and Moses, were Raised to Believe and Practice in Their Daily Lives.

- 3.1. All Judeans, even the radical separatists living out beside the Dead Sea (at Qumran) believed that God was community-forming power. The big question then (as well as now) was: who is in and who is out? And then: Why? And who decides?**
- 3.2. There were early challenges to the exclusive mentality of "our group is the only one God really cares about," especially by Isaiah, Jonah (who invited even the despised**

Ninevites to join God's people), and the by John the Baptizer (who even invited "dirty" Roman soldiers to become part of God's people).

4. God's radical inclusivity was proclaimed by John the B: "God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones!" (Matt. 3:9/Luke 3:8).

4.1. Jesus of Nazareth joined John's ministry and this profound challenge to the status quo. He then took this message of God's inauguration of a radically new time in history "on the road" into the towns and villages of Israel. With prophetic zeal and focus, Jesus proclaimed that God's real concern was about the "purity" of the relationships between people, not about the characteristics of food or about the need to avoid all those people whom the Pharisees regarded as impure, i.e., as "sinners."

4.2. Paul of Tarsus, a leading Pharisee, began to hear about the movement that Jesus was creating, a movement that Paul eventually decided to oppose vigorously. He had already become convinced that two serious threats to the future existence of his people required an aggressive grass-roots response. These two threats were first the "modern" allure of Hellenistic culture and then the Temple authorities' shameful and risky cooperation with the Roman occupation of his land. So he embraced the "circle-the wagons" personal-purity strategy that the Pharisee faction had already created.

4.3. For Paul, Jesus' radically inclusive strategy was completely wrong-headed: Jesus was contributing to the further dilution of the purity of Israel and undermining the best efforts of the Pharisees to create a do-able future for the people of God. Paul used every means that he had as a respected leader among his people to stamp out this vision and stop this movement, including traveling to far-away cities to nip it in the bud.

5. But, then, Paul radically changed his mind and became convinced that Jesus was not only a true prophet but that Jesus had been commissioned by God to open up the era promised to Abraham so many centuries earlier ("in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"-- Gen 12:3).

5.1. Paul turned his brilliant mind and deep spiritual passion to developing and extending Jesus' vision throughout the Mediterranean world.

5.2. Paul's was liberated to enter any place and interact with anyone by his personal experience of that radical inclusivity and forgiveness offered him by the Christ-followers whom he had persecuted. He was obviously convinced that the power and reality of God's Spirit in him was stronger than any "impurity" he had previously found in others, both women and men (see the "contagious" spiritual power of the wife in 1 Cor. 7:13--15).

5.3. Thus Paul could write that the "fruit of the Spirit" is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control," (Galatians 5:22--23), precisely the characteristics needed for participating positively in making and sustaining an authentic community.

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