

Peter's Rubicon

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in an eight-part series

June 4, 2023

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Genesis 12:1–3 (NIV)

The LORD had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

² “I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”

Acts 10:34–48 (NIV)

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

³⁶ You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. ³⁷ You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—³⁸ how 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, ⁴⁰ but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. ⁴¹ He 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. ⁴² He 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. ⁴³ All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

⁴⁴ While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. ⁴⁵ The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. ⁴⁶ For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, ⁴⁷ “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” ⁴⁸ So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Still today, it is easy to forget that the Good News is meant for everyone. Even Peter had some trouble truly grasping the scope of God’s work.

Crossing the Rubicon. An old phrase that speaks to the moment in January 49 BC when Julius Caesar had to cross the river Rubicon or turn back. He knew crossing meant civil war in the Roman Republic. The phrase is still with us as “crossing the point of no return.” Cross over and things will never be the same.

So it was with Peter about a decade after Jesus’ death and resurrection. Little could he imagine what awaited on a mission to Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Here’s that story.

A promise made for 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 Gentiles¹ be

¹“Gentile” simply means “not Jewish.”

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.² 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's 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's 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,

²Circumcision 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.

enabling them to speak in tongues³. 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. Will Willimon reflects on the conversions in the book of Acts:

Conversions in Luke-Acts are *stories about beginnings*—the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church, the initiation of a new mission, as well as the beginning of a new life for the individual person. Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey, not its final destination. Moreover, conversions in Acts are *stories about vocation*—someone is being called for some godly work. Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel. Finally, conversions in Acts are *stories about the gifts of God*—God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip's work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of “free will” and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. “*By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope . . .*” (1 Peter 1:3b; author's italics.)⁴

³We 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.

⁴William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 103–104.

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).

“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 participate in the kingdom of 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.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”.

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

Scott’s Sunday Class

June 4 – Ask Scott Day!

Beginning June 11 – *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel. Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.