

An Inconvenient Truth

Acts 10:44-11:18

The main role of Peter's presence is first to provide the message that God's favor is open to the any who seek him, and then as a witness to the gentile's receiving of the Holy Spirit. Peter and his Jewish companions will have to report back to the church in Jerusalem a very astonishing Spirit led step in the spread of the church. It was not the apostles who had invited the Gentiles into the kingdom, but God himself who offered the invitation. Peter's witness of this event and the weight of his testimony is what will supply the necessary credentials for the Gentiles' acceptance. It is very likely that the doors of the church in Jerusalem may not have been willing to open and include the Gentile believers in the body of Christ without Peter's testimony.

We are first told in Chapter 11 that the news of the Gentiles receiving the Word of God spread throughout Judea, and preceded Peter's return to Jerusalem. You can imagine the church leaders congregating together debating over the truth of this amazing report. Isn't it interesting that they seem to have little qualms over the Gentiles receiving the Word. That doesn't seem to ruffle as many feathers as one would think. But I do find it very interesting that Peter is questioned over his *eating* with Gentiles rather than his *baptizing* them!

Peter is first and foremost criticized for entering a Gentile's home and eating at table with him. Those doing the criticizing appear to be a group within the church known as the "circumcision group", later we will hear them called "Judaizers". These are believers within the church who strongly believe that to become a Christian one must first become a Jew. After all, Jesus was a Jew and salvation was to come through the Jews. It was a natural progression to believe that to be a Christian, one had to become a Jew first. Becoming a Jew meant that a Gentile would have to undergo the normal procedure of becoming a Jewish proselyte, including circumcision and adherence to the dietary food laws, among the many other Pharisaic traditions. Most Gentiles found these requirements difficult to accept and likely prevented God-fearers like Cornelius from fully converting to Judaism. If these Jewish requirements had also become requirements for Gentiles, there likely would not have been a very effective Gentile mission. The issue of Peter's eating with the Gentiles highlights the value Jews placed on table fellowship as part and parcel of acceptance within the body of believers. One couldn't be fully accepted into the body of believers if they couldn't sit down at table together. There was not to be two churches – one made up of Jewish believers and another of Gentiles, God was making it clear that his kingdom would be inclusive of *all* believers. The Jewish believers would have to accept the Gentile not only into the kingdom, but to their table, as well!

Rather than defending his own actions, Peter allows God to be his defense. Peter explained his actions by first retelling his vision and the subsequent events at the home of Cornelius. While the retelling of this story may seem repetitious, it is Luke's way of signifying

the importance of these events. Peter begins his explanation with a detailed account of his own vision, the sheet descending from heaven with all the “*four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds of the air*” (v.6) and the voice of the Lord telling Peter, “*Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.*” When Peter protests, the voice commands “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*” (v.9). For Peter this vision is the key to the whole Gentile Pentecost event. God is telling him there are no unclean people, and God has accepted the Gentiles. Peter is not laying claim to the being the one that made this radical decision to allow Gentiles into the body of believers. It was God’s command.

Just as Peter’s vision came to an end, the three Romans dispatched by Cornelius arrived. At this point Luke also reveals an additional detail previously unmentioned: six Christians from Joppa accompanied Peter and witnessed the events relayed by Peter; furthermore, those six brothers came to Jerusalem with Peter to provide their testimony as to the truth of these matters. God provided multiple witnesses for this momentous event. As the Romans arrived the Spirit spoke to Peter telling him not to hesitate in accompanying them. From the instruction of the Spirit, Peter and the Christians with him entered the home of Cornelius. At God’s leading the men did as they were bid. Peter again affirms that it was not by his own initiative that this decision was made, but at the instruction of God through the Spirit. Upon entering the home of Cornelius the men hear the story of Cornelius’ angelic visitation instructing him to seek out Peter, for “*he will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved*” (v.14). Again it is at the insistence of God that Peter is brought to the home of Cornelius, not a decision on the part of Peter or even Cornelius.

In fact, Peter barely begins to share the gospel with the gathered Gentiles before he is interrupted and they are overcome with the Holy Spirit. Peter draws the parallel for the Christians in Jerusalem that the descent of the Holy Spirit upon these Gentiles was the same as it had been for the Jews at Pentecost (v.15). Just as the presence of the Holy Spirit manifested itself in the speaking of tongues and praising God at the first Pentecost (Acts 2:4), so the Holy Spirit manifested itself in the same manner in the home of Cornelius. (Acts 10: 45-46). The pouring forth of speech and praise in foreign tongues is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit, the purpose of which was to convince unbelievers, as explained by Paul to the Corinthians: “*Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but unbelievers; prophesy, however is for believers, not for unbelievers*” (1 Corinthians 14:22). In other words, the speech poured forth in foreign tongues was a miraculous sign intended to draw the attention of non-believers and cause them to pause and consider what they were hearing and realize that only a powerful God could cause such a phenomena. The ecstatic praising of God, was a sign for believers to realize that those pouring forth speech in such a manner are doing so under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit. This was a sign for Peter and those with him to recognize that God himself poured out the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, addressing both the Christians unbelief that Gentiles could receive the Holy Spirit while at the same time their ecstatic praise confirmed the belief that it truly was the power of the God of Israel at work.

