

Peter & The Gentiles

Memory Text: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.’” (Acts 2:38, 39)

Setting The Stage: “Two apples up in a tree were looking down on the world. The first apple said, ‘Look at all those people fighting, robbing, rioting - no one seems willing to get along with his fellow man. Someday we apples will be the only ones left. Then we’ll rule the world.’ Replied the second apple, ‘Which of us - the reds or the greens?’”

Although a simple and humorous story, it speaks to how human beings like to divide, group, and categorize people, which can lead to viewing some as inferior and others superior. While this attitude is pervasive in the world, exhibited in prejudice and bigotry in the areas of race, class, status, gender, and religion, has the church in some quarters succumbed to the same spirit, witnessed in lack-luster efforts to share the gospel among certain people? Did the early church struggle with prejudice? How did it break down the walls that separated people? How did God get through to the apostle Peter so he could be used to share the gospel with the Gentiles, because after all, even after his conversion experience he did struggle with prejudice? How can God get through to us if we find ourselves in the same position?

What do we know about Peter? Shortly after the baptism of Jesus, Andrew brought his brother, Peter, to Jesus, essentially making Peter the first Christian convert (John 1:40-42). Later he became the first apostle to witness the gospel to the Gentiles. But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Peter responded to the call to accept Jesus as Messiah and associated with Him intermittently. Nearly two years later Jesus called him to permanent discipleship (Matt 4:12), along with his brother Andrew, and his work partners, James and John. Peter appears first in all four NT lists of the twelve disciples. We know he often took upon himself the role of spokesman for the entire group (Matt. 14:26; 16:16; 17:24; 26:35, etc.).

The SDA Bible Commentary authors have this to say about Peter: *“His ardor, eagerness, earnestness, courage, loyalty, vigor, and organizing ability no doubt marked him for leadership among the disciples from the very beginning. Peter was pre-eminently a man of action; his enthusiastic disposition was his strongest personal character trait. He was a man of pronounced extremes, and his strong personality was the source of marked virtues and serious defects.”* (SDA BC, vol. 5, p. 594, 595)

However, on that fateful evening when he denied Jesus three times, and with bitter shame he looked into the compassionate, disappointed eyes of Jesus, his life would never be the same again. Peter became a changed man.

“Before his fall, Peter was always speaking unadvisedly, from the impulse of the moment. He was always ready to correct others, and to express his mind, before he had a clear comprehension of himself or of what he had to say. But the converted Peter was very different. He retained his former fervor, but the grace of Christ regulated his zeal. He was no longer impetuous, self-confident, and self-exalted, but calm, self-possessed, and teachable.” (Desire of Ages, p. 815)

Peter was eventually given authority (not supremacy) from Christ to feed the flock of God (John 21:15-17). He became the first apostle to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (From the Jewish perspective, Gentiles were often seen as pagans who did not know the true God. During Jesus’ time, many Jews took such pride in their cultural and religious heritage that they considered Gentiles “unclean,” calling them “dogs” and “the uncircumcised.” Gentiles and the half-Gentile Samaritans were viewed as enemies to be shunned - see John 4:9; 18:28; Acts 10:28).

Although he struggled at times with his bigotry (Gal. 2:11-14), but was eventually victorious over it, he helped the early church, along with Paul, to understand the need to proclaim the gospel to all nations and peoples, as well as guided the church through issues that threatened to divide it (Acts 15).

There’s a lot we can learn about in the conversion of Peter and his willingness to be used of God. One lesson stands out immediately; a changed person in the hands of God can be a powerful instrument in bringing others to Christ.

Sunday – Peter at Pentecost

Acts 2:1-39

Throughout His ministry, Jesus had made it more than clear that the gospel was to go to all people, that it wasn’t to be kept merely for the Jews as was so commonly believed in Israel (John 4; Matt. 24:14; Acts 1:8). In fact, His teaching and practice was predicated on the Old Testament Scriptures which declared that the work of the Messiah was to bring light of truth to the Gentiles (Isa. 11:10; 42:1, 6).

Yet Jesus had also made it evident that the disciple’s first labors was to be among the Israelites (Acts 1:8). God wasn’t finished with them yet (Dan. 9:24). The disciples were to wait for the promise of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. When the day of Pentecost had come, God used Peter to preach the gospel to visiting Jews of the Diaspora, thus paving the way for the gospel to go to about fifteen nations.

