

Church 2.0

*“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”
(John 10:16 ESV)*

*“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”
(Eph. 3:6 ESV)*

A Church Committed to the Mission

April 16th, 2023

Acts 11:1-18

Pastor Rob Brockman

Today we jump back into our Acts series after a little break for the Easter season. When we left off, we read about a watershed moment not only in the Book of Acts but in the entire Bible. In **Acts 10**, we saw how a barrier had been crossed in the Great Commission that had not never been crossed before – Gentiles, seen as unclean and unworthy by Jews, were coming to faith in Jesus and being included into the covenant community! Peter, a strict Jew, enters the home of a Gentile, preaches the Gospel, and the Spirit of God falls in a mini-Pentecost. What had happened to the Jewish believers in **Acts 2**, to the Samaritans in **Acts 8**, was now happening to Gentiles – Gentiles were coming to faith in Jesus Christ and receiving the promised Holy Spirit. This was all in fulfillment to what Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**, *“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.”*

But, as we will see in our text, before the church could embrace this new mission to the Gentiles, they had to deal with a big stumbling block in the way of that mission.

Hear now the inspired and inerrant Word of the Lord,

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.'"

This is the Word of the Lord.

News of what had happened in Caesarea with Gentiles spread like wildfire throughout the region - not only had Samaritans received the Gospel, but now Gentiles as well!

But not everyone was thrilled by this.

Back in Jerusalem, the Jewish Christians who heard about this were not overwhelmed with joy.

Yes, for Saul of Tarsus to be saved, that was a great miracle! What a win for team Jesus! Even for the Samaritans to be saved, OK, we can get behind that. Revival had finally come to Samaria!

But GENTILES? Pagans? Romans? Idolators?? They were unclean! How could the Spirit of God dwell within unclean and filthy vessels such as Gentiles!?

When Peter returns to Jerusalem, on a serious high after seeing what God has done in the Gentile world, he is immediately confronted with a group of Jewish Christian purists. They were still zealous for Jewish customs, and they believed that Christians were to still maintain a strict adherence to the Torah – including the purity laws that would exclude them from eating unclean foods or fellowshiping with unclean Gentiles.¹

And they confront Peter:

“Peter, you met with unclean, uncircumcised, and uninitiated Gentiles! You defiled yourself by eating with them! You broke the Law of Moses!”

The response to the news was not celebration, but rather it was opposition.

But if the early church was to embrace the Great Commission given by Jesus, to reach all the nations of the earth with the Gospel, then some of the cultural practices and prejudices that opposed the mission to the Gentiles needed to go.

A Church Committed to Mission...

In our text, we see how God uses Peter to bring the church from resistance to the mission to the Gentiles, to a greater acceptance and obedience to the Great Commission.

It would be naïve to think that similar issues do not get in the way of Gospel Mission today. Resistance can arise today, within a church or within individuals, and if we are not careful, it can neuter our effectiveness in the mission of the Church.

If we want to be a church that is fully committed to the Great Commission, wherever it leads us, we will confront and weed out any resistance within us to the Great Commission by the examining power of the Spirit.

¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1998,) pg. 362

From this story, we can glean some lessons on what a church looks like that is committed to the mission.

The first thing we see is that a church that is committed to the mission...

1. Will let the Spirit lead the mission.

To respond to the accusation that Peter has sullied himself by fellowshipping with Gentiles, Peter explains how it wasn't HIS idea to go to the Gentiles - it was the Holy Spirit's idea.

Look at **vs. 12**, "*And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction.*"

Peter says, "I know what you are thinking, I thought the same thing when those Gentiles showed up and invited me to go with them, but I heard the **Spirit** tell me, 'Peter, go with them. Don't refuse because they are Gentiles.' So I went!"

Peter goes, and preaches the Gospel, and look at **vs. 15**, "*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.*"

Did you pick that up? "JUST AS ON US." Peter says, "Remember what happened to us? It happened again, but this time it happened with Gentiles! There was NO difference!"

Ben Witherington III comments here, "*For Peter, the decisive factor was that God had gave the same gift to them, the Holy Spirit, as he gave those in the upper room when they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.*"²

Peter recognized the work of the Spirit! He could see that the Spirit of God was moving and directing, and against his own concerns of comfort or his own convictions about cleanliness, Peter followed.

² Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pg. 364.

So, this first lesson we see is this - If we want to be effective in the Great Commission as a church, we need to be able to decipher the work and leading of the Holy Spirit. And a church that is filled with the Holy Spirit will know the voice and will follow the leading of the Spirit as we seek to proclaim the Gospel.

This is what the Apostle Paul will tell the church in Ephesus, *“Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”*³

A church that is filled with the Spirit will know and discern the will of God.

HOW you may ask? HOW do we know the will of God?

The Scriptures! The Scriptures are God’s perfect revealed will for His people!

Listen - the Holy Spirit will never lead you from teachings of Jesus. The Holy Spirit will never inspire you to disobey Jesus, or to do something that the Scripture forbids.

Jesus said this in **John 14:26**, *“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”*

The Holy Spirit’s job is to lead the Church of Jesus in the Mission OF Jesus.

If as Elders and Pastors we got up here and said, “Church, listen. Last night, a bunch of us pastors were praying, and we heard the Holy Spirit say, ‘I don’t want you meeting as a church anymore. You’ve done enough church. Instead, sell the building, and Sunday mornings, go out and clean lawns and serve the community. THAT is your church now,” - that is CLEARLY not the voice of the Spirit, because the Spirit would never tell us to stop meeting as a church!

But if we got up here and said, “Church, listen. We went away for our Elders retreat, and as we were praying, we heard the Spirit say, ‘I want you to start a work in Coldwater. Coldwater needs churches that preach the Gospel of Jesus,’” - well, that’s entirely different story, because that lines up with what we see in the commands of Jesus!

³ Eph. 5:17-18

This is why Peter says, in **vs. 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.’”*

The Spirit at work in the Gentiles aligned perfectly with what Jesus had spoken! It agreed with the revealed purposes and plan of God, and so Peter recognized it!

It might have taken him a moment, it might take the church a bit to get it, but they got it!

So if the Spirit leads us as a church to stretch the budget a little more to plant churches, or if the Spirit leads you to extend yourself by inviting over that gruff neighbour – that’s the kind of thing the Holy Spirit does.

A church on mission knows, listens to, and obeys the voice of the Spirit in the mission.

Secondly, a church that is committed to the mission...

2. Will abandon prejudices that prevent the mission.

Peter explains that the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles was completely in line with the words of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit. It was undeniable that God was behind this.

Look at **vs. 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?”*

The early Jewish Christians had been used to an acceptable prejudice towards Gentiles. After all, the Law considered them unclean, their practices to be avoided, and throughout history Gentile nations had oppressed them.

But what the Law had intended to keep Israel from idolatry and immorality, the Jews had turned into prejudice and disdain. So God, through Peter’s interaction with Cornelius, showed them that ANYONE who confessed Christ and ANYONE who has the indwelling Spirit as a guarantee of their belonging to God is a child of God.

It doesn't matter someone's cultural background, skin color, previous religion, or any other marker – *“For, ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”*⁴

Cornerstone, any prejudice that leads us to deem certain people unworthy to hear the Gospel - any prejudice that leads us to practically withhold the Gospel from someone because of their background, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or anything like that – is, to use the words of Peter, standing in the way of God!

There is a famous clip on Youtube of Penn Jillette (a famous magician and atheist) and in the video he is talking about an encounter he had with a Christian who tried to share the Gospel with him after one of his shows.

Penn reflects on the encounter, and he says this (you can watch this video on Youtube), *“I’ve always said I don’t respect people who don’t proselytize. I don’t respect that at all. If you believe that there’s a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it’s not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward...How much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? If I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn’t believe it, and that truck was bearing down on you, there’s a certain point where I tackle you. And this is **more important** than that.”*⁵

It is an act of, dare I say, hatred to allow prejudices and intolerance to lead us to exclude people from hearing the Gospel of Jesus. We would be found standing in God’s way.

If we are all saved the same way – sinners saved by the amazing grace of Jesus - how could we think of denying others the same gift we have received by withholding the Gospel?

⁴ Rom. 10:13

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>

So, Cornerstone, we must ask ourselves the question that Peter was forced to ask, “Are there prejudices we have that make us stand in the way of God?”

