

Inclusive Church?: The Theology and Ethics of Inclusivity

I first met Philip when, as a new ethics tutor at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, I was involved in their “Future of Anglicanism” conference held to celebrate the college’s 125th anniversary in June/July 2002.¹ I was Secretary to the Ethics Group chaired by Oliver O’Donovan, a small group in which a highlight for me was getting to know Philip. I was unaware at the time that this would be the start of a long journey together in which I have learned so much from him about ethics, the church, and what it means to follow Christ. Following that conference my New Testament colleague, Peter Walker, and I were asked by Archbishop Drexel Gomez to write on the issue of same-sex relationships. We produced *True Union in the Body?* which was presented by Archbishop Drexel at the Primates’ Meeting in Brazil in 2003.² Philip had of course earlier worked with Archbishop Drexel on *To Mend the Net* and the newly formed Anglican Communion Institute (ACI) in which Philip was involved kindly invited me to join them as a Fellow. Thus began what is now over a decade of conversation, collaboration and companionship – sadly mostly online rather than in person – as we journeyed together through the travails of the Anglican Communion in which Philip (along with Ephraim Radner, Chris Seitz, Don Armstrong, and more recently Mark McCall) has been such a wise and insightful guide for me and so many others.³

This essay seeks to explore a subject which has been a driving force in the divisions within the Communion and at the heart of the new ecclesial ethic of The Episcopal Church (USA): inclusivity. Although the current emphasis on inclusion has been strongest in the United States, indeed Philip has referred to “the doctrine of radical inclusion that now serves as an epitome of the working theology of ECUSA”,⁴ this theology and ethic is increasingly shaping other Anglican provinces, including the Church of England. When, in 2003, Jeffrey John withdrew from his appointment as Bishop of Reading in the face of controversy over being in a same-sex partnership, many of his supporters formed a still influential network called “Inclusive Church”.

¹ My account of the event appeared as “Conference Report: The Future of Anglicanism”, *Anvil* 19.4 (2002), pp. 296-9. Online at http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/19-4_296.pdf

² The text is online at <http://ago.ncf.ca/elmhurst/true-union.pdf>

³ In addition to his many online writings for ACI, the main published source for Philip’s thinking here is Turner and Radner, *The Fate of Communion: The Agony of Anglicanism and the Future of a Global Church* (Eerdmans, 2006).

⁴ Turner, “ECUSA’s God and the Idols of Liberal Protestantism” in Turner & Radner (eds), *The Fate of Communion*, p. 247.

Although interest in inclusivity has been most associated with the recent debates about sexuality in the Christian Church, it is a subject which extends well beyond these, not only into other practical areas,⁵ but, less often acknowledged, into deeper questions relating to central Christian doctrines. It has, however, been subject to limited biblical and theological evaluation and while what follows is limited I hope it will highlight some of the main areas requiring further work. It sketches some of the biblical bases for a focus on inclusion but also draws attention to what today we might see as “non-inclusive” or “exclusive” elements found within Scripture and important in the early church. In the light of this it is argued that certain common understandings of “inclusivity” owe more to aspects of contemporary liberal culture and philosophy than to Scripture and Christian theology. In place of these, I explore Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 6 to develop an understanding of inclusivity rooted in baptism, justification and holiness.

Biblical Inclusion

In most of the discussion of inclusivity, attention is given to Jesus’ pattern of ministry and the relationship of the first Jewish Christians to Gentile converts as witnessed to in Acts and the writings of Paul. That is therefore the focus here but the Old Testament must not be ignored or treated as simply opposed to inclusion. Indeed, if it is, we are more likely to misunderstand the inclusivity of the apostolic era by interpreting it within our own secular, liberal frame of reference rather than within the teaching of the canon of Scripture.

At the heart of the Old Testament is a tension which must remain in any Christian understanding of inclusivity: the focussed, particular electing grace of God which chooses one rather than others but which does so in order to become universal in its scope. This is clear in the Abrahamic covenant. As soon as Genesis turns from its universal history of humankind in Genesis 1-11 to focus on Israel, it makes clear that Israel is not to understand itself in a narrowly exclusivist manner. The call to Abram has a clear goal: “and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12.3). While Israel often forgets this is her calling or misconstrues it in an

⁵ Inclusive Church has produced a series of six booklets covering disability, mental health, poverty, gender and ethnicity as well as sexuality – details at <http://inclusive-church.org/resources/inclusive-church-books>

imperialistic or destructive manner, there are of course numerous passages that remind her of her vocation and God's wider, inclusive purpose:

All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, O Lord;
they will bring glory to your name (Psalm 86.9)

Many peoples will come and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths" (Isaiah 2.3).

Internally, within Israel itself, there is also an expectation that those who are currently excluded among God's chosen people will in the future find themselves included by God. These are also passages which shaped the early church's self-understanding, notably Joel's prophecy, fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (Joel 2.28, quoted by Peter in Acts 2.16-21) and Isaiah's vision of inclusion of those currently excluded, surely of importance in understanding the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 (Isaiah 56.3-5).

