

Acts 10: To The Ends Of The Earth

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We are all aware of exclusivism or barriers between cultures and races of people. In High School they called it “clicks”. The jocks, the nerds, the beautiful, and the wild group all had hard to cross barriers between them. In first century Jerusalem, the barriers were much greater than anything we have today. They had barriers between slave and free, racial, ethnic, gender, religion, and rich vs. poor, just to name a few. Unlike 21st century America, those boundaries were almost un-crossable. In Acts 8, the barrier between Jews and Samaritans had been brought down, but the bigger barrier blocking the Gentiles also had to be brought down. In Acts 10-11, it would be Peter who God chose to take that next step.

In Exodus 19:5-6, God spoke through Moses to Israel, telling them that if they kept the covenant with God then they would be a special people set apart by God, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. When God gave them their new home in Canaan, He told them to be separate from the Canaanites, and not to intermarry or even live with them. As part of that separation, God gave them special dietary laws in Leviticus 11 that would make them unique and separate from the nations. The Canaanites were a despicable, evil, idolatrous people so God gave such dietary restrictions to hinder social contact with them. All Jews were brought up with these dietary restrictions, and taught that anything else was unclean for them. Thus, the Gentiles who ate the forbidden food were also considered unclean. Today, we use the word kosher, which means fit or allowed.

To Peter, the dietary laws were so ingrained into his life that it was unthinkable to even sit down at a table with Gentiles. It was assumed that their stuff was unclean, and even their houses were contaminated. No respectable first century Jew would go to a Gentile city unless he had to, and they would definitely not go into a Gentile's house. Ten to twelve years after Jesus gave the commission to His disciples to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth, the disciples did not comprehend that they were supposed to go to Gentile cities, enter Gentile houses, eat with Gentiles, and open the door for Gentiles to be saved and in the church. That dividing wall had to be broken down, and it would require the intervention of God. We can see six steps in the Acts 10 story that broke down that wall.

God's Preparation

God prepared both Cornelius to receive the gospel and Peter to deliver the gospel. Scripture says that God responds to the seeking heart. Jeremiah 29:13 quotes God, saying “and you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” In Acts 10:1-8, God prepared the centurion Cornelius to receive the good news about Jesus. Cornelius was a God fearer who was seeking the truth about God. It must have required some humility for a Roman centurion to deny the pagan polytheism of his countrymen to believe in the God of Israel, but he had. He even gave money to needy Jewish people. He was not a proselyte, but was just seeking the one true God. He had lived up to the small amount of light that he had, but now God was going to shine the light of Jesus on him. God gave him a vision of an angel who told him to send for Peter.

The next day, God also was preparing Peter for this encounter. In Acts 10:9-20, Peter was waiting for his lunch, and he went up on the housetop to pray. Peter was hungry so God gave him a vision of food. Peter saw both clean and unclean animals. A voice told him to kill and eat all of them including the unclean, but naturally Peter said no. It took three repeated visions for the message to get through that things had changed. The separating features of kosher eating were now counterproductive. God was now bringing Jews and Gentiles together as one in the church. In the vision, the clean animals represented the Jews and the unclean animals represented the Gentiles, and now they were all included in God's program. Peter was still perplexed about this, but the Spirit spoke to him that three men were coming to get him, and he should go with them.

Submission to God's Will

In spite of Peter's powerful traditions that were so ingrained in him, he relented to the leading of the Holy Spirit to go. Both Peter and Cornelius were obedient to God's revealed will in spite of the fact that they did not fully understand or agree. The world of monotheistic, law abiding Jew was about to collide with the world of polytheistic philosophical Greco-Roman culture.

Peter and his six devout law abiding Jews were going to meet in the house of a bunch of wild eyed Gentiles, and it would be a significant marker in the life of the church. Peter's introduction to Cornelius revealed how unprepared he was for this event. In verse 28 Peter said "You know that me being here is unlawful since a Jew must not associate with a foreigner or visit him." Peter was saying-I shouldn't even be here, but God has commanded it so here I am.

Gospel Presentation

In Acts 10:34-43, Peter delivered quite a different gospel presentation from the personal and convicting sermons he gave the people of Jerusalem. To this audience, he explains why he is there, and then gave a very positive message about Jesus. Some people might need lengthy explanations, illustrations, and history; but the audience at the home of Cornelius was primed and ready to go. Peter made it clear that this audience was new and unique for him, and that Peter had learned something brand new—that God does not show partiality, but wanted him to share the gospel in every nation. Peter went on to explain that Jesus was sent by God, went about doing signs and wonders that only God could do, and was put to death in Jerusalem, but God raised Him on the third day which was witnessed by many including Peter. Jesus has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead, and everyone who believes in Jesus as their Savior receives forgiveness of sins. No doubt Peter had much more to say, but he was cut off by the miraculous interruption of the Holy Spirit. In what I think was a one time unique event, the Holy Spirit fell upon his audience, and they began speaking in unknown languages. I'm guessing they started praising God in Hebrew, which these Romans would not have known. Before Peter could even lead them in a prayer, they had believed and been indwelt permanently by the Spirit. It was important that they manifest the Holy Spirit so that the surprised Peter and friends would have no doubt that they were saved. Peter could go back to Jerusalem with all certainty and testify to the leaders there that God had accepted the Gentiles.

The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

The New Testament is clear that all who believe in Jesus will be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In the 21st century it is something that happens to us without us necessarily knowing it or manifesting it to others as it did in Acts. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, Paul told them that after hearing and believing the gospel of Jesus Christ, they were saved because they believed, and then they were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit (1:13). The image of the seal came from the seal that government officials put on documents signifying that they belonged to the emperor or governor. God's gift of the Holy Spirit to us seals us as belonging to Him.

Public Profession

In the conversion of Cornelius and his household, water baptism follows their salvation in Acts 10:48 at the direction of Peter. In other words, Peter told them "Now that you are saved, you need to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ." Water baptism played no part in their salvation, but it was an important part to the story because it was good for Cornelius to make that public profession of his inner faith. He would never be the same, and he let the Jews and Gentiles there in on his great change.

Fellowship

The end of the salvation story of Cornelius says, "Then they asked him to stay on for a few days." Cornelius and company had just entered a whole new world, a new belief system, and suddenly they were brothers of a sort with these Jews. They wanted to know what they knew, share experiences, and ask direction. The desire for Christian fellowship should come naturally from Christ just as a desire for biblical knowledge will come. It is a mark of genuine saving faith. Another barrier had fallen. The Gentiles were included in the church, the kosher laws were replaced by Christ, and their homes were opened to all. Later Paul, a Jew, wrote to the church at Corinth what the kosher laws meant to him now that all the dividing walls were gone, "to the Jews I became a Jew, that I might win Jews (to Christ); to those who are under the law, as under the law myself, though not being under the law that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without the law (Gentiles), as without the law...that I might win those who are without law." Paul was saying that in evangelism, he respected different peoples' rules and customs so that he could win them to Christ, which would free them from all the rules they couldn't keep anyway. The dramatic way that Cornelius was saved was effective in removing all the barriers between Jews and Gentiles, because Peter found that the Jews in Jerusalem were initially appalled that he had gone to the Gentile's house until they heard what God had done. Then they had no choice but to say in 11:18, "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

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