

Acts | The Incendiary Fellowship
The Barrier Broken (To Stand in God's Way)
Acts 10.44 – 11.18
5.7.17

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.⁴⁵ All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also.⁴⁶ For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered,⁴⁷ "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?"⁴⁸ And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. (Act 10:1 NAU)

11 *Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,³ saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."⁴ But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me,⁶ and when I had fixed my gaze upon it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air.⁷ "And I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Arise, Peter; kill and eat.'⁸ "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'⁹ "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.'¹⁰ "And this happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.¹¹ "And behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.¹² "And the Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. And these six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man's house.¹³ "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here;¹⁴ and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'¹⁵ "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning.¹⁶ "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'¹⁷ "If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"*

We have re-entered to Story of the EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH as told by Luke (the writer of the Third Gospel). This is the sequel to Luke's first book. He sees this story as the ongoing work of The Resurrected Man. Luke's telling us what Jesus Christ began to do and teach (in the Gospel According to Luke) AND now what Jesus Christ continued to do in this second volume.

It's sometimes called Acts of the Holy Spirit and it really is the Church animated by God's Spirit and broadcasting the Gospel (basic message of Christianity) and winning the Roman Empire to belief in the Risen Man...churches are being planted... "Aslan is on the MOVE!" (as they say in Narnia).

If you are trying to get a grip on what Christianity really is...and how it's distinct and what is the difference and the main idea that makes it different from other spiritual approaches...THIS book is wonderful and FOR those who are already Christians, this book is our roots...gets us back to our origins.

Today is the "rest of the story" we began last week, an impasse that only God could overcome...and HE does! A question has to be answered: what will be the relationship between Judaism and the Way of Jesus? How will Jewish believers in Jesus Christ relate to Gentiles? What IF Gentile people want to know this Resurrected Man...what do you call that kind of a person – a Gentile who joins himself to the Seed promised to Abraham – Jesus Christ? And how does the Gospel, then, envision and enable a new way of thinking about racial divisions in Church/world?

Let's dive in to the rest of the story:

- 1) An Amazing Moment Off the Grid
- 2) Meanwhile Back at the Ranch
- 3) An Amazing Moment Back at the Ranch

The telling of this story – again, the longest single narrative in the Book of Acts (70 verses) – the record high-lights timing... Hours are mentioned ("about the ninth hour...about the sixth hour"). And there are all these "coincidences" (at least from our perspective): Peter is at a loss about what this vision means and JUST then the men from Cornelius arrive at the gate ...but God has already told Peter to go down from the roof and the men will be waiting and he's to go with them. So all the coincidences turn out to be orchestrated by the hand of God.

And then the crowning coincidence, THE AMAZING MOMENT, is when Peter preaches this sermon to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea (Cornelius has used the wait...to gather his family and friends) and Peter finds this huge group of Gentiles and we skipped over the sermon (REGRETTABLY because it's amazing – just had to make choices!) and Peter tells the whole story of Jesus Christ from His baptism by John to the miracles and the crucifixion and resurrection and how they ate and drank with the Risen Man and how they were commissioned to be His witnesses and to proclaim the News of who this Man IS – the Judge of the living and the dead... and THEN THE DECISIVE MOMENT – Peter says, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." (43)

And then it happens: "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message." (44) It's now crystal clear that none of this is chance/coincidence but is God – the Holy Spirit "fell" (a very intense word). At the mention of the prophets' witness and forgiveness of sin through believing in Jesus Christ – the Spirit falls.

It's like the whole group of Gentiles is so primed... they've been waiting...and it's God's timing... the wait of the world is now over and the Holy Spirit falls like fire falling on bone-dry, gasoline soaked kindling wood and it all IGNITES!

And what follows is the Gentile Pentecost – they act just like the Jewish followers of Jesus did on the original day of Pentecost. They speak in languages they had never learned (a miracle of speech!) and Babel is reversed...the Spirit has landed and God is being celebrated...and it's so OBVIOUSLY God's doing that there can be no doubt: "All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also." (45)

And they're baptized with water and thus are BORN into the Church... uncircumcised Gentile people...a whole huge household... an amazing moment off the grid...outside the box...but clearly God's doing!

And...meanwhile...back at the ranch...the apostles and the Jewish believers in Jesus Christ who are centered in Jerusalem...news gets out that Peter (Simon Bar Jonah) Peter went to "THEM"...to the "other side of the tracks"...and "THEY" "the Gentiles had also received the word of God."

And with the many, many years of racial/religious separation deeply rooted in their hearts...these early Jewish Christians "took issue with Peter" (2-3) because he "went to the uncircumcised and ATE with them." And we get the idea that it's the eating that's really the deal-breaker, that "we're not CRUEL! If God wants to forgive the Gentiles and wants to apply Jesus Christ's work to them – we're good with that...but we don't EAT with them...do we?"

This changes the whole way we thought this was going to go! There can be Jewish groups who believe in Jesus and there can even be Gentile groups (I guess?) but...together? Can't we be equal but separate? I'm sure that's how God would want it... I mean I WAS sure... I thought... WE thought we knew what God was doing...but "eating" with them?

"Peter can you please explain yourself?"

