

The Great Stories of the Early Church

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Cornelius04

Peter's Vision

Acts 10:1-18

- 1 There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band,
- 2 A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway.
- 3 He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him, and saying unto him, Cornelius.
- 4 And when he looked on him, he was afraid, and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God.
- 5 And now send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter:
- 6 He lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the sea side: he shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do.
- 7 And when the angel which spake unto Cornelius was departed, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually;
- 8 And when he had declared all these things unto them, he sent them to Joppa.
- 9 On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour:
- 10 And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance,
- 11 And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth:
- 12 Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.
- 13 And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat.
- 14 But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean.
- 15 And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.
- 16 This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven.
- 17 Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made inquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate,
- 18 And called, and asked whether Simon, which was surnamed Peter, were lodged there.
KJV

Introduction:

This whole story of Peter and Cornelius is an enormous story. God spoke to Peter in a vision but

the vision is far larger than the story of a Roman Centurion who became a Christian, it is the declaration of God to the entire Jewish Church that Gentiles were going to be coming in and that they need not become Jewish proselytes in order to do so. This event will not forever solve the problem but it will be the theological foundation by which the church will argue against the heresies which are going to arise, particularly among the Jewish converts.

Without Peter suspecting it, God has drawn him in to a Huge Doctrinal Issue. A massive shift was about to occur in the church based on what Christ had finalized on the cross. Some theologians view it as the conclusion of one Covenant and the beginning of a New one. Some call it a change of administration in a single unified Covenant. Others describe it as the end of one Dispensation and the arrival of a New. And still others view this as the final revelation in an ongoing process of God unfolding His Work of Redemption. It is not my purpose to debate the various understandings of what has occurred in the Death, Burial, Resurrection and Ascension of Christ but merely to point out to you what God was unfolding to Peter, Cornelius and to the Jerusalem Church that an Enormous Change had taken place and things were going to be much different from here forward.

This doctrinal change was going to force a very dramatic and profound practical change upon the Church which had, up until now, been primarily inhabited and ruled by believing Jews. If the Great Commission was going to be implemented, and if it included the Gentiles, then Jews were going to be required to interact with Gentiles on a personal and intimate level. As we shall see before we are done, this was going to be beyond challenging to them.

Additionally, a Clear and Ringing Example was going to be left to impress upon every Christian going forward that following Christ and preaching the gospel means dealing with all kinds of people, often to the very great discomfort on those evangelizing outside of their own culture. Success will be measured by the harmony and unity produced within congregations made up of people from very different backgrounds, cultures, and even races.

First, let us tackle this Huge Doctrinal Issue.

From the time when Noah and his family disembarked from the ark after the Flood until that Awful Moment when the Son of God uttered those declarative Words from the Cross, "It is Finished," the Work of God in the world had primarily focused on the eldest son of Noah and his descendants. It is believed by some that Shem himself was a mighty force for Truth and the True Worship of God for 500 years after the flood and well into the life of Abraham, who would be a distant grandson, with 8 generations separating them.

Abram, as he was originally named, was called by God from the Chaldean city of Ur and promised that God would do two things:

1. Make of his descendants a mighty people,
- and,
2. Bless all of the families of the earth through him.

So, from the time those promises were given until these early days of the church, it was widely believed and assumed that this meant the Jews would be blessed by God and ultimately rise to be

the Only World Power. The rest of the world would be blessed by having the Jews and their Ultimate King, the Messiah, rule over them and bring God's truth to them

This notion is the basis for a question that the disciples asked Jesus after He had risen and just before He returned to heaven.

Acts 1:4-6

- 4 And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me.
- 5 For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.
- 6 When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? KJV

That idea was undoubtedly a part of the thought processes of the early church since they were being led by the people that had asked the question. But now they were about to learn that this is not what God had in His mind at all. God's purpose, they were about to learn, was to have both a physical *and* a spiritual people through Abraham and the spiritual people, unlike the physical, would not be racially defined. God had intended, and had already given, many blessings to His physical people, the Jews, but the real blessings were reserved for the spiritual sons of Abraham. Furthermore, the spiritual children of Abraham were going to be drawn to God from this point on primarily from among the Gentile (non-Jewish) people groups of the world. Not only that but for the immediate future it was going to be the task of the believing Jews to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ to those Gentile people.

