

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### **Should Christians Be Inclusive?**

Should everyone be included in God’s kingdom? God desires for everyone to be saved (2 Peter 3:9), and he wants us to preach the gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15). Does that mean that we should allow everyone into our congregations? A growing number of people are arguing that we should. They say that everyone, no matter what they believe or how they behave, should be included in Christian assemblies. Here are some examples of what they say:

“Create more inclusive spaces within our churches where everyone feels safe and is accepted regardless of who they are or what they believe. This is ultimately the only way we will all grow closer together spiritually.”

- Rev. Paul M. Turnerin, “Why Lent Is the Perfect Time To Call Out the Evangelical Church”, Feb 27, 2023 (<https://whosoever.org/why-lent-is-the-perfect-time-to-call-out-the-evangelical-church/>)

“Progressive Christians affirm full inclusion of LGBTQ people into the church, including same-sex couples and gay clergy. They point out that while the Bible says little about homosexuality (Jesus never mentions it), Scripture says much about love, grace, kindness, inclusion, and justice.”

- Martin Thielen, “Minority View: A Brief Introduction to Progressive Christianity”, *Herald Citizen*, Cookeville TN, August 2022. (<https://doubtersparish.com/articles/minority-view/>)

Are these critics right? Jesus, whose Hebrew name was Yeshua, did teach about grace and inclusion. When Christian assemblies exclude people from fellowship, does that violate Yeshua’s teachings?

To put this question another way, under what circumstances can a person be excluded from a Christian assembly? Are there any such circumstances, or should everyone be included all of the time? Do the Scriptures give us any guidance on this matter?

To address this question, we will first look at the scriptures which speak about inclusion. Then, we will

look at the scriptures which speak about exclusion. Finally, we will see how these scriptures can be reconciled with one another. When we're finished, we will have an answer for these critics. We will be able to define the limits of inclusivity—if there even are any limits at all.

## **Who is Included in the Kingdom of God?**

To start, let's look at what the Scriptures say about inclusion into God's people. YHWH's kingdom is very inclusive. Take John 3:16, for example:

### **John 3:16**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Yeshua says here that “whoever” believes in him has eternal life. “Whoever” is quite an inclusive term. Other scriptures break down in detail how this inclusion works. For example, YHWH does not discriminate based on race or nationality:

### **Leviticus 19:34**

You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD [YHWH] your God.

### **Acts 10:34-35**

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

It does not matter who your parents were or where you were born; if you come to the God of Israel, he will accept you. But YHWH's inclusion goes even further than that: he also does not discriminate based upon wealth or social status:

### **James 2:2-4**

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

### **Galatians 3:27-29**

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua]. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

(see also: Exodus 23:6-8)

It does not matter to God what the world thinks of you. God does not value you the same way that the world does; he has no respect for the world's hierarchies. In the kingdoms of this world, you may be a prince or you may be a pauper, but in God's kingdom, you are simply a son of God (see Romans 8:14; 9:26; Galatians 3:26; 4:7; 1 John 3:1-3; Revelation 21:7; Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 3:21-23; 31:20; Hosea

1:10; 11:1; Psalm 2:7-9). One more important feature of YHWH's inclusiveness is that he does not discriminate based upon your past sins:

### **Romans 3:23-26**

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua], whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus [Yeshua].

### **Romans 5:8**

but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

### **Ephesians 2:4-5**

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.

(see also: Deuteronomy 9:6; Daniel 9:18)

God does not allow us to join his kingdom because we are righteous; he allows us to join so that he can make us righteous. If God excluded people because of their past sins, then nobody could become a Christian. Paul tells us in Romans 3:23 that “**all have sinned.**” One of the main tenets of Christianity is that we have forgiveness for our sins through Christ. This basic idea is what allows for the inclusion of everyone. Make no mistake: everyone has the opportunity to come to Christ and be saved. As it says in John 3, whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:15-16). The Scriptures are abundantly clear that God's kingdom is very inclusive.

## **Who is Excluded From the Kingdom of God?**

While the preceding section seemed very clear, we must look at the full witness of Scripture before we come to any conclusions. There are, in fact, scriptures which say that certain people are to be excluded from Christian fellowship. We can divide these people into three categories: those who reject the gospel, those who destroy the gospel, and those who persist in sin.