The gift of tongues was given the disciples so that the visiting Jews could understand the message of the gospel in their native tongue (Acts 2:8). They were familiar with Hebrew, so they could enjoy the temple services, as this was the language the

services were conducted in. However, they would not have been familiar with Aramaic, the language of the disciples. This is why God gave the disciples the gift of tongues, or languages. Point: God gives gifts, not as evidence of the conversion of the individual, but that the work of God might move forward.

Acts 2:22:24. Peter preaches the certainty and purpose of Christ's death and resurrection. "Not possible." Why? Because of the sure word of prophecy (v. 25-28), Christ's sinlessness, and because Christ was (is) the Life-Giver.

Acts 2:29-33, 36. Peter exalts Christ to the position of Christ and Lord.

Acts 2:38, 39. "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'"

Peter reveals the sinners appropriate response to conviction of sin – repentance and baptism. Of note, the Holy Spirit is said to be available to all, including Gentiles, meaning that the gospel was to go to all, no matter their creed, color, gender, persuasion, or religion. Without the powerful working of the Spirit of God our efforts to lead people to Christ would be fruitless.

Monday – The Conversion of Cornelius, Part 1

Acts 10:1-8; 11:1-4, 15-18

v. 1 – Cornelius was a Roman officer, a centurion to be exact, in a cohort, leading archers who were non-Roman citizens.

v. 2 - Cornelius was not entirely heathen. He was "devout," "feared God," "gave alms," and "prayed to God continually." *"Believing in God as the Creator of heaven and earth, Cornelius revered Him, acknowledged His authority, and sought His counsel in all the affairs of life. He was faithful to Jehovah in his home life and in his official duties. He had erected the altar of God in his home, for he dared not attempt to carry out his plans or to bear his responsibilities without the help of God."* (Acts of the Apostles, p. 133)

Even still, to the Jews he was a Gentile as he hadn't been circumcised. This story addresses the most divisive issue facing the early church: can a Gentile become a Christian without first becoming a Jew? Cornelius' conversion, along with his household, has often been termed the "Gentile Pentecost." It was huge, so big in fact that Peter had to defend what had happened when some Jewish converts accused him of boycotting standard Jewish practice (see Acts 11:1-4, 15-18).

v. 3-6 – God saw in Cornelius a seeker for truth. He believed the prophecies and was waiting for the Messiah to come, yet didn't know that they had been fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He desired to more fully understand the way of

salvation (see Acts 11:14). So God went to great lengths to ensure this man heard the gospel. Yet Cornelius still had a part to play. Truth acquired by personal effort is often more valued and appreciated than truth thrust on us.

Can a person be a follower of God even though they may not have a correct understanding on all things? Does God judge a person based on the degree of knowledge they have of truth or upon the use made of what they have? What does this teach us about how we interact with someone who doesn't believe like we do? Is there room for harsh criticism or should we express disinterested love and compassion?

Tuesday – The Conversion of Cornelius, Part 2

Acts 10:23-48

v.6 – The angel didn't share the gospel, but instead directs Cornelius to Peter who will proclaim the glad tidings. *“Thus God gave evidence of His regard for the gospel ministry and for His organized church [Phillip and Queen Candice of Ethiopia's treasurer; Ananias and Saul/Paul]. The angel was not commissioned to tell Cornelius the story of the cross. A man subject, even as the centurion himself, to human frailties and temptations, was to be the one to tell him of the crucified and risen Saviour.”* (Acts of the Apostles, p. 134)

v. 24-26 – Peter responded to the call of God to go to Caesarea. Cornelius was overwhelmed to meet Peter inasmuch that he bowed in reverential worship. However, Peter was neither put off, nor flattered, and invited Cornelius to recognize him as a man like himself.

v. 27-29 – Peter first explained the Jewish custom and relationship to Gentiles to Cornelius' household but emphasized that he responded without objection. Peter also acknowledged that he has been taught a valuable lesson – that he should call no man common or unclean (v. 28).

After Cornelius related the reason for Peter being called (to hear “all things commanded you by God” v. 33), Peter, with clearer insight than before, confessed a tremendous truth – “God shows no partiality.” (v. 34, 35).

v. 35-43 – Peter preached Christ – His life, His miracles, His betrayal and crucifixion, His resurrection and ascension, and His work in heaven as man's representative and advocate. Peter presented Jesus as the sinner's only hope. Peter again testifies to the truth of the gospel going to “whoever.” (v. 43)

John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Revelation 22:17: “And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.”

v. 44-48 – The Holy Spirit is then poured out upon Cornelius and his household, which is manifested in the gift of speaking in tongues/languages. The purpose was to convince Peter’s Jewish companion’s of Peter’s vision and that the gospel was to go to all people.