For example, is there prejudice towards outsiders – non-Orillians – within us? Do we keep newcomers at arm’s length? For some of us, perhaps prejudice has prevented us from reaching out to our neighbors who moved from Toronto during COVID. Can we see how a prejudice like that prevents us from fulfilling the Great Commission?

Or for some of us, perhaps there is prejudice against people struggling with drug addiction, mental health, and homelessness? Are we bitter and annoyed that our nice downtown core has been overrun with drug addicts and homeless people, and does that cause us to forsake compassion and mercy? Perhaps prejudice has prevented us from engaging with someone on the street, or to share the hope of the Gospel and practical help? Can we see how we might be tempted to avoid supporting local ministries that seek to help and bring healing to those less fortunate among us?

If we look at our LGBTQ+ neighbor, or our Muslim neighbor, or our wealthy neighbor, or our (fill in the blank) neighbor and say, “They are unworthy of hearing the Gospel,” – hey, news flash, YOU WERE UNWORTHY!

What basis could we have for disqualifying someone from the Gospel?

“They are sexually immoral!” SO WERE YOU!

“They are greedy!” SO WERE YOU!

“They follow idols!” SO DID YOU before Jesus!

The point is this - prejudice has no place in a church committed to the Great Commission, because we understand that the same grace that saved us can save them!

So, a church that is committed to the mission will let the Spirit lead the mission, will abandon prejudices that prevent the mission, and thirdly,

3. Will shed cultural norms that hinder the mission.

The Jewish Christians not only were limited by their prejudice, but there also were inhibited by the Jewish customs that deemed Gentiles unclean. This was what led the Jewish Christians to attack Peter in **vs. 3**, *“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”*

Now Peter himself, up until this point, would have agreed with them.

Remember, when the vision of the unclean animals first came to Peter, what did he say?

Acts 10:14, *“By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.”*

Peter was still thinking in terms of “clean” or “unclean” right up until then! Gentiles, like certain foods, would have caused him to be ritually unclean! But the vision and the experience with Cornelius had changed Peter deeply.

He had realized that the vision was more than just about food, it was about people!

Derek Thomas, commenting on this text, says here, *“He [Peter] came to appreciate that he had held to an utterly wrong understanding of God’s intention for the Gentiles! ... Peter had held to a traditional understanding of things, one that developed from a misunderstanding of Scripture ... Yet he learned that the old traditions had been hindrances to the purposes of almighty God!”*⁶

The Lord had spoken - there are no more “clean” or “unclean” people!

The groundwork for this had already been accomplished by Jesus back in **Mark 7!**

Jesus was often criticized by the Pharisee’s for doing things that their customs forbade. They had all kinds of customs around washing of hands before meals, and they had twisted the Law of God to make a self-righteous culture of false purity.

So Jesus, after a while of this, says, *“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.)*⁷

⁶ Derek Thomas, *Acts*, pg. 309.

⁷ Mark 7:18b-19

If external food was not what made someone unclean, then neither could being in the home of a Gentile and eating shrimp cocktail!

The Jews had made a culture out of observing purity rituals, but now that culture was getting in the way of them fulfilling the Great Commission.

So Peter confronts this by saying, *“If 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?”*

Now, we must be clear here – this is not talking about changing the truth in the Bible to reach people with the Gospel.

We might be tempted to get a little turned around here and confused!

The issue here is that the Jewish customs around ritual purity were preventing the early church from fulfilling the Mission of Jesus! Those customs kept Jews from defiling themselves with things that made them ritually impure.

But their obedience to their customs now led to disobedience to Jesus!

Jesus’ life, death and resurrection accomplished what the purity and ceremonial laws merely pointed to! True purity, true righteousness, true holiness comes not by avoiding human bodily fluids or by not wearing mixed linens – it comes through Christ’s imputed righteousness and His sanctifying presence dwelling within us through the Holy Spirit!

So those purity laws were fulfilled IN Christ.

Christ is now our purity, and He cleanses us from within!

So the content of the gospel never changes - we don’t get to edit the message - but WHO can hear the gospel has. We are not limited anymore in who we can share Christ with.

