

PETER #9 Changing Peter's Concept

I The spread of the gospel to the Gentiles – Acts 10:1-48

- A The gospel reached Gentiles in Antioch after persecution began with Stephen – 8:1; 11:19-21
1. Acts records a pivotal event—the arrival of the gospel in Antioch, a truly cosmopolitan city (Acts 11:19-21). This was “one of the most crucial events in Christian history,” because it was “the first real encounter of the Christian faith with the pagan world,” says Professor Andrew F. Walls. [*The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, p. 52.] Prior to Antioch the gospel was proclaimed to people familiar with the Old Covenant. This included Jews (both Hebrew & Hellenist), “half-Jews” (Samaritans) & Gentile proselytes & God-fearers. However, it had not yet reached the pagan Greeks, the typical heathen Gentiles. “Antioch is famous,” says F. B. Meyer “because a number of ...unnamed disciples dared to preach the gospel to Greeks...in entire disregard of...Judaism.” This epoch-changing event was not the work of the apostles, Peter or Paul, but of “small potatoes,” some anonymous believers. “Antioch...the most important event in [Church] history, was brought about by unknown Christians,” notes Johannes Munck. They were refugees from the persecution triggered by Stephen’s martyrdom (Acts 11:19). Yet, after arriving in Antioch, they flaunted religious convention by evangelizing their pagan neighbours. Their success marked the beginning of the conversion of the Greek world, a step which changed the face of Christianity. [Andrew F. Walls]
 2. The break-through in Antioch (in the mid 30s AD) might well have preceded Cornelius’ conversion (~39 AD?). However, Luke’s “object is plain: to demonstrate that the first break-through of the gospel to the Gentiles or at least the first break-through recognized by the Jerusalem church...was led by Peter himself...Whenever it took place (& it must have been early)...the event of Cornelius’ acceptance by Peter marked a step of momentous significance which can hardly have been ignored at the time.” [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, p. 383, 387]

- B The gospel goes to Cornelius, a Roman soldier, who was a God-fearer – Acts 10:1-48

The conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile soldier, his relatives & close friends is the longest narrative in Acts. The story’s importance is highlighted through repetition. The visions of Cornelius & Peter are repeated several times, & 11:1-18 is a detailed retelling of the events of chap. 10. The incident put Peter at the center of the mission to the Gentiles. Cornelius resided at Caesarea, a city on the coast 31 miles (50 km) north of Joppa; Caesarea was the centre of Roman government of Judea. Cornelius was a centurion, a commander of 100 men, & a member of the Italian Cohort. (A “cohort” consisted of 600 men under the command of 6 centurions, but in remote areas such as Judea a “cohort” might have as many as 1,000 men.) 10 cohorts formed a “legion.” Centurions were paid very well, so Cornelius would have been socially prominent & wealthy. Cornelius as a “God-fearer,” a Gentile who worshiped Israel’s God & was attached to a synagogue but who had not submitted to Jewish conversion rites (esp. circumcision). He followed 2 of the primary expressions of Jewish piety—prayer & almsgiving. *Alms* are gifts to the poor [charity]. ESV

- 1 An angel of God appeared to Cornelius, while he was praying
- 2 Telling him to fetch Peter
- 3 To give them a message by which they would be saved – 11:14

