

*Reclaiming an Inclusive Church: Have You Got the Spirit?*  
*Acts 11: 1-18*  
*May 6, 2007*

Olla! Buenos Dias! Commas Stas! Thank you Joseph! What a witness of God working in your life. You inspire us all to expect God to work in our lives. Thank you choir and Rob and Bob, you inspire us to revere God with better worship. Thank you children, you inspire us to live our lives with greater awe and wonder. Thank you congregation for your thoughts and prayers as we approach Annual Conference for you inspire me to be less fearful of this opportunity for change in our denomination. The thing you have inspired me to do, along with our local RMN team is to get out and talk to other pastors who have a different point of view and get their perspectives on full inclusion. And this is where I want to start this morning in my reflections on *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*, my current sermon series on the Book of Acts.

I had lunch this past week with a well-respected pastor of a tall steeple church here in town. This pastor is respected for his many gifts. I also respect this pastor because he is smart, listens well, is moderate in his positions, and will weigh all the evidence before he makes a decision on the question of full inclusion of GLBT people. We talked, shared positions, debated those positions, and broke bread together in a collegial atmosphere. He said many things, but one part of his conversation really stayed with me. He said, “You know, Andy, I think we do need to have a change in our discipline in our language around full inclusion toward gay and lesbian people.” He then looked a little sad. He went on to tell a story about a gathering of “tall steeple” clergy where Adam Hamilton, pastor of the Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas, presented to the group. Hamilton has authored many good books. One of his better

books is entitled *Confronting the Controversies*. It deals in a very balanced way with the controversial issues that the church is struggling with. One of those topics is homosexuality. Hamilton had written in his first version of his book an essay that confirmed the language of the Discipline – that the “practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.” But something gnawed at him. He had not dealt deeply enough with the experience of hearing the stories of gay and lesbian people. So he spent a lot of time hearing those stories. And his heart was changed. He wrote a second version of his essay and softened his tone, neither affirming nor criticizing the stance of the Discipline. Within months, 800 families left his church. Now his church has over 15000 members, but that is still a significant number, more than the entire membership of our church. Knowing Adam, I bet he grieved every one of those families in a very personal way. This minister I had lunch with then said to me, “Andy, there are a lot of other families who would do the same in every congregation.” I now knew the sadness that came to his face. He feared the consequences of doing the right thing. Last weekend I played golf and just happened to be paired with a couple of guys who are active members of a very conservative Methodist Church in a northern suburb of Houston. These were great guys, committed Christians. I told them about Bering Memorial UMC and they were interested and complimentary of our ministry and our people. Their pastor is one of the leaders of the Confessing Movement, a conservative movement in the UMC who are very much opposed to our reconciling cause. I thought for a moment about this pastoral leader and I imagined how he might fear the loss of great people like these two guys I met. Now in my more calloused moments I can say to myself, “Good riddance to

you if you leave.” But these are for the most part good people with whom we have a differing view of the gospel.

I then thought of you all. Maybe we have a temptation to think, with all the strides we’ve made in society, as GLBT people are more accepted by the culture, that we’ve gained enough in our personal lives. Do we really care to continue the struggle? Or are we comfortable to enjoy the lives that we now have? We’re not hassled as much as we used to be hassled. Sure, not every landscaper in town will give us a bid. But we’re getting more and more respect in the media and in society. Should we be satisfied? Should we be more militant in our approach? What is God calling us to do? If we decide to press forward, what should be our approach? How do we gain further acceptance among the larger culture? Some fear begins to raise its head in my heart. Is there a risk of losing what we already have? Or maybe we’ll raise our expectations to a level that cannot be met with the current reality. So we have a wide gulf here caused by fear. On one end we have the fear of conservative churches of losing their members; on the other end we have our own fears of losing what we’ve gained and facing rejection. Why do anything?

So now we encounter our text from the early church in the Book of Acts. There are some startling similarities here. Let’s look at them. They concern the conflict between the “Confessing Movement” of Peter’s time and the growing, moderate movement for full inclusion of Gentiles represented by Peter. The conservative branch of Judaism is this “circumcision party.” They pose the question to Peter, “We hear that you have been eating with Gentiles.” These were early, conservative Christians who believed that one had to become a Jew first before you could become a Christian. They also took

the ceremonial law very seriously. To share table fellowship with a non-Jew was forbidden. These folk quite sincerely placed roadblocks in the way of full inclusion. There is still a sense in Judaism of putting a “fence around Torah.” This is necessary for Jewish culture to be preserved so that the scattered people of God will not simply disappear into the general culture. This is important for cultural differentiation, which is a good thing. By extension the early believers may have thought that the Holy Spirit was reserved just for them, the first Jewish Christians. There was genuine fear of losing their Jewishness and disappearing into the larger gentile culture, not to mention being disobedient to Jewish canon law.

