

Act Normal

4. Embrace a Bigger Family

March 19, 2023

Text: Acts 10

Welcome to Week 4 of our message series *Act Normal*. This series is part of our spiritual growth campaign designed to help us hear and respond to God together. We hear a scripture taught on Sunday, then in our LifeGroups we look at that same scripture, focusing on how we will apply it. Hear and apply – that’s how spiritual growth happens!

If you have a Bible, please turn to Acts 10. Let’s pray. Lord, as we look at your word today, help us to see what you want us to see, hear what you want us to hear from you, and give us the power to do what you call us to do. Amen.

[Videos of movie families shown on the screen.] As a kid, I thought, whoa, this family does things differently. The Book of Acts shows us what was normal in the family of God -- that is, for followers of Jesus. They appeared unusual and even strange to the non-Christians around them. No one else lived like these early Christians did. No one died as martyrs like these Christians did either. Sometimes the difference provoked people into hating them. Sometimes it sparked people’s curiosity.

Christians rarely grew in number because they won arguments. They grew because the way they lived was so different and intriguing. It made people want to know why they lived like that. What made them so generous with their money? Why did they value faithfulness in marriage? Why did they seem peaceful about dying for their faith? Why did miracles happen among them?

The early Christians’ lifestyles and behaviors demonstrated what they believed. They were generous because they loved each other and believed God provided for them. They were willing to die because they were convinced that heaven was real. They were faithful to their spouses because they believed God’s commands were for their good, and faithfulness is a byproduct of being filled with the Spirit.

Today, if you and I “Act Normal” – that is, live the way that was normal for those in the Book of Acts – it can cause pre-Christians to be curious. They might wonder. To “act normal” requires that we make periodic adjustments in order to stay in step with God’s ways. We’ll need to make course corrections.

In the Book of Acts, we see God prompt course corrections in his people. Here’s the pattern: the Christ-followers start out living a new way as the family of God on the mission of God. But after a while, the believers/church drift away from God’s plan and revert back to what they were used to. Then the Holy Spirit prompts them back to normal Christian life.

So, let’s do a recap of the last few weeks and put some actions to it. Let’s stand. The first week, we saw that in Acts 1 Jesus tells the believers to wait for the Holy Spirit because they can’t do the mission without him. Then in Acts 2, they are filled with the Spirit. Let’s symbolize it like this: [Pastor holds his hands up over his head.] But by

Acts 19, some believers are saying, “We haven’t even heard there is a Holy Spirit.” [Pastor brings his hands back down.] But Paul prays for them, and they are filled. [Pastor holds his hands up over his head.]

The second week, we see that in Acts 2 and Acts 4, the believers are giving with extraordinary generosity. Let’s show it like this [Pastor holds open hand out.] Then in Acts 5, we see some grasping starting to creep in. [Pastor closes hand and pulls it back in.] But the Lord course-corrects, and the people become generous again. [Pastor holds open hand out.]

Then last week, we saw the people being witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem. [Pastor pointing to the cross.] Jesus said in Acts 1 they were to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. But they weren’t doing that. They were staying in Jerusalem. [Pastor stops pointing to the cross.] Then persecution scattered the believers, and they declared the Gospel wherever they went. [Pastor points again to the cross.] They were back on track.

Today, we look at another very important course correction in Acts -- Embrace a larger family. It’s natural to love those who are like us. It is supernatural to love those who are different than us. In the Kingdom of God, we’re called to embrace as family all people who call on Jesus. We start at the beginning of Acts 10. We read about a guy who was on the outside of the church’s family looking in, until God stepped in and redirected the church.

At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. ² He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. This guy was seeking God, but he didn’t fit a neat category. He was Roman but didn’t worship the pagan gods. So he didn’t go to the pagan temples. He wasn’t Jewish; he was a Gentile (non-Jew.) Although he worshiped the God of Israel, he was not a convert. And he hadn’t been circumcised. So he was not able to worship in the synagogue or temple. But he was truly seeking God. We can tell because he is being generous to others and praying regularly. **Acts 10:3-4** *One day at about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!” Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked. The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God.”* Cornelius is seeking God, and God knows that. He reaches out to Cornelius. In the Bible, it isn’t unusual for God to communicate with people through visions. And people still see them today. Many believers in the Muslim world came to Christ because Jesus appeared to them in a dream. If you are seeking, you will find because God wants to be found. Jesus said, “Seek and you will find.” God shows up where he is wanted, and Cornelius wanted to know God. Here’s what the angel said. **Acts 10:5-6** *Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter. ⁶ He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”* The angel instructs Cornelius to send for Peter. Why doesn’t the angel just tell him himself? After all, the word “angel” comes from the word “messenger.” Two reasons: Because God is going to do a work in Cornelius’ life, and in Peter’s life, and the life of the whole Church. *Angels never preach the gospel.* We people get the privilege of preaching the Gospel.

