

Church 2.0

*“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 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Peter And Cornelius

March 26th, 2023

Acts 10:1-48

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 10:1; that’s on page 918 in your pew Bibles. This morning we are reading arguably the most important chapter in the Book of Acts. As we’ve talked about a few times before, the Book of Acts traces the outward progress of the Gospel. There is a sense in which that progress is geographical – the Book of Acts begins with Jesus saying:

“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And so the progress of the Gospel proceeds more or less along those lines. But there is also a sense in which that progress can be mapped out across a set of ethnic boundaries as well. Jewish people at that time tended to divide the world into four categories: there were Jews, there were Samaritans – who were basically half Jewish; the Jews thought of them like most Christians think of the Christian cults, the JW’s and the Mormons, and then there proselytes – people who converted to Judaism but who were not ethnically Jewish – we think of the Ethiopian Eunuch – and then there were the Gentiles – whom the Jews regarded as full blown pagans – and as we have been reading the Book of Acts we have been watching the Gospel crossing each of those barriers, in their turn, as well.

In Acts 2 on The Day of Pentecost we saw many Jewish people converting to Christianity – 3000 people were baptized in a single day!

Then in Acts 8 we saw a great work of God among the Samaritans!

Then later in Acts 8 we saw the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Now here in Acts 10 we observe the conversion of the first Gentile household. It is a really big deal – which is why Luke gives it so much real estate in your Bible. In theory this story could have been told in 4 sentences:

There once was a Gentile fellow named Cornelius.

God sent Peter to him to preach the Gospel.

He and his household heard and believed.

They received the Holy Spirit and were baptized – praise the Lord!

That's it! That's all that happens – so the fact that Luke devotes all of chapter 10 and half of chapter 11 to telling this story reveals to us it's significance. The Old Testament spoke about a day when the cords would be lengthened and the stakes would be strengthened so that the House of God could be expanded and the peoples of the nations welcomed in – well Luke is saying, brothers and sisters, that this is that! This is the day when the great promises of God are being realized – praise the Lord!

So we'll read the story – it is a long one, so we will read it in three chunks, because as I think you will see for yourself the story is divided into three distinct sections. As we read through the chapter we will see a barrier crossed, a Gospel preached and a people included.

We'll begin with a barrier crossed.

A Barrier Crossed

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort,² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.”⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him,⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray.¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth.¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.¹³ And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.”¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.”¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

¹⁷ Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon’s house, stood at the gate¹⁸ and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.”²¹ And Peter went down to the men and said, “I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?”²² And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”

²³ So he invited them in to be his guests. The next day he rose and went away with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ 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.”

As Peter intimated in his opening address to this gathering, it was a pretty big deal for a Jew to associate with and to receive to hospitality in the house of Gentile people. It wasn't done – it couldn't be done, largely because of the intricate Jewish purity code.

When we were in Israel back in 2011 we visited an orthodox Jewish home and in that home they had separate pots and pans for cooking different items because according to their dietary code MEAT can never come into contact with DAIRY. Some orthodox Jews even have two separate kitchens! So obviously you couldn't just stroll into some pagan's house and receive their hospitality. The rules were too intricate – the Jews themselves could barely keep them straight – they couldn't trust their Gentile neighbours to do what needed to be done and therefore they remained socially and ethnically isolated.

Which is why God very graciously sent Peter that very specific and detailed vision. There was very little nuance in that vision. Peter sees a sheet filled with things that the Jewish Dietary Code strictly forbid him to eat. And yet in the vision three times, Peter is told:

“Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” (Acts 10:13 ESV)

In terms of figuring out how to read your Bible, that might be the most important verse in the New Testament. David Peterson says here:

“the threefold vision given to Peter offers a new perspective on the way in which Scripture is to be interpreted and the gospel is to be preached. The provisions of the Mosaic law for cleansing

and sanctification are fulfilled in Christ and thus the cultic restrictions excluding Gentiles from the community of God's people are no longer applicable."¹

Are no longer applicable.

From this moment on the ceremonial laws in the Mosaic Code are no longer in effect. Now, as Bible readers, we knew this was coming. We sensed this coming the moment John the Baptist pointed at Jesus and said:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

John seems to be saying there, that everything the Old Testament ritual law looked forward to will now be REALIZED and PERFECTED in the person and work of Christ. So that was our first clue. Our second clue came when Jesus said in Mark 7:

¹⁸ Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, ¹⁹ since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) (Mark 7:18–19 ESV)

THUS HE DECLARED ALL FOODS CLEAN.

We knew this was coming! Peter knew this was coming – or at least he should have known, but centuries of tradition die hard.

