

Theology from the Deep End

This is one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament, perhaps in the entire Bible. Peter presents his viewpoint, defends his action against critics, and lets his defense rest. The text tells us that his critics were silenced by his reply, and the notion that one must first convert to Judaism to become a Christian was rightly put to rest.

That alone would make this a significant text, but that's not why it's so important.

This text is also a *generous* rebuttal against *any* case for exclusion from the body of the faithful. We already know from Philip's baptism of an Ethiopian eunuch in Chapter 8 and Peter's vision in chapter ten that the use of the Torah for the categorical exclusion of any person from the company of the faithful is decidedly out-of-bounds. Indeed, Luke painstakingly tells the story a second time in what we just read, just in case we missed the point one chapter earlier when it was told the first time. He tells it again - word for word the same story. He tells it twice to make sure we get it. And the same words are the cornerstone of the story both times it is told: *What God has made clean, you must not call profane.*

The text is clear that this isn't about what food is on the table, it's about to whom Jesus has given a seat at the table. And that too, would also be enough to make this a significant passage of scripture, but that's not why it is so important either.

Here is why this is one of the most important texts of the Bible: it is *applied Christianity*.

Peter takes what he has learned as a disciple of Christ and uses it to understand faith.

Now, for us this may not seem earth shattering. After all, we do this almost every week. We read what the Bible says. I outline some of what the church teaches. I find some story or a poem to illustrate it. Then you go from worship and apply what you've learned in the sermon in the way you deem faithful. It is a model of faith development.

Jesus did plenty of this, indeed, that's pretty much the Sermon on the Mount.

But this is the first-time Peter had to go out in the deep end theologically for *himself*.

Will Willimon, former dean of the Chapel at Duke University writes, "The affirmation of Christ's Lordship is a theological statement gleaned from the experience and faith of the apostles, *not something to be proved from the Torah or prophets*. Peter's sermon is an attempt to struggle with his recently received new perception of the movement. He has no proof text to justify himself. *He is out on risky terrain without tradition or Scripture to back him up.*"¹

It takes a certain *kind* of guts to go out on a limb like that. It takes a certain type of guts to be the first to do something when all the history, all the tradition, leads the other way.

It takes a certain kind of guts to be willing to be unpopular.

¹ William H. Willimon. *Acts in Interpretation*. (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1988) p98, emphasis mine.

Do you remember the manufactured kerfuffle about Boaty McBoatface?

The United Kingdom's Natural Environment Research Council commissioned £300M polar research vessel and they had an online poll to name this spectacular ship.

And as *the Atlantic* magazine noted at the time, "The people have spoken, and they spoke like a five-year-old." The winner of the poll, by a landslide, was the name "Boaty McBoatface," despite the reality that its initial suggestion was a joke.

In an op-ed piece for *The Guardian*, Stuart Heritage wrote, "The government's science minister Jo Johnson has suggested that Boaty McBoatface is such a stupid idea that it doesn't deserve to count. 'The new royal research ship will be sailing into the world's iciest waters to address global challenges that affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people,' he said. 'That's why we want a name that lasts longer than a social media news cycle.'"²

You would think that this display of perspicacity and wisdom would be welcomed, right?

You would be wrong.

"How dare you, Jo Johnson," Heritage wrote, "What gives you the right to trample over democracy like this? More than 124,000 people voted to ensure that the boat would be named Boaty McBoatface. Yes, admittedly, almost every single one of these people was a tedious wet-mouthed ninny who found themselves stuck in the self-administered clutches of pathetic arrested development. Yes, admittedly, the name would have turned a multimillion-pound research vessel into a jumped-up Innocent smoothie carton, a vehicle so infuriatingly twee that it might as well grow an ironic moustache, learn to play the ukulele and get cast in a match.com commercial for all the pxy good it did."³

And here is my point with this story: If people can get this worked up over a joke, can you imagine how worked up they get over things that really matter?

It takes a certain kind of guts to live the faith when it means going out on a limb.

That's what Martin Luther meant when he said, "Be a sinner and sin boldly."

Now, Luther didn't consider sin a matter for flippancy, nor did he want us to hurt each other or ourselves. He meant that if anyone is going to live this faith, we're going to have to risk going out into the deep end theologically. And when we do, we do so trusting in Jesus Christ.

Just about everything the church has ever done that was worthwhile involved going out on a limb for the sake of Jesus Christ.

Peter had to get out into the deep water of faith, trusting that the Lordship of Jesus Christ really *is* for all and not just a few.

