

Acts 10:1-23, No. 22
“The Conversion of Peter”
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Text Comment

- v.2 “God-fearer” here is probably the technical term. In those days a “God-fearer” was a Gentile who had embraced the Jewish faith, its monotheism and its theology of God, but was not yet a practicing Jew in the full sense, since he had not submitted to circumcision. We know this to be so of Cornelius given what is said about him in 11:3.
- v.3 The ninth hour – that would be 3:00 in the afternoon - was a time of prayer and so Cornelius was at prayer at this hour as devout Jews would have been.
- v.4 It seems clear that we are meant to understand that Cornelius was already a believing man. That is, he believed in and loved the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but as yet knew nothing about the life, death, resurrection, and teaching of Jesus Christ. There were, of course, a number of real Jewish believers at the time Christ appeared. Think of Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, or Simeon and Anna, people whose faith was shaped by the first 39 books of the Bible. No doubt there were many more. And, in the same way, there were believers scattered throughout the Jewish diaspora at this later period who simply needed to know what had happened in the life, death, and resurrection of the Messiah. Paul would draw a number of these into the Christian community simply by informing them what had happened.
- v.9 Many Jews followed a custom of prayer three times a day, as Daniel had (Dan. 6:10). If there is a temptation that prayers on a schedule may become rote, the solution to that is to work against that tendency. Certainly more prayer is better than no prayer at all!
- v.12 These are the three categories of animals known from the Law of Moses. Many of them would have been unclean animals, perhaps Peter’s response indicates that all of them were.
- v.14 You may remember that during the Lord’s ministry Peter on two separate occasions saw fit say “No!” to the Lord. The first was when Jesus at Caesarea Philippi began to speak of his impending death. Jesus rebuked him on that occasion as an instrument of Satan! The other was when the Lord began to wash his disciples’ feet in the upper room the night of his betrayal (Matt. 16:22; John 13:8). He was corrected then as well. Peter is here an example for us of how easily we pipsqueaks can think ourselves wiser than God and how limited our perspective so often is!

I have read, by the way, of a minister who put Peter’s response to good effect in counseling. A woman had come to him who was struggling with God’s will. She knew God had commanded her to do something, but she really didn’t want to do it. She thought obedience in this case would be unwise. So this pastor left her in his office with

this verse open before her. “I’m leaving,” he said. “You stay here until you cross out one or the other: either ‘by no means’ or ‘Lord.’” Do you get his point? If he really is the Lord the discussion is over. Obedience on our part is to be unquestioning. If we don’t obey, then we need to give up the pretense that we actually believe him to be the Lord.

- v.15 You remember that in Mark 7 the Lord had made some remarks about Jewish laws of ceremonial purity and about the spirit that then lay behind Jewish obedience to those laws, remarks that the Gospel writer, in an editorial comment, explained in this way: “In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.” But it is not clear - in fact, it does not seem to be the case - that during the days of his ministry Jesus ever abolished the distinction between clean and unclean foods or began to ignore or taught his disciples to ignore the distinction between foods. Hence Peter’s statement that he had never eaten anything unclean. Mark certainly tells us that Jesus prepared the way for the abolition of that distinction, but for all we know, *this* is the point at which the implications of Jesus’ earlier remarks were first fully understood and began to be practiced in the church.
- v.16 Apparently the vision was repeated three times while Peter was in the trance. This would be a typical way of confirming the truth of what was being revealed.
- v.18 These were Gentiles so they approached the Jewish home cautiously, not wanting to provoke unnecessary offense.
- v.23 The vision of the sheet filled with all sorts of animals was ostensibly about food, but as events unfolded Peter realized, as he will say later in vv. 28-29, that the Lord’s command had more to do with other things than with what food was permissible to eat. The vision in fact to do with people much more than with food. Jews in those days did not enter Gentile homes – a tradition that was neither taught nor suggested in the OT law – and it is not hard to see the connection between food and entering a Gentile home. If you went to such a home in those days when hospitality was a social requirement, you would have unclean food placed before you. If you refused you courted social disaster. If you ate, you broke the law. It was simply much easier not to enter the house in the first place. But Jesus was telling Peter that he needn’t worry. He was free to meet Cornelius in his Gentile home. Peter was being taught to call *no man* unclean!

Peter brought with him to Caesarea six other Jewish Christians from Joppa who, as we will learn in chapter 11, serve as important witnesses of what transpired in Cornelius’ home.