The point is that SOME ASPECTS of the Old Testament law were TEMPORARY or PROVISIONAL. Now don't be alarmed by that. That is BASIC, ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY – and we talked about this back when we were studying Leviticus. Almost every week in that series we heard that great quote by John Calvin who said:

¹ David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 325.

“The ceremonial law of the Jews was **a tutelage** by which the Lord was pleased to exercise, as it were, the childhood of that people, until the fulness of the time should come when he was fully to manifest his wisdom to the world”²

So the ceremonial or ritual law of the Jews was a TUTELAGE – it was a teaching tool – it was never meant to be permanent, it was meant to be preparatory. It was preparing us to receive the Wisdom of God in Jesus Christ.

Now, to be clear, SOME aspects of the Old Testament law are not preparatory – they are permanent. Contrasting the ceremonial law in the Old Testament to the moral law, R.C. Sproul says here:

“God would never repeal the moral law ... because to do so, He would be denying His character.”³

The moral law is unchanging – but the ceremonial law was temporary, and here we see it being repealed to prepare the way for Peter, and by extension, the church, to take the Gospel into Gentile territory. From now on, the rule for missionaries is to eat whatever is set before you. Don’t ask any questions, don’t worry about the ritual law. If they bring you a hot dog boiled in goat’s milk you eat it and you ask for seconds. That’s the new deal.

From this point on, it is all ahead full in pursuit of the Great Commission – praise the Lord!

Alright, the second thing we see in this story is a Gospel preached. Peter has crossed the threshold. He has entered the house of a Gentile family in order to share the Good News of Jesus Christ and so he does. We’ll jump back into the story at verse 30:

A Gospel Preached

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), paragraph 3315.

³R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 152.

³⁰ 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 clothing³¹ 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.”

We’ve talked many times in this series about how these stories in the Book of Acts are presented to us as a sort of template or plumbline. At the end of Acts 2 Luke was saying: “this is what a healthy church looks like.” In Acts 8 and 9 we’ve got a couple of stories saying “this is what conversion looks like”; now here in Acts 10 we’ve got a story that is saying: “this is what sharing the Gospel looks like.” And that’s very helpful because a lot of what we call “sharing the Gospel” is not sharing the Gospel. It might be sharing our testimony, it might be saying something nice about Jesus, but it is not “sharing the Gospel”. The Gospel is a MESSAGE – it is literally GOOD NEWS and no part of that message can be deleted. So let’s take a minute and notice what Peter says.

We notice first of all:

I. He spoke about peace

We see that in verse 36. He characterized his entire message as “good news of peace through Jesus Christ”. The gospel is fundamentally about reconciliation. Because of sin we are ESTRANGED from God. We are rebels under a sentence of death – but through the person and work of Jesus we can come home. We can be repatriated. We can be reconciled to God. We can have peace – and being at peace with God, we can access the resources and help we need to live at peace with others.

One of the surest signs that you are not truly saved is that you cannot be at peace with other people. That is the situation of an unsaved person. A saved person is now at peace with God and because of that, is able to pray and receive the grace needed to grow and to forgive and once you can do those things, peace, at least on your end, ought to be entirely within your grasp.

So that’s good news!

Peter also spoke about Lordship.

II. He spoke about Lordship

In verse 36 he says that the Gospel is about peace through Jesus Christ who is LORD OF ALL. You aren’t preaching the Gospel unless you are preaching the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The true Christian invitation is not just: “come and be forgiven” it is come and bow down. Receive Christ as Savior AND Lord. There is no conversion that does not involve allegiance.

When you come BACK you come UNDER – that’s the deal.

Peter spoke also about liberty:

III. He spoke about liberty

We see that in verse 38. The Gospel is about how Jesus frees us from the power of the devil.

In verse 39 he begins to speak about the atonement.

IV. He spoke about atonement

You aren't preaching the Gospel if you aren't preaching THE CROSS. It was on the cross that Jesus bore the wrath our sins deserved. It was on the cross that Jesus paid our debt and tore the veil making it possible for all of us to go home, not as rebels, not as the traitors we are, but as beloved sons and daughters. The cross of Jesus Christ is the centre and the source of it all – thanks be to God!

In verse 40 Peter begins to speak about the resurrection.

V. He spoke about resurrection

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then we above all people are most to be pitied – but thanks be to God he did rise from the dead and if you put your faith in him as your Lord and Savior, then so will you. Anyone is in Christ, though he die, yet shall he live – that's the Gospel!

There is life, there is hope beyond the grave.

But that life begins with judgment – Peter begins to speak about that in verse 42.

VI. He spoke about judgment

This is part that is so often skipped by modern day Christians – but it was a part of the first century Gospel. Peter is very clear that Jesus is not just our Savior, he is not just our Lord, he is also our Judge.