You know how things can be ...back at the ranch. We can get very...provincial...very tribal and insular and narrow-minded...and comfortable... We see the church as a place of comfort (and it IS... we get used to things the way they are...) we feel like we have God figured out... and no one likes change (especially when it means we have to change our thinking and our habits and routines...and be inconvenienced).

I mean we're talking about tweaking some things around here... trying to keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5.25)... but really any changes we're making here are small potatoes... but we do know...don't we that God is on the move...in big ways (I mean global and history-altering

ways)?... Did you know for instance that the geographical center of Christianity is shifting right under our feet... It's no longer the great cities of Europe but it's shifting South and East.

In Philip Jenkins astounding book, **The Next Christendom** (now there's a third edition!) he includes an excerpt from Evelyn Waugh's short story from 1933 called "Out of Depth" where a time traveller visits England 500 years in the future and the whole nation is this primitive peasant society colonized by some advanced African nations and in the crux of the story...there's a church service where a bunch of uneducated semi-literate English farmers are being evangelized by an Christian priest from Africa.

And that was laughable when Waugh wrote the story but... turned out to be prophetic. Even today there are more Anglicans in Nigeria than in England and more Presbyterians in Malawi than there are in Scotland... And I haven't even mentioned China!

And it doesn't matter if I like it or don't like it – it's the way it is... a mega-shift...Aslan is on the move... Will we stay informed... will we discern the times... will we keep in step with the Spirit...? But even these global changes are small stuff compared with the shift going on in Peter's thinking! Paradigm Shift!

"Peter will you explain yourself?" (They're worked up!)

And Peter does... He takes it from the top...recounts the whole story...his roof-top visions (not one but three!) and all the coincidences that were NOT chance but clearly choreographed by God... and then he concludes, "Friends...once again we have underestimated what our Rabbi was teaching us and we reduced this thing to a reform movement – turns out this is the dawn of a NEW PHASE in God's plan – Jesus will save the world and make a New Creation: "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (16-17)

And the place ... went silent...and then... "they quieted down and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.'" (18)

Yes! God's mercy is wider than we thought! And Jesus Christ's work is more wonderful than we dreamed... and we don't have it all worked out yet but we DO want to move with Him who is making all things new!

And we'll see in a few weeks (God willing) that the Church eventually calls together a huge Council (the famous Jerusalem Council – CH 15) to work through some of the thorny issues... and God is maturing the Church and leaving future generations of Christians with a model of how to make decisions and how to engage in mission and how to move forward...with Him.

Meanwhile...back at the ranch...there's rejoicing! They're celebrating the goodness of God... It's dawning on them that God called Abraham (2000 years prior to this) God called Abraham in order to bless the whole world, "Abraham, I will make you a great nation... and in you will all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen 12.2-3)

And NOW in the fullness of time (Gal 4.4) God is making good on His promise...from the nation of Abraham...the Seed of Abraham (Gal 3.16) has come the blessing to all the nations, the Gentiles, the blessing Personified in the Man who lived perfect goodness and overcame evil and died under the penalty of the justice that I deserved...and rose again so that through His name, everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins." (Acts 10.43)

Everyone... Jewish people who believe in Abraham's Seed receive forgiveness of sins...Gentiles... Hindus... Muslims... secular people...spiritual people...

God is granting repentance (See? Repentance is a gift...and it leads to life) God is enabling people to say what we just can't say without His power, "I AM WRONG! I am sinful...I have guilt and I need relief" – repentance! A new beginning EVERY DAY!

And God is giving all kinds of people LIFE – and He is building a New Temple...a new humanity...people with radical/core differences ushered into life and gathered from out of the world into the Church – Jews and Gentiles, men and women, Italians (like Cornelius) people from every tribe and tongue, made to eat together as a family... living in repentance and faith together...baptized by the Spirit and water (born through water INTO the Church), recipients of the Spirit and the Word.

If you're already in...then glorify God...if you're not yet in, then come! Get relief from your guilt and enter this weird and wonderful family – belonging is for everyone who believes...

The Communion

5.7.17

The Christian Church has celebrated the Lord's Supper in a variety of ways over its long history. Some churches have communicants come forward. Some have them kneel at a rail (some of the Puritans violently opposed this...and some didn't)

In past centuries Presbyterians would come forward with a token in their hands showing that they had been examined and the elders found that this person does actually believe.

Then they would sit at long tables – maybe 10 people and be served by the minister. Then that 10 would be dismissed and another 10 would come.

OUR custom is...as it is... and I think most people try to focus on God (always a good thing to do) and I don't want to discourage that at all...but I do want to point out that Communion can't be taken alone.

There have to be other worshipers present...because we commune BOTH vertically (with God) AND horizontally with one another (like the two beams of the Cross) Communion is NOT and NEVER IS just between YOU AND GOD... it's BOTH.

So today...hold the vertical (you and God) but maybe be a little more cognizant of the horizontal – you are NOT alone...we are eating together...as a family.

They were shocked that Jewish Peter ATE with Gentiles...and how shocking that WE are eating together...maybe apart from Jesus Christ you would be enemies and opponents of some of the people here... BUT (shocking as it is) NOW, in Christ we are not only tolerating one another ...not only com-pan-i-ions (with bread) but FAMILY.

This is a miracle...this should make the world take note. This glorifies God... We eat of the same Bread...and that Bread is Jesus Christ who grants forgiveness and enables us to love God and love one another.