

## **The Church's Expansion**

Acts 10:1-48

In the 1933, in response to the economic devastation that so many Americans were experiencing during the Great Depression, President Roosevelt unveiled a plan called the “New Deal.” It was a massive undertaking, wherein the federal government spent billions and billions of dollars to establish public works and initiate economic reforms and relief programs, all designed to stimulate the economy, get people back to work, and restore prosperity to the American people.

But when it came down to implementing certain key elements, it turned out that the promise of prosperity wasn't really for *all* the American people. For instance, part of the New Deal was the creation of the Home Owners Loan Corporation (which eventually became the FHA—the Federal Housing Association). In effort to reduce the number of home foreclosures the federal agencies decided to grade “neighborhoods in 239 cities, color-coding them green for ‘best,’ blue for ‘still desirable,’ yellow for ‘definitely declining’ and red for ‘hazardous.’”<sup>1</sup> The “hazardous” areas “were deemed unfit for investment by banks, insurance companies, savings and loan associations, and other financial services companies.”<sup>2</sup> And because they were demarcated with the color red on the map, this became known as “redlining.”

But of course redlining weren't driven merely by economic hardship; it also zeroed in on areas predominantly populated by ethnic minorities. And so if you wanted to buy a house in one of those neighborhoods, banks wouldn't give you a loan—which meant that blacks were often unable to buy property, and therefore unable to accumulate wealth, while their neighborhoods continued to decline. And in some instances, if a black family wanted to buy a house in a predominantly white neighborhood, they would also be declined—not because they couldn't afford it, but because their presence in that neighborhood was seen as a threat to the economic value of that neighborhood. And so in essence, redlining was “tantamount to a ‘state-sponsored system of segregation.’”<sup>3</sup> And despite having been banned for 50 years, much of the ongoing segregation and wealth gap today between whites and ethnic minorities (the fact that “white families today have nearly 10 times the net worth of black families and more than eight times that of Hispanic families, according to the Federal Reserve”<sup>4</sup>)—these can be traced in part to the impact of redlining. “3 out of 4 neighborhoods ‘redlined’ on government maps 80 years ago continuing to struggle economically.”<sup>5</sup> So as good as the New Deal was for restoring the prosperity of Americans, it was really only for *some* Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> Tracy Jan, “[Redlining was banned 50 years ago. It's still hurting minorities today.](#)” *Washington Post*, Mar. 28, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> B. Gaspaire, “[Redlining \(1937-\)](#),” *BlackPast*, Dec. 28, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Gross, “[A 'Forgotten History' Of How The U.S. Government Segregated America.](#)” *NPR*, May 3, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Jan, “Redlining.”

<sup>5</sup> Jan, “Redlining.”

As the early church carried the good news of Jesus forward to new areas—from Jerusalem and then Judea and Samaria and beyond—they faced a surprisingly similar temptation, to treat the gospel as though it only applied to some people or peoples. Specifically to Jewish people. Jesus is Jewish; his disciples were Jewish; this was good news of *Israel's* King. And so the temptation was to treat the promise as for the Jews, while withholding it from Gentiles—non-Jews. In other words, the early church was in serious danger of redlining the mission of the gospel. Of maintaining a covenant distinction (and an ethnic distinction) that Jesus tore down through the cross, not realizing that God's vision for his church is to be a diverse people unified in Christ.

Our passage this morning is therefore a major turning point in the book of Acts, and not just that, but in the history of God's saving activity. As Austin showed us last week in ch. 9, we've already seen how God is at work to bring reconciliation to the most unlikely of people—first reconciling Saul to himself, a Pharisee known for breathing threats and murder against the church and therefore Christ, and then reconciling Saul to the church he persecuted. In ch. 10, we see that unlikely reconciliation take on a whole new level—a *completely unexpected level* for the early church—as the church expands to include Gentiles—non-Jews—*without* requiring them to become Jewish.

It takes a rather miraculous course of events to bring this about. In fact, the story turns on two visions from God—first to Cornelius in vv. 1-8, and then to the apostle Peter in vv. 9-16. And the rest of the story is the fulfillment of those two visions, for Peter in vv. 17-33, as the scope of his mission is expanded to include Gentiles, and then for Cornelius in vv. 34-48, as the church itself is expanded to include Gentiles like Cornelius.