Let's start by looking at the verses that talk about excluding those who reject the gospel. Yeshua commanded his disciples to travel about, preaching and ministering to the people. But what did he say should be done if someone rejected their message?

### **Mark 6:7-11**

And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts—but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

When someone rejected the disciples' message, Yeshua told them to “shake the dust off their feet”? Why? The gospel of Luke explains:

## **Luke 10:10-12**

But whenever you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet we wipe off against you. Nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.’ I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

The dust is shaken off their feet, because the disciples don’t even want to be associated with the dust of that town. They don’t want to face the same judgment as those people. Just as the people of that town have excluded them, so they have excluded those people. So, Yeshua says not to include everyone, but to exclude those who reject the gospel.

A second category of people who are excluded are those who work to destroy the gospel. Paul warns against such people in Galatians, and declares that they are “accursed”:

## **Galatians 1:8-9**

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Paul makes it clear that there cannot be contrary gospels. He says that those who preach a contrary gospel must be “accursed.” This is the same term he uses in Romans 9:3, where he equates being “accursed” to being “cut off from Christ.” What he is recommending in Galatians 1 is that those who oppose the gospel that he has presented should be excluded from fellowship. The apostle John makes this same point:

## **2 John 9-11**

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

So, the Scriptures say that those who try to undermine or destroy the gospel must be excluded.

The third and by far the most mentioned category of people to be excluded is those who persist in sin. Paul characterizes sin as our former “master,” and us as its former “slaves.” He says that when we come to Christ, we are redeemed from our old master, and put into the service of God. Our old master paid us with death, but our new master pays us with life.

## **Romans 6:16-18**

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

## **Romans 6:22-23**

But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] our Lord.

Since we are no longer bound to our old master, Paul tells us not to obey it anymore. He tells us not to sin.

### **Romans 6:12-14**

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

The language Paul uses here in Romans falls short of commanding that a sinner should be excluded from fellowship, but such language is used in other places. This exclusion is based on the same idea that Paul presents here: that we are supposed to be servants of God, rather than servants of sin. For example, here is what John said:

### **1 John 3:4-8**

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

John says that those who sin, those who practice lawlessness, do the works of the devil, while those who practice righteousness do the works of God. Can a congregation include people who do both kinds of works? It seems clear that it can't, and in 1 Corinthians, Paul clearly says as much:

### **1 Corinthians 5:9-13**

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Paul says to “purge the evil person from among you.” In context, Paul was speaking about a person in the Corinthian church who was engaging in an incestuous relationship (1 Corinthians 5:1). This kind of relationship is prohibited by God's law (Leviticus 18:8)—in other words, it is sin.

### **1 John 3:4**

...sin is lawlessness.

Likewise, swindling and idolatry and all the other bad things Paul mentions in this passage are sins—they are also things prohibited by God's law. So, Paul says that those who call themselves “brother” but continue to sin must be excluded from fellowship. Yeshua himself says the same thing:

### **Matthew 18:15-17**

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Yeshua says that one who sins and refuses to listen to correction must be excluded from the church; he is to be regarded as an outsider. These verses all point to another category of exclusion: anyone who calls himself a Christian but continues to sin must be excluded from fellowship.

(See also: Acts 15:19-20; 1 Timothy 5:20; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Titus 3:10-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:14)

## **Reconciling Inclusion With Exclusion**

We've read the verses that speak of total inclusion into God's kingdom, as well as the ones which appear to speak of exclusion. Can these passages be reconciled with each other? Can they both be true? Let's take a closer look at each category of exclusion and see.

The first category of those to be excluded are those who reject the gospel message. While this is technically a category of exclusion, it is not difficult to reconcile this with the idea of inclusion. We can be as inclusive as we like, but we cannot force others to be included when they don't want to. If we invite someone to join us, and they turn down the invitation, then they are excluding themselves. So there is no real contradiction here. We should be willing to include these people, but there is nothing we can do if they choose to reject the gospel.

