

OPEN EARS

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



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Acts 10:24–11:18
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Acts 10:24–11:18

Much has been made of the so-called “echo chambers” in which Americans increasingly live. We are more able to arrange our lives, especially with the help of the algorithms of social media, to hear what we want to hear. What Paul Simon sang so many years ago may be even more true today: “All lies and jest / Still, a man hears what he wants to hear / And disregards the rest.”¹

However, in recent months, some people who had been mostly content to post happy news on Facebook have taken to expressing political views. Some people therefore are no longer hearing what they want to hear from their so-called “friends.” As a result, there’s been a spike in “unfriending.”

By contrast, Peter and Cornelius, who seemingly had every reason to be enemies, became friends. In light of the racial and political upheavals of our day, what do we learn from them?

Cornelius, a Roman soldier, and Peter, a Jewish apostle of Jesus, each received visions. In his vision, Cornelius was told to send for Peter. In his vision, Peter was told to eat food that was previously forbidden to him by the Mosaic Law. The men from Cornelius arrived in Joppa, where Peter was staying, and asked him to come to Caesarea, where Cornelius was stationed. Peter set out with the men for Caesarea.

All peoples are clean

Acts 10:24-29:

And on the following day they entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25 When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. 26 But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.” 27 And as he talked with him, he went in and found many persons gathered. 28 And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew

to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without objection. I ask then why you sent for me.”

What sort of contact Jews were allowed to have with Gentiles under the Mosaic Law was much debated in Peter’s day. Up until now, he has sided with those who consider it unlawful for a Jew to enter the house of a Gentile, yet he enters anyway—and even sees fit to tell Cornelius and company that he’s breaking the law to do so. Earlier, when Peter saw the vision of a sheet descending with all kinds of animals and heard a voice commanding him to eat, Peter protested, because the Mosaic Law forbade eating such animals. The voice told him, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” Peter didn’t know how to interpret the vision.

The Holy Spirit had also commanded Peter to go with the men who were sent by Cornelius. At that point, or at some point thereafter, Peter knew how to interpret the vision. The vision meant that it was permissible for Peter, a Jew, to eat foods that were previously forbidden to him: the kinds of foods the Gentiles ate. On the one hand, that meant that Peter could eat with Gentiles. Yes, he could enter a Gentile house and eat with Gentiles. On the other hand, he interprets the vision to mean not only that all foods are clean but also that all peoples are clean: “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.” Peter has been healed of his ethnocentricity (though he will suffer a relapse in Antioch, as recorded by Paul in Galatians 2:11-14).

It takes courage to break with tribal tradition. What will Peter’s countrymen, even his fellow countrymen who follow Jesus, think? We’ll find out a little later, by the way. It takes courage to enter the house of a leader of an oppressing power, make yourself vulnerable, and ask a question.

God showed Peter that he should not call any person common or unclean. What is God showing us?

Access for everyone

Acts 10:30-43:

And Cornelius said, “Four days ago, about this hour, I was praying in my house at the ninth hour, and behold, a man stood before me in bright clothing 31 and said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. 32 Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’ 33 So I sent for you at once, and you have been kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

34 So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), 37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. 43 To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Unlike Peter’s vision, Cornelius’ vision was straightforward. An angel told Cornelius to send for Peter, and he’s done so. Peter has complied. Cornelius speaks as if his house, where both Jews and Gentiles are gathered, is a temple. Here and now, he wants to hear from the God of Israel: what Peter has been commanded by the Lord, evidently what he has been commanded by the Lord to speak. This takes courage on Cornelius’ part,

for the conquering Romans for the most part considered themselves superior to the Jews. What will his higher-ups think?

Luke has described Cornelius as someone who not only “feared God” but also “gave alms generously” to the people of Israel and “prayed continually to God.” In other words, he “does what is right.” Peter now understands that Gentiles such as Cornelius are acceptable to God—not that they don’t need the Gospel but that they’re ready for the Gospel, or good news, which Peter proceeds to give to Cornelius.

The Gospel message concerns “peace through Jesus Christ,” the Jewish king who defeated evil through his death and resurrection. Having defeated evil, Christ makes peace possible—that is, well-being in relationship with God that even extends to well-being in relationships between people of different ethnicities (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Peter tells Cornelius and company the story of Jesus Christ, who is “Lord of all.” The Jewish king upstages the Roman king, because Caesar, whose army Cornelius served, was hailed as “Lord.” In that Jewish Messiah is Lord of all, all are summoned to give their allegiance to him, even Romans, who are ruling over the Jews.

God anointed Jesus as king, and Jesus’ reign was marked by both goodness and power. The Jews handed him over to the Romans, who “put him to death by hanging him on a tree,” which marked him out for Jews as a cursed man and for Romans as a minor nuisance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). But God overturned the verdict of both Jews and Romans by raising Jesus from the dead. Peter and others not only saw the risen Jesus, they also ate and drank with him.