It is in this light of Israel's election and special calling and God's universal purposes through her that we must understand Jesus' own ministry with its hallmark of inclusion. In his study of the historical Jesus, Tom Wright describes the story of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and how it begins with invitation and proceeds with welcome in terms of generous inclusion: "Jesus' kingdom-stories made it clear that all and sundry were potential beneficiaries, with the most striking examples being the poor and the sinners".⁶ Luke's writings particularly enable us to trace this and its subsequent impact on the ministry of the apostles. Although not lacking in other gospels, he perhaps best illustrates this pattern of inclusivity for, in the words of Yoder, Luke is "especially attentive to underdogs – women, tax collectors, soldiers, the poor, lepers; in short, he gave status to outsiders".⁷ From the announcement of Jesus' birth to the dubious shepherds through to the commissioning of women to proclaim the good news of the resurrection, his gospel is filled with examples of those on the margins, those who are suspect, those who are excluded, being drawn in and included by God's action. Again and again in Luke's gospel we see that Jesus provoked controversy because "the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering round to hear him" with the result that those most concerned to defend Israel's purity

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, 1996), p. 245.

⁷ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans 1996), p. 54.

and boundaries were muttering “This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them” (Luke 15.1-2).

Recent scholarship has also made us aware that the healings (again very prominent in Luke) must not be reduced – as they have been in much of Christian history – to miracles proving Christ’s divinity. Rather, these too are part of a pattern of inclusion. In the words of Wright again,

For a first-century Jew, most if not all of the works of healing, which form the bulk of Jesus’ mighty works, could be seen as the restoration to membership in Israel of those who, through sickness or whatever, had been excluded as ritually unclean. The healings thus function in exact parallel with the welcome of sinners, and this, we may be quite sure, was what Jesus himself intended....Jesus’ healing miracles must be seen clearly as...bringing not only physical health but renewed membership in the people of YHWH...So too his miracles performed for Gentiles, and for a Samaritan, bear witness to the inclusion within the people of YHWH of those who had formerly been outside.⁸

The commitment to including within God’s people those who are excluded and placed outside is therefore an ethic firmly rooted in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It soon extends in the early church beyond the boundaries of God’s elect nation Israel as Gentiles are welcomed into the people of God. Again Luke is our primary witness.

In Acts 10 we see that the initiative – as always – lies with God and his missionary work of inclusion not with humans who have developed an inclusivist agenda. The outsider – Cornelius – is included by God who then has to work hard to prepare the reluctant apostle Peter (who, in a nice echo of that other great inclusivist Old Testament text, Jonah, is staying in a place called Joppa, (Acts 10.5, Jonah 1.3). Peter is challenged to act in a manner apparently contrary to God’s will revealed in Leviticus (Leviticus 11) and to allow his understanding of the identity of God’s people to undergo radical re-shaping by embracing rather than excluding a Gentile. He does so and, once again, God takes the initiative and pours out his Spirit in such a way that Peter recognises God’s inclusion of the Gentiles and so seals that by including them through baptism (Acts 10.47), the significance of which we return to later. As he explains to the first set of objectors – “If God gave them the same gift as

⁸ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 191, 192.

he gave us...who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (Acts 11.17). The logic is clear – the “us” and “them” division has been overcome by the gracious giving of God and “we” are therefore to reshape our thinking and our action in the light of this divine action to include outsiders within his people rather than to oppose it. This vision is also of course at the heart of the New Testament book which is central in much of Philip’s recent work: Ephesians.⁹

The next great challenge is clarifying what pattern of life is expected and required of those who have been included because the principle of inclusion on its own is incapable of answering this question. In the early church this leads to serious conflict focussed on the issue of circumcision. The pattern of response to this crucial question surrounding the ethics of inclusivity is illuminating. The testimony, based on experience, of those who have been at the forefront of the inclusion of the Gentiles, is heard by those responsible for guarding the community’s identity. Some were glad and welcomed them and their news, others saw the identity of God’s people under threat by the uncritical inclusion of outsiders and so demanded their conformity to existing moral authorities and norms – “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15.5).

In the ensuing debate, Luke highlights the testimony not of those Gentiles who were previously excluded but rather those Jews at the forefront of Gentile inclusion – first Peter and then Barnabas and Paul. Their emphasis throughout is on the prior, initiating powerful work of God and the proper human response to this work. The authoritative judgment of James is then given by relating God’s present work of including Gentiles to the Jewish Scriptures – “The words of the prophet are in agreement with this, as it is written...” (Acts 15.15). As a result the demand for circumcision is not accepted. However, and this is vitally important and again highlights the limits of any ethic of inclusion, neither is the inclusion of Gentiles free of all ethical conditions or expectations (just as it wasn’t later in Ephesians e.g. Ephesians 4.17ff). In fact, drawing it would appear on part of Leviticus, the conduct of included Gentiles is expected to change and to conform with other expectations of the Christian community they have joined: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to

⁹ See his discussion in Turner, *Christian Ethics and the Church* (Baker Academic, 2015), especially chpt 4.

idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality” (Act 15.29).¹⁰

In summary, the biblical picture from both Old & New Testaments is clear and neatly summed up by the great missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin:

No one, whoever he or she be, can establish claims on God’s grace which exclude others. God’s electing grace calls into being a people charged with the responsibility of being the bearers of his universal salvation. He commits himself to them. But they can never establish exclusive claims on him...God’s electing grace, his choosing of some to be the bearers of his salvation for all...can never become the ground for making claims against God which exclude others...His grace is free and sovereign, and there is no place for an exclusive claim on his grace, a claim by which others are excluded.¹¹

What’s So Bad About Exclusivity and Exclusion?