What about the second category to be excluded, those who oppose and seek to destroy the gospel? Excluding these people is also not that difficult to reconcile. Clearly, a group cannot function if it contains people who are working toward completely opposite goals. Yeshua himself says that a house divided against itself cannot stand (Mark 3:25). We can no more include people who seek to destroy us than an army can include a foreign spy, or a flock of sheep can include a wolf. Such inclusion would result in the total destruction of the group of people we're trying to nourish and grow. So, there is nothing about excluding such people that is inconsistent or uncharitable. Also, it is again worth mentioning that these enemies of the gospel do not have to be excluded forever. If these destructive people ever change their mind and accept the true gospel, then they will be accepted. This is exactly what happened to the apostle Paul. Before he came to Christ, Paul actively worked to destroy the Christian church, but after he was converted, he was accepted, and he became a leading voice to promote the church. God was willing to include Paul all along, but Paul was the one holding up the process. He had to stop fighting against God's plan for him. Once he did that, he was included, just like God always wanted.

This brings us to our third category of people who are excluded: those who persist in sin. This is the most challenging form of exclusion to reconcile with the Scriptures about inclusion. To put the challenge simply: how can it be that sinners are welcome to come to Christ and be saved, while at the same time, sinners are excluded from Christian fellowship? Isn't that a contradiction on its face? How can we include sinners while also excluding them?

To understand this, we need to take a closer look at the verses which speak of inclusion and exclusion with reference to sin. Let's start with the main one, John 3:16:

### **John 3:16**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

This verse, as we mentioned before, is extremely inclusive; “whoever” believes in the Son of God will have eternal life. As we keep reading John 3, we see more reinforcement of this idea:

### **John 3:17**

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

The reason Christ came was to include the world in God’s salvation. Anyone who “believes” in Christ can partake of that salvation. Again, this is extremely inclusive. But, implicit in this passage is a kind of exclusion. It says that anyone who “believes” will be saved. This, by definition, would exclude those who do not “believe.” As we keep reading this passage, we find that this exclusion is explained:

### **John 3:18-21**

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

Those who believe in Christ are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned. What is the difference between those who believe and those who do not? Those who do not believe do “wicked things.” Their works are evil. Those who do believe do the works of God.

What John is talking about here is repentance. A person who believes also repents of his sin. He stops serving sin and starts serving God instead. This is how we can tell that he believes. This is the very thing that was mentioned in 1 John 3:

### **1 John 3:4-8**

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

John is clear that those who believe in Christ will also change their behavior; they will change from a sinful lifestyle to a righteous lifestyle. They will stop doing the “works of the devil,” and start doing the works of God. Anyone who does not do this is not abiding in Christ, and is therefore excluded from Christ. We see this again in another one of the verses we cited that supports inclusion:

### **Acts 10:34-35**

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Peter does not say that everyone is acceptable to God no matter what they do. He says that everyone “[who fears him and does what is right](#)” is acceptable to God. A person cannot do whatever he wants and still be included among God’s people. He must turn away from sin.

Now, again, how can we reconcile this with the idea that sinners can come to Christ? Well, it is all a question of when a person is sinning. If a person lives a lifestyle of sin before he comes to Christ, that is exactly what we would expect. Christ came to include those people; he came to save us from our sins:

**Matthew 1:21**

[She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus \[Yeshua\], for he will save his people from their sins.](#)

**1 Timothy 1:15**

[The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus \[Messiah Yeshua\] came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.](#)

If we weren’t sinning, we would not need to be “saved.” But, once we are “saved,” we are expected to stop sinning. If we claim that we are “saved,” but we continue to live a lifestyle of sin, then we are rejecting the very “salvation” that we claim to have. If we are still slaves to sin, then we are no different than someone who rejected the gospel to begin with. This is why Paul is clear that we do not exclude sinners; we exclude sinners who calls themselves “brother”:

**1 Corinthians 5:9-13**

[I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”](#)

We do not prevent sinners from coming to Christ and being saved. We do not exclude people based on their past sins. But we do prevent sinners from continuing to fellowship with us if they refuse to repent and change their ways. We do exclude people who claim to be Christians, but who don’t follow Christ.