These things seem crystal clear to us but it was not so to them in those early days. There was a purpose in God sending the vision to Peter and not some lesser known of His servants. Peter was going to be the one to introduce this earth-shattering reality to the church at Jerusalem because anyone with less respect would probably not have been believed. We shall see in a future message that Peter was barely able to present his case and have it received. He was sternly questioned and many were profoundly upset at his actions in going in to Cornelius and treating him as if he were as acceptable as a Jewish believer.

But the ground had shifted at the Cross and the Spiritual Universe had, as it were, rotated 180 degrees.

Paul will later describe the issue to a primarily Gentile church in this way.

Eph 2:11-22

- 11 Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands;
- 12 That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world:

- 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.
- 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;
- 15 Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace;
- 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:
- 17 And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.
- 18 For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.
- 19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;
- 20 And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;
- 21 In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:
- 22 In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

What Paul called “the middle wall of partition” included everything that made or suggested that Jews by birth were superior to Gentiles, that they had any sort of ‘leg up’ on acceptance with God in Jesus Christ. And this wall had been broken down by God in such a way as to never be repaired or erected again, neither from the Jewish side nor from the Gentile side.

John Calvin said here, “the distinction which God had formerly imposed was now removed.”

That force which caused the earthquake in Jerusalem as Jesus cried out and gave up the ghost rent in sunder far more than the veil in the Temple. It forever shredded any valid notion that there was some spiritual genetic superiority of one people over any other. It completely leveled the playing field and abolished eternally the idea of a ‘do not enter’ sign on the gates of heaven for any racial group.

Jesus Christ had done a work, in a sense changed all of the rules, and now the Church He had purchased with His Own blood was being required to adjust her thinking and her practice to accommodate the new reality.

Parentetical

May I insert this? This division had never been a concrete one. You will recall that Moses’ father-in-law, the ‘priest of Midian,’ was quite obviously a believer in Jehovah. So was Rahab the harlot, Ruth the Moabitess, Naaman the Syrian, the inhabitants of Nineveh in the days of Jonah, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the Centurion at Capernaum and many others. In every time and place the soul that has looked to God in repentance and faith has been received by Him fully in mercy.

What God has done in Christ has been to state that reality emphatically and make an open

declaration of it, taking away all claims to the contrary.

End of parenthesis

The Doctrine thus established, we are introduced to the Practical Adjustments that were going to be required in order to fully implement the Great Commission.

I think that it is difficult for us to fully understand the contempt and hatred that most Jews felt for Gentiles, and Romans in particular.

I grew up in the Deep South in the days of full segregation, Jim Crow laws, and all that went with those things. One of my early memories was of riding to the First Grace on the school bus. Right at the intersection when the bus turned from the highway to go to the school there was an old fashioned hamburger stand which faced the highway. Facing the street down which we turned was a side of the building which held two water fountains, one with a sign which read 'white' and one with the sign, 'colored.' I remember looking at those two signs and water fountains every school day for two years and wondering about them. I know about racial hatred and bitterness from experience and yet if I understand history correctly there never was a white man who hated a black man more than the average Jew, and especially the orthodox, hated Romans.

First of all, they were uncircumcised which made them seem filthy to the Jew and identified them to him as being condemned, cursed, and completely cast away by God. They were to him both physically and spiritually vile. Then, they ate unclean food about which Jews were steeped in tradition. Such food was a disgusting to them as the stories we hear from the mission field about people eating dogs, rats, or spiders.

Add to that the false gods of the Gentiles and the grotesque and immoral ways they worshiped them.

All of this taken together made a mountain too high to climb even for the believing Jew, at least in the beginning days of the church.

To top it all off, the Romans were the ones dominating Judea and Galilee by force, depriving them of their (supposed) God-given right to be free and to rule the world from Jerusalem.

As I said, it is almost impossible for us to imagine the loathing a Jew felt for a Roman.

And now, believing Jews were to go to the Gentiles with the Gospel. And, when they believed, the Jews were to baptize them, touch them, get in the same water with them, receive them as fellow members of the church and consider them full spiritual brothers, welcoming them into fellowship as equals! To borrow a word, *inconceivable!*

Can you see the massive shift that was about to take place? Can you comprehend Peter's reluctance? Can you see why a Direct Word from God, repeated three times, would be necessary to convince him to go to Cornelius' house?