### **An Unexpected Visit: Cornelius's Vision (10:1-8)**

It all starts with an unexpected visit in vv. 1-8. While Peter is staying in Joppa at the end of ch. 9, over in Caesarea (about 31 miles away), we meet a man named Cornelius. And Luke tells us several things about him. First, he was a centurion of the Italian Cohort, which means he was in charge of one of the six divisions of 100 men within a Roman military cohort. He worked for Caesar. But he was also a God-fearing man. And the term “God-fearer” in the New Testament usually describes a Gentile who has faith in Israel's God. He's not a convert to Judaism, but he believes that Israel's God is the true God. And you see that in his worship—“he gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (v. 2).

But even with his genuine faith and worship, this man, as a Gentile, remains outside the household of God. He's in a redlined neighborhood. If you follow the story of the Old Testament, you see that while God's promise to Abraham envisioned blessing all nations, that blessing was carried forward specifically through Israel. They were God's chosen nation, set apart from all other peoples to be his own. If you wanted to become part of God's people, that meant becoming Jewish—moving out of our Gentile world and converting to Judaism. And that's something Cornelius hasn't done.

But all of a sudden, God answers his prayers in the most spectacular of ways. He sends an angel, a heavenly messenger, with very specific instructions to “send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter” (v. 5). We're not told what God's going to do or what this is about, simply that Peter has a message for Cornelius from God (which is still news to Peter at this

point). But Cornelius obeys. He finds three men and sends them to find Peter in Joppa and bring him back. Meanwhile, in Joppa, God gives Peter a vision of his own.

### **A Perplexing Command: Peter's Vision (10:9-16)**

Where Cornelius's vision was clear and straightforward, Peter's strikes him as mysterious and perplexing. Which is nice, because it's pretty confusing for us today, too. Peter, while praying (and notice the central place of prayer in God revealing himself and expanding his kingdom—Cornelius was praying, Peter was praying)—so Peter, while praying, becomes hungry and all of a sudden falls into a trance, a vision. And (v. 11): he “saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat’” (vv. 11-13).

If you're starving, and someone comes up and tells you that God is going to provide you with food from heaven, this is *not* what you're expecting to be on the menu. When Carissa and I spend a summer in Japan back in 2003, we went out to dinner one night. And when they brought out our salads before the main course, I looked down, and there was an entire baby octopus sitting on top of my salad. And I wanted to say, ‘I didn't order that. I'm not sure why that's on the menu. Did you run out of croutons? I don't understand.’

And when Peter sees this sheet with all these reptiles and birds, his reaction is similar. ‘I can't eat that.’ Not because the menu is so gross, but because everything on that menu is *unclean* according to Israel's Law. Again, if you go back to the Old Testament and the Law God gave Israel at Mount Sinai, part of that Law included instructions about clean and unclean foods. For instance, Leviticus 11 details the kinds of animals that are either clean or unclean. “This is the law about beast and bird and every living creature that moves through the waters and every creature that swarms on the ground, to make a distinction between the unclean and the clean and between the living creature that may be eaten and the living creature that may not be eaten” (Lev. 11:46-47). And everything Peter sees on this sheet falls into the unclean category.

So Peter's reaction to this command to kill and eat unclean animals is to say, as strongly and politely as possible, No way! “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (v. 14).

But look at what God says next (v. 15), which is the most surprising and yet most critical part of the vision. “And the voice came to him again a second time, ‘What God has made clean, do not call common.’” What God has made clean, do not call common. What is he saying? And what does that have to do with Cornelius's vision and Peter's mission? Is this simply about undoing the old covenant food laws, putting bacon back on the menu? The New Testament does undo the food laws; in Mark 7, we're told that Jesus declared all foods clean (Mk. 7:19; cf. Mk. 7:14-23; Col. 2:16-23; Rom. 14:1-15:7; 1 Tim. 4:1-5). But why this vision here?

It's perplexing. And Peter is perplexed. But not for very long. Because in v. 17, the men Cornelius sent show up, and the big picture of what God is doing—not just in this story, but in his cosmic plan of salvation—finally begins to make sense.

## The Fulfillment of Peter's Vision: The Scope of his Mission Expands to Include Gentiles (11:17-33)

Verse 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 gate<sup>18</sup> and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there.<sup>19</sup> And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you.<sup>20</sup> Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." (Acts 10:17-20).

God's fingerprints are all over this event. Not only was it stimulated by two divine visions, now these Gentile strangers show up in a new town, with precise information about where Peter was staying. It's not like they could follow Peter's Instagram to find out where he was doing ministry lately, and then Google Simon the Tanner to figure out what town he lived in. God directed them to Joppa. And not only that, he instructs Peter to go with these Gentiles who have come looking for him out *without hesitation*—or more literally, without *distinction*—since he is the one who sent them.