The Scriptural and gospel basis for the significance of inclusion having been sketched, it is important to note another important but seemingly opposing strand of the biblical witness: a clear concern for purity, identity and boundaries that leads to limits and exclusions both from and within God’s people. A temptation among those eager to emphasise “inclusivity” is to view this simply as an Old Testament theme that is superseded by Christ and the gospel of grace. However, as we have seen, there are other strong “inclusive” elements in the Old Testament and the New Testament is also not as uniformly “inclusive” as many would like.

Christ himself, according to the gospels, had a ministry marked not only by welcome but also by warning. While “many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” it is also the case that “the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth” (Matthew 8.11-12). Wright again neatly captures the tension –

Jesus’ message, so far from omitting or toning down the warning of judgment, seems from a wide variety of texts to have emphasized it continually...Israel’s boundaries were thus radically redrawn by Jesus, so as to include those who

¹⁰ I have discussed this, and its relevance to current debates about sexuality in Andrew Goddard, *God, Gentiles and Gay Christians: Acts 15 and Change in the Church* (Grove Books, 2001).

¹¹ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (SPCK, 1989), pp. 85-6.

‘repented’ according to his own redefinition, but to exclude those who did not... Those who failed to heed Jesus’ warnings would discover themselves in the position that they thought was reserved for the pagans.¹²

This experience of exclusion was not simply left to take place at some future judgment. It was also to shape the conduct of the community gathered around Jesus. As Matthew 18 makes clear, when someone sins against another and it cannot be resolved by due process the final outcome may be exclusion – “if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18.17) - although Hays is right to remind us that “Jesus notoriously sought out fellowship with tax collectors and sinners”.¹³ So although this is not to result in treating someone as a pariah, it is clear that, in Hays’ words again, “The final step of expulsion of the unrepentant sinner from the community indicates how seriously the imperatives of righteousness are to be taken. One cannot be an unrepentant sinner and remain within the community of Jesus’ disciples”.¹⁴

In his study, *Exclusion & Embrace*, Miroslav Volf is therefore quite clear that we must not paint a false picture of Jesus in our desire to be inclusive:

Jesus was no prophet of “inclusion”, for whom the chief virtue was acceptance and the cardinal vice “intolerance”. Instead, he was the bringer of “grace”, who not only scandalously included “anyone” in the fellowship of “open commensality”, but made the “intolerant” demand of repentance and the “condescending” offer of forgiveness. The mission of Jesus consisted not simply in re-naming the behavior that was falsely labelled “sinful” but also in re-making the people who have actually sinned or have suffered misfortune.¹⁵

That this was the pattern of inclusion taken seriously in the apostolic church is clear from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. There, faced with a congregation that happily includes within it someone engaged in serious sexual immorality, Paul is quite clear as to the necessary response. Drawing on the Deuteronomic response in Old Testament Israel, but reconfiguring its rationale and form in the light of Christ, his call is clear: “Expel the wicked person from among you” (1 Corinthians 5.13).

The same concern to guard the boundaries and make visible the transformative nature of the Christian community is particularly clear in the post-apostolic period. As

¹² Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp. 327, 329.

¹³ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (T&T Clark, 1997), p. 102.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, (Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 72-3.

Alan Kreider has shown,¹⁶ catechism focussed on Jesus' ethical teaching was of vital importance in transforming the lifestyles of those who sought entry through baptism into the early Christian community. Perhaps the best example of what this meant is the early 3rd century Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus whose expectations of those coming forward for entry into the catechumenate hardly fits our current understanding of what it means to be an "inclusive church":

They will inquire concerning the works and occupations of those who are brought forward for instruction. If someone is a pimp who supports prostitutes, he shall cease or shall be rejected. If someone is a sculptor or a painter, let them be taught not to make idols. Either let them cease or let them be rejected. If someone is an actor or does shows in the theater, either he shall cease or he shall be rejected...A charioteer, likewise, or one who takes part in the games, or one who goes to the games, he shall cease or he shall be rejected. If someone is a gladiator, or one who teaches those among the gladiators how to fight, or a hunter who is in the wild beast shows in the arena, or a public official who is concerned with gladiator shows, either he shall cease, or he shall be rejected.¹⁷

The rulings of later church councils show a similar concern to exclude certain ways of life and patterns of behaviour from the common life of the Christian church.¹⁸ Any "ethic of inclusivity" shaped by Scripture and Christian tradition needs, therefore, to be able to account for this other strand of the biblical witness and its significance in later Christian practice, particularly in the early centuries of the church when, as now in the secular west, the church was a minority voice in a culture and among power structures largely alienated from a Christian worldview and ethic.

Contemporary Inclusivity: A Critique

When we turn from Scripture to the focus of most current church debates about inclusivity we see a significant shift: current controversies tend to focus not on inclusion into God's people but rather on challenging exclusion from office within

¹⁶ Alan Kreider, 'Baptism, Catechism, and the Eclipse of Jesus' Teaching in Early Christianity' *Tyndale Bulletin*, 47.2, 315-48. Online at http://www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/tynbull_1996_47_2_06_kreider_baptism_earlychrsitianity.pdf

¹⁷ Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 16.2-7

¹⁸ An online search of these Councils reveals that 'excommunicate' and its cognates or synonyms are among the most common words in the conciliar documents!

