

Strangers in Our Midst

Acts 11:1-11; Ephesians 2:11-14

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November 24, 2019

The New Testament describes the early church as a dynamic community that positively influenced the surrounding society and addressed issues of imbalance and moral decay. Jesus entrusted the apostles with leadership of the church, and through them the world was turned right-side-up. The church was inclusive to Jews and Gentiles, and reached out to people everywhere as the gospel was spread to the ends of the earth. But today, how welcoming are we to the strangers in our midst? In Acts 1:4-5 Jesus tells the disciples to wait until the Holy Spirit comes upon them. The Spirit will empower the disciples to proclaim Christ to all people. However, this was not what the disciples had in mind. In v. 6 they ask Jesus when Israel will be restored. They are more concerned with the political restoration of the nation of Israel than the growth of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus gently corrects them by shifting their focus from Israel to the ends of the earth. Before He restores and reigns over Israel, Jesus wants the disciples to witness to Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles in the power of the Holy Spirit. Likewise we are called to witness to those around us, and we have the same Holy Spirit within us to empower and embolden us (Romans 8:26). And like the disciples, we are called to reach out not only to those who are similar to us, but to the strangers in our midst. These may be the youth whom we must try to understand and compromise with. These might be people with different lifestyles who don't go to church regularly, whom we must reach out to and encourage. They might be people who returned to the church after falling away temporarily, whom we must not judge but rather welcome back. For those who are different from us, let us not use derogatory or judgmental language but welcome them as our own. This is how the church should treat strangers.

After the end of apartheid in South Africa, the community of Hillbrow went from a thriving cosmopolitan community with the highest density of churches to a hive of immorality and crime. The reason for the decline was that rather than welcoming and engaging newcomers to the community, the residents decided to move out. Christians are called to be a light that shines in the midst of darkness, not to run away from the dark places. It's not just about direct evangelism, but our light shines often most brightly when we lead by example. The power of the gospel should be clearly visible in our lives. We shouldn't isolate ourselves and remove our children from public schools. Rather we should be amongst the community and influence them

morally. I knew a Muslim refugee that was prejudiced against Christians, but eventually he and his family became Christian after experiencing the warmth and welcoming spirit of Christians. He went on to reach out to other Muslims in his country. This is the power that we can have if we welcome the strangers in our midst and show the love of Christ to others.

In Ephesians 2:11-14, Paul doesn't address specific sins but rather he wants to expand the horizons of the congregation. Jesus took the Gentiles who were far from God, and the Jews who were nearer to God, and made them one in Himself. Through Jesus, both are united and brought closer to God than the nation of Israel ever was. They are united in Christ. The phrase "in Christ" is repeated several times in this chapter. This is an important concept. When we are in Christ, we are no longer Jew or Gentile. Our identity is not in our culture or race, but in Christ. We don't represent ourselves individually, but we represent Christ collectively, being united in purpose and identity. Later in Ephesians 6, when Paul talks about the armor of God, he only mentions armor that protects our front. This is first because we are to be ever facing forward, never backwards. We are to engage the world not run away from it. But also we have each other to watch our backs. We all look out for each other. This is what it means to be united. When others see us they shouldn't just each of us individually, but they should see Christ. We are hidden in Christ. But also we form a temple in which God dwells through the Holy Spirit (2:21). So we are in God and God is in us. He strengthens us, and we should also strengthen each other.

In 1 and 2 Thessalonians, Paul thanks God for the faith of the Thessalonians. Here we learn that 3 things are vital to a stable church: turning away from idols to God, serving God alone, and waiting for the return of Jesus. Although Ephesians ends on an encouraging note, we learn from Revelation that the church in Ephesus abandoned their first love. Let us follow the example of the Thessalonians, and heed the warning to the Ephesians to repent and return to Jesus, our first love. Let us remain focused on Him and put our hope in Him. Let us not focus on that which divides us, but rather on that which unites us. Focus on Jesus and His mission, and welcome the strangers in our midst as He would.