II God Brought Peter into the Spirit’s work among the Gentiles

- A Peter’s vision on the roof while in prayer – Acts 10:10-16; 11:5-10

- 1 Peter's resistance to the vision - Acts 10:14; 11:8
 - 2 The command to '*kill and eat*' (10:13) made no sense to Peter, since it violated Jewish food laws [Lev. 11]. In the OT, "the LORD spoke to...Israel, saying, "These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals...Whatever parts the hoof & is cloven-footed & chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat...You shall *not* eat these: The camel, the rock badger, the hare (rabbit), & the pig...You shall not eat any of their flesh, & you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you'." (Lev. 11:1-8). But the heavenly voice said, "What God has cleansed, don't call common." (10:15); this is the key: God was overturning the old clean/unclean distinctions & dietary laws in general, plus all other "ceremonial" laws in Moses' covenant (including laws about sacrifices, festivals & special days, and circumcision). Nothing like this was to get in the way of fellowship with Gentiles. ESV
 - 3 "It is important for the 21st-century reader to appreciate that the issue was not a minor matter of insignificant dietary fads. It lay at the heart of Jewish identity...Was the [Jesus' movement] loyal to the now traditionally distinctive features of the covenant people [God's OT people—the Jews]? ...Hitherto Peter...& believers in Jerusalem assumed the answer to be 'Yes.' But now Peter was faced with one of the most radical rethinks of religious principle imaginable." [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, p 393]
- B The Spirit's speaking to Peter – Acts 10:19-20; 11:12
- C Peter's obedience – Acts 10:23-24
- D Peter deduced the vision's wider implications—it's not just about food (diet), but people: Peter told Cornelius' guests, "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*. So when I was sent for, I came without objection..." (Acts 10:28-29) "The importance of the lesson just learned by Peter is drawn out clearly & should not be missed: not simply could he now eat 'unclean' *meat* with a good conscience, but he must not call any other *person* 'unclean'. {"For most late 2nd-Temple Jews, Gentiles were not *ritually* impure, but [worse] *morally* impure; only a Jew could be holy (not profane)" [note #69]}" [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, p. 394]
- E Peter's 'conversion'
1. Acts 10 records "the conversion of Peter himself...a conversion from traditional & deeply rooted convictions which...had completely governed his life until that moment. Peter was then ready, as not before, to preach the good news of Jesus to this Gentile. The fact that it took the...Spirit's coming upon Cornelius in such an unexpected and unprecedented way to complete Peter's conversion indicates...just how major a transformation had taken place in Peter & how epochal a step [it] was." [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, pp 390-1]
 2. "The breakdown of the ethnic/religious boundary around Israel was indispensable & integral to the break-through of the gospel to the nations at large. The success of God's plan for 'all the families of the earth' involved a redefinition of Israel's own identity insofar as it was defined by separation from Gentiles. It was this process of redefinition in which Peter found himself." [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, p. 396]
 3. "Peter's conversion of Cornelius was a –perhaps *the* most – significant watershed [event] in the early days of the new [Jesus] movement, but it could only happen because Peter himself had been converted! [in his concept of Israel's ethnic/religious boundaries]" [James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning in Jerusalem*, p. 401]

- F Peter spoke the good news to Cornelius and his household
- G The Spirit fell on the Gentiles as He did on the Jews – Acts 10:44-45; 11:15-16 The *Holy Spirit fell* on the Gentiles in a way that was visible & audible... These Gentiles had come to genuine saving faith in Christ & received the new covenant power & fullness of the Holy Spirit, which was a sign that they'd been accepted by God as full & equal members of his people. The fact that they hadn't followed any of Moses' ceremonial laws (e.g., circumcision, sacrifice, & diet) before receiving the gift of the Spirit is an important point, as soon becomes evident. Their *speaking in tongues* & praise of God outwardly demonstrated the Spirit's presence & God's acceptance of Gentiles without their circumcision (which was required for conversion to Judaism). ESV
- H The Gentile believers were baptized – Acts 10:47-48;
 - 1 Not withholding or standing in the way – 10:47; 11:17 Peter said, "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?" (11:17)
 - 2 "*Stand in God's way*" (11:17). Here Peter used the same word (Greek, *kōlyō*) as earlier in Cornelius's conversion ("withhold"—"Can anyone *withhold* water for baptizing these people, who've received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (10:47), & the Ethiopian eunuch used the same word at the time of his conversion ("prevents"—"the eunuch said, 'See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?'" (8:36). These 3 examples demonstrate, that God was expanding the church to include Gentiles, & no one should try to "prevent" or "stand in the way" of that. Peter knew he couldn't refuse these new believers baptism so they could give outward evidence that they were full members of the church. ESV
- I Peter stayed with them for some days – 10:48 (violating Jewish regulations of separation)

Note: Peter's willingness to stay with them likely involved his sharing meals with the Gentiles, a bold step for Peter who formerly was so concerned about clean & unclean foods. ESV

III Criticism of God's move – Acts. 11:1-18

- A By the traditional Christian Jews—"When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them'." (Acts 11:2-3)

Note: The issue was raised by "the circumcision party," a group of strict Jewish Christians, perhaps of a Pharisaic background (see Acts 15:1, 5). They probably held the position that Gentiles who wished to become Christians must first become converts to Judaism, which included circumcision & living by the ritual laws. ESV
- B Peter related the story (this account repeats chapter 10)
- C The critics accepted God's work among the Gentiles and glorified God.

IV Application

- A The Spirit of God is working
- B Don't stand in the way/hinder what God is doing
 - 1 It may not fit our past or our concept – Andrew Murray
 - 2 It may go against our traditional way of doing things
- C Be willing to participate if you can – God will use others if we are not willing
- D Glorify God for what He is doing (including beyond our walls) – increase
- E Be careful of criticism