

Acts 10:9-18, 27-29, 34-43(NIV)

⁹About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹²It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

¹⁴“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

¹⁵The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

¹⁶This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

¹⁷While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. ¹⁸They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

²⁷While talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

²⁸He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

²⁹So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁴Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.

³⁶You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

³⁹“We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, ⁴⁰but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

An undignified church? That was the very idea in the beginning.

What is the church supposed to be? A gathering of like-minded people? The home of the righteous? Who is really and truly welcome to be part of the church? What would be expected of them? In the first years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, his followers had to wrestle with these questions. They were all Jewish and the most obvious questions were these:

- Should Gentiles (all those who are not Jewish) be accepted into the burgeoning Christian communities?
- Should they keep the Jewish law? After all, the first believers were all Jewish. Jesus was Jewish. If the Law was good enough for Jesus, wasn’t it good enough for these newbies? Granted, it would mean that male Gentiles coming into the church would have to be circumcised – but if that is the proper sign of God’s covenant with his people, then so be it.

As you might imagine, these questions would be debated and even fought over within the Christian communities. Even twenty years after Jesus, these were hot topics.

Here's another way to put it: Was Jesus the savior of the Jews only or would the Gentiles be saved also? To put a finer point to it: Would Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus have to first become Jewish, including keeping the Law of Moses (Sabbath, food laws, circumcision, and so on)?

It can seem easy to open the pages of Scripture and answer this question. Isn't the promise made to Abraham a promise that encompasses "all the families of the earth?" Yes (Genesis 12:3). Weren't the Jews given by God to be "light to the nations?" Yes (Isaiah 49:6). Didn't God promise a day when nation no longer lifted up sword against

"Works of the Law"

There is a phrase we sometimes use to express the idea that we can do enough good acts (good works) to make ourselves acceptable to God, to get to "heaven" as it were. The phrase is "works righteousness." Much of Christian teaching is devoted to showing the fallacy of this notion. We are made right with God by God's grace, for we are simply unable to love sufficiently on our own. We can never earn our way into God's presence.

Christians have often mistakenly assumed that the ancient Jews practiced "works righteousness." We think that the Jews believed that if they could keep the Law in all its many details they would be saved and get to "heaven;" hence, all the Pharisees' concern about law-keeping. But this is a caricature of ancient Judaism.

Instead, the Jews of Jesus day believed that God had chosen them from among all the peoples on the earth. They, the people of God, would one day be God's renewed and restored people. Thus, the question for a Jew was whether someone was in the people of God or not. Did they belong or not? Could the person wear the "badge of membership?" If they wore the badge, they would be made right with God.

When Peter is concerned about what he can eat or Paul speaks of the "works of the law," they are referring to the Jewish external symbols of membership in the people of God: Sabbath-keeping, adherence to the food laws, circumcision, and so on. These "works of the law," he writes, are no longer the badges of membership in the people of God, now the only badge of membership is faith in Jesus Christ.

nation but they all sat under fig trees unafraid? Yes (Micah 4:4). And on . . . and on . . .

Yet, piles of Scripture can still leave the human heart untouched. Who could blame the Jews for losing their sense of mission to the world? The Assyrians had scattered ten tribes to the winds. The Babylonians had burned down Solomon's temple and sent tens of thousands of Jews into exile. And for most of the last five hundred years, the Jews had traded one pagan, Gentile oppression for another, the latest edition being written in Latin.

We need to have some sympathy for Peter and the other apostles as they struggled to hear and to live out God's incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Abraham, i.e., into God's plan to rescue Israel and the whole world. Even the gift of God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost did not obliterate the apostles' confusion and concerns.

All this said, we aren't then surprised that the story of the first conversion of a genuine, completely-outside-the-family, Gentile, is no simple matter. We get angels, visions, and the Holy Spirit's direct intervention. The whole story, from Acts 10:1-11:18, including Peter's defense of his actions, is by far the longest story in the book of Acts. The story is a hinge-point in the narrative of God's work to redeem his creation.

Even the Gentiles

Cornelius is an important man, an officer in the Roman Army. He and his family live in Caesarea, a large city built by the Romans on the Mediterranean coast northwest of Jerusalem. Cornelius is one

of the God-fearers. These were Gentiles who were drawn to the God of Israel, read the Hebrew Scriptures (in Greek!) and even prayed to God – but were NOT Jewish, which, for Cornelius, would mean circumcision.¹ Though not Jewish, he is a devout and generous man.

One day an angel comes to Cornelius to let him know that God has heard his prayer and seen his generosity. The angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter.

The next day, before Cornelius' men arrive in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his house praying. He grows hungry and falls into a trance. He then has a vision in which, basically, despite being a Jew, he is commanded to eat pork. Peter, of course, protests, for the food laws, like circumcision, set the Jews apart. If you ate pork, you weren't Jewish. If you ate pork, you were not part of the people of God. And Peter was most certainly a devout Jew and had been all his life.

