

## What Is Our Business?

*"God is seeking to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. ... we live not for rewards after death, but because our living will make the common good better. Faith is the ground for compassionate action in our world that needs healing."*

### Season of Easter

#### Fifth Sunday

Acts 11:1-18

Read the Bible passage: [Acts 11:1-18](#), The Message; or [Acts 11:1-18](#), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

Click here: [George Hermanson's sermon](#), for an easy to print or email Adobe PDF version of this post.

The Rev. Dr. George Hermanson

Peter Drucker, who developed one of the first executive MBA programs at Claremont Graduate University, said the first question any organization needs to ask is: "What is your business?"

This is the question the church is at the moment asking, both in the context of what it means to be The United Church of Canada, and how to be the church in a community.

Now it would seem self evident that we know what we are about. However, it isn't. We have as many theories about being church as there are people. For some it is a question of survival; we must grow. For others, it is to be the same as it was years ago. For others, it is to speak to power words of justice and compassion. For others, it is to support what they think are the values of traditional society. For others, it is to have correct unchanging doctrine - this is what you must believe. For others, it is to enhance their sense of God and have a spirituality that sustains them in their daily living.

This deep seeking has been the history of the church. When we read Acts there is the question of what is the business of the church. In Acts is a moment of transformation.

We live in a complex world of pluralism. Institutions and ideas are to be questioned. This creates a tension, because our world as we have known it, is challenged by other ideas. There is a tension brought about by differences of colour and cultures. Because our reality is changing, for some this is a threat to our way of life, and for others a time to celebrate for it brings more colour and vividness.

To find what is our business is to ask, what is our context? Then to ask how did we get here? What is our identity and how was it formed? What are the strengths we bring to our journey?

The foundational question for the church in asking "What is our business?" is: What is our understanding of how we experience the lure of God? What are the images and words and theologies that will carry us into a new reality?

There are many answers out there. To simplify this complex reality, there is a choice between two competing ways of understanding faith. There is a tension between these two ways. I would describe the tension as between a confessional approach to faith as opposed to a dogmatic approach.

The confessional approach begins in an affirmation about the character of God. God is seeking to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. That we live not for rewards after death, but because our living will make the common good better. Faith is the ground for compassionate action in our world that needs healing.

The dogmatic approach begins in the idea that there are statements and doctrines that are unchangeable. You have to give assent to those doctrines without any question. In fact, to ask questions is a sign of unfaith.

When Christianity emerged as a new religion this was the tension - confession or dogmatic. It was an age of seeking and searching. Old forms of religion and thought were not working. It was a time of competing gods, of symbols.

Out of the Judaism of the time there emerged two new branches of faith. One is rabbinic Judaism and the other is Christianity. Within Christianity there were several different views and communities.

What we see emerging in Acts is a trajectory of understanding that is still operative today. It is an understanding that the experience of God will go through transformations. That the Holy Spirit will help us adapt our faith to the changing circumstances.

What I just said is a confessional approach. It is not to accept unchanged doctrines as a sign of our faithfulness. It is to locate ourselves in a Way of living that Jesus represented. That Way is a dynamic and changing way so we can be faithful to the issues of our time and space. It is to understand that our understandings change so we can be a resource for healing in our here and now. It is to ask hard questions and know that is part of the faith journey. It is to have a living and changing faith. It is to live with this idea of Drucker's. "Do not simply cling to your past successes, be willing to change, adopt new ideas and continually review all the different segments of business."

We can see this process in our reading this morning. To understand we need to go back to that time for there was break within Judaism that sends Christians on a new trajectory that becomes a new reality. At issue was the power of ritual and symbols. Were they unchanging? The question was one of opening the faith to gentiles and did that require giving up dogma, to removed some of the sectarian aspects of the original root?

Peter has a dream that sees those who were originally were unclean and by a unchanging definition would always be unclean. There is a surprise in the dream, the unclean were made clean by God. Everything is clean in radical hospitality of all are welcome to the table. Peter makes this the confessional stance of the early church. The church grows.

The issue of clean and unclean is still with us. There are those who seek uncluttered purity - no sign of reality or dirt. Within this view our job is cover children's eyes and try to keep them from seeing or touching the world's impurity.

# George Hermanson

May the Lure be with you

The response it to take serious an earthly spirituality. This is where we are a wonderful mixture of heaven and earth. A church where all are welcomed in the various shapes and orientations we are.

The issue Peter faced was exclusionary holiness against holy hospitality. Today we face this tension in questions about same-sex marriage and orientation.

These are our issues not the issues that divided the early church. They must be worked out in the same way Peter challenged the faithful in Jerusalem. At first they must of thought he was crazy but he convinced them that the Holy Spirit required an openness to rethinking what is clean and what is unclean.

If we listen closely to the yearnings and desires of our world, and within ourselves, we will feel the Spirit of love moving us into unknown territories of life. That Spirit is there with us, working with us, luring us into new senses of a common humanity. It is calling us to imagine a vision where God brings together the disparate elements of life, a vision of a broader sense of ourselves, community and world. A vision of radical hospitality practiced so the earth will show the love God has for it. Our living will actual be one of inclusion and the colours of the rainbow.

*Thanks to Jon Walton (Christian Century, April 17) and Burton Mack (Claremont, 1993).*

George Hermanson

[www.georgehermanson.com](http://www.georgehermanson.com)