

One Size Fits All?

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Acts 17:1-15



Let me re-introduce you to the Jones family. We've met them in their cake shop; we've followed them down to the Cotswolds. But now, I want to tell you about another strand of the family: the Norman and Norma Joneses.

You see, the Norman and Norma Joneses are a strange phenomenon; each one sounds, looks, and behaves in identical ways. One Norman Jones is indistinguishable from the other; likewise, you couldn't pick a significant difference in a line-up of Norma Joneses. It causes all sorts of confusion at family parties, and at weddings it is almost impossible to get the seating plans right.

So, how to identify a Norman and a Norma Jones?

Well, a Norman Jones is always ginger-haired. He can be identified by a receding hairline that starts exactly one month after his 19th birthday. He will have a penchant for colourful shirts and a strong belief that no sandal can be worn without a sock. He staunchly believes that the moon is made of a particularly strong type of cheddar cheese, and thinks that the lunar landing, though not doubting its veracity, is hiding the truth of this fantastic fromage. He will be a fully paid up member of his own religion, the Venerable Order of Lunar Cheese; All Norman Joneses are Pasteurs of their own congregations, usually limited in number, though their fondue parties are the must-attend event of the local social calendar.

All Norman Joneses are gregarious, out-going, out-spoken and, mysteriously, support Greenock Morton Football Club in the second tier of Scottish football. However, they have never attended a match, which is

a shame as the attendance at Cappielow Park would benefit from an influx of cheese-waving fans. Probably this isn't a bad thing though, as Norman Jones is known to have a short-fuse and can get angry easily, particularly over fashion.

As to Norma Jones, she is characterised by a love of women's rugby, but takes a more parochial stance to support. On any given matchday at the local rugby club, you should be able to spot a Norma Jones in the standard garb of black trousers and wax jacket with the local team's scarf wound around her neck. All Norma Joneses grow to exactly 5 feet 4 inches in height, reaching that peak on the fortieth day after their 20th birthday, which falls on April 17th. Each one prefers a side parting to their brown hair and eschews makeup unless they are going out.

Unlike Norman Joneses, Norma's religious belief is more orthodox; they are all members of their local Parish Churches. Taking their opportunities to be able to show off their baking and flower arranging skills, each Norma Jones will be a regular fixture at any given social function and no harvest festival will be complete without a Norma Jones quiche and flower basket. A Norma Jones is a well-liked member of every community in which they will be found, though they all display a penchant for a bit of gossip.

So, why the Normas and Normans this week? Well, let's look at it this way: if you see a jar labelled "Marmite" on a shelf you will know whether this is a good idea to spread on your breakfast toast or not. You certainly know what you expect when you open the jar; you will be confronted by a tar-like substance that will either bring joy or calamity to your culinary experience.

However, what would happen if you opened a jar of Marmite and found that it was pink in colour, or that it was Bovril instead? What happens if you find out that the label is misleading, or that what you thought was Marmite turned out to be something totally different? As a Marmite eater, I would be worried that they had messed about with the ingredients without warning. For others, they may be grateful that it might be more edible...

But what if you had a jar on the shelf that was enigmatically labelled "Sandwich filling"? You didn't know what you were going to have until you opened it; it might be jam (of a variety of fruits), or marmalade, or sandwich spread (remember that?), or meat paste, or anything else that might comfortably go between two slices of bread. This might be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on whether the resultant sandwich was palatable or not, but at least it would mean that there would be a surprise awaiting you when you dig into the jar.

Take these two examples, the Joneses and Marmite, and let's look at the reading for today through this lens. Paul and his troupe of travelling evangelists are in Thessalonica and Berea, doing what they do best, telling people about the Good News of Jesus Christ. They find a positive response among some of their listeners, but as happens so often, they also find resistance. This manifests itself in violent opposition, arrests and threats.

But here we have a problem. We read that there are the same people on both sides of the fence; Luke records that along with "a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women" (Acts 7:4) there were Jews who responded favourably to the Paul's message. However, there were also Jews in opposition, who stirred up trouble not just in Thessalonica but also travelled to Berea to make sure that their ire was heard.

These can't be the same Jews who changed their minds when they found that Gentiles and important women were getting in on the act, though Luke's phrasing is slightly ambiguous and could allow for that understanding. But who are they? They can't be every Jew in Thessalonica who opposed the Gospel

message; I'm sure that like in all walks of life there were some who were apathetic if not accepting.

So, it's temptingly easy to put them all into a Jewish box labelled "anti-Christian", even though that's wrong. However, it's tragically historically true that this has happened; the Holocaust was in part justified by the complicit silence of the majority of German churches who thought that the victims were getting their just desserts for the sins of their forebears who had cried "Crucify him!" on that first Good Friday.

Likewise, the lazy labelling of others makes hatred all the easier to fester; just look at how easy we categorise a group of "not-me" to show how disgusting/despicable/evil they are because of their difference to us. Woe betide that we find out that behind the label beats a heart like ours, with joys and fears like us; it's easier to homogenise and distil people down to a single characteristic, forgetting the vast spectrum of their full identity that we might just recognise.

In some ways, this has no greater resonance than this weekend as we engage in acts of remembrance in the run-up to November 11th and all that it means to us in the light of two world wars and countless ongoing conflicts across the world. We use our own labels to mark the day: the Fallen and the dwindling number of Veterans who will, COVID-19 restrictions allowing, still be able to attend ceremonies at War Memorials across the world.

But it would be wrong to categorise all who fought for the Allied Forces against the Nazis as heroes against villains. This is not to say that there were not heroic acts; of course, there were. This is not to say that there weren't villainous acts; of course, there were and the most horrific of these has been mentioned. However, it helps to recognise that among those who fought on both sides of the war the full range of human activity, for good and ill, was in evidence.

Not all those who fought for the liberation of Europe led unblemished lives; there were thieves and abusers among those who landed at D-Day, just as there were liars and cheats who had been rescued from those same beaches four years earlier. But there were also jolly jokers, lives-and-souls of parties, generous givers, and just plain old ordinary folk. But they were all people, individuals in their own rights, with their own particular life story that may well have ended too early, or went on to tell tales of comrades or shudder at the sound of fireworks, unable to escape the sights, sounds and smells of the battlefield.

We see pejorative labelling in the political arena: Republican and Democrat in the States, or the still-active Brexiter and Remainer of this country. Likewise, to be labelled a Christian seems to press us into a stereotyped mould that few would realistically fit into. In doing so, it becomes easy to forget that not only is the person behind the label so much more than the label, but also the label is broader than the person using it intends.

Just as it would be my worst nightmare to be born a Norman Jones^[1], cursed to be identical in every way to all my namesakes, so I do well to remember the full range that makes up the human race, each created uniquely in the image of God. So, when I use a label, I do it in the knowledge that it must not be allowed to diminish the person or people I'm referring to; I wouldn't want to be thought as identical to every other Paul in history. After all, not all of them like Marmite...

Amen.

^[1] As in the example above - I'm sure there are some lovely real Norman Joneses out there who don't wear socks and sandals.

(Photo by [Eduardo Casajús Gorostiaga](#) on [Unsplash](#))
