

Bumper Sticker Theology: Coexist

Galatians 3:27-28

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Prayer - May your truth be spoken and your purpose revealed. Open our ears to hear, our eyes to see, and our minds to consider your possibilities.

Message -

They are small but can make a big impact. They have few words yet speak volumes. They are often right in front of us yet overlooked or ignored. They can inspire us, fill us with good vibes and warm fuzzies, and at times, cause us to roll our eyes in disgust or snap with anger.

I am talking of course about bumper stickers. Bumper stickers. Those annoying but sometimes fun or even perceptive messages stuck to the back of cars, trucks, campers, RVs, compact, and hybrid models of just about anything.

This week and next, I want to invite you to have some fun with me reflecting on what we are calling “bumper sticker theology.” The idea being that regardless of the size, shape, or color of the sticker, the purpose of the bumper sticker is to communicate an underlying message or perceived truth that speaks to our human behavior, belief, conviction, interests, or cause.

The use of the term “Bumper sticker theology” refers specifically to God-talk on bumper stickers; used as a way to express, proclaim , or share our thoughts and beliefs about God.

You have heard or seen many of these I am sure:

“Let go and let God.”

“Honk if you love Jesus”

“WWJD”

“Christians aren’t perfect...just forgiven.”

“God is my co-pilot.”

“Never drive faster than your guardian angel can fly.”

In the year 2000, Jewish graphic poster designer, (Pee-yut Mo-do-zen-etz) Piotr Mlodozieniec created what has become one of the most popular bumper stickers and one of the most challenging when it comes to theology.

Slide - classic Coexist

Mlodozieniec (mo-do-zen-etz) created this design in response to a contest hosted by the Museum of the Seam, a contemporary art museum in Jerusalem, dedicated to peace and reconciliation. His design didn’t win first place in the contest but it did become part of a 20-poster touring exhibition and was the standout entry in Jerusalem and around the world. He had no idea it would become a viral symbol. It was simply his artistic expression of peace among the three major world religions: Islam. Judaism. Christianity.

Since then, the original design has been adjusted, revamped, and redone giving us today's version. The current design incorporates the original three symbols, as well as the symbols representing peace, gender equality, paganism, and the philosophical symbol of Taoism.

Before we go any farther, let me interject and make it very clear: I am not using this bumper sticker as a political statement. I am not using it to disrupt, upset, or usurp our basic Christian beliefs at Grace Church. And I am not using it to cause a debate of what is true, right, and good.

I am using it to make a point and to direct our attention to a bigger picture. A bigger picture of humanity and our place in it. A bigger picture, I believe Paul helps us understand in his letter to the Galatians.

Background to text: Both Paul and the gospel he was teaching was under attack at this point in (when was he not under attack)! There were some who said Paul was not a true apostle because he was not with Jesus personally from the time of Jesus' baptism, through his ministry, and to his trial, death and resurrection. Paul argued his point saying his transformation on the Damascus road, as recorded in the book of Acts, where he experienced Christ face to face, qualified him as an apostle and the gospel he preached was in full approval of those who were the acknowledged leaders of the Christian church (Barclay 4).

The final attack involved the fact that Paul was teaching and preaching to the Gentiles - a despised group of outsiders. Some Jewish leaders believed that all God's promises and gifts were for Jews alone and that no Gentile (outsider) could be admitted to these precious privileges. One sect of Jews arrogantly believed in the idea that God only loved the people of Israel. It is recorded that such Jewish believers felt that "God created the Gentiles to be fuel for the fires of Hell" (Barclay 5). So ingrained was this hate toward Gentiles that a law was passed making it illegal to help or aid a Gentile mother giving birth, for that would only bring another Gentile into the world. It seems targeting minority groups, the marginalized, or those who are different is nothing new, not even in the church.

No wonder then, when Paul arrived on the scene in Galatia preaching and teaching a theology of grace and faith, and NOT a theology law and works, he was attacked.

All of this leads to a back and forth, back and forth battle between Jewish leaders and Paul. Until in Chapter three, Paul makes it clear *who*, *not what* we are to put our trust in and how that act of faith unites us first to God through Christ and then unites us all one to another.

Read Text Gal. 3:23-29 MSG

If there was a "coexist" bumper sticker message in the early church, Galatians 3:28 was it.

In his book, *A Fellowship of Differents*, Professor Scott McKnight, takes Paul's teaching of unity and equality and compares this kind of coexistence to a salad bowl. Yes, he illustrates this deep theological long standing debate and struggle for truth with a bowl of lettuce, veggies, and dressing!

"The church is a salad," McKnight writes. But not just any salad. He describes that there are three ways to make a salad, the American way, the weird way, and the right way.

The American Way - iceberg lettuce and maybe spinach leaves, tomato slices and maybe carrots and then smother it with salad dressing, Ranch, Thousand Island or Italian or, for special occasions, Caesar.

The Weird Way is to separate each item in your salad around on your plate, then eat them as separate items; often not even using dressing. That's just weird.