That we have reached a turning-point in the history of the gospel and of the world is indicated by the emphasis that Luke places on this history, giving it at length in chapter 10 and then repeating it at length in chapter 11. The conversion of the Apostle Paul is the only other event that is narrated more than once in Acts. *Something very important was happening here.* As we learn here, Cornelius was a Gentile. We have in the early chapters of Acts witnessed a large influx of Jews entering the kingdom of God through faith in Jesus. In chapter 8 we witnessed a large number of Samaritans believe in Jesus as well, not Jews but not quite Gentiles either. True enough, the Ethiopian eunuch was not a Jew, though like Cornelius, he was certainly a God-

fearer, a Jew in all but ceremonial practice, but off he went to Africa. He was not part of the world the evangelization of which is to be the great story of the rest of the book of Acts. But Cornelius was a Roman centurion, a quintessential representative of the Greco-Roman world, the Gentile world that Jesus had told his disciples they were to reach with the good news. Indeed, an officer in the Roman army, he was even a representative of the Roman state.

It is difficult for us nowadays to appreciate how wide the chasm was that separated Jews from Gentiles in that time and place. The Jews knew very well that they were God's chosen people, but instead of humbling them as it should have, their election was turned in most of their minds into a thinly-disguised spirit of favoritism and superiority. True, they knew that God had promised that through Abraham he would bless all the nations of the world. True, they knew that the prophets had promised a day when the knowledge of the Lord would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, a day when the Gentiles would confess Israel's God as the true and living God, a day when all the nations of the world would come to Jerusalem to worship, a day when God would pour out his Spirit upon all mankind. But what that had come to mean *in their minds and hearts* was that everyone else in the world *would become Jews*, would become like *them*. In their minds to be pleasing to God one had to be a Jew; to enter eternal life one had to be a Jew. It was a toxic misunderstanding of biblical theology which became a witch's brew of racism and spiritual pride. They regularly referred to Gentiles as "dogs," thought of them as crass idolaters, unclean and immoral, and would no more enter a Gentile home, or sit down to a meal with a Gentile than they would eat a ham sandwich. *Like the Pharisees in the Lord's parable, they thought themselves better than the Gentiles.* Peter himself admits this later in v. 28, where we read him saying to Cornelius and his household, "You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation..." Again, there was nothing to this effect in the Law of Moses. It was not unlawful, but it was the way the rabbi's had fenced the law. If you don't want to eat unclean food or be rendered unclean by touching unclean things, it is better just not to enter a Gentile house or even associate with them.

And, of course, if that was their view of Gentiles, it is no wonder that Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world did not have a positive impression of Jews. It is hard to like someone who thinks of you and speaks of you as a dog! Antisemitism, as a particularly fixed and specifically targeted racial or ethnic prejudice, really began in this period, when Jews living in the diaspora were despised by their fellow citizens *because they were Jews, and because they lived and thought like Jews*. We Christians are beginning to discover what it is like to be disdained in the larger society, and, alas, sometimes we have brought that disdain upon ourselves by the way we have spoken of non-Christians.

So appreciate the background of this history. Jews did not enter the homes of Gentiles. They had received with their mother's milk a disdain for Gentiles. And, as we know from the later chapters of Acts and from the rest of the New Testament, there were a significant number of Jewish *Christians* who found it very difficult to shed these prejudices. The problem that Paul would later address in a number of his letters, Galatians especially, was created by the unwillingness of Jewish *Christians* to welcome Gentile believers in Jesus into the church *as Gentiles*. They were happy to have them enter the church, but they continued to believe that to be true *Christians* they had to become Jews. Indeed, as powerful as this experience had been for Peter, as sure as he was that, as he puts it in 11:18 that "God had granted repentance that leads to

life to the Gentiles,” he would himself struggle to be true to that conviction later in Antioch, as Paul tells us in Galatians 2. Remember, though feeling free to eat with Gentiles himself, and having done so for some time, he quit doing so for fear of incurring the wrath of some of those Jewish Christians who had yet to shed that old prejudice.

So you see, whether or not Cornelius was “saved” at this time, though he was almost certainly already a believing man before he ever met Peter, though Cornelius was not at this moment *converted* in the ordinary Christian sense of the term, *Peter was certainly converted*, that is he was changed in a very dramatic and important way. And Peter himself will tell us that this was the case in the observations that follow in this chapter. In 10:34 we will read that Peter admitted that he *now understood* that God shows no partiality and, in v. 45, that “*everyone* who believes in him – that is everyone irrespective of his national, social, racial, religious, or ethnic background – receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” His initial response to the vision indicated that he had not understood that, or not fully. So deep was his prejudice, he failed to grasp the fact that the salvation of Christ was for the world, not only for the Jews. No doubt Peter knew that in some sense, but not at a level that would eradicate his life-long prejudice against Gentiles.

