

The faithful followers of Jesus Christ will attract a lot of controversy and abuse. The Christ we follow was called blasphemous, irreligious, scandalous, libertarian, demonized, and a threat to public order.

This story from ACTS is impossible to make any sense of unless you have at least a little understanding of Jewish religious history and customs. They are what the argument in the story is over. Peter is accused of defying important customs and thereby putting the authenticity of their religion at risk, and he has to defend himself against those charges.

In the history of Israel, going back to ancient times, the Jews have always been living in a multi-cultural society where their religion and culture were practised alongside others. And frequently they have been under the thumb of some other nation, first Egypt, then Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia, then Greece, then Rome, and recently Germany. They have had several long periods of exile from the land of Israel.

They are the only minority ethnic group in the world who have managed to maintain their culture and religion through such a history. Every other similar group has been gradually conformed into the dominant cultures until nothing distinctive remained.

There is a reason for this cultural survival. When the Jews went into exile in Babylon about 600 years before Jesus, they knew that it was a major threat to their identity, so they set about putting in place some customs and social laws that would mark them off from other people and keep them distinctive.

These customs fell into four main areas

- Sabbath keeping, very strict about what you can and can't do on a Saturday.
- Food laws. - Circumcision. - marriage and social contact laws, especially eating with others.

Now all these things seem a little strange to us, but they worked. They served as the boundary markers between the Jews, and everybody else. And any group that wants to survive has to protect its boundary markers, the things that keep it distinctive. For the Jews, these boundary marking practices became deeply ingrained in the psyche.

Go back to our story, you can see why Peter was so resistant when he was told in a dream to eat unclean animals. The idea was abhorrent to his being. He would have felt lightning bolt would strike him if he did it. But the voice of God tells him, "If God says it's clean, who are you to say otherwise. Don't call it profane if God says it's good." Even with instruction from God, it took three times before Peter would eat.

The next day he discovers that God was preparing him for something. He receives an invitation to dinner in the home of gentile people, who the customs said he couldn't eat with. They wanted to hear about God from him. So having been prepared in the dream, he went. But when he got back to the church council at Jerusalem had a problem with it, and Peter is called to account for his outrageous scandalous behaviour. People think he's sold out and abandoned his faith. They think he's behaved in a grossly offensive and irreligious manner. And Peter has to explain that God is changing the rules. The times are a changing.

One way of describing the history of the church is as one long struggle over the boundary markers. Who's in and who's out. Pretty much every major dispute in the story of the church, has been about whether certain beliefs or certain behaviours meant you were un-Christian or not. Some of the earliest of those fights in the Christian church happened while the New Testament was still being written and you can see some of them being fought out in the Bible, in the letters of Paul.

Others were fought out in the major Church councils. Things like the importance of believing the doctrine of the trinity were argued over endlessly. The reformation was a major spat over who was in and who was out and how you came to get in or out. In recent centuries we've had some big ones. In America there was a long war about whether a slave could be accepted in the church, and then as slavery was recognized as the evil it was there was an argument over whether a slave owner could be accepted in the church.

As we have broken down another barrier, we have in fact become more Christian, and that we need to be constantly vigilant that we are not putting up new ones. And we need to be constantly listening to the voices of anyone who feels alienated from us or excluded by us to see whether we in fact have some barriers up that we were unaware of.

The Christ we have chosen to follow was, more than anything else, on about inclusiveness. His message was that anyone can be close to God and accepted by God, and that those who had been most excluded by social and religious customs were most welcome. If you read the gospels, you will find that the things that Jesus was repeatedly in trouble over, and that he was eventually executed because of, were mainly about this.

And his practice of accepting people and advocating acceptance doesn't seem to have been as conditional as we often think. Certainly Jesus was someone who advocated repentance and change and growth. But he doesn't seem to have ever made it a condition of acceptance. Jesus is accused of partying with prostitutes and sinners, not ex-prostitutes and ex-sinners. And in one particular argument with some religious leaders who were specialists in deciding who to keep out, he said that the prostitutes and tax-collectors were going into the Kingdom of God before them. And once again he didn't say repentant ex-prostitutes. He was saying that a person who is still involved in prostitution has a better chance of being accepted by God than a pious religious leader who is too judgmental and condemning.

The gospels contain story after story of Jesus accepting people who had been pushed aside by church and society. Prostitutes, tax collectors, publicans, the blind and disabled, the mentally ill, the foreigners. Again and again every boundary is pushed back or broken down. Were women excluded from participating in religious life? Jesus welcomes them into his circle of disciples. Were those of other races considered second rate to the "chosen" people? Jesus goes to them to preach about acceptance by God. Now if all these laws and customs functioned as boundary markers and were about maintaining the identity of the community, you can see why Jesus was unpopular. If we follow Jesus in breaking down all the boundaries how will we know who is Christian and who isn't, who is part of God's family and who's not. If they're all gone, who are we? The same fear worried many around Jesus as he dismantled all the boundaries. What distinguishes us?

who are we? How are we distinguished from those who haven't responded to the grace of God?

And Jesus gives just one answer, and one only. "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." That's it. There is no other distinguishing feature that is not directly related to that. Yes we are a people of justice, we are a people of mercy, we are a people of compassion. All that is love in action. "Love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." This is the boundary marker. Any other boundary marker that is not directly related to this is not Christian.

And so Peter when he reported back to the church council at Jerusalem had to say, "I know these people were supposed to be outsiders based on all we had ever known, but God was clearly at work among them, and if God accepts them and they accept God, then I reckon the rest of us better get out of the way and let God's will be done."

There is no other distinction. Jesus said, "By their fruit you will know them." If the fruit is love, then they are living in response to the Spirit of God, because God is love.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.