Cornelius wanted to hear all that Peter had been “commanded by the Lord.” Well, Peter says, he and others have been “commanded” to preach the Gospel, which includes judgment, for doesn’t Cornelius a God-fearing man who does good, want a king to render righteous judgments?

Peter now understands that the prophets of Israel anticipated the day when access to the God of Israel would be open to “everyone,” not just Jews, and that such access would be—and now is—through giving one’s allegiance to Jesus, the Messiah. Those who give their allegiance to Jesus need not fear the judgment of God, because they receive forgiveness of sins.

The Spirit interrupts

Acts 10:44-48:

While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, 47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” 48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.

Peter is just getting warmed up when he is interrupted by the Holy Spirit, who falls on Cornelius and company, just as he fell on Jesus' first followers in Jerusalem and on the Samaritans (Acts 2:1-4, 8:14-17).

In Acts 2, the first followers of Jesus are not reported as doing anything before the Spirit came other than gathering together. In Acts 8, the Spirit came after the Samaritans believed and were baptized, when two apostles, Peter and John, prayed for them and laid their hands on them. In Acts 2, the first believers miraculously spoke in tongues—other languages that they did not know. In Acts 8, it is not reported that the Samaritans spoke in tongues, but that doesn't mean they didn't do so. In Acts 10, the Spirit falls on the Gentiles before they have been baptized. In fact, it isn't even reported that they believed the Gospel; it is only reported that they “heard the word.” The Gentiles speak in tongues, though it is not reported whether they're speaking in human languages. In Acts, there is no regular order of things when it comes to the Holy Spirit.

What is regular in Acts 8 and Acts 10 is that Jewish believers are present to witness the coming of the Spirit on Samaritans, who weren't considered fully Jewish, and on Romans, who weren't anything close to being Jewish. What did Jesus tell his first followers? “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). When Peter preaches the Gospel to Gentiles in Caesarea, and the Spirit falls on them, he is witnessing beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria; he is witnessing to the end of the earth.

Some Jews would withhold baptismal water from Gentiles, but Peter, having been taught by Jesus, having received the Spirit, having received a vision, and having witnessed the coming of the Spirit on Gentiles, is no longer among them. The coming of the Spirit in Acts 8 and 10 is evidence for the Jews as much as for the Samaritans and the Romans that the good news of the victory of the Jewish Messiah is for everyone, not just Jews.

Criticism in Jerusalem

Acts 11:1-18:

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.” 4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 5 “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ 8 But I said, ‘By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’ 10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’ 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?”

18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

The Jews who witnessed the Spirit’s coming in Caesarea (“believers from among the circumcised”), though they were amazed, assented to the baptism of the Gentiles. Some Jews in Jerusalem who believed in Jesus (“the circumcision party”), however, take umbrage that Peter even ate with uncircumcised Gentiles. For some Jews, eating with Gentiles meant fraternizing with the enemy. For them, food laws, and Sabbath-keeping marked them out as the people of God. To violate such customs was like trampling on a national flag.

Peter tells the objectors the story, adding a few details and some interpretation. He says that when the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and company, he remembered that Jesus told him and the other first followers that they would be “baptized with the Holy Spirit.” And they were, in Jerusalem (Acts 2). But so were the Gentiles, in Caesarea (Acts 10). Just as the Jews who witnessed the coming of the Spirit in Caesarea offered no objection to the baptism of Gentiles, the Jews who hear Peter’s story offer no objection to his eating with Gentiles. In fact, they recognize that God is including the Gentiles.

What is God showing us?

Peter needed three years with Jesus, the coming of the Spirit, and a vision from God to finally realize that the Gospel—the good news of the victory of the Jewish King over evil—was for everyone. Do we need to realize the same? Probably not. Most of us who believe the Gospel believe that it is for everyone, at least in theory.

We’ve read our Bibles. We’ve been taught. We send out missionaries to the ends of the earth. The Gospel, not to mention the Scriptures as a whole, has done its work in our hearts and even in our culture, which for the most part embraces equality, at least in theory. Indeed, all peoples are clean: candidates for the Gospel. No one person has any more value than another: each of us has been created in the image of God. As Peter learned, “God shows no partiality.”

What is God showing us? Maybe we don’t need the kind of vision Peter received; maybe we just need to live in light of it—and in light of the rest of the New Testament, which works out the implications of Peter’s vision.

The goal of the Gospel

Indeed, share the Gospel with anyone and everyone, and support missionaries who do so—but the goal of the Gospel is not simply to convert more people. The goal of the Gospel is also to create a multiethnic people for God’s name.

The apostle John gives us a vision of the future: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’” (Revelation 7:9-10)

The apostle Paul gives us a vision for living the life of the future in our churches, even now. Read Romans. Read Galatians. Read Ephesians. He is emphatic that Jews and Gentiles belong together in the same worshipping community. He is uncompromising on the need for unity between Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s letter to the Romans leads to this climax: “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.” (Romans 15:5-7)

Faith in Christ unites us

How does the Gospel unite us? First, the Gospel convicts us of sin: we all stand guilty before God. Second, the Gospel offers us Christ as the answer to our sin: we are forgiven only in view of his sacrifice in our behalf.

