**The Defense Rests**

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Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-6

This is one of the most important passages in the entire New Testament, perhaps in the entire Bible. It seems a simple case of Peter presenting his viewpoint, defending his action against critics, and letting the defense rest. The text tells us that his critics were silenced by his reply. Indeed, they were silenced in the criticism and induced to praise God for the implications of the actions they previously judged wrong. And so 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. Between Peter’s vision and the insight of Philip with the Ethiopian Eunuch, the categorical exclusion of any person from the company of the faithful for reasons based upon the Law is swept aside, definitively. Indeed, the story is painstakingly told a second time just in case we missed the point one chapter earlier when it was told the first time, and it is almost word for word the same story told 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 Bible doesn’t have ‘tone of voice’ in it per se, but I’ve always heard that said by God with a mix of anger and exasperation. *Thou Shalt Not Exclude In My Name,* saith the Lord… the text says that Jesus is Lord of all, it’s crystal clear that this isn’t about what food is on the table, it’s about who can sit 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.
Here is why this is one of the most important texts of the Bible: it is applied Christianity. It is taking what has been learned and using it to understand the world and the Christian’s place in it. It is privileging our understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ above all else.

Now, for us this may not seem earth shattering… I do that to you almost every week – I give you what the Bible says, I try to find some story to illustrate it, and then you go forth from this worship and hopefully apply what you’ve learned in the sermon in the way you see fit.

But this is the first time Peter had to do it himself. And he wasn’t hearing a sermon, he was preaching it.

Listen to what Will Willimon says about that sermon:

“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 it alone. It takes a certain type of guts to be the first to do something when all the history, all the tradition goes the other way.

It takes a certain kind of guts to be unpopular.

Have you heard about Boaty McBoatface?

The United Kingdom’s Natural Environment Research Council’s new polar research vessel. It’s cost is roughly $300 million. And there was an online poll to name this

spectacular vessel. And as the Atlantic notes, “the people have spoken, and they spoke like a five year old.”

That’s right, the winner of the poll, by a landslide, was the name “Boaty McBoatface,” despite the reality that its initial suggestion was a joke.

“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.’”

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

“How dare you, Jo Johnson,” writes Stuart Heritage in the Guardian. “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 poxy good it did.”

If people can get this worked up over a joke, can you imagine how worked up they get

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2 Boaty McBoatface: tyrants have crushed the people’s will, by Stuart Heritage. Guardian.com Tuesday, April 19th

3 Ibid.
over things that really matter?

It takes a certain kind of guts to live the faith when it means going out on a very big limb. That’s what Martin Luther meant when he said, “be a sinner and sin boldly.” That’s what Helmut Thielicke meant when he said that every Christian who claims to represent the Gospel must be prepared to risk heresy.

Neither meant that sin or heresy was a matter for flippancy or cavalier behavior. They meant that if you are going to live this faith, you’re going to have to risk going out into the deep water. You have to risk going out in the deep water trusting in Jesus Christ.

Again, Willimon knows this. He continues,

“This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the Gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at scripture. This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy into our own bold new ideas or the pitiful effort to catch the wind of the latest trend in the culture under the guise of seeking new revelation. Rather, it means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the Scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to divine prodding.”

Peter had to go out into the deep water of faith, trusting that the Lordship of Jesus Christ really is for all, a claim that seems second nature, I hope, for us, but that was decidedly not second nature for him. He had to go out on limb. He had to make his defense, and let it rest, and trust that the very same Lord who illuminated the path in his heart would

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4 Willimon, p98
illuminate it in the hearts of others.

And that is the work of the church. There is no question about it, there is no escaping it.

Jonathan sent me a marvelous article this week by Professor Bill Leonard of Wake Forest, entitled, *That’s Not Your Seat: Regulating the Seating Arrangements at God’s Dinner Party*. In the article, Dr. Leonard does a marvelous job of cataloguing instances in American Christianity where the church had to go out on a limb; to take an unpopular stand. Frankly, he’s critical. 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?”

That’s the sort of *deep water of Christianity* thinking that Peter had to do.

And it’s tempting to shrink from it.

It’s tempting to want to stick your head in the sand and not be held accountable.

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 from ‘the woman at the well’ to the ‘thief on the cross,’ with publicans and Re-publicans, the impoverished and the disabled, the good Samaritans and those wretched ‘winebibbers’ in between. But his patience wears thin with the really religious crowd who want to regulate

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5 *That’s not your seat: Regulating the seating arrangements at God’s dinner party* in The Baptist News

OPINION BILL LEONARD | APRIL 21, 2016
the seating arrangements at God’s great dinner party.”

It’s the faithful response.

But it probably won’t make you popular at dinner parties.

And you may have to spend a lot of time feeling really unsure of yourself while your new reality settles around you. But I would go so far as to suggest that the new reality that is settling around you 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 new vision.

New, like the workers for civil rights envisioned.

New, like the fresh start of forgiveness and a redeemed life.

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. It means letting go when letting go is what is called for.


6 Ibid.
I am afraid I might be making this sound a lot harder than it really is. I’m trying to say trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, and then just try to live it.

There’s a great story told by Michael Murphy of a golf match played in a region in the north of Scotland 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 waggle. 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.”

What Murphy called *True Gravity* on the golf course may be nothing more simple in the church that trusting in the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all of life, over our minds and intellects as well as our actions and attitudes.

Trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and sin boldly. Trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and risk heresy. Trust in the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and know that the new heaven, and the new earth demand from you and from me, a vision of redemption worthy of the savior who death and resurrection all of our defenses rest. Know who Jesus is, and live like it.

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

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