God's people.¹⁹ This is not an insignificant shift of focus and gives the first pointer to an ethic of inclusivity in danger of being shaped more by our social context than biblical theology. This danger is also signalled in making appeals for "justice" to order the Church's own common life which never define "justice" and so raise the question whether this "justice" is being detached from the gracious justice of God revealed in Christ and instead being shaped more by the liberal understanding of justice, rights and inclusivity in contemporary political society.

Miroslav Volf, drawing on the analysis of Alan Wolfe and Niklas Luhmann, has argued that we need to be aware of a modern, democratic Western narrative of inclusion that contains its own inclusivist imperative:

Every person must have equal access to education, to all available jobs, to political decision-making, and the like. The history of modern democracies is about progressive and ever expanding inclusion, about "taking in rather than...keeping out".²⁰

When its focus is on, for example, ordination, there is a strong *prima facie* case that the recent Christian ethic of inclusivity is shaped, at least in part, by this modern Western narrative of inclusion. This is given further support by the fact that the biblical text does not relate its own clear and strong ethic of inclusion to its accounts of who should be recognised as exercising authority in the Christian community. It approaches that question from a quite different angle. The New Testament – most notably in the Pastoral Epistles – sees the ordering of the Christian community as primarily a divine task and relates human judgments in large part to an assessment of the pattern of life of those considered for leadership. It is, in other words, a community ethic and a vision of the good, as revealed by the word and work of God, rather than an ethic of inclusivity that is determinative. Those included as leaders of the community are expected to exemplify a particular way of life, for example "the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-

¹⁹ The original founding statement of "Inclusive Church" within the Church of England read "We affirm that the Church's mission, in obedience to Holy Scripture, is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in every generation. We acknowledge that this is Good News for people regardless of their sex, race or sexual orientation. We believe that, in order to strengthen the Gospel's proclamation of justice to the world, and for the greater glory of God, the Church's own common life must be justly ordered. To that end, we call on our Church to live out the promise of the Gospel; to celebrate the diverse gifts of all members of the body of Christ; and in the ordering of our common life to open the ministries of deacon, priest and bishop to those so called to serve by God, regardless of their sex, race or sexual orientation". The statement and background is summarised at <http://www.stmw.org/inclusive-church.html>

²⁰ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 58-9.

controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money..." (1 Timothy 3.2-3).

This emphasis is in sharp contrast to modern secular expectations of leadership which generally determine suitability by technical ability to perform particular functions and view other matters, including those of moral standing and personal character, as largely irrelevant. The rationale for this secular non-moral view of leadership qualification is in turn based on a much wider liberal vision of society and the good. This vision has in turn shaped much contemporary "ethics of inclusion" and, through that, elements of the debate over sexuality in the churches.

D. Stephen Long defines "liberalism" as a political theory and practice that privileges individual possession over communal ownership and seeks to protect individual possessions from common interests. He demonstrates how this approach increasingly extends to more and more of life, discussing economics, education and politics in order to show how no "common end" should be allowed to define our life. The basis for this is a conviction that "All common ends are *a priori* identified as 'totalitarianisms'. Each individual must decide for himself or herself what his or her end is".²¹ This is what Scott Bader-Saye, drawing on Alasdair Macintyre, describes as the centrality of voluntarism in our society – the triumph of freedom as individual choice or individual assertions of desire:

The issue of what ought to be desired or what choices ought to be made is privatised in modern liberal democracies as a way of removing such volatile discussions from the public arena. A certain kind of peace results from making any substantive determinations about the good or the right a matter of private decision... Liberal democracy names that polity in which people can decide for themselves what constitutes "the good life" and pursue it as they wish, so long as they do not infringe on others.²²

Clearly in such a society it is impossible to lay down substantive moral requirements for one's community's leaders. Rather, freedom of choice is dominant and we have the primacy of individual assertions of desire that often then get translated into the language of individual rights that the community must formally recognise. To affirm

²¹ D. Stephen Long, "Ecclesial Disobedience or Ecclesial Subordination to Liberal Institutions?", in Maxie D. Dunnam & H. Newton Malony (eds), *Staying the Course: Supporting the Church's Position on Homosexuality* (Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 44.

²² Scott Bader-Saye, *Church & Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Westview Press, 1999), p. 7.

and seek to implement a common vision of the human good is, in this context, to disregard the diversity of different moral choices in any society. It risks excluding people and/or limiting the freedom of those who refuse to conform to the common vision.

