

***The Great Stories of the Early Church***  
***33 - Peter's Ministry 07***  
***Cornelius06***  
***Peter Confronted Concerning Cornelius***  
***Acts 11:1-18***

- 1 And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.
- 2 And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him,
- 3 Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.
- 4 But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying,
- 5 I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me:
- 6 Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air.
- 7 And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat.
- 8 But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth.
- 9 But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.
- 10 And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven.
- 11 And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me.
- 12 And the spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house:
- 13 And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter;
- 14 Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.
- 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.
- 16 Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost.
- 17 Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?
- 18 When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life. KJV

**Introduction:**

The news of what had happened at Caesarea outran Peter back to Jerusalem and by the time that Peter arrived back there a group of the membership of the church was ready to confront him about his behavior, specifically that he had resided and eaten with uncircumcised men. Now this

seems odd to us from our perspective as we have noticed in previous messages from this time in the life of the church. Understanding what was going on can be very instructive to us.

There were already different groups within the church in spite of the fact that all of them in Jerusalem were Jews. Luke designated this committee that confronted Peter as “they that were of the circumcision.” But all of the Jews were circumcised, so what does this mean? Understand that Luke was writing some time later and not an ongoing record of the events as they occurred. By the time that Luke wrote this book there was a very definite segment of Jewish Christianity that had distinguished itself from the mainstream of Christian thought and practice. There were diligently trying to hold on to Jewish tradition in the face of the ever growing Gentile church and insisting that all who came to Christ should also come to Moses, submit to circumcision and Jewish life and customs. They were designated as “of the circumcision” because of the importance they placed on it in contrast to the way that Paul taught on the subject.

There were many groups and subdivisions within the Jewish culture: Pharisees (the majority), Sadducees (also called ‘Grecians’), Zealots, Herodians, many other smaller groups, and, finally, the common people. From among all these divisions people had been converted and had joined the church. The primary groups we have been introduced to have been the ‘Grecians,’ Jews who primarily spoke Greek, most of whom had been born abroad and had migrated back to Jerusalem, and then there were those who primarily spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, natives of Jerusalem.

The Grecians had their own synagogues and had a much more open mind to the Gentiles than the rest, especially those who had been converted from the Pharisees who were not at all ready to amalgamate into a mixed multitude of Jews and Gentiles. They were rigid devotees of the Jewish religion and culture. To them, Peter’s visit to Cornelius and his behavior there was most offensive and they considered it a violation of God’s Word, Moses’ Law, and, indeed it was as the rabbis had interpreted it to them.

It is obvious that these people and maybe most of the church had not yet fully embraced nor understood the Great Commission and the instructions of Jesus just as He had left earth after His resurrection.

Matt 28:18-20

- 18 And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.
- 19 Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:
- 20 Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. KJV

Acts 1:8

- 8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye

shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. KJV

As we said in the last message, the full impact of these words had not even been fully absorbed by the apostles, so we cannot fault those ‘of the circumcision’ too severely for their ignorance. In their minds they were simply defending and holding on to the truth, concerned that Peter was turning in a false direction.

The fact that it was only ‘they of the circumcision’ and not the ‘Grecians’ who confronted Peter tells us that these two groups at least were coexisting within the church but not fully reconciled as to their world view. This could only mean that there was an ongoing, percolating sense of disharmony and possibly distrust between the two groups.

I do not believe that it is too much of a stretch to think that the ‘Grecians,’ the more moderate of the Jewish Christians would have been the first to rejoice over understanding that the full blessings of Christianity, including the given Holy Spirit, were available to the Gentiles. This would have been much more consistent with their world view than that of the traditionalists, ‘they of the circumcision.’

Peter, very much a ‘traditionalist’ himself, had survived this powerful blow to his own view of the world and the future of the church but now it was to be his task to explain what he had learned to the Jerusalem church in which were all these different streams of thought. How could they embrace this new reality?

His manner of explanation is very much worthy of note.

