Hi,

Happy Monday. Here are today’s updates:

* My 3pm Monday Matthew class and my noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet this week on [my new Facebook Page: “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour)
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Today, we continue with this series on the Holy Spirit, who is the principal driver of the action in the book of Acts.

***Genesis 12:1-3 (NRSV)***

**Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”**

***Acts 10:34-48 (NRSV)***

**Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”**

**While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.**

*A promise made to all?*

Here’s the question the apostles had to face in the years after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: 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, taking on the keeping of the Jewish Law?

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 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 their temple and sent tens of thousands 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 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.

*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, Gentiles who are drawn to the God of Israel and even read the Hebrew Scriptures (in Greek!) and pray to God – but are NOT Jewish, which, for Cornelius, would mean circumcision. 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.

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 he 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.

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 tongues. 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, in essence, it is acceptable 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 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).

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott