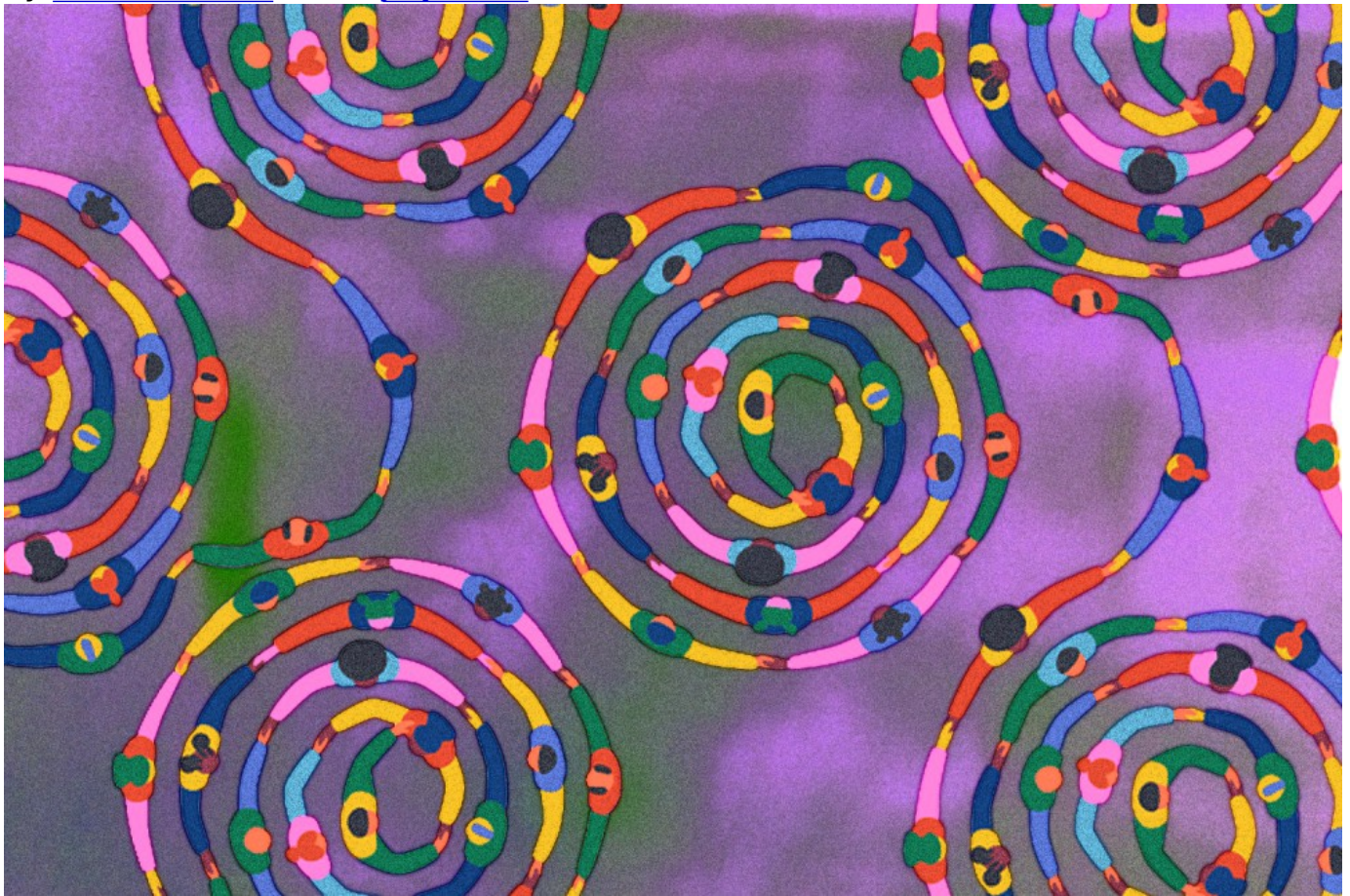


What does it mean to be an inclusive church?