That's a claim that seems second nature, I hope, for us, but that was decidedly *not* second nature for Peter. He had to make his defense, and let it rest, trusting that the very same Lord who

² *Boaty McBoatface: tyrants have crushed the people's will*, by [Stuart Heritage](#). Guardian.com Tuesday, April 19th

³ *Ibid.*

illuminated the path in his heart would illuminate it in the hearts of others.

And *that* is the work of the church.

In an article entitled, *That's Not Your Seat: Regulating the Seating Arrangements at God's Dinner Party*, Professor Bill Leonard of Wake Forest Divinity School catalogues various instances in American Christianity where the church needed to go out on a limb; to take an unpopular stand. Frankly, he's critical of the church's witness. He writes, "Recent state legislation from 'religious liberty' protections to 'birth certificate restrooms' suggests that when it comes to matters of church and state many Americans cannot distinguish freedom of conscience from blatant discrimination. How often in Christian history has the church of Jesus Christ warned the marginalized — whether Gentiles, dissenters, women, people of color or LGBT-related individuals — that "that's not your seat," only to come out on the far side of grace?"⁴

That's what was at stake when Peter stood up to make his defense.

It is so easy to justify *not* going out into the deep water. It's risky. It takes a special kind of guts. It takes a special kind of determination to be that kind of a Christian. Leonard concludes, "And Jesus is no help at all. He keeps offering radical grace to everyone ... But his patience wears thin with the really religious crowd who want to regulate the seating arrangements at God's great dinner party."⁵

Standing up for the radically inclusive grace of Jesus Christ is our common calling but I don't want to suggest glibly that living in a state of constant inquiry into the mind of Christ with reference to where God is calling us to go is necessarily an easy reality.

But it might just be the new heaven and the new earth.

In John's spectacular revelation, we learn that the first things will pass away — indeed, that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And in one of the rare times where God speaks in Revelation, the voice from the throne declares that God is making all things new. But catch this important distinction: God isn't making *all new things*. God is making *all things new*.

And I take two tremendous points of comfort from this passage: First, that the world that God has made and loved, and indeed where we are invited to be coworkers with God in reconciliation so that we too may love this world, is not being destroyed, it is being made *new*.

New, like Peter's fresh vision of the kingdom of God.

The second is the reminder that God is the one making it new; we're just the co-workers.

But that's not nothing. Being a co-worker with God means living in the deep end theologically. It means challenging our assumptions, and more importantly, having the strength to let go when letting go is what is called for. And the only way to do that is to trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, and then just get on with our discipleship.

Michael Murphy tells the story of a golf match played in a region in the north of Scotland

⁴ *That's not your seat: Regulating the seating arrangements at God's dinner party* in *The Baptist News*
OPINION BILL LEONARD | APRIL 21, 2016

⁵ *Ibid.*

called the Kingdom, between the firth of Forth and firth of Tay. It's the birthplace of golf. To be able to play there is many golfers' dream.

He was assigned to play with a pro named Shivas Irons and another man, a Mr. MacIver.

It dawned on him when he teed up that he was playing in The Kingdom and he became so nervous he knocked the ball off the tee. His second shot was clear, but short. He finally shot four on the first hole.

It got worse, which is why I don't play golf. On the second hole he put his ball into a deep bunker before two-putting on the green for a double-bogey. At this point, Mr. MacIver volunteered to keep score, and Shivas insisted. Murphy said, "Four on the first, and a six on the second." Shivas sternly rebuked him, "Ye had a five on the first. Ye must count the one you knocked off the tee when ye took yer waggie. Tis the only way to play in The Kingdom."

The game devolved further – and it was then that Murphy overheard Shivas explaining to MacIver what he called "true gravity."

True gravity, according the old golf pro, had to do with just swinging, letting the nothingness into your shots, imagining the flight of the ball rather than fretting over the shot. Eventually, Murphy relaxed and his game relaxed also. Several hours later on the 18th hole, Shivas threw his arm over Murphy's shoulders and proclaimed, "Ye deseruv' a drink. Ye shot a 34 comin' in after a 52 goin' out. True gravity works when you imagine golf as 'twas meant to be played in The Kingdom."⁶

What Murphy called *True Gravity* on the golf course may be nothing simpler for the church than trusting in the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, over our minds and intellects as well as our actions and attitudes. It may be nothing more than trusting that, in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the new heaven and the new earth are being worked out in the good providence of our savior. It may be nothing more than trusting that if we go out on a limb for Christ, it will hold.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

⁶ Michael Murphy, *Golf In the Kingdom* (Dell, NY, 1972) pp12-33