
Inclusion: Making Room for Grace

BY: ERIC H.F. LAW

St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press

2000, 152 pp. paper

ISBN 0827216203

Growing up in a small Northwest town in the 1950s and '60s, I had little contact with people who were not like me. My exposure to diverse peoples came primarily through National Geographic, LIFE magazine, the Huntley Brinkley report and our high school's annual foreign exchange student. Fast forward almost two generations to the 21st century. Eric Law's four books, the third of which is *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace*, affirm for this small-town boy not only that today's world faces increasing cultural interaction, but also why the Church holds such promise, if it can live out of its central doctrine.

This territory that Law traverses assiduously is known in current jargon as "cultural diversity" and "multiculturalism." Law does not linger upon definitions of this phenomenon. In *Inclusion*, Law who is an Episcopal priest seeks to "provid[e] practical and theologically sound theories, models, and skills that are necessary for moving a faith community toward greater inclusion" (xi). This one sentence aptly summarizes Law's aims and general approach to the topic in this volume, but also relates to all four of his books.

In this volume, readers will find neither complex, drawn-out theological justifications for socially liberal policies, nor lists of techniques guaranteed to fix quickly your church's problem. Instead, Law's work reveals considerable creative and synthetic capacity. It is difficult to fit his books neatly into any typical categories. They all blend illuminating exegesis with secular human behavioral insights, reflecting theologically and procedurally on how reframed models lead to new ways of doing things. Law's focus on community in *Inclusion* builds upon his earlier two books (*The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb*, 1993 and *The Bush Was Burning But Not Consumed*, 1996) which focus on developing leadership for multicultural ministry. In particular, *Inclusion* lays out a way to understand challenges that any group of believers faces when seeking to include outsiders.

One of the key elements in making Law's work so fresh is his own experience with marginality. Born in Hong Kong, Law moved to New York City at the age of 14 and was still learning English when he started college. Law's distinctive perspective on America's racially-defined exclusions allows both majority and minority Americans to see things in a new way. He neither bashes whites nor glorifies oppressed ethnic groups. His approach avoids theological ideologies that oversimplify text, doctrine or human condition.

In developing this model, Law found himself framing his concepts and processes with new terms (xii). Key among these are "boundary challenge" (16-17), "boundary function" (17-21) and "grace margin" (43). Boundaries, as Law sees them, can operate either exclusively (19) or inclusively (43). The challenge to faith communities comes in making room for anyone perceived as an outsider. Law argues that this vital Christian challenge needs grace as the buffer zone between the community's own fear and its need for safety.

Law lines out this ginger task in four steps with one chapter devoted to each: "drawing an outer parameter" (chapter 5); "revisiting the boundary of the safe zone" (chapter 6); "maintaining the grace margin" (chapter 7); and "recreating the community" (chapter 8). Law laces the chapters with biblical narrative and exegesis, accounts from his training work, quotable theological assertions (e.g., ". . . Christ . . . is the true guide to our work of inclusion, because Christ is the gate of our community." - 47), group behavioral insights (e.g., "An inclusive community or organization cannot be a static entity." - 16), practical advice (e.g., "Whenever a community's boundary is challenged, we need to help the community avoid making a quick decision . . ." - 55), and synthetic observations (e.g., "A community that consistently . . . affirms a variety of images . . . of God is more likely to act inclusively when its boundary is being challenged." - 81).

The interdisciplinary and practical method that Law consistently employs in his work defies easy categorization, and so do his audiences. I have used *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb* in church training and seminary teaching. His style remains crisp, low on emotion but clearly passionate about its vision. Chapters are concise. Each book includes several appendices, specifying various group processes that Law has tested and refined through training.

This eel-like quality to Law's work ("I can see it, I just can't quite get my hands around it.") could contribute to the caution that a couple of my teaching colleagues have reported. They have noted less-than-enthusiastic responses from persons of color concerning Law's use of a particular theory of power. What Law is trying to distinguish with the theory in question are differences in how power is perceived. People of color, Law claims, tend to inherit cultural assumptions about group participation that differ from white, middle-class assertive individualism. Some readers might construe Law as criticizing their culture or stereotyping ethnic behavior. Law acknowledges the risk of generalizing but believes that it still directs our understanding to prevailing trends.

Other readers might resist Law's use of overt structures and processes. Such readers could feel that church change cannot be so easily orchestrated. Such an argument often fails to recognize that all communities maintain their own default systems. By making both his concepts and his processes definite, Law gently pushes us to *do* things differently, so that we can *become* different.

Membership in one ethnic group or another, or benefiting from power privilege, does not interest Law centrally. Learning how to share power, how to live together, how to overcome features that too easily divide—this is what Law is after. Perhaps it takes someone like him, who comes from the margins of this society, to help all of us in America learn how to see more clearly, and act more deeply, Christian.

As a seminal professor who also trains and coaches congregations in transition, I welcome Eric Law's significant contributions to the future of ministry practice. I hope that *Inclusion* and other Law books will be used widely – by seminary teachers, by pastors, religious educators, denominational officials and ultimately by God's real people in and of the Church.

George B. Thompson, Jr.
Associate Professor of Church Administration and Leadership
Interdenominational Theological Center, Atlanta, GA