Derek Thomas makes this point clearly, *“This is not a justification of changes adopted for which there is no biblical support, changes that reflect a softening of our commitment to Scripture. Not at all! It is rather a call to be willing to admit when we have been wrong, when we have*

*maintained a view simply because it was traditional, but for which there isn't a shred of biblical support."*⁸

Now we might be tempted to think, "Rob, we don't have traditions that make obeying the Great Commission difficult!"

But Cornerstone, if we think that there are no cultural norms in Canada or Orillia that can impede our ability to fulfill the Great Commission, we are seriously deceiving ourselves!

Canadians are notoriously private. We are homebodies. We like our private property with our tall fences and quiet backyards. Do you think that cultural norm DOESN'T get in the way of the Great Commission?

We are generally wealthy, and we prioritize recreation and relaxation. We have Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Plus, and all the sports we can watch. Yet, I wonder how if we ever consider how the comforts of our wealth distract us from a devotion to the Great Commission.

Canadians are notoriously polite! We generally dislike social awkwardness and would do anything to avoid conflict. Do you think that gets in the way of sharing your faith, pushing back on cultural deceptions, or standing for truth with gentleness and kindness?

What our text shows us is ANY cultural tradition or norm that stands in the way of our ability to fulfill the Great Commission puts us in a position where we stand in the way of God!

So, CBC, what tradition or cultural norm prevents you from sharing your faith?

Does your view on alcohol prevent you from sharing the gospel with coworkers?

Does Sunday afternoon football routine help or keep you from the Great Commission?

A church that is committed to the Great Commission will shed any cultural norm that hinders their complete commitment to the Great Commission.

⁸ Derek Thomas, *Acts*, pg. 310.

But finally, a church that is committed to the mission,

4. Will give God glory in the mission.

The reaction and response, once Peter finishes telling this remarkable story, is clear in **vs. 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.’”*

After hearing Peter’s story, the result was undeniable – if indeed the Holy Spirit had fallen on Gentiles, if indeed they had heard the gospel and repented, then the saving power of the gospel had reached even to the Gentiles.

And so, they rejoiced!

They responded with awe and wonder, and they glorified God for what had happened.

Now make no mistake, this is not the end of the conflict between the Apostles and the legalistic Jewish Christians. We will see in **Acts 15** how this conflict arises again, and it will be a common theme throughout some of the Apostle Paul’s writings, especially Galatians. Even Peter himself, we will read about in Galatians, would later vacillate on this issue, and slip back into hypocrisy. While visiting the church in Antioch, with this strict Jewish Christian crowd from Jerusalem, Peter will allow the pressure of this legalistic group to lead him, and even Barnabas, to pull back from table fellowship with the Gentiles in that church!

However, the early church is here beginning to accept that the Gospel is not just for the Jew, not just for Samaritan, the Eunuch, or even for hostile Jews like Saul of Tarsus, but now the Gospel is for even the Gentile world.

The diversity of a church that has shed prejudices and cultural norms for the sake of the Gospel, that brings in all kinds of people, is exactly what Jesus promised would happen.

In **John 10**, Jesus says that He is the Good Shepherd, and how the only way to the Father is through Him. He is the gate to the sheepfold.

Listen to what Jesus says in **vs. 16**, *“And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.”*

“There will be a day,” Jesus says, “That other sheep, sheep that are not of this fold, will be brought in. They will hear my voice and they will come, and there will be ONE flock, and ONE Shepherd.”

This is the mystery of the Gospel that the Apostle Paul talks about in **Ephesians 3:6,10**, *“This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”*

As the church fulfills its mission, as it is led by the Spirit to reject prejudices and cultural norms that prevent the spread of the Gospel, as the sheep of Christ are bought in and are transformed by the power of the Gospel of Jesus, the manifold wisdom of God is broadcast into the universe!

A church that is committed to the Great Commission is a church of great joy and a church where God gets great glory!

When congregants are led by the Spirit to share Christ with those He leads them to – God gets the glory!

When a once prejudiced Christian shares the Gospel with his neighbour – God gets the glory!

When a drug-addict is welcomed into the church and finds a home, finds compassion, and finds healing through the Gospel of Jesus – God gets the glory!

When Christians, from every tribe and nation, gather in unity to worship the Good Shepherd who saved them from pride, prejudice, and sin – God gets glory!

That is a church that God will use powerfully in the Great Commission.

May that be true of us!