The Right Way to make and eat a salad is to gather all your ingredients: spinach, kale, arugula, and lettuce and chop them into smaller bits. Then cut up some tomatoes, carrots, onions, red, yellow or green pepper, purple cabbage or splash, celery for crunch, radish for zest. Then add some nuts and dried berries, a little Romano cheese, and finally drizzle over the whole thing with some good olive oil which somehow brings the taste of each item to its fullest. (McKnight 14).

When it comes to church doing and being church, it needs to take on this idea of coexistence - a mixed salad done right; or what McKnight calls a fellowship of different tastes all mixed together with the olive oil accentuating the taste of each.

The earliest Christian churches were made up of folks from all over the social map, yet they found a fellowship of different tastes. A British scholar recently concluded that in the apostle Paul's house church, like the one in Galatia, it was composed of about 30 people:

- A craft worker, in whose house they met, his wife and children and servants
- Some tenants, with servants and dependents
- Family members of a householder who did not participate in the house church
- A couple of slaves whose owners did not attend
- Some freed slaves who did not participate in the church but were there
- A couple of homeless people
- A few migrant workers who rented small rooms in the home where the church met .

Add to this group some Jewish folks and perhaps an enslaved prostitute and it is easy to see how many "different tastes" were in a typical house church during Paul's time. Men and women, citizens, slaves, and freed slaves, Jews and Gentiles, people from all moral walks of life, and perhaps most notable, people from elite classes all the way down the social scale to homeless people.

Do you think these folks agreed on everything? NO. Were they a fellowship of different? YES. Was life together - coexisting hard? YES.

That was and is the whole point of being church; of showing the world then and now, a new way to be community; a new way to be the people of God.

The Christian life is not just about how I am doing as an individual, but how we are doing as a church, and how and what am I doing in that mix of others called the church?

God designed the church. Through the example and teaching of Jesus and empowered it with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. That is the heart of Paul's message and mission - to be what McKnight calls, "a fellowship of difference and different." If we are to be a fellowship of difference and different; if the church is a mixed salad and a place to coexist, we should see different kinds of people, different socioeconomic groups, different races, cultures, music, artistic styles, different ages, forms of communication, moral histories, and marital statuses. Do we?

If the church is a mixed salad, a place of difference / different, to coexist, we should understand the Christian life and fellowship as a social revolution, as life *together*, as transcending difference, as honoring differences, enjoying difference, and as the ultimate expression of love, justice, and reconciliation. Do we?

My answer is yes (pause) and no.

Yes. Grace church involves a lot of people, men and women with different backgrounds, interests, music and artistic style. Yes we see different forms of worship, communication, experiences, and ages. Yes we do a lot in our community.

AND no. We are not a complete salad. We can do better. I believe we need to do better. There are people within our walls and outside our walls who need us to do better. Your own responses from a survey a few years ago, asking the question, “who are you Grace church?” speaks to the kind of church we are and can be. A welcome church. An encouraging church. A church that values everyone. A church that builds community. If any church can coexist or be a fellowship of different, Grace can do it. I truly believe that. With all the divisions in our world. With so many people, groups, and causes, fracturing around us. With mainline denominations dwindling and splitting. If any church can coexist, Grace church is the one to do it.

We start by opening our hearts to Jesus and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Only then can we get out of our own way and be open to those who are invisible and ignored around and among us. Next we have to trust that God is in control, and is big enough to bring us through anything, come what may.

It is Jesus, not us, (not me, not you, not Pastor Andy, or the SPRC, or the music ministry, or Admin. Council) that makes it possible to coexist. It's

our faith in Jesus. It is Jesus, not us, (not me, not you, not our various outreach ministries, or all the programs we are a part of) that makes it possible to be a fellowship of different. It is our faith in Jesus.

That is what the Christian life is all about; learning to love one another, by the power of God's grace, so all can flourish as the people of God in this world. Some churches do a great job of loving people inside its walls, yet forget about those outside. Some churches do a great job of loving people outside their walls and forget or lose sight of those inside. It takes both to be the body of Christ.

I leave you this dear church: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile - neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female. For you are all one in Christ." In other words, there are no longer ethnic barriers to divide us. Oh they are there, but we can do better. There are no longer social or socio-economic classes to pit us one against another. Oh they still show up but we are called to do better. There is no longer inequality of any kind among humanity. Oh our world tries to tell us otherwise and force us to pick a side, but we are called to do better. In Jesus, we all stand on common, level, equal, ground.

I know it is near impossible to wrap your head around that kind of community; to fathom what that kind of place or existence could look like; to comprehend what role we could have in creating such a place for ourselves and others, but dear friends, it is called the Kingdom of God for a reason. It is called the Kingdom of God and we are called to live it out here and now, together. AMEN.

Resources Consulted

William Barclay, Daily Study Bible Series *The Letter to Galatians*

Phil Edward, The big fight over Coexist phil.edwards@vox.com June 8, 2016

Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differents*

Religious-Symbols.net