When Peter wakes up he is puzzled by what the vision meant but then the Spirit of God speaks to him, telling him that the front doorbell is about to ring and he should go with the men he will meet at the door . . . and Peter does.

When Peter arrives at Cornelius' home, he learns that Cornelius has gathered both family and friends. Cornelius falls on his knees to worship Peter, who gently corrects him. It seems that the purpose of all this is dawning on Peter, for he tells the gathering of Gentiles that God has shown him no one is "unclean" just as no food, such as pork, is "unclean." People are people and food is food. Old boundaries no longer have any use. Perhaps Peter remembers something Jesus once said, that it is what comes out of our mouths that makes us unclean, not what goes in (Mark 7:14-15; see also Romans 14:14).

Cornelius tells Peter that a "man in dazzling clothes" came to him and had him send for Peter. Now, Cornelius, along with his family and friends, are ready to hear Peter's message. And Peter proceeds to tell them the story of Jesus, who is the "Lord of all." Even before Peter finishes, the Holy Spirit takes his dwelling within these Gentiles, enabling them to speak in tongues². Then Peter, seeing what was happening, baptized them all with water in the name of Jesus Christ.

There are a couple of important things to notice about the story.

- First, this is all God's doing – in the person of the Holy Spirit. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
- Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by God's insistence that it is now acceptable for the people of God to eat pork. The much-protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God. Your reading of the New Testament will be helped tremendously if you understand that this question became a long-running dispute. Acts 15 tells the story of major meeting of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem in 49AD to address this question.

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter's baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jewish believers, Peter shouldn't

¹Circumcision was one of what Paul calls "the works of the Law" that distinguished between Jews from non-Jews. It was a boundary marker. The food laws, which were the focus of Peter's vision, were also boundary markers. See the text box above for more.

²We can't really know from the text whether this experience of the power of the Spirit is the same as at Pentecost, when the disciples were enabled to speak in other languages. It could be or it could be another manifestation of the Spirit. But, like Acts 2, we know it was audible. Personally, I think it was a Pentecost 2 experience, signifying again the undoing of the tower of Babel.

have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God's way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised . . . and avoid pork . . . and keep the Sabbath . . . and so on? The decision made by the conference was a firm “no,” though those who wished certainly could keep the Law in good conscience.

Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such “works of the Law” (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from non-believers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us. It is the Spirit who is given to all who share in this faith.

As Paul would write to Christians in western Asia Minor (Turkey): “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of Cornelius' conversion is about many things, but it is surely about inclusiveness, to use a buzz-word from our day. The Jews had fought long and hard to maintain their identity, to stay true to their Jewishness and to their God as best as they knew how. Despite God's promise to Abraham and all the expansive word-pictures of the prophets, the first believers, all of whom are Jewish, are shocked and astounded that God's Spirit would be poured out on a Gentile. Questions of exclusivity inevitably arise for Christians. For 2,000 years nearly all Christians have claimed rightly that, in the end, we must come to God through Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ is inescapably the boundary marker that sets apart the people of God. Yet, just as Peter was surprised, how might we be surprised? How does any notion of a boundary marker or a badge of membership work against our seeing God's work in the world? Does Jesus belong only to the Christians? Does God?

Rev. Arthur Jones wrote the following discussion questions for the St. Andrew connection groups to consider this week:

The church has a different status now than it did. Presidential candidates are interested in being connected to churches because it provides credibility and status. In Peter's time, the church was small, fragmented, and risked death for worshiping a crucified man. To the Romans, they were the definition of undignified. In the 10th chapter of Acts, they became undignified to the Jews as well by spending time with Gentiles. The Spirit told Peter, “Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation.” The church is not called to hesitate.

1. When you think about the church, who do you think of? Is it the preachers? The staff? You?
2. What is the difference between the church and any other social club? What makes the church different?
3. One person called St. Andrew a church on the move. When have you been most proud of the church? What can you do to make the church more effective?
4. What could your connection group [you!] do as representatives of St. Andrew that could be counted as undignified?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. *The story of Cornelius and Peter is central to the biblical story of God's salvation of all. In this week's readings we are taking a look at some passages that bear on the incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Israel.*

<p>Monday, Isaiah 49:1-6 God and all the nations</p>	<p>Tuesday, Micah 4 Not only is Israel to be lifted up and restored, all the nations are to be brought to God's house, to worship the God-who-is.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 4:23-38 Hmm . . . Luke's genealogy of Jesus. Note that Jesus is traced all the way to Adam, not just to Abraham as in Matthew's. Luke's point is that Jesus is savior of <i>all</i>.</p>	<p>Thursday, Galatians 3:1-9 How hard it was for some Jewish believers to give up their devotion to the works of the Law and supposed ethnic privilege. Harsh words from Paul! This letter was probably written at about the same time as the big meeting recounted in Acts 15.</p>
<p>Friday, Acts 15 The story of the conference called in Jerusalem to address whether Gentile believers had to keep the Law.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