To bring Peter to such a revolutionary conviction required some dramatic intervention on the Lord’s part and that is what we find here in this narrative. First the dramatic vision was repeated three times for emphasis. But the vision itself had left Peter perplexed. What exactly was he being told to do? Go down to the nearest deli and order a ham on rye? But when Gentile men showed up at his door just when the vision had ended, and when he received instructions from the Holy Spirit to go with them and to do so without hesitation, and when he was told that an angel had told Cornelius to send for Peter the mists cleared and Peter realized the significance of what he had seen and what he had been told. The gospel’s progress into the world was going to change things dramatically and Gentiles were going to follow Jesus Christ too. For more than a thousand years the kingdom of God had been identified with the Jewish people. It would no longer be so.

Peter was a clever fellow. He cannot have failed to realize what this was going to mean. There have never been that many Jews in the world. *More than 7 billion human beings populate the planet now; 13 million of them are Jews.* They were a tiny minority of the population of the Greco-Roman world, but keeping them pacified took 10% of the imperial budget. If the church were to welcome Gentile believers, its character was going to change dramatically. The church wasn’t very much longer going to look Jewish or sound Jewish or even smell Jewish. Only a principle as fundamental as the salvation of the world, only a power as great as the love of God was sufficient to make a loyal, patriotic Jew, who had Judaism’s special place in the plan and purpose of God deep in his bones, willing to welcome the idea that the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ was no longer going to be a Jewish kingdom. It was a change so profound that we might liken it to Chinese coming in vast numbers to the United States and very rapidly taking over our country, changing its culture, its music, its dress, its food, even its language; and all of us would have to start learning Chinese in order to get along.

Now there is no doubt that this particular change – from Jew to Gentile – announced and prepared for in the history we read this morning is the burden of Luke’s narrative. In the history

of redemption and the salvation of the world this is key turning point, a change that had to be made because all but a few of the world's inhabitants were Gentiles and, up to this point, there were no Gentiles in the Christian church.

But, it is also true that the lesson that Peter was taught here – and it is clear that it had to be Peter who was taught it first, Peter being the leader of the apostles and the man with the greatest authority at this point in the history of the infant church, the man whose voice was going to count for a great deal when he spoke about these things – is a lesson every Christian must learn and a principle every Christian church must embrace. Indeed, the New Testament will expand the lesson, ring the changes on it with respect to other prejudices and social divisions of the time – not only Jew and Gentile, but man and woman, barbarian, Scythian, slave, and free, as Paul puts it in Galatians.

I grew up in suburban St. Louis, Missouri. I went to an all-white, all middle class elementary school. There was, if I recall correctly, *one* African American student in my high school of some 2,500 students. There were no Hispanics so far as I can remember. And what was true of my school was equally true of my church. It was monochrome. We were comfortable with one another because we were all the same. We weren't thinking much about that fact in those days. This was before Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement. We would have welcomed people of other races and ethnicities, but we rarely encountered them. We knew very well that the gospel was for everyone and that the church was to be composed of people from every tongue, tribe, and nation, but we had little experience of that reality ourselves.

My first real exposure to the reality that Peter first encountered as an existential fact of Christian life in Caesarea at the home of Cornelius was on a trip to India in 1975. And frankly it was a wonderful experience, a transforming experience for me. I was suddenly placed in a culture profoundly different from my own. People there looked different, dressed differently, they spoke another language (though thankfully many of them spoke English as well), their houses looked different, they ate different food, they were much poorer than I, and they listened to different music. I remember sitting in a living room one night listening to a concert of *Sitar* music played by a nationally recognized musician. I had never heard such music before.

But the people I was with, different as they were in so many ways, were likewise Christians. We worshipped the same God, read the same Bible, loved the same Lord Jesus, and, more striking to me, had the same experiences typical of Christians in the world: the same struggle with sin and temptation, the same pleasure in Christian fellowship, the same practices of prayer and worship, and so on. We had the same hopes for our lives as Christians.

One weekend four of us students from Covenant Seminary went touring with a young Indian pastor. That Friday night we found ourselves in an Ashram, a Hindu monastery. Now the disciples who were staying and studying and meditating in that Ashram were the Indian pastor's people, at least racially and culturally. They spoke Hindi as he did, their appearance was Indian as his was, and so on. But he found them as strange as we did and we found him as familiar as he found us. We shared something that was far more profound than those characteristics that distinguished him from us. We shared our faith in God and Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and a view of ourselves and the world based on the teaching of the Bible. As Paul would put it, the

differences we make so much of disappear when Christ is all and in all. We all sat there, dismayed by what we saw: the eating of a miserable meal, as if there was some virtue in eating bad food, the belching afterward, the humming, the mindless repetition of mantra, the reading of the *Gita*. They may have been Indians but our friend was essentially a Christian and he felt as far away from those fellow Indians as he felt a close kinship with us. And, since there were a few Americans among the Ashram's disciples, we felt as alienated from them as we felt one with our Indian Christian friend. It seemed entirely natural for the five of us to gather in our room that night and pray for the people we had been with, Indian and Americans together, feeling as if it were us against them.