But, of course, the problem is that the liberal alternative is not – despite its protestations – value-free. As Ronald Beiner writes

To forego a substantive theory of the human good in favour of consumer freedom is already to exclude an entire way of life postulated upon non-consumerist conceptions of human fulfilment, and so to favour a particular vision of the human good, thereby contradicting the neutralist presumption. Thus, paradoxically, to say there is no need to adjudicate between rival conceptions of the good is already to yield, by default, to a particular vision of personal and political good, namely that of consumerist liberalism.²³

Within the Christian church, an ethic of inclusivity shaped by this liberal philosophy creates exactly the same problems. It imposes, surreptitiously, its own vision of the good and this in part explains the ferociousness of some of the church conflicts over sexuality. It is not simply the sensitivities and prejudices related to the presenting issue but rather a deeper political – and theological - question about the identity and common life of the church focussed on incompatible understandings of “inclusivity”. Few are going to favour exclusion and intolerance over “inclusion” but as Long puts it, in a passage worth quoting at length, “inclusion” as widely understood is not such a neutral and positive term

The problem with being an “inclusivist” church is that those “included” are only those who are committed to a vision of the church as “open” and “inclusive”. This becomes a *common* confession defining our membership. We must *believe* in inclusivity... Those who do not believe in the “inclusive” vision of the Church are slowly but decisively being excluded, particularly from the leadership of the Church. The fact that many in the leadership cannot see the irony in this exclusion based on a dogmatic belief in inclusivity makes one wonder how completely the liberal tradition, with its hidden exclusionary foundation, has been embodied in the life of the Church. If a believer thinks of Methodism as a holiness sect striving for perfection based on a common life,

²³ Ronald Beiner, *What's the matter with Liberalism?* (University of California Press, 1992), p. 8. Quoted in Scott Bader-Saye, *Church & Israel after Christendom*, pp. 7-8.

this ecclesiology cannot, ipso facto, be “included” once we begin with the notion of the Church as “open” and “inclusive”; for the latter, in keeping with the liberal tradition, refuses to exercise discernment on what is keeping with our common life, except for that act of discernment that categorically states we must not judge about common ends.²⁴

Towards an Alternative Biblical Ethic of Inclusivity

Having delineated some problems with a certain ethic of inclusivity, can an alternative ethic of inclusivity be formulated and what light might it shed on the church’s ongoing struggles about sexuality? Perhaps one key is a passage often cited in the homosexuality debates and the subject of much heated debate about philology – 1 Corinthians 6.9-11. Paul here opens with a warning of exclusion – “the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God”. He then lists examples of those threatened by this, apparently including homosexual offenders. The key for any ethics of inclusivity is, however, verse 11 – “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”.

The shocking opening words of the verse show the “inclusive” nature of the Corinthian church and of Paul’s missionary church-planting. This has already been seen in relation to social standing in the opening chapter (1.26ff). Now it is seen in relation to the patterns of life and moral character of those who are now part of the body of Christ. Paul has listed a set of vices – sexually immoral, thieves, greedy, drunkards etc. He then writes, as Thiselton translates – “**this** is the kind of thing that you were”.²⁵ The fact that they were “this kind of thing” did not, however, prevent their inclusion into Christ. Paul’s three-fold description of what happened to include them enables us to provide more shape to a Christian ethic of inclusivity – “you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified”. We need, in other words, to root an ecclesial ethic of inclusivity in baptism & conversion, in holiness, and in justification.

Baptism and conversion

²⁴ Long, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-3. More succinctly, this understanding is captured in what may be an apocryphal account of a conservative delegate being told at a General Convention that it would be better if they left the church so it could be more inclusive.

²⁵ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 453.

The aorist “you were washed” is often understood as a baptismal aorist but Thiselton, drawing on Dunn, has warned against too narrow a reading and prefers to speak of “conversion-initiation”.²⁶ Taking baptism first - for the language of “washing” to my mind makes that central – it is important to recall Paul’s wider theology of baptism and its ethical import, perhaps most fully enunciated in the sixth chapter of Romans: “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death?” (Romans 6.2,3).

An ethic of inclusion which recognises that inclusion is by means of dying with Christ in baptism stands in sharp contrast to the loose popular sense of “baptising” something meaning “to accept or embrace it as it stands”. From a New Testament perspective, inclusion comes about only through death and resurrection not through affirmation of one’s existing state. Hence Paul’s use of the past tense to the Corinthians – “such *were* some of you”.

Anyone in any group – Jew, Gentile, rich, poor, black, white, male, female, gay, straight – or involved in any sin – greed, sexual immorality, drunkenness - is able to be included in Christ. But their inclusion involves not the affirmation of them or of their group or of their pattern of life as it stands. Rather it involves their stripping off their whole way of life and a giving of themselves over to death in order to receive the gift of new life, the gift of being re-clothed in Christ to use the imagery of Ephesians 4.20-24.²⁷ The fundamental equality that there is in Christ is an equality based on entry into Christ by means of union with Christ in his death. So Paul’s famous charter of equality in Galatians is firmly set in the context of baptism:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ (Galatians 3.26-8).

In other words, inclusion is not simply inclusion as one is. It is inclusion *in Christ* and this is by means of baptismal death. Tim Bradshaw, in his important article, “Baptism and Inclusivity in the Church” is thus quite right to warn against misreadings of baptism found in certain ethics of inclusivity –

²⁶ Thiselton, pp. 453-4. Hays claims that “Paul alludes here to their baptism” (Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, John Knox Press, 1997, p. 97) but Fee states that “Paul is not here concerned with the Christian initiatory rite, but with the spiritual transformation made possible through Christ and effected by the Spirit” (Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 247).

²⁷ For discussion of this see Turner, *Christian Ethics and the Church*, pp. 97-103.