“He does not refer to his apostolic authority. He might have reminded them of the fact that the Lord, at another Caesarea, had committed unto him, “the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven,” and that in virtue of this commission he had acted. But no reference to that is made at all by him. Nor does he go to his fellow apostles to lay the matter before them (in private). His defense consists in a rehearsal of what had taken place.” *Commentary on Acts*, Arno Gabelein

If one compares the two accounts of the story there is no deviation. He simply told what God had done without embellishment. Let us take note that the truth simply and plainly told is the most powerful instrument of propagating God’s message to the world. Nothing can improve upon it.

|      |        |                 |                |
|------|--------|-----------------|----------------|
| Not: | poetry | not ceremony or |                |
|      | drama  | ritual          |                |
|      | Dance  | not pageantry   | not even music |

For sure poetry and music have been effectively used as secondary tools for the declaration of truth but nothing has ever been nor will ever be as effective as the simple speaking of truth by a servant of God enabled by the Spirit of God.

Declared truth is the only vehicle which God uses to communicate with humanity. Impressions, perceptions, feelings are always suspect but spoken truth and written truth can be trusted

implicitly and eternally. The church would be greatly helped in our day if pulpits would again become places where the truth of God is plainly and clearly delivered.

But back to our story and the divisions within the church. 11:18 seems to indicate that the matter was settled but it was not. Look at Acts 15:1.

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. KJV

Acts 14 had ended with Paul and Barnabus returning from Paul's first missionary journey to the church at Antioch in Syria from which they had been sent out in chapter 13. Luke described the situation as "certain men which came down from Judea.." Paul will later describe these men as "certain which came from James" and he will add the detail that Peter had come to Antioch before these men arrived. Listen to the story.

Gal 2:11-14

11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.  
12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.  
13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.  
14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? KJV

We do not have time here to fully develop the text. We will save that for our study of Acts 15 but it is clear that these who "came down" to Antioch are of the same opinion as "they of the circumcision" in Acts 11:2.

Even though they had "held their peace" while the church in general rejoiced at the news concerning Cornelius and the opening of the gospel to the Gentiles, God granting the "repentance unto life," they had not changed their mind. They had, instead, 'gone underground' with their opinions and then had decided to export their opinions under the lie that James, the half-brother of Jesus and chief elder of the Jerusalem church, had sent them and had endorsed their message.

I want you to see clearly how influential and persuasive they were. Peter, Barnabus and the other mature Jewish believers at Antioch, were "carried away" with the deception so that they introduced a division within the church. They stopped eating with the Gentiles (because their food was 'unclean' by Jewish standards) and returned to their cultural preference of eating only 'clean' food and only with fellow Jews.

This is the same Peter who had gone to Cornelius' house, preached the gospel to him, lodged at his home, ate with him, baptized him and then had defended those actions to the church based on

the clear revelation that God had given him. This is the same Barnabus who has been preaching the gospel throughout Asia with Paul, seeing many Gentiles converted, putting no difference between them and the Jews, eating and fellowshiping with them, never thinking to require them to convert to Judaism.

We know instinctively how the Gentiles must have reacted. If Peter, Barnabus, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen and others agreed with these who “came from James,” then their theology must be true and Gentiles must really need to become Jewish proselytes in order to be right with God. They must be circumcised and keep the Law as well as believe on Jesus in order to be saved. One can only imagine how upset Paul became as he saw these sincere and believing Gentiles making preparations to be circumcised so that they could be accepted fully. He withstood Peter to the face, and, we presumed, in public, in front of Jews and Gentiles in the church, openly rebuking him not only for the error but also for the hypocrisy.

Gal 2

14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

But there is a question here that begs for an answer, “how could Peter and Barnabus, with the others, be drawn into this error when they obviously knew better?” The answer, I believe, is to be found in the power that our culture has on us and the ease with which we can become willing to adapt ‘Christianity’ so that it fits better with our cultural norms.

Christianity, *and I am talking about the real thing here, the manner of life to which we are called by Jesus Christ*, is an uncomfortable life. It pushes us to see behaviors we have long accepted to be sinful. It calls us to see things we have refused to do all of our lives as our real duty. It demands at times that we let go of relationships that are very dear to us and take up relationships with people we once would never have accepted as friends. It teaches us to re-schedule our time in ways that are not natural to us and contrary to our dispositions. It requires us at times to give up pleasurable things, not because they are sinful but because they interfere with our service to the Father and the Son.