But why would Peter *hesitate* to go with someone to preach the gospel? Why would God need to tell him *not* to make a distinction? Is it because Peter might be concerned for his own safety? The church is being persecuted; he doesn't know these people; what if it's a trap? But Peter has needed no encouragement to preach the gospel boldly in contexts likely to get him in trouble, and he's seen God miraculously rescue him from prison already. So I don't think it's safety. I think it's the same reason he hesitated to eat the food he saw in the vision—according to God's Law, they're unclean. They're Gentiles, outside the covenant. This is a redlined neighborhood. The good news is great, but it's not for them. That's the temptation—to limit the gospel's application to only some people or peoples.

And all of a sudden the vision makes sense. It's not really about food. It's not about the holiness code, clean and unclean. It's about the expansion of the church to include men and women from *every nation under heaven*, not just the Jewish nation.

And that makes even more sense when you understand the purpose of the food laws in Leviticus. God commanded Israel to make a distinction in their diet to remind them that they were a distinct people. Leviticus 20 describes it like this:

“. . . I am the LORD your God, who has *separated* you from the peoples.<sup>25</sup> You shall therefore *separate* the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.<sup>26</sup> You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have *separated* you from the peoples, that you should be mine.”  
(Lev. 20:24-26)

But now that the gospel is going to all nations, now that in Christ there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile in God's economy of salvation, stipulations about clean and unclean

foods no longer make sense. God undoes them. He takes the redlined map and tears it up. As Paul explains it in Ephesians 2, speaking of this former separation between Jew and Gentile,

For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made us both [Jew and Gentile] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility<sup>15</sup> by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself *one new man* in place of the two, so making peace,<sup>16</sup> and might reconcile us *both* to God in *one body* through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Eph. 2:14-16)

What Christ accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection was not just redemption for Israel, but for all nations. All people groups. He took the sins of all people and paid the price in full, not only to reconcile us to God, but also to reconcile us to one another. *What God has made clean, do not call common.* The gospel is for everyone. Regardless of your ethnic heritage. Regardless of your gender. Regardless of your job. No matter how religious or irreligious your background. The gospel unites us not based on our common heritage or interests or achievements. The good news of Jesus takes a wonderfully diverse people and makes them one *in Christ*. That's God's vision for his church—a diverse people unified in Christ.

So what will Peter do? Will he go? Or will he say, as he did with the food, as strongly and politely as possible, No way? The suspense is heightened when you remember another story when a servant of the Lord found himself in the city of Joppa, with the instruction to bring God's message to a bunch of Gentiles? A prophet who ended up fleeing and running the opposite direction, because he resented the fact that God might show compassion and mercy to a Gentile nation, and enemy of God's people. Will Peter pull a Jonah? Or will he allow God to reshape his categories, to reject the temptation to redline other peoples, and include the Gentiles in the promise of new life as well?

When you read the story, you can see that Peter is working to overcome a little bit of the hesitation. This is genuinely new territory for him. God tells him to go with them, but Peter still asks what they want (vv. 21-22). He invites them in to be his guests, which is huge. And he goes with them to Caesarea the next day, which is even huger. But when he gets there, he still feels the need to tell them what a big deal it is that he's there—"You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation . . ." (v. 28). But then you see that he gets it. He really does get it—in the very same sentence: "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" (10:28-29). His answer was not, as before, "By no means, Lord!" He came without objection. As he reports back to the church in Jerusalem in ch. 11:12, he says, "And the Spirit told me to go with them, *making no distinction.*" He understood the point of the vision. God expanded the scope of Paul's mission to line up with the scope of Jesus' mission—to truly include the Gentiles and embrace God's vision of a diverse people unified in Christ.

And now that Peter's vision has been fulfilled, we come back to Cornelius's vision, and see it fulfilled in the expansion of the church to include Gentiles like Cornelius (vv. 34-38).

### **The Fulfillment of Cornelius's Vision: the Church Expands to Include Gentiles (11:34-48)**

It's a pretty moving scene. You really see Cornelius's faith on display. He's not just curious what God wants to say to him through Peter; he calls together his relatives and close friends (v. 24,

27). He wants everyone to hear this. As he says in v. 33, “Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.”

“So Peter opened his mouth . . .” (v. 34). And notice how, before he gets to the gospel, he confesses his own paradigm shift: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35). But then he gets to the gospel, v. 36:

As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all),<sup>37</sup> you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed:<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. . . . (10:36-38)

Peter preaches Jesus’ life, how Christ went about in the power of the Holy Spirit, doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil (v. 38). He preaches Jesus’ crucifixion, how they put him to death by hanging him on a tree (v. 39). He preaches his resurrection, how God raised him on the third day and made him to appear (v. 40). He preaches the judgment to come, that this Jesus is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead (v. 42). And he preaches the forgiveness of sins through faith in Christ for *everyone* who believes: “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (v. 43).