Being a community means welcoming those with diverse views, not cocooning oneself with like-minded people.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [July 2024](#) issue



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I've never felt comfortable with the label "progressive." It buys into the narrative that "things are gradually getting better because of the activism of people like me"—a narrative that seems under-theologized, to say nothing of narcissistic. But I seem to have found myself in a place among people who basically believe all of it—the virgin birth and the resurrection, shall we say—but see Jesus as a figure of liberation and radical recalibration, rather than a signpost pointing back to the

secure 1950s. And I find myself at a church that likes to be challenged to explore the theological roots of its largely soft-left social and political convictions.

So this year on Good Friday I decided to take on the theology of the atonement. My premise is that everyone has long had difficulty with satisfaction and substitution theories, and yet there is often an eerie silence when you ask a revisionist Christian to articulate precisely what place the cross has in Christian theology and whether Jesus' crucifixion was necessary, inevitable, or unfortunate.

In my remarks I highlighted a number of features common to several atonement theories—utterly centered on human scarcity rather than God's abundance, devoid of context, little engagement with the narrative of Jesus' life, strains of subtle or less subtle antisemitism, overemphasis on the Fall—and landed on the key problem, manifest even in Christus Victor, which has had a recent comeback: they all forget that God's means and God's ends are identical. They tend to push God out of shape to achieve something more important than God's character remaining unchanged. Which means we can't, in the end, trust God's character.

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Those familiar with my theology of "being with" won't be surprised that my alternative proposal was that being with us is the nature of the Trinity, the purpose of creation, the reason for the incarnation, and our final destiny with God forever. If on the *via dolorosa* Jesus had said, "I don't fancy it," for conventional theories everyone could have packed up and come back the next day to try again. But for a theology of being with, such a move by Jesus would go against the whole character of God from Genesis to the maps and thus be apocalyptically catastrophic. Jesus' death shows that God will go to any lengths to be with us, and his resurrection shows that this desire will not in the end be thwarted.

One reason I decided on this theme was that during the pandemic our congregation gained a good few worshipers from conservative backgrounds who wanted something more inclusive (another word I don't warm to—because it suggests I'm in the center, benevolently giving hospitality to the waifs and strays) but whose theology hadn't yet caught up with their ethics. I wanted to give them a dismantling and reconstructing exercise. Most of the feedback I received on this project was positive.

But one of these messages had a sting in the tail. “Can you help me explain to my daughters why they should be part of a church that doesn’t show people who are gay equal valuing?” (The Church of England currently offers same-sex blessings but not marriages.)

I pondered the question for a few days. In the end I replied that there are two issues here. One is about belonging. If you belong, you don’t expect everyone to agree with you—and you understand that change sometimes comes slowly. Fifty years ago, hardly anyone in the church would have gone along with same-sex marriage. Now some of the same people who used to oppose it are saying we should have no time for those who still do. I think it’s important to let people change their minds without being humiliated. I often say our congregation shouldn’t call itself an inclusive church if it won’t include people who disagree on this and other such issues. I myself have a strong view, but being a community means open arms to people of diverse views, not cocooning oneself with like-minded people. Don’t forget that many Africans say, “A century ago you came here and told us gay sex was wrong. Now you’re coming here telling us gay sex is right. The thing that hasn’t changed is you still think you know better than us.”

The other issue is about humility. It’s a tough thing to say to your daughters, but it feels like they’re saying, “The church isn’t good enough for me.” I’m afraid it’s a community of human beings, and the thing about community is, sometimes you think, “It’s not good enough for me,” and other times you think, “I’m not good enough for it.” There are three ways to seek justice. One is to change the world through legislation and trust the rule of law and equality and equity and procedure and propriety. Another is to protest and denounce and march and upturn unjust prosecutions. But a third, which no one makes movies about, is to try to foster a community that models what good might look like.

That’s what we’ve spent the last 12 years trying to do at St. Martin’s. We need all the help we can get. If people who could bring energy and life and joy and talent to our community will have nothing to do with us because we’re trying still to be civil to and persuade people with whom we disagree, then we and they are the poorer. How does change happen? Not by the righteous sitting afar and waiting for things to change by themselves. Campaign by all means, protest if you must, but why not join in trying to do things better and create an example to inspire others?

The exchange left me with questions. Is the church too flawed to be worthy of its doctrine? Is the doctrine too flawed to be worthy of the church’s devotion? Has

seeking God's realm become a spectator sport where people watch from the stands to see if the dancing ponies put on a good enough show to be worth their joining in?