Baptism does more than signify the fact of egalitarianism before God and in Christ. It does not simply signify the fact that in principle it is open to all humanity...Baptism concerns death to the self, sharing the death of the Lord. Baptism into Christ means entry into his death, not merely being accepted as we are. Again, open candidature for baptism must not become its meaning, indeed cannot possibly if we attend to the apostolic witness; the very last meaning envisaged is endorsement of pre-baptismal life and lifestyle.²⁸

This therefore leads to a quite different ethic of inclusivity. A danger in much current discussion is a belief that we can only truly come to know God, humanity and the good by including and receiving within the church the experience and self-identity of those who hitherto have been excluded. Indeed, for some, it is by means of this form of special revelation that the Spirit leads us into all truth. Inclusion *by baptism* points us away from ourselves and all our human diversity (both created and fallen) as the source of revelation and identity and directs us instead to Christ. In the words of the St Andrew's Day Statement:

“In him” (ie Christ) – and in him alone – “we know both God and human nature as they truly are”; and so in him alone we know ourselves as we truly are. There can be no description of human reality, in general or in particular, outside the reality in Christ. We must be on guard, therefore, against constructing any other ground for our identities than the redeemed humanity given us in him.²⁹

The wider allusion to conversion argued for by Dunn must also be incorporated in any ethic of inclusivity. Again, one of the underlying conflicts in disagreements over sexuality is found in deeper disagreements about the nature of Christian conversion and hence of Christian mission and the relationship of the gospel and culture. The recognition that inclusion is effected by conversion emphasises that while there are dangers in defining boundaries, there is a decisive distinction that must be drawn and that being included within the church leads to a shift in one's whole identity and outlook. One of the best definitions of this is given by Lesslie Newbigin:

In the missionary encounter between the gospel and our culture, the first party will be represented by a community for which the Bible is the determinative

²⁸ Tim Bradshaw, “Baptism and Inclusivity in the Church” in R.E.O. White and Stanley E. Porter, *Baptism, The New Testament and the Church*, (Continuum, 1999), pp. 457-8.

²⁹ The St Andrew's Day Statement, in Tim Bradshaw (ed), *The Way Forward?* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), p. 7. Online at http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/110-02_102.pdf

clue to the character and activity of the one whose purpose is the final meaning of history. The boundary between this community and the society for which the Bible is not determinative is marked by the paradigm shift that is traditionally called conversion.³⁰

Crossing the boundary and becoming included in Christ therefore re-shapes one's whole way of life and inclusion *by conversion* entails within it obedience. As Newbigin again puts it – “To be converted in any sense which is true to the Bible is something which involves the whole person. It is a total change of direction which includes both the inner reorientation of the heart and mind and the outward reorientation of conduct in all areas of life”.³¹

Properly understood, such conversion effects the same self-annihilation that is symbolised in baptism. At the heart of conversion is repentance, language which speaks of turning away from our past decisions and identities. But if this is genuine repentance and conversion then it involves death as O'Donovan vividly demonstrates in his discussion of reason and the will and the work of the Spirit in restoring our access to reality:

Man must be freed to cease willing his own past. But as willing his own past is, in itself, a natural thing to do, a guarantee of the coherence and integrity in our purpose that is indispensable to our fulfilment as moral beings, that “freedom” is, in one sense, death. If we cease to reinforce the fundamental choices of our past with the continuing affirmation of our will, we abandon altogether that “I” which we were in the way of realizing; it becomes to us the “old man” who, as Saint Paul says, is crucified with Christ.³²

The language of “you were washed” therefore points us to the fact that inclusion for Paul is a transforming event, symbolised in baptism, in which the person enters the body of Christ by dying to self. In conversion, the Christian believer turns away from existing identities and patterns of life and gives herself over to be identified with Christ and to find herself in Him. This in turn explains why, in the previous chapter of 1 Corinthians, and elsewhere in his letters, Paul can combine a strong emphasis on inclusivity with demands to expel those whose whole pattern of life demonstrates a

³⁰ Lesslie Newbigin in *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 61-2. Quoted in George Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 158.

³¹ Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (SPCK, 1995), pp. 150-1. Cited in Hunsberger, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

³² Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection & Moral Order* (IVP, 1994), p. 112.

rejection of this pattern of baptismal inclusion and identity-formation. It also explains the rationale of texts such as Hippolytus that demand the renunciation of certain professions and patterns of life on the part of those serious about Christian faith.

Sanctified

The second verb Paul uses to describe the change that has happened to those included despite having lived in a manner which would exclude them from God's kingdom is "sanctified". "Saints" is how Paul has described the Corinthians in his opening (1.2) and the theme of holiness has already appeared in the letter. In describing them as "set apart as holy", Paul again stresses that their inclusion and transformation is the result of God's work, an emphasis highlighted in our earlier discussion of biblical inclusion. John Webster's study of holiness emphasises this in his proposition that "The sanctification of the Christian is the work of the Holy Trinity" and that the active life of holy fellowship is "grounded in the electing, reconciling and perfecting work of Father, Son and Spirit". Although this is in one sense a completed work, it is a work which continues to shape the Christian's life and so Webster emphasises that this work has a goal and purpose – it is a work of the Holy Trinity "in which the reconciled sinner is renewed for the active life of holy fellowship with God". This life "is the work of faith...at every moment characterised by mortification and vivification", and "actual as freedom, obedience and love".³³ Inclusion by means of being sanctified will, in other words, generate an ethic of inclusivity in which inclusion is empowering, renewing, and transformative inclusion.

