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## Gentiles, Homosexuality, and Grace in the Body of Christ

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As the church wrestles with whether women and men who practice homosexuality ought to be embraced into the full life of the church, it is important to remember that the church has struggled with questions of membership from the very beginning. The primary conflict in the life of the early church had to do with another question: Should Gentiles, who do not keep the mosaic law, be received into the fellowship of the body of Christ?

The church embraced believing Gentiles, but only after an intense conflict that featured breaches of fellowship (between Peter and Paul, among others), intense argument (Paul's letters to the Galatians and the Romans, among others), and even a major church council (the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15). It took testimonies of special revelation (Peter's visions in Acts 10), indisputable signs of the outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentiles (Acts 10-11), and careful study of Old Testament prophetic texts to determine that the Spirit was indeed calling believing Gentiles and believing Jews to be united in one body.

In the end, the apostles determined that to deny Gentiles membership in the body of Christ was to deny the gospel. It was to commit the heresy of saying that salvation comes by the law rather than by grace through faith.

Should the church use the same process of discernment to determine whether or not to receive our gay and lesbian neighbors,

friends, and family  
members into full  
church membership?

**We must carefully listen to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who confess faith in the gospel.**

It is an important question because nothing less than the graciousness of the gospel is at stake. To exclude a gospel-believing person from the church because she is same-sex attracted is to abandon the gospel of salvation by grace through faith, without question. And does the exclusion of such a person, if she refuses to give up the practice of homosexuality, also amount to an insistence on salvation by works of the law? What if she confesses the faith of the gospel, as did the Roman centurion Cornelius, who heard Peter preach in Acts 10? What if her life evidences the fruits of the Spirit, as did the Gentiles who experienced their own Pentecost at Antioch (Acts 10)?

A lot is at stake. As Paul put it in Galatians 5:4, "You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

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So we have got to get this right. How exactly did the early church discern that Gentiles, despite their infidelity to the law of Moses, had received the Spirit of Christ? And what would it look like for the 21st-century church to discern whether gay and lesbian men and women have also shared in the blessing of grace?

The early church's discernment process consisted of six dimensions.

First, certain apostles received special revelation from God that key elements of the mosaic law were no longer binding. Most famously, Peter experienced a vision in which God commanded him to eat animals that were unclean according to the law. God told Peter, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15); Peter eventually grasped that God was calling him to receive believing Gentiles into the church.

Second, the Gentiles responded to the preaching of the gospel with faith. The apostles reasoned that if salvation is truly by grace through faith, then that is as true for Gentiles as it is for Jews (Acts 15:9; Gal. 3:8).

Third, God immediately poured the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, manifesting his presence within them by enabling them to speak in tongues (Acts 10:44-46). Peter quickly grasped the significance: "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have" (Acts 10:47).

Fourth, believing Gentiles began to practice the fruits of repentance. The apostles recognized that "even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18).

Fifth, the church met as a council to hear the reports of Peter and Paul that the Gentiles were embracing the gospel in faith and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit, and to consider whether or not these Gentiles should be forced to keep the law of Moses. The apostles and elders came to a decision in unity as a body: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (Acts 15:28).

Sixth, the church carefully reconsidered the teaching of Scripture. Upon hearing the experiences of Peter, Paul, and the Gentiles who had received the Holy Spirit, the apostle James grasped that he had heard of this phenomenon before. Where? In the Old Testament prophets. As James put it, "Simon has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written . . ." (Acts 15:14-18). James goes on to quote Amos 9:11-12, and it is on this basis—the explicit teaching of Scripture—not merely on the basis of the experiences of his colleagues and fellow Christians, that James concludes, "It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God" (Acts 15:19). The upshot? They should be required to demonstrate the fruits of repentance in accord with faith (including the command to avoid "sexual immorality" (Acts 15:28), but otherwise set free from the burden of the law.

We would do well to follow this same process of discernment as we wrestle with questions concerning the inclusion of gay and lesbian men and women in the church today. We have no right to force others to keep the law as a condition of salvation if we ourselves have been saved by grace through faith. We must carefully listen to our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters who confess faith in the gospel, testify to the work of the Spirit in their lives, and practice the fruits of repentance. And finally, we must submit their testimony to the witness of Scripture.

Does Scripture prophesy the blessing of homosexuality as it explicitly prophesies the inclusion of Gentiles within the church? Does it prophesy the blessing of same-sex marriage as it explicitly prophesies that women, like men, will exercise the gifts of ministry (Joel 2:28-29)? Finally, what does it mean for gay and lesbian Christians to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18), and

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these injunctions—rooted in the gospel, not the law—aside.

In the end, we can only claim the name of “church” if we remain rooted in the grace of the gospel of Christ. And the gospel is that all people—including people who are gay and lesbian—are saved by grace through faith alone, and that the wonderful fruit of grace—for all people, regardless of sexual attraction—is the ongoing life of repentance through the work of the Holy Spirit.

### Questions for Discussion

1. If you were a first-century Jewish Christian, why and how might you struggle with the inclusion of Gentiles into your religious community?
2. How does your local church currently provide pastoral guidance to Christians who have same-sex attraction? Do you think it could or should do more?
3. Professor Tuininga listed six dimensions to the early church’s discernment process. Do you think these six dimensions are equally important, or are some dimensions more crucial than others? Why or why not?
4. How does remaining rooted in salvation by grace through faith alone and in an ongoing life of repentance manifest itself in each of us?

### About the Author

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