

Neither One Way Nor the Other

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In post-colonial studies, the concept of third space is an integral part of the writings of Homi Bhabha. He observes that, ‘... passage through a Third Space’ results in a hybrid, which is ‘neither the one thing nor the other’.*

As I reflect on this concept of third space, I find it’s important to recognize that it doesn’t negate the reality of either/or choices or yes/no questions that are part of everyday life. Sometimes, however, it may appear that all we have is an either/or choice. But appearances can be deceiving. For example, we often don’t recognize how complex a simple disagreement can be. There may not be just two sides—there may be another way to resolve an issue. This is where the concept of third space may be helpful. Sometimes the best way forward, to paraphrase Bhabha’s words, is neither one way nor the other, but rather a negotiated third way.

As an example of a third way, let’s consider a critical point in the history of the Church and its mission. There were two deeply entrenched sides in the disagreement that led to the gathering that has been referred to as the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 (NLT). One side stated clearly that ‘The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses’ (15:5), and the other side declared that God ‘accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit’ (15:8). Both sides had strong cases for their position. The Pharisees’ representatives from Judea based their position on the Law of Moses (15:1), but Paul and Barnabas argued their position from ‘the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles’ (15:12). In defense of Paul and Barnabas, James referred to Peter’s experience and quoted the prophets to argue that the Scriptures predicted exactly what Paul and Barnabas were claiming. For the Jews on both sides of this dispute, the Law of Moses was not something to be taken lightly, but the signs and wonders God was doing among the Gentiles were impossible to ignore! How could an impasse of this magnitude be resolved?

This is where the letter written by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem comes in. Here’s an excerpt of what they wrote to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. (15:28-29).

What happened to the insistence on circumcision and following the Law of Moses? While these three requirements are consistent with or found within the law (for example, Leviticus 17:10-14 on the matter of consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals), they are certainly not equivalent to being circumcised and obeying the Law. We could also ask: what happened to Paul and Barnabas' position that God accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit? If this is the case, why should Gentile believers be given any requirements from the Law?

At this point, I recall Bhabha's description of the third space as 'neither the one thing nor the other' and consider how this describes what the letter from the apostles and elders in Acts 15 does. There was both respect for the Law and recognition of the gift of the Spirit, but neither side simply won. What emerged was a negotiated third way, a way forward that was neither the Pharisees' way nor that of Paul and Barnabas.

But—you might protest—that's different! The Holy Spirit guided them to that 'inspired' solution. True, we're not the apostles and elders of Paul's day, but the same Spirit is guiding the Church today. When we're faced with complex issues, it may appear there are only two sides, but may the Spirit give us discernment and guide us to look beyond the usual binary choices and find a third way forward.

*Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 49.

In Franklin, Kirk. *Towards Global Missional Leadership: A Journey Through Leadership Paradigm Shift in the Mission of God* (Regnum Practitioner Series) (Kindle Locations 2297-2302). Regnum Studies in Mission. Kindle Edition.