We wonder if Peter should not have understood from Jesus' words in the Great

Commission that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

But Peter and the early church were similar to us in many ways. When one possible understanding of scripture is unpleasant to us or difficult for us, we tend to look for other interpretations. It is quite likely that going to the Gentiles and receiving those who believed as equals was a thought so distasteful they assumed Jesus meant something else. This has been going on from the earliest days.

With a little bit of work and prejudiced presumption the words of Jesus might have been re-read to say, "Go to the Jews scattered throughout the world and such Gentiles as will convert to Judaism and teach them the words of Christ, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, being sure to keep the Gentiles as second class members of the church." I can see that happening. But now God was going to upset their entire world.

Maybe we can find compassion for those who struggled against the New Order being revealed and learn as they did. Within 100 years of the death of John (90-100) the church became primarily Gentile and now the problems took a different form but had to be handled by the same principles. The Jews were now the problems to the Gentile majority and the doctrinal errors were now seeping in from Greco-Roman influences rather than Jewish.

But the principles of dealing with one another in both longsuffering as well as commitment to unity and truth remained and have continued to remain in the church as an abiding challenge.

The plaintive request of Paul still rings across the centuries,

Eph 4:1-3

- 1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,
- 2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;
- 3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. KJV

And this brings us to the practical application for us.

God has indeed called on us to fully accept all that He has cleansed.

Please understand that I am not parroting the modern false message of inclusivism. I am not saying that we are to fully accept all who call themselves "Christian." Indeed, we are forbidden to do that, Gal 1:8,9 forbid us to receive anyone who brings a gospel different from Paul's. I Cor. 5:9-11 requires us to withdraw from those who claim to be brothers who live wickedly. Titus 3:10 commands us to reject those who cause division and 2 Thess 3:6 states that we are to reject those who 'walk disorderly.'

But once we determine that one has sufficient credentials for us to receive him/her as a child of God, we are to be willing to go very far in setting aside prejudices and secondary issues that might be obstacles to opening our arms wide to receive them.

We do not have time here to explore it all but this was the lesson that Paul taught to the Roman church in the end of his letter to them in chapters 12 through 16.

I will reference one passage but urge you to read the entire section.

Rom 14:1-4

- 1 Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.
- 2 For one believeth that he may eat all things: another, who is weak, eateth herbs.
- 3 Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him.
- 4 Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand. KJV

The issue here was one of diet and the Jews were always a problem there. But the text shows us how we are to be willing to set aside secondary (I said *secondary*) issues for the sake of fellowship and unity. Neither are we allowed to take secondary issues and make them primary.

The issue is that no race, no nation, no culture is off-limits to the gospel. No one may be safely ignored because of his/her background, ethnicity, former life, or previous manner of worship. Listen to this.

1 Cor 6:9-11

- 9 Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,
- 10 Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.
- 11 And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. KJV

No person who is truly called to salvation by God should ever find himself cut off by secondary issues from worshipping with any true church of God.

There is a spirit of division and schism which affects all men and the churches of Christ have never been totally free of it. I can imagine someone in one of those early Jewish communities saying, "I don't mind if Gentiles are converted but let them have their own churches. Why must they come to ours?"

The 'why' is that this is not what God intended.

Acts 15:7-11

- 7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.
- 8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;
- 9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.
- 10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples,

which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

- 11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they. KJV

His design is that within any particular locality all who are truly His would be united in a spirit of harmony and mutual submission to one another. There should be no true church that caters to one race or one cultural group or one social construction to the exclusion of others. The only cultural identity any church should have is the culture of Christ and that should be pretty much the same wherever one finds it.

Sadly that is not the case. In most places walls and partitions have been erected to divide the people of God into ever smaller subsets. This is not how God ordained His church to be. We have already referenced Eph 4 which teaches exactly this truth.

God has at times reunited His people through Revival and then, at times, through persecution. I pray that He will do it again, hopefully through Revival rather than persecution. But, I will tell you a secret in closing. He had rather have His people united and in harmony than to have them safe.

Learn to love the people of God, all of them.