Now, there is a danger in this kind of exclusion. None of us is perfect; we all make mistakes. Couldn’t a church use this against people that they want to exclude for illegitimate reasons? Couldn’t they point to a mistake that someone made, and then kick that person out for his “sin,” when the real reason they are excluding him is because he is poor, or a foreigner, or for some other reason? Isn’t this a loophole that wicked people can exploit to exclude people who really should be included?

In theory, such abuse is possible, but if we obey the Scriptures, they do provide some protections against it. Notice what Paul says in Titus:

**Titus 3:10-11**

[As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.](#)

When a Christian sins, we must give him numerous chances to repent from that sin. We don’t kick a



person to the curb just for making one mistake. When a person repents of his sin, he is to be forgiven (Matthew 18:21-22). It is only if he refuses to repent, if he insists on continuing to sin, that he condemns and excludes himself. Yeshua said much the same thing:

#### **Matthew 18:15-17**

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Yeshua's teaching here sounds much like Paul's in Titus 3. He says that when a "brother"—a fellow Christian—sins against us, that we should give him multiple chances to repent. We should confront him about his sin (see Leviticus 19:17-18) and be willing to forgive him when he admits fault (see Matthew 18:21-22). It is only if he continues to walk in the stubbornness of his heart that he's no longer welcome. Only a person who openly, repeatedly, and willfully disobeys God is to be excluded. Also, note what Yeshua says about who can do the excluding. A single person cannot exclude another person from a group based on that person's sin. He must provide witnesses to the sin, and the case must be heard by "the church," that is to say, by the elders who are in leadership. Also, when a person repents, he must be forgiven. Once his sin has been forgiven, it must not be held against him anymore. Yeshua explains this a little later on in the same chapter:

#### **Matthew 18:21-22**

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus [Yeshua] said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."

So, we cannot use a person's mistakes as an excuse to get rid of him, when we really want him gone for some other reason. We can only exclude someone who insists on living a sinful lifestyle. One more point along these lines is that, in these cases, it is not really us who's doing the "excluding;" it is the person who is continuing to sin. Paul says that such a person condemns himself:

#### **Titus 3:10-11**

As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

This is much like the case of the person who rejects the gospel outright; we have made every effort to include this person, but he is not willing to include himself. So too, a person who refuses to repent has excluded himself from Christian fellowship.

## **Conclusion**

So, should everyone be included in a Christian assembly? The Scriptures are clear that everyone is welcome to come to God. Nobody can be excluded because of their race or nationality or their social status. Also, nobody can be excluded based on their past sins. When we come to God, he saves us from our sins, and the death that sin brings. Everyone is invited to partake of the life that God offers through his grace and mercy.

With that being said, someone who comes to God and does not repent of his sins is not partaking of the life that God offers. A person must choose whom he will serve. Someone who is offered the opportunity to serve God and turns it down has rejected the gospel. A person who insists on staying in a sinful lifestyle simply cannot be included.

Now, this does not mean that a Christian has to be perfect, nor does it mean that we can exclude someone based on a single mistake. Those who sin should be corrected, and when they listen to that correction, they should be forgiven. We should only exclude those who insist on defying God's Word.

So, Christians should be inclusive, tolerant, merciful, and gracious. We should not turn anybody away—no race, no nationality, and no social status should be excluded. Nor should anyone be excluded because of sins they have committed in the past. All are welcome to come to Christ, to have their hearts changed and their lives transformed. A person should only be excluded when he refuses to live that transformed life. If a person insists on continuing to sin, then it is not violating Yeshua's teachings to exclude him from fellowship. Rather, this is exactly what Yeshua said to do in Matthew 18. Yeshua says we should bring his sin to his attention and give him numerous opportunities to make things right. If he repents, then we should forgive him. But if he turns down all of those opportunities, then he has excluded himself, and that is his decision to make. So, while we should certainly be very inclusive, we cannot include those who refuse to include themselves.

*We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.*

*Remember, continue to test everything.*

*Shalom!*

*For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

**EMAIL:** [Info@119ministries.com](mailto:Info@119ministries.com)

**FACEBOOK:** [www.facebook.com/119Ministries](http://www.facebook.com/119Ministries)

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