It is easier, of course, to feel that unity and to be grateful for it when you find yourself in an Ashram far from home. But the fact is American culture is no less the Devil's lair than an Indian Ashram and the importance of our unity in Christ is no less here than there.

When so much attention is being paid here to the difficulty of getting over a sense of entitlement on the part of Christians and to the breaking down of what had been profound barriers separating people from one another, any thoughtful reader of this part of Luke ought to be asking himself or herself how this passage might be addressing us today. We no longer struggle with Gentile acceptance in the church for we are, almost all of us, Gentiles. We take that for granted. But surely there are ways in which Peter's initial attitude can still be ours today and in which believers – assuming Cornelius was a believer already, as seems to be the case – can be separated from one another. Peter shows us how hard it can be to eradicate prejudices and how powerful must be the principles that are adequate to destroy them. It may be no longer Jew or Gentile, but it can be a hundred other distinctions of culture, race, class, education, appearance, and so on.

What Peter learned, as he will put it in v. 34, is that God does not play favorites. What is to separate people from one another is simply faith in Christ or the lack of it. As we read in v. 43: *everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

There was no greater separation in those days, no greater alienation than that between Jew and Gentile. It affected everything. Jews would not marry Gentiles, they didn't make Gentile friends; they wouldn't even enter Gentile homes. But all of that was to end for Christian Jews. Now and forever they would have more in common, much more, they would share a deeper bond with a Christian Gentile than with an unbelieving Jew. Because Jesus Christ is the entire meaning of our lives. If we share him with someone else, we share everything that matters; absolutely everything.

I read recently the fascinating account of two Presbyterian missionaries, two young men of the American South, William Henry Sheppard and Samuel Norvell Lapsley. They went as two twenty-something single men to Africa together under the auspices of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Now the later 19th century was a time we would rather forget as Americans for the evil of our race relations, for the injustices perpetrated against American blacks, for the hard hearts toward and the theological betrayal of African Americans by white American Christians, including Presbyterians, who certainly should have known to think and to act much better than they did. The behavior of American Christians toward their black brethren was no better and

often much worse than the Jews toward the Gentiles, because as Christians *they knew* that Christ had broken down the wall of separation and included all believers in a single fellowship of love, but they didn't act like it.

But William Sheppard was black, the son of a slave, and Samuel Lapsley was white, the son of a former slave owner, and they were paired as missionaries to Africa. In fact Sheppard had wanted to go to Africa sooner but the church had a policy of sending men in pairs and he had to wait until someone volunteered to go with him. That volunteer was Samuel Lapsley. Once in Africa they settled to the hard work of learning the language of the Congolese, figuring out their culture, providing for themselves living accommodations, and adjusting to the country, its climate and its food. Their letters indicate how much they admired and respected one another. As Lapsley wrote of his black colleague, "Sheppard is a treasure" and "the most popular man that ever came to this [place]." As so often happened to western missionaries in Africa in those days, Samuel Lapsley did not survive two full years, being carried away by malaria. He was 26 years old when he died. William Sheppard wrote to Lapsley's mother:

"I have loved and cared for him as if he were my own brother. My friend and brother has gone to be with Christ and I shall see him no more. No more kneeling together in prayer! No more planning together future work! His work is done..."

Sheppard remained, planting the church in West Africa. [D. Calhoun, "'A Little While': William Henry Sheppard and Samuel Norvell Lapsley," *Presbyterion* XLI (Fall 2015) 1-11.

Beautiful! The more beautiful for its time, for its absolute contradiction of the vicious prejudices of the culture in which those two men were raised. *That is precisely the picture we are being given here of Peter the Jew and Cornelius the Gentile.* Not enemies, not even simply friends. No, of those two men, as of Sheppard and Lapsley, it could be said, *they would have said*, what Augustine said of his Christian brother Alypius, "We are washed in the same blood."

And to practice that unity, to treasure that bond of faith in Christ, to bend all one's powers to the great divine project of calling the entire world to faith in Christ, *that* is our calling, yours and mine. The greater the barriers, the more certain that in Christ's name and by his power, they must be overcome.

Every believer is my brother or sister; and every unbeliever is a potential believer!