If the language of being washed clean emphasises how inclusion is brought about through a break with one's own past, this description highlights that there is also a break with one's culture and surroundings from which one has been "set apart". Those who are now included were like everyone else. They have now been set apart by God and are, to import Peter's language, to understand themselves as "resident aliens" (1 Peter 2.11).

In relation to an ethics of inclusivity, two central points need to be noted. First, having been set apart by God and included in his people should not be expressed by withdrawal from, and the exclusion of, wider society. It would appear there are concerns about this in Corinth that Paul has to correct: they can still associate with

³³ John Webster, *Holiness* (SCM Press, 2003), pp. 78-9.

those in the world who are immoral and greedy (1 Corinthians 5.10) and indeed when they are united to unbelievers in the “one flesh” bond of marriage they should if possible remain married and thereby “sanctify” their spouse and their children (7.14). Their “setting apart” is – as with baptism – setting apart *in Christ* who Paul has earlier described as their “holiness” or “sanctification” (1.30). This setting apart as holy is not, therefore, to be seen as a generating a pattern of life that excludes others but one which – following Christ’s own mission – welcomes the “unholy” that they in turn may be included through being washed, sanctified and justified.

Secondly, however, the Christian community must not take its own identity from the wider society but from God and his sanctifying work. This has, of course, been where historically the church has often failed and allowed itself to be shaped instead by the dominant ideologies of society and politics. These ideologies have then led the church to reject God’s inclusive mission and conform to the culture from which by God’s work they had been “set apart”. While some contemporary critiques of the period of Christendom are in danger of exaggerating the extent to which this has marred Christian history, in the last century the example of the German Christians in Nazi Germany or the Dutch Reformed Church in apartheid South Africa are stark reminders of how easily the church can become captive to, rather than set apart, from the world.

The Barmen Declaration made in the first of these contexts, cites Paul’s earlier words, “Christ Jesus, whom God has made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” (1 Corinthians 1:30) and continues –

As Jesus Christ is God's assurance of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, in the same way and with the same seriousness he is also God's mighty claim upon our whole life. Through him befalls us a joyful deliverance from the godless fetters of this world for a free, grateful service to his creatures. We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords -- areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him.

The irony is that in rightly critiquing exclusionary aspects of the church’s life, many of them developed within a Christendom model, there can now develop understandings of inclusivity which fall into the same Christendom trap as they either consciously or subconsciously accept a liberal voluntarist understanding. In so doing they embrace an ethic of inclusivity that effectively excludes those who seek a

common moral life defined by God in Christ and offer instead a new form of civic religion for post-Christian, post-Christendom societies shaped by secular liberalism.

Justified

In an Oxford University Sermon entitled “The Reformation Continued”, the Revd Dr Giles Fraser, one of the founders of Inclusive Church, claimed Martin Luther and the Reformation for his inclusive cause and for the wider revisionist cause in debates on sexuality.³⁴ At its heart was his claim that “Luther’s theological breakthrough was to describe a wholly non-abusive God, a God who loves His children gratuitously and not on the basis of merit”. In contrast, he claimed that orthodox church teaching forced gay people to deny and hide the truth about themselves or to change what they are in an abusive manner. It therefore needed to be challenged with the fact that,

Being saved is evangelical language for describing the new life that opens up beyond the censure of an abusive God. The sense of finally facing the truth, the sense of admitting it to others, the sense of being accepted as one is, the sense of being released from the burden of impossible condemnation: being saved is an experience emotionally identical to coming out of the closet...

Fraser therefore concluded that “there is some deep connection between the lyrics of one gay anthem: ‘I am what I am, and what I am, needs no excuses’ and Martin Luther’s: ‘Here I stand, I can do no other’.”

But can a Lutheran, an evangelical, a Pauline, understanding of justification be expressed simply in terms of “being accepted as one is” and compared to coming out of the closet into a truly inclusive church singing “I am what I am, and what I am, needs no excuses”? Or is another song closer to the truth – “Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me...Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind”?

What is starkly omitted from Fraser’s sermon – literally if one does a word search – is “faith” and “Christ”. We are, therefore, here far from the vision of Luther and justification of the sinner by faith in Christ. In his study of justification and sanctification, Lutheran dogmatician Oswald Bayer is quite clear - “The need that lies deeply within each of us to prove our right to exist – not simply to be there, but to gain recognition by what we can afford and accomplish – is put to death”.³⁵ He

³⁴ The sermon, preached on 9th May 2004, is available online at

<http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000600.html>

³⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification* (Eerdmans, 2003), p. 21.

continues by quoting Luther on our fallen nature that “is very unwilling to die and to suffer, and it is a bitter holy day for nature to cease from its own work and be dead”.³⁶ And yet according to Luther it must die because our righteousness is not our own, something we have in and of ourselves, but rather an alien righteousness – the righteousness of Christ - which is God’s gift that becomes ours through self-forgetful faith in him.

While we are now rightly cautious of merging Lutheran and Pauline views on justification, on the central point here there is agreement as is perhaps most evident by reference to Paul’s discussion of justification in Philippians 3. There we see a form of justification that he contrasts with the “you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” found in 1 Corinthians 6.11. It takes the form of confidence in “the flesh”. But this is not simply “flesh” as in sinful “works of the flesh” such as those Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 6. It is rather such things as “circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3.5). If anyone could say “I am what I am, and what I am needs no excuses” then it was Paul but rather he says “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ and be found in him” (Philippians 3.8-9).