Peter then makes the further connection recalling the Lord saying, “*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit*” (v.16). Just as Jesus’ prediction was fulfilled at Pentecost for the Jewish believers, so it was being fulfilled in front of his very eyes here in Caesarea for the Gentiles. The comparison could hardly be more obvious and clear. This event was the culmination of God’s plan not Peter’s, he was there to share the gospel leading the Gentiles into faith in Christ and to witness the miraculous event, nothing more. Acts 10:48 tells us that Peter remained with Cornelius for a few days presumably to further teach and instruct the new believers.

Peter goes on to say to the Jerusalem believers, “*So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think I could oppose God?*” (v.17). Opposition to the baptism of the Gentiles would be opposition to God. Peter was not going to put himself in that position, and clearly neither were any of the believers of the “circumcision group”. There was nothing they could say in protest to Peter’s actions. The gift of the Holy Spirit was God’s to give, and no man could question God’s authority to do so. All that was left was to praise God for allowing the Gentiles into the Kingdom of God.

There was little that could be said by the circumcision group upon the admittance of Gentiles into the assembly of believers at this time. The number of Gentiles was small at this point, and the reality of combining the two disparate groups was still to come. It wouldn’t be until Paul and Barnabas begin their first missionary journey that living with the inclusion of the Gentiles would begin to rankle at the Jewish believers legalistic ideals. While in theory acceptance of the Gentiles was resolved, the practical aspect of including them in table fellowship was still to be worked through. The Circumcision Group, or Judaizers, would bring this issue to the forefront when Jews would be expected to come to the table with those who did not uphold the religious food laws. This issue would eventually be decided in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council, but the Judaizers would still have difficulty with fully accepting the Gentiles into the fold, becoming a dispute that would drive a wedge into the church.

The root of the circumcision group’s opposition lays in an exclusivist attitude towards God’s promises. Throughout the Old Testament God revealed his salvation plan was for the world, not just the nation of Israel. This revelation began with the general promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3,

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

And again in 18:18: “*Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.*” The Lord revealed to Isaiah:

*“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob*

*and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)*

And to Malachi: "My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty." (Malachi 1:11). And finally to Paul where in the book of Romans he writes, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.⁸ For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs⁹ so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written:

*"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name."*

¹⁰Again, it says,
"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people."

¹¹And again,
*"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples."*

¹²And again, Isaiah says,
*"The Root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him."*

Romans 15:7-12 (NIV)

For the Jews, Christian as well as non-Christian, these prophecies were an inconvenient truth they did not want accept. They wanted to continue in the belief that they were God's chosen people, privileged above the rest of the world because God had chosen them to receive his law and revelation. While the Jewish Christians understood that Christ fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament, they preferred to overlook some of the other Old Testament teachings. To do so would mean that they would have to overthrow the traditions they grew up with and overcome the prejudices ingrained in their thinking. Not an easy thing to do. It was easier to ignore those inconvenient truths and go on as they had for generations in their relations with Gentiles than to reorder their belief system to include those *they believed* "unclean" or profane, not chosen by God, despite evidence to God's inclusion of the Gentiles in his salvation plan.

Today we still grapple with inconvenient truths – aspects of God's Word that we struggle with because they don't fit in with our own view of God's Salvation plan. It is easier to ignore the teachings we don't like or label them as old fashioned or inappropriate for our modern culture. The reality is that God's Word, all of it, is absolute truth. His ideas, opinions,

commands, and values have not changed and we must accept his Word as the *final* Word on all matters that he openly addresses, as well as those things which we can infer from his Word as applicable to situations not delineated in the Bible.

Our passage today teaches us how to deal with some of those inconvenient truths. Peter didn't attempt to defend his own actions, he pointed out God's activity in the events surrounding the Gentile Pentecost. He didn't argue with the circumcision group, he presented facts as they occurred without embellishment, and let them speak for themselves and presented six witnesses as to the validity of his testimony. The believers in Jerusalem heard him out. They didn't attempt to "shut him down" or refuse to hear his side of the story. They listened patiently permitting the Holy Spirit to reveal an important truth to them. While the dispute between the circumcision group and the Gentiles was far from settled completely, Peter was able to establish a precedent based on God's activity, not man's, making it difficult to refute. As the leader of the Jerusalem church Peter did not force this "new concept" of acceptance of Gentiles into the body of believers, he helped his church understand the divine intervention and leadership of this new element to the numbers. He worked to persuade and convince the others, bringing consensus to the group, not division.