Wednesday – Peter’s Vision

Acts 10:44, 45

What event changed Peter’s attitude toward the Gentiles? Acts 10:9-21 relates the story of Peter’s vision. He was in Joppa at Simon the tanner’s house, a detail that helps us see that Peter wasn’t entirely entrenched in prejudice, as tanners were repulsive to the Jews as they handled dead bodies and body waste in their process. However, Peter still needed to grow, and he was about to be given an opportunity to do so.

v. 9-16 – Peter saw in his vision a great sheet descending from to earth that had on it multiple unclean creatures – creatures prohibited by God to eat (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). He heard the voice of Jesus commanding him to eat them, but Peter protested seeking to be obedient to his heritage and God’s commands. Jesus proceeded to tell Peter not to declare something God has cleansed common or unclean. This happened three times, indicating the importance of the message.

Peter (son of Jonah) and Jonah are very similar. 1) Both are called from Joppa. 2) Both are reluctant. 3) Both initially protest. 4) To convince them God intervened in supernatural ways (3 days – 3 times). 5) Both are told to get up and go. 6) In both cases the Gentiles believe. 7) In both cases the conversion experienced generated hostile responses

v. 17-22 – God provided the answer to Peter’s questions concerning the visions when Cornelius’ servants showed up to take him to this God-fearing man. Peter realizes that Jesus wasn’t inviting him to eat unclean food, but calling Peter to put away his prejudice (v. 28, 34, 35). The lesson is clear; all people are acceptable to God. He loves us each equally, no matter our background, our present standing.

Q: It’s often asked if Cornelius was already a God-fearing man why did Peter need to witness to him? Wasn’t there a risk that he might reject greater light and in so doing jeopardize his standing with God? Why do we need to witness to people of other faiths, after all God will judge them based on what they do with the light they have not the amount of light?

First, God was the one who arranged for the meeting. If it’s good enough for God then it’s good enough for you and me. Second, have you ever been in a one-window

room? How much can you see outside? When you open the door you discover there's a whole lot more to appreciate. God's not content with people living a one-window experience when it comes to their relationship with God. His truth is not designed to curse people but to bless them. Why would we not want people to experience the blessings we enjoy?

Lastly, the story highlights a very important point – while all people are acceptable to God, not all religions or faiths are. We need to remember that believing a lie is harmful and that the enemy of God and man can use that to lead a person to be lost eternally. Yet while the Christian faith is superior to other faiths, this doesn't make the followers of Jesus superior or better than others. A life of disinterested love for someone is more effective in winning someone to Jesus than merely arguing the truth.

Thursday – The Jerusalem Decree

Acts 15:1-35

The success of the mission to the Gentiles raised some important questions for the early church regarding what Jewish requirements should be expected of Gentile converts. The main focus was circumcision of men as it represented compliance with all Jewish requirements. Should male Gentile converts be circumcised before they are welcomed into the church? Some Jewish converts thought it imperative and essential for salvation (Acts 15:1). The issue became significant enough for a conference to be held to resolve the matter so that it wouldn't be a distraction and hinder the mission of the church.

What happened at the Jerusalem Council that helped settle this important issue?

1. Peter reminds the listeners of what he witnessed in Cornelius' household as each of them, upon accepting the gospel, received the Holy Spirit just as those in the upper room had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:7-9). Remember, their reception of the Spirit came as they obeyed a command Jesus gave to tarry for the promise of the Father, and the outpouring of the Spirit, just as in the case of Cornelius' family, was a partial fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.
2. Peter reminds those gathered for the council that salvation is through Jesus alone, not by works, a teaching handed to them by Jesus and the OT prophets (v. 11).
3. The council were given the opportunity to listen to God's working among the Gentiles apart from following Jewish traditional requirements, which gave evidence that the work of God was moving beyond the borders of Israel, just as God had desired long ago (v. 12).
4. James reminds the listeners about what God had told His people in OT times about calling the Gentiles to Himself (13-21) thus affirming Peter's testimony and that of Paul and Barnabas from the Word of God.

God's servants essentially helped solve the problem from the Bible, confirmed by the testimony of the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Gentiles. Because those present had open hearts, were desirous to follow God's Word, had confidence in the Spirit's leading, the early church was able to overcome a major challenge that threatened to hinder the work of God. May God help us to resolve issues in the same manner.

Appeal: May we always view people with the eyes of Jesus – what people can be when transformed by the grace of Jesus.