So what did Peter do to convince the circumcision party of the need for full inclusion of Gentile people in the new Body of Christ? How did they not get bogged down in changing the “Secret Book” or in changing legislation or in tabled resolutions? Did it happen so easily as in these few verses and why did it change at all? Peter did some wonderful things. He summarized brilliantly the story of Cornelius’ conversion and what God was doing in Cornelius’ life. Did you notice how he brought six witnessing believers with him to Cornelius’ house? In the major cultures of the world like Egypt it took up to six witnesses to get a conviction. It took six seals in Rome to get a new piece of legislature passed. Peter was successful when he posed the question, “And who am I to stand in God’s way?” This is the same question that Gamaliel posed in an earlier scene in Acts when this great Jewish leader was able to save the lives of all the Apostles from execution. He showed how God was in this change!

But the clincher to his success with the conservative party was to show the evidence of the Holy Spirit in the changed lives of these gentiles. Of all the ways that we

illustrate the life of a Christian the most important is the evidence of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. As I asked our children, “Have you got the Spirit?” That’s what the church received on Pentecost. It is what makes us a church. It was the greatest promise of Jesus to his followers. It is the source of the gifts in our lives – of music, of giving, of encouraging, of teaching, of helping our sisters and brothers in faith. It is the source of the evidence of fruit in our lives – of hoping, of having peace, of having patience, of loving one another. To those who oppose full inclusion of GLBT people we must not only answer in words but also demonstrate in our lives the answer to the question, “Have you got the Spirit?”

We must confess that our past strategy for full inclusion has not been entirely effective. Our strategy has been based on social justice and for ordering the world to the coming reign of God. Those are powerful arguments to be sure. But they also present our cause as one-way receipt of power relinquished from those presently in power. We have not adequately answered the question, “what is in it for the other guys?” They may see our arguments and want to do the right thing. But also they fear the loss of members who will leave their churches. They may also be caught up in some confusion, to use an analogy, in making beautiful music for the glory of God versus organ maintenance. Bob, I am not going to pick on you here, but it can become easy to focus on the instrument too much and not on the music. What pleases God and people is the music. The instrument is necessary but should not be idolized. If we spend all of our time tuning and caring for the instrument, we lose the love of the music. If we don’t tune the instrument at all, the music suffers. The awe and mystery of God is best appreciated when we leave room for the Holy Spirit to move among us. This is like being completely consumed with the

Book of Discipline, the law, and not seeing the Holy Spirit moving in and among us. We have to point out the Spirit moving among GLBT people.

A few weeks ago the life of Jackie Robinson, the man who broke the color barrier in baseball, was celebrated on its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his entry into the game. I listened to the testimony of two of my favorite baseball players of old, Hank Aaron and Frank Robinson. What I remember from their witness that night was this: when Branch Rickey decided to take a huge risk by bringing Jackie up to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers he had several motivations. Sure, he wanted to do the right thing for the cause of social justice, but he also had a more personal motivation. Baseball in those days was even more boring than it is today. It was in decline among fans. Something had to be done to improve its entertainment value. Players didn't steal bases much. They moved only when the ball was hit. It was a bit like watching paint dry. But Jackie Robinson brought new gifts and talents to the game that had not been seen before. He could steal home plate. He had fabulous gifts that would raise the level of the game as entertainment. Branch Rickey knew this and that there were other Jackie Robinsons waiting to come in and join. Jackie Robinson could raise the level of the game.

The Spirit gifts GLBT people as well. Troy Plummer raised the level of ministry in this church. Dawson Taylor, our speaker at the Breaking the Silence lunch at Annual Conference raised the level of ministry everywhere he goes. At Memorial Drive UMC and now at the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas. The UMC is in decline and is missing these gifts and talents. We can raise the level of God's Kindom here and now if given the chance.

It is said by many in conservative corners of our church that we are presenting a different gospel than the conservatives are presented. Ours, they say, is a gospel of *acceptance*. Theirs is a gospel of *redemption*. Let's think about that for a moment. Do we idolize unconditional acceptance? Do we not stress the life-changing or redeeming power of the Holy Spirit working in lives? I see examples every day of God's life-changing power in the people of this church and community. Sexual orientation and gender identity is not something that needs to be redeemed. But there are aspects of every life that do need to be redeemed. If not, who needs Christ? I would say we present a gospel that is both radically accepting and radically redemptive. Choose today to present your life as a modern-day gospel. In word and deed make your life answer the question, "have you got the Spirit?" a resounding "yes!"