The gospel of Jesus is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek (Rom. 1:16). And as Peter preaches the gospel in Caesaria, that day became a day of salvation for Cornelius and his family, and a new horizon in God’s unfolding plan of salvation, through the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God.

And that new horizon is marked by a recapitulation of Pentecost (10:44-46, cf. 11:15). If you remember back to ch. 2, how the Holy Spirit fell upon the church, filling them with God’s presence and empowering them for mission, with the disciples speaking in tongues, proclaiming the gospel in languages they didn’t even know—that’s what happens among Cornelius and his family. God himself affirms *his* acceptance of Gentile believers by baptizing them with his Spirit. Who is Peter to withhold the waters of baptism, the church’s mark of inclusion into the family of God? (10:47-48). And so the church expands—a diverse people unified in Christ.

The gospel is for everyone. Regardless of your ethnic heritage. Regardless of your gender. Regardless of your background. And that’s just as true for us today as it was for Cornelius and his family.

And so how do we live out this kind of gospel-formed unity as a diverse people? There’s so much that can be said about that, but I think this passage invites us to ask several questions of our faith and practice today.

First, are there things that divide the church today that shouldn’t?<sup>6</sup> Skin color. Ethnic background. Political affiliations. Musical preferences. Secondary doctrines. Stage of life. There are some thing that necessarily divide us—when the gospel of Jesus is forfeited, for instance.

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<sup>6</sup> Several of these application questions come from David Dewberry.

False teaching. Unrepentant sin. And there remains a distinction between the church and the world—those who are in Christ and those who aren't. But most of the things that divide the church today, if we're honest, shouldn't.

Second, are there things that unite the church that shouldn't? Skin color. Ethnic background. Political affiliations. Musical preferences. Secondary doctrines. Stage of life. It's really easy to find unity with people who are just like you in some way. To substitute unity for uniformity, whether out of a desire for comfort, or a loyalty to tradition, or a fear of people who are different. What unites the church, however, is not our common interest in something, our common background, or anything like that. What unites us is our common faith in Jesus Christ. Is that the bond we feel when we gather? Is that the bond that pulls on us when we're tempted to divide? Whatever we're united around is what's going to keep us together, which means our unity is only ever as strong as that common bond. Let Jesus be our bond; only Christ is enough.

Third, do we have a healthy view of diversity? In our divided world, it's really easy to view diversity as a threat. A threat to the status quo. Or as weakness. But then of course, on the other hand, because of that rampant division and the damage it causes, it's just as easy to treat diversity as an idol. An end in itself, something to be aspired to at all costs, even at the cost of truth. Healthy diversity is neither afraid of differences, nor untethered from truth. It's not the end of the church, but an essential means to the church's real end—the glorification of God in Christ. Diversity and unity are held together by the gospel.

Finally, are we passionate about seeing the gospel advance among all nations? If the gospel is for everyone, if God's vision for the church is a diverse people unified in Christ, then are we willing to devote ourselves to that cause, both locally and globally? The book of Acts is a missionary book, because the church is a missionary people. And we're committed to that mission here at Westgate. But none of us are immune from the temptation to limit the gospel's application to only some people or peoples. None of us would ever admit to agreeing with a redline-approach to gospel ministry. But what does our outreach look like functionally? Are we only reaching out to people who are like us? Do we even spend enough time with people different from us to have a chance to share the gospel? And what does the church lose when we limit our reach to those within a comfortable arm's reach?

Much to pray about and think about. But let our thoughts be driven the gospel—the worthiness of God, the sufficiency of Jesus, the mission of Christ to all nations, God's vision for the church of a diverse people united in Christ. "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" (Gal. 3:28).

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### **Questions for Study and Understanding**

1. How does the previous section provide important context for what happens in this story?
2. What do we learn about the characters in this story?

3. What are the surprises or challenges do the characters encounter that move the story forward (think about how plot works in a narrative)?
4. What does the author seem to be emphasizing in these verses (for clues, look at things like structure, repetition, etc.)?
5. What do you think is the connection between Peter's vision and the assignment God gives him to go to Cornelius?
6. How would you summarize the main point of this story?
7. How does this story impact the unfolding story of Acts?

### **Questions for Reflection and Application**

8. What do you think God wants us to know about himself or his mission from this passage?
9. What do you think God is calling us to do in light of this passage?
10. What does that look like for you practically? What keeps you from this? What can help you move forward in it?