

When “They” Come to Church

Acts 11:1–18

Studies in Acts #14

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Do you understand how enormous a thing it was for Cornelius to receive salvation in chapter 10? For those of us older it would have been like Madilyn Murray O’Hare, the great American atheist, coming to church and professing faith. For those of us younger, it would be like Richard Dawkins coming in here tonight. For our brothers and sisters in China, for example, we can only imagine what it must feel like if a government official from the Communist Party converted. There would be suspicion, fear, and bewilderment (10:45; 11:3, 18).

But in the cross of Jesus Christ the great dividing wall between different people from different cultures and ethnicity was toppled. It was like when many of us witnessed on television the toppling of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Now the joyfully news is that the Jews and Gentiles are one people in the church of Jesus Christ! This is also a providential text before us tonight given the ongoing struggle in our nation with racism as evidenced this week in Charleston, South Carolina.

1. *One Party’s Prejudice*
2. *God’s Persistence*
3. *The Church’s Praise*

One Party’s Prejudice

The first thing we see in the aftermath of Peter’s trip to Caesarea and Cornelius’ household is *one party’s prejudice*. We read that **the apostles and the brothers who**

were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God (v. 1). This good news spread fast and far. “But not so fast!” Whenever a spark is ignited there is threat of someone dousing it with water. We read in verse 2 that **when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them”** (vv. 2–3). There’s debate about who these are, whether non-Christian Jews who were criticizing Peter as a Christian or Christian Jews. I think it’s the latter as we’ve just read a story of the uncircumcised Gentile Cornelius and his household. So now there are two groups of sinners saved by grace in the church. But the first thing these Jewish believers throw up before Peter is that he **ate** with Gentiles. What’s interesting is that not eating with Gentiles was a Jewish tradition; it was not the Law of God.

The principle we learn here is that these Jewish Christians were prejudiced against Gentile Christians. “I mean, it’s one thing to have Greek-speaking widows in our community, but now we have actual Greeks!” The way the story is being set-up and how it ends teaches us unequivocally that prejudice against another because of their ethnicity or to put it in the terms we know so well, because of the color of their skin, is sin. God created the world. We all descend from one man and one woman. And each of our individual shapes, colors, and ethnicities is a part of the image of God in which we were created and continue to be human. To deny someone the love of neighbor God commands who is a different color or whose eyes are a different shape or who talks differently than you do or came from somewhere “outside” is to deny their full humanity; and to deny that humanity is to deny God!

God's Persistence

But then Peter recounts what happened (v. 4) and in that we see *God's persistence* in affirming the humanity of the Gentiles and his plan to save them. He mentions the vision he saw of the sheet and the animals (vv. 5–6). He mentions the voice that said, **“Rise, Peter; kill and eat”** (v. 7). Astonishingly he mentions his stubbornness with God: **“By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth”** (v. 8). He mentions God's voice a second time: **“What God has made clean, do not call common”** (v. 9). And he mentions that **this happened three times** (v. 10). In other words, the apostle Peter needed to be told, told again, and told again that Gentiles were clean. Sometimes God shows his persistence with us in beating the sin out of us! And the sin of racism is one of those that has plagued the human race for millennia. It is one of the sins of the heart so hard to rid oneself of. There's “us” and then there's “them.”

How did Peter know the Gentiles were clean and the same kinds of sinners in need of salvation? First, the vision of the sheet and animals was not about kosher food laws but about Gentile people, as we read in chapter 10. Second, here Peter recounts that **“the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction”** (v. 12). Third, the same Spirit who came upon the Day of Pentecost **“fell on them just as on us at the beginning”** (v. 15). If you compare the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 with this Gentile Pentecost in Acts 10, you see that both are described in terms of the Spirit falling upon people (2:17, 33; 10:44–45), in terms of people magnifying God (2:11; 10:46), in terms of the amazement that followed (2:7, 12; 10:45), and in terms of subsequent baptisms (2:38; 10:48). And fourth, this reminded Peter of Jesus' words, which were now being fulfilled: **“I remembered the**

word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” (v. 16). Peter’s logic is from the greater to the lesser, “If God baptized the Gentiles in the Spirit, we surely can baptize them with mere water.” And the application is clear to us: If God has broken down the walls of racism, nationalism, tribalism in the church, who are we to re-erect them?

The Church’s Praise

So Peter was convinced, but how about the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who argued with Peter? Notice how Peter concluded his speech saying, **“If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”** (v. 17) What was the result? **When they**—that is, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem—**heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life”** (v. 18). The end result was *the church’s praise*. As one commentator said, “Their criticism ceased; their worship began.”¹

What we need to learn in our hearts and apply in actions is the principles that “the terms on which God accepts sinners in Jesus Christ...shape[s] and determine[s] the terms of their fellowship one with another.”²

And when we do this, we will see an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our lives and the life of our church leading to many kinds of people glorifying God. Amen.

¹ Bruce, cited in Stott, 196.

² Waters, 275.