When was the last time you told someone that?

Every human being, made in the image and likeness of God, will be resurrected to stand before God for final judgment. On that day you will answer for everything you have ever done – and for everything you’ve ever said. Jesus said that. He said:

“I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak” (Matthew 12:36 ESV)

That sounds terrible – and it will be terrible unless you have put your faith in Jesus. If you have put your faith in Jesus then you will not be punished for any of those things. That’s the climax of Peter’s presentation. In verse 43 he speaks about the forgiveness of sins.

VII. He spoke about the forgiveness of sins

He says:

“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:43 ESV)

That’s preaching the Gospel. If you are leaving any of that, then you’re not doing it.

The last thing we see in this story, is a people included. We jump back into Acts 10 at verse 44:

A People Included

⁴⁴ 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. (Acts 10:1–48 ESV)

This event is sometimes referred to as “The Gentile Pentecost”. It was a way for God to communicate that these people were just as saved as the Jewish people who were saved in Acts 2. There are no second class citizens. If you are in Christ, then you are new creation. You are a son or a daughter of the king. If you have the Holy Spirit then you have the PREMIER PROMISE in all the Bible. This goes all the way back to the prophet Ezekiel who records the greatest promise ever made in the Old Testament. God said:

“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” (Ezekiel 36:26–28 ESV)

This is that, Luke is saying, and wonder of wonders, this promise extends even unto the Gentiles. The fact that they received the Holy Spirit meant there was no reason why they could not be baptized. And so they were. They were received into the church as full and equal members. And with that, the ancient barriers become irrelevant – how do we know that? Well, look at the very end of the story. Luke closes the narrative by saying:

“Then they asked him to remain for some days.” (Acts 10:1–48 ESV)

Peter had a sleepover in a Gentile household! John Stott says here:

“Peter’s acceptance of their hospitality demonstrated the new Jewish-Gentile solidarity which Christ had established.”⁴

Praise the Lord!

⁴John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 192-193.

So that's the story – as I said, it is arguably the most important story in the Book of Acts – some say it is arguably the most important story in the New Testament after the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. There are innumerable potential takeaways for us in this passage – but because many of them are going to be worked out in the several chapters in Acts that follow, I just want to focus in on one, in the few minutes that we have remaining to us this morning. If this passage is intended to be read paradigmatically – which I think it is – then the Holy Spirit is saying that the church of Jesus Christ should be a boundary crossing, Gospel preaching, other including kind of place – and for us to be like that today, I think we need to ask and answer a very important question, and that question is this:

In what sense is the church of Jesus Christ to be “inclusive”?

In the wider evangelical world it is entirely possible that you will encounter a preacher or a writer saying that because God told Peter to arise, kill and eat, and because God said: “What God has made clean, do not call common”, then it is no longer appropriate for the church to exclude anyone on any basis. I've heard that argument made, for example, in order to suggest that it is time for the church to change or mute her teaching on human sexuality.

But is that the kind of inclusion that is being called for here?

I think the answer is remarkably clear for anyone who is honestly looking for it – we can see it plainly and transparently in verses 34-35. Peter tells us how he understood the vision and what the Words of God interpreting the vision meant to him. He says:

“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.” (Acts 10:34–35 ESV)

So there's your basis for inclusion: Anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

So what does that mean? What does it mean to “fear God”? That’s a very Jewish expression isn’t it? But Peter is a very Jewish guy and so we need to figure out what he meant by that. Old Testament scholar Charles Bridges says helpfully here:

“The fear of the Lord is that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father’s law.”⁵

In essence then, Peter is saying, anyone can be reconciled to God through the Gospel of peace. It doesn’t matter where you come from. It doesn’t matter where you grew up. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done. It doesn’t matter what your religious background is. It doesn’t matter what colour you are or what language you speak, or what food you eat. What matters is that you come to God humbly and carefully in the way that God prescribes – which is through the person and work of Jesus Christ - and that you relate to him with affectionate reverence – which means you love him and obey him.

If you do that – then you will be accepted.

You will be accepted by God – and you will be included in the church.

That’s what’s on the table today; so if that sounds good to you, then come. Come unto Jesus and be saved. Friends, we have another baptism service coming up on Easter Sunday. If you have heard the word and received it with faith today; if you want to come to God through the person and work of Jesus Christ; if you want to begin relating to your Heavenly Father with affectionate reverence then it would be our privilege to speak to you after the service. You can connect with pastor Matt or myself and we will get you ready and prepared to return to your Maker and to be welcomed into the church of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday – thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.

⁵ Charles Bridges as cited by Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* in *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 101.