The same pattern discovered in relation to baptism and washing is here found in relation to justification in Paul. Graham Redding, in his discussion of Phil 3, sums it up: “There is, therefore, no place in this new life in Christ for clinging to a personal identity that has been forged under the old regime. It is all crap compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ”.³⁷ His application of this in relation to current debates about sexuality and inclusivity stands in sharp contrast to that offered by Fraser but is indisputably closer both to Paul and the Reformers:

One does not need to dwell for long on this fact to detect the critique that is thereby offered in the context of the current debate of the oft-heard call to exalt and celebrate one’s sexual identity in and of itself and even to give it

³⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 21, n. 10.

³⁷ Graham Redding, “Being in Christ and Living by the Spirit: A Basis For Understanding Human Identity and Freedom” in Murray Rae & Graham Redding (eds), *More Than A Single Issue* (Australian Theological Forum, 2002), pp. 216-7.

divine sanction. Such a call has no theological warrant, no matter how highly important and prized one's sexual identity might be.³⁸

The contrast – and again this highlights some of the deeper theological, ecclesiological and soteriological questions at stake in parts of current debates about sexuality and inclusivity – is between a theology of inclusivity that borders on justification in oneself (“what I am needs no excuses”) and one that centres on sinful humanity's justification in Christ. Paul's focus here in 1 Corinthians reminds us that any theology and ethic of inclusivity must be centred on Christ and be shaped by the biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification summed up by T F Torrance:

We appear before God not in our own name, not in our own significance, not in virtue of our own acts of confession, contrition, worship and thanksgiving, but solely in the name of Christ and solely in virtue of what he has done in our name and on our behalf, and in our stead...He only represents humanity. He only has an offering with which to appear before God...Nothing in our hands we bring – simply to the Cross we cling.³⁹

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the contemporary advocates of an “inclusive church” are highlighting an important biblical theme: God's mission from the call of Abraham and fulfilled in Christ is to include within his people those who are currently outside it and even actively excluded by some within it. In relation to human sexuality, however, although appeal to inclusion can challenge the church's un-Christlike failures when it has excluded sexual minorities it cannot give us the shape of a Christian sexual ethic. The problem in much current language of “inclusion”, especially among those who argue it does provide a basis to revise a traditional sexual ethic, is in fact even deeper and much more theologically serious. This widespread understanding of what it means to be inclusive and have a gospel of inclusion is not only too shaped by secular Western liberal social and political philosophy, it is also often simply the new clothing of the liberal theology famously summed up nearly eighty years ago by Richard H. Niebhur in his *The Kingdom of God in America*: “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁹ T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction*, p. 167. Quoted in Rae & Redding (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 264.

of a Christ without a Cross”.⁴⁰ It is clothing which, in the language of Ephesians, we need to take off.

In contrast, a Christo-centric biblical theology and ethic of inclusion, such as that sketched here on the basis of 1 Corinthians 6.9-11, emphasises that inclusion is not ultimately the work of the church but the work of the triune God. It is a work in which anyone at all – whatever their identity, whatever their sins - is promised inclusion and rescue from the judgment of exclusion from the Kingdom of God through union with Christ by being crucified with him in baptism, though being set apart from sin by the sanctifying power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and through being judged righteous through faith in Christ which rejects all self-justification and, by becoming like him in his death, counts as rubbish all else that might give us identity, security and standing before God.

This, I believe, gives the structure for a theology of inclusivity, which is not simply, in Philip’s words describing The Episcopal Church, “the theology of divine acceptance (rather than redemption)”.⁴¹ Instead it places central “the sort of meeting with Christ that in traditional Christian terms leads through faith, forgiveness, judgment, repentance, and amendment of life” and keeps central “the atoning power of Christ’s death, faith, justification, repentance and holiness of life”.⁴² Here there is radical inclusion but, shaped by Scripture and the Great Tradition, “God’s loving embrace is never divorced from his sacrificial act of atonement, his judgment upon all unrighteousness, and his call to holiness of life”.⁴³ This theology of inclusivity is one that generates an ecclesial and missional ethic in which “the church is a community elected and called out by God from the peoples of the earth for a particular purpose” which is not simply to tell people they are included but rather “to bear witness to the saving event of Christ’s life, death and resurrection and to call people to believe, repent, and live in an entirely different manner”.⁴⁴ An ethic in which – as Philip calls for at the end of *Christian Ethics and the Church* – the heart is love of the God whose mission of inclusion we are caught up in when like the old Ugandan woman who taught Philip to understand the first commandment as the first, we can say as a truly inclusive church “this is the kind of thing we were...but we were washed, we were

⁴⁰ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Harper and Row, 1959 [1937]), p. 193.

⁴¹ Turner, “ECUSA’s God” in Turner and Radner (eds), *The Fate of Communion*, p. 246.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

sanctified, we were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” because we have handed over the centre of our old way of life in exchange for a new one - united by water and the Spirit to the crucified and risen Christ.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Turner, *Christian Ethics and the Church*, pp. 268-9.