Therefore, Paul says, “no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9). Particularly, both in Romans and Ephesians, Paul is concerned about ethnic boasting: the Jew over the Gentile or the Gentile over the Jew. Ethnicity doesn’t unite us. Peter, a Jewish apostle of Jesus (and the Jews with him), and Cornelius, a Roman servant of Caesar (and the Romans with him), gather in the same place, which Cornelius speaks of as if it were a temple: “we are all here in the presence of God.”

Gender doesn’t unite us. Paul again: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Especially in the wake of a polarizing election, it needs to be said that political preference doesn't unite us. Among the twelve disciples whom Jesus called were two men who hailed from different sides of the political fence. Jesus called Matthew, or Levi, a tax collector, and Jewish nationalists despised tax collectors because they worked for Rome, the enslaving power. Who else did Jesus call? He called Simon the Zealot, a Jewish nationalist!

Neither ethnicity nor gender nor political preference unites us. What then unites us? Allegiance to Christ, and only allegiance to Christ, unites us.

To love is to listen

What then is required of us? Listen to Paul again: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). For the sake of unity, we "must bear with one another in love," which means, among other things, listening to one another.

It takes courage to listen, because in listening, you open yourself up to something that may be difficult to hear. Much of what passes for listening in our world, however, is not listening at all: it's getting ready to talk.

Notice: Peter, a Jew, asked Gentile visitors a question in order to hear what they had to say: "What is the reason for your coming?" Notice: Peter, a Jew, asked Cornelius, a Gentile, a question in order to hear what Cornelius had to say: "I ask then why you sent for me." Notice: Cornelius, a Gentile, invited Peter, a Jew, to speak in order to hear what Peter had to say: "Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." Cornelius wants to hear "all"—everything, even the parts that are hard to hear. Notice: Jews who first judged Peter for eating with Gentiles listened to his story and changed their assessment of him and even glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Next time, if you find yourself disagreeing with someone, especially a brother or sister in Christ, instead of launching a counter-argument, ask a follow-up question about what you heard so that you can better understand him or her.

Just because we disagree doesn't mean we're breaking "the unity of the Spirit." Paul advocates unity, not uniformity. It's inevitable that we disagree. But it is not inevitable that we tune out those with whom we disagree. We don't have to agree, but we do have to love: we do have to listen.

In the aftermath of the election, I've tried to listen. I've listened to people who voted for Donald Trump. I've listened to people who voted for Hillary Clinton. I've listened to people who voted for no one. I've listened to one person who voted for Steve Holmlund. Steve, one of our elders, determined not to vote for either major party candidate and on a whim offered himself on Facebook as a write-in candidate for president. He even had a vice presidential running mate. Steve is the moderator of our elder board. Since the election, however, I've taken to calling him "Mr. President."

A week ago Wednesday, at the seniors Bible study, I invited those in attendance to share what they were thinking and feeling in the wake of the election. By the way, the seniors Bible study is a wonderfully diverse, multiethnic community within our community. People talked, and people listened. Several people commented afterward what a wonderful time it was.

In listening, I've been challenged. I've also learned a few things.

The witness of the Gospel

What's so important about unity in the church? Paul says that Christ has taken Jews and Gentiles and created "one new man in place of the two" so that his church might make known "the manifold wisdom of God" to Satan and his minions (Ephesians 2:15, 3:10). Satan sows hostility between ethnicities, races, and nations. Christ unites ethnicities, races, and nations in his church.

In the unseen world, the unity of the church says to the armies of darkness: "Your time is up." In the seen world, the unity of the church says to warring factions: come to Jesus and be healed of your fear and anger. The unity of the church across ethnic lines and, yes, political lines, is a powerful witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Listen to Jesus: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35).

Many people in our world preach tolerance and coexistence. Jesus doesn't stop there, however. Jesus preaches love: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:43-45).

The Gospel declares that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, who unites humanity. Jesus went to the cross not only to unite us with God but also to unite us with others who are united with God in order to reflect the multifaceted splendor of God to the world and even to the heavenlies. When we gather as different kinds of people to worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are saying that we are not worshiping the projection of our own culture but the one true God of the whole world (Wright 114).

Opportunities

In light of the racial and political upheavals in our day: what an opportunity for the church! What an opportunity for us to love each other! What an opportunity for us to love the world! What an opportunity for us to show the world the healing power of the Gospel!

What an opportunity for us to listen—to each other, to the world!

**"Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers dwell in unity!"
(Psalm 133:1).**

Endnotes

¹ Simon, Paul. "The Boxer." *Columbia Records*, 1968.

² Wright, N.T., *Paul for Everyone: Romans: Part Two*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.