

Spong

GENTILES; Beyond the barrier dividing the Jew from the Samaritan, there was the separation of the Jews from the gentiles, which also carried with it the force of a long and painful history. This separation had been part of the Jewish technique of survival through centuries. It precluded any intermingling. In the service of survival mentality, gentiles were even declared unclean by the Jews. They were known as the uncircumcised, as those not bound by the kosher dietary laws, and as those who were ignorant of the holy demands of the Torah. Association with gentiles, therefore, would corrupt the Jew and make him or her unclean and therefore equally unacceptable to the Jewish community and presumably to the Jewish God. It must be noted that gentiles were equally negative in their characterization of Jews.

Yet Jesus was portrayed in Mark's Gospel as going to the gentile side of the lake to repeat the feeding of the multitude in the wilderness story. (Mark 8:1-10).

He also reached out the Syro-Phoenician woman, another gentile, and to have healed her daughter (Mark 7:24-30). The Gospels tell of Jesus healing the slave of a Roman centurion and even of commending his faith as greater than he had found in Israel (Matt. 8:5-10; Luke 7:1-10). Mark's Gospel concluded the crucifixion story with a gentile soldier standing before the cross and becoming the first one to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. "Truly this man was the Son of God," the centurion exclaimed (Mark 15:39). At Jesus' birth gentiles known as wise men or magi had come to bring this Jewish messiah gifts. After the death of Jesus Matthew reported that his risen Christ commissioned his disciples to go into all the world – to go, that is, far beyond the boundaries which at that time separated Jew from gentile (Matt. 28:16-20).

In the genealogy gentiles are included (Matt and Luke 3).

Jesus also lived in a world where **cultural barriers** were drawn that defined women as subhuman and children as not worthy of God's concern. Yet Jesus had spoken with the woman by the well, answered her questions, engaged her in dialogue, challenged her presuppositions, and even invited her into the worship of God "in spirit and truth" (John 4:7-30). He also welcomed women into discipleship led by Mary Magdalene, who cared for the disciple band with their own resources (Luke 8:3). When the Church was born, women were present in the upper room to become numbered among the original recipients of the Spirit (Acts 1: 14). Even Paul declared that "in Christ there is neither male nor female"(Gal. 3:28)

Jesus welcomed children when they were prohibited by disciples (Mark 10:13-15). Jesus' source of love lay beyond every human boundary.

Spong:

LOVE AND EMPTY: When his disciples forsook him, he loved his forsakers. When one of them denied him and another betrayed him, he loved the denier and betrayer. When his enemies abused him, he loved his abusers. When they killed him, he loved his killers. What more can one do to live out the meaning of the God who is love?

He emptied himself and gave himself

He was condemned to die.

He gave his life away even as they took it from him.

Here was a whole human being who lived fully, who loved wastefully, and who had the courage to be himself under every set of circumstances. He was thus a human portrait of the meaning of God, understood as the source of life, the source of love, and the ground of being.

Churches continue to live out this Jesus:

Gentiles did ultimately find welcome in the church.

Slavery was finally ended.

Segregation and apartheid had their backs broken.

Women did achieve ecclesiastical power and position.

Mentally ill people were finally understood and treated as sick people, not crazy people.

Divorced people were finally offered a second chance at marriage and happiness.

Gay and lesbian people are welcomed in to the church.

INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS P. 192

Reversals are a standard feature of the genuine parables of Jesus. In the tragic plot, reversal results in exclusion for those who think they should be included, who do the right thing, who are justified by their own standards.

Those who have been marginalized, who are outcasts, who could not have been expected to be invited, to be paid the full wage, to be welcomed home, are surprised by their unexpected good fortune. ¹

Another way of saying is that Christians no longer wanted to think of themselves as “sinners,” that is, as *outsiders*. Those with whom Jesus ate and drank originally, however, were all real sinners or *outsiders* - that is how they were perceived socially from the standpoint of those who adhered to purity codes and ate kosher. Sinners, outsiders in Jesus’ society, included persons with a skin disease (“lepers”), the maimed, the halt, the blind, gentiles, Samaritans, as well as petty tax officials, who were Roman collaborators, and women who did not observe the social properties. Outsiders must have been a fairly numerous element in Galilean and Judean society. ²

¹ Robert W. Funk, *HONEST TO JESUS* (San Francisco:Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 192.

² Robert W. Funk, *HONEST TO JESUS* (San Francisco:Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 194.

The Pharisees are those who considered themselves insiders but who, from the later, Christian perspective, were viewed as perpetual outsiders because they were unbelievers. The clue to the development of this contrast lies in how the contrast *insider/outsider* is understood. ³

This paradox of Jesus – outsiders are in, insiders are out – throws light on another saying: “I swear to you, the toll collectors and prostitutes will get into God’s domain, but you will not.” Here Jesus is speaking to religious authorities of some sort – the keepers of the social codes. Prostitute is a code word for “women who behave in an unseemly manner in public.” To become disciples of a male teacher, to follow him about in his travels and discuss matters of moral importance with him at public meals, would have been quite enough to attract the label. ⁴

In a well-ordered society, people know their places. In Jesus’ world the few very rich and the many very poor knew their places. The social distance between them was mediated by brokers who dispensed favors bestowed by patrons on compliant peasants and peons. In contravention of social order, Jesus was socially promiscuous: he ate and drank publicly with petty tax officials and “sinners,” yet he did not refuse dinner with the learned and wealthy. He was seen in the company of women in public – an occasion for scandal in his society. He included children in his social circle – children were regarded as chattel, especially females, if they were permitted to live at birth – and advised that God’s domain is filled with them. ⁵

GENTILE (Gardner)

The word *Gentile* comes from the Latin *gens* (people, nation) and means a non-Jew. In the NT, the plural *Gentiles* translates the Greek *ethne*, which can also mean *nations*. The distinction between Jews and Gentiles is reflected in numerous NT texts and mirrors a mutually felt separateness in the ancient world. From the Jewish perspective, Israel as a nation had a calling that set it apart from other nations. Further, the people who inhabited these other nations were viewed as alien because of their worship of false gods and their generally sexual conduct. While Jew and Gentile could not avoid dealing with each other in the course of every day life, the Jewish community sought to maintain symbolic boundaries through the rite of circumcision, special dietary laws, and other practices. In the Gospel of Matthew, the boundary between Jew and Gentile becomes apparent in the way Jesus restricts his mission and that of his disciples to Jewish territory. Throughout the story, however, there are hints that Gentiles will eventually share in God’s kingdom. And at the end of the Gospel, Jesus lifts the earlier restriction and commissions his apostles to make disciples of *all* nations, to create a community to which Gentiles as well as Jews may belong. ⁶

³ Robert W. Funk, *HONEST TO JESUS* (San Francisco:Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 194.

⁴ Robert W. Funk, *HONEST TO JESUS* (San Francisco:Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 194.

⁵ Robert W. Funk, *HONEST TO JESUS* (San Francisco:Harper SanFrancisco, 1996), 196.

⁶ Richard B. Gardner. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *MATTHEW* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991), 420-421