But, most of all, Real Christianity is uncomfortable because it refuses to allow us to reshape it into an extension of our own culture. This is what these “of the circumcision” were doing. They were molding the Doctrine of Christ into a shape that they could embrace without conflicting so much with their families, their rabbis, and the lifestyles of their friends. They could be Christians and still be accepted by the ‘world’ of their own experience and liking.’

Humanity is both quite inventive and quite persistent when it comes to avoiding discomfort. Peter and Barnabus were carried away by the persuasiveness of these from Jerusalem who insisted on making Christianity culturally comfortable to themselves as Jews. Shall you and I escape similar traps? Have we already become ensnared in one? Has it happened without our notice? I fear that it has. We have fashioned a Christianity for ourselves into a little culture that is comfortable to us and we strongly resist all efforts at change because they cost us our comfort.

Peter was helping to fashion a sub-culture within the church that excluded the Gentiles who were unwilling to live as Jews. And all around us little sub-cultures like this exist. People may affirm the same doctrine, give lip-service to their belief that others are genuine believers, but refuse to extend to them full fellowship because they are different from us in some minor way. We find ourselves being irritated with them and we also find little ways to let them know that. Humans are social animals and we all know how to read the ‘cues’ that we receive from others.

Somewhere down deep in that part of us that is unredeemed, that part which Paul calls the ‘old man,’ there is a desire that everyone be like us or that they suit us ‘just so,’ and when they do not, we give off messages that we had rather they go away and not bother us because they disturb our comfort.

Within the Greater Memphis area I am away of at least four sub-cultures within the tiny little minority of Baptists who believe in the Sovereignty of God. So far no one has been able to persuade them to fellowship with each other because they make each other uncomfortable. And these are people who know and believe the gospel. I am sure the same goes for other groups as well.

Nationally there are even more subsets, mini-cultures, of Sovereign Grace Baptists. One insists on an absolute adherence to the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith while another says, “no, we only *generally* agree with it.” Another groups demands full agreement with the 1644 London Baptist Confession. There are groups that celebrate their “liberty in Christ” by making much of their liberty to smoke cigars and consume alcohol. Then there are those who are very strict concerning such behavior. Some will have nothing of musical instruments and some can’t find enough of them to use. All of them confess the same gospel (at least in theory) but each has a closed culture in which no one is welcome except those who fully agree with them.

The great problem to me is that no one seems to have any problem with all of these divisions even as new ones are seemingly invented on a monthly basis. In my humble opinion all of this is contrary to the clear instructions of the apostle.

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.

He literally begs us to practice unity as we say “NO!”

There is a more closely practical application for us personally and for our church.

Do we seek to enforce unbiblical standards on people (even subtly) then push them away if they do not comply?

Do we refuse to engage with genuine believers because they somehow do not suit us or they make us uncomfortable in some way?

The standards to which we hold others for acceptance, are they biblical?

Are you absolutely sure?

What effort do you put into obedience to Paul's instructions "endeavor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?

Do you bear with the faults of others?

Are you longsuffering?

Do you realize that the design of the Body of Christ is that they be no divisions?

1 Cor 12:12-25

12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.

13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.

14 For the body is not one member, but many.

15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body?

17 If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling?

18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him.

19 And if they were all one member, where were the body?

20 But now are they many members, yet but one body.

21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary:

23 And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness.

24 For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked:

25 ***That there should be no schism in the body;*** but that the members should have the same care one for another. KJV

He does not mean that there be no schism within our little minute mini-culture in our tiny subset of a minute division of this minority faction of Christ's body. He means no schism at all beyond what He has commanded.

Some division are commanded and those are clear. Beyond those I suspect we are going to be held accountable for those we have created ourselves.

Division was created by disobedient people over the opening of the gospel to Cornelius... and the process continues.

May the Lord deliver us from the sin of Division and Divisiveness.