Meanwhile, Peter is about to have a vision of his own. ***⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to***

pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened, and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not I, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

So, Peter is praying, and he sees a vision. We see theme here. Prayer allows us to encounter God. The vision is of animals that good Jews are not supposed to eat because of they are against the Old Testament dietary laws. And even though God tells Peter to eat them, Peter says no. He must think God is testing him to see if he will stay true. But God surprises him and says, I call these clean, so don't call it impure. God is telling Peter that he is revoking the dietary laws because they fulfilled their purpose, and they are no longer necessary. God never revokes his moral laws (like the Ten Commandments.) But he did remove the ceremonial laws. This vision happens three times, really driving home the point. God was preparing him for a major shift in his thinking.

And that shift is - **All people are invited into God's family.** Until now, Peter would have assumed that only Jews could be followers of Jesus. After all, Jesus was Jewish, the 12 disciples were all Jewish. He was the Jewish Messiah. But God is showing Peter that everyone is invited to follow Jesus. **Acts 10:19-20** *While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."* Why would Peter hesitate? The Jew/Gentile divide ran deep. Jews didn't mingle with Gentiles. The Jews even had laws that said you couldn't go into a Gentile's house or eat with Gentiles or you would be ceremonially unclean and not able to go into the temple to worship. Worse, if you went to their houses, you might eat with them and become friends. And if you did that, Jews might end up marrying Gentiles and have non-Jewish kids. And do that enough, and the whole nation would disappear. Peter knew he'd be in trouble with his peers if he went to Cornelius' house. But he listened to God, and it was a huge course correction for the church. Jesus had told his followers to connect with everyone, **Matthew 28:19** *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations,* That means different ethnic groups – non-Jewish people. But the disciples were only reaching out to Jews. And now God is correcting their course. **Acts 10:34-35** *Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.* Peter tells them about Jesus and the Spirit comes on them, just like he did in the Upper Room in Acts 2. Now Peter gets it. God invites all to a new life in Christ. He doesn't play favorites. It is a lesson we are still relearning. God doesn't play favorites. God does not show favorites means that God does not love Americans more than Mexicans or Koreans. And God does not love Mexicans or Koreans more than Americans. And he calls us to love the same way. God doesn't love Democrats more than Republicans, or Republicans more than Democrats. Do we? God does not love white people more than Asians or Africans. And he doesn't love Asians or Africans more than white people. Do we?

So many of the great moves of God break down barriers between categories of people. Last week, I went to see the movie *The Jesus Revolution*, which is the true story of the beginning of The Jesus Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Historians say that the Jesus movement was a full-blown genuine revival that reached more lost people than in the previous Great Awakenings in the 18th century. What stood out to me the most was the importance of welcoming groups considered “unclean.”

At that time, God was drawing young people from the “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” counterculture. Young people called “hippies,” who had long hair and protested the Vietnam War. The movie depicted the struggle that Calvary Chapel’s Pastor Chuck Smith had to welcome hippie believers into his church.

Chuck initially dismissed hippies as parasites upon society, thinking, “Why don’t they cut their hair, get a bath and a job?” He wanted nothing to do with them. He told his wife Kay, “It’s too late. They are too far gone. I think they are beyond help.” Kay broke down and started crying, saying “Chuck, don’t say that.” She saw them as lost and wanted to reach out to them.

When some hippies started showing up at Calvary Chapel, a church elder posted a sign banning people with bare feet and dirty jeans. Smith tore the sign down. He said that he would rather rip out the carpets and pews than turn away these young people seeking God. In a sense, Calvary Chapel lost their church. It was radically changed. It wasn’t the same ever again. But it was amazing!

The movie doesn’t show all that, but here’s what’s important to know about that movement of God: If Pastor Chuck had turned away those young people or demanded that they wear the same clothes as the other members, he and Calvary Chapel would have missed it. Maybe God would have picked other leaders, but Chuck wouldn’t have experienced the miraculous transformation of a generation.

Many Christians would love to see a move of God like the Jesus Movement again. The Lord’s Spirit is stirring in people and in his church today, especially among Gen Z, but also among everyone who is open. And we can be a part of it! For that to happen, here is what is required.

Embracing those who are different prepares for spiritual awakening. God is seeking all people – even those who are not like us! People who are different politically, racially, economically. We need to be ready to ignore categories and embrace everyone God is stirring. And that will make people curious about why we’re different. Because it will be different. Our world and our nation are more divided than ever in recent history. America is growing more demographically polarized -- red zip codes are getting redder and blue zip codes are becoming bluer. The national real estate brokerage firm Redfin noted that, “people are moving to places that align with their politics.” Unfortunately, the church has followed the world’s trend.

Across the country over the last several years, people have left churches to sort out into political camps. A recent [survey](#) from Lifeway Research found that half of Protestant churchgoers agreed with the statement, “I prefer to attend a church where people share my political beliefs.” Only 23% said they worship with people who held different political convictions. That’s less than 1 in 4. Researcher Tim Alberta reports that in many communities, significant numbers of people have left churches they have been part of for decades and gone to another church that more closely reflects their

partisan political views – which are generally to the right. And that is not the path toward spiritual awakening.

Here at Crossroads, you won't hear partisan politics from the platform. Not because we're afraid of offending people. Actually, some have been offended we're *not* politically oriented. But that's okay because our message is the Gospel, not an ideology. And we believe that the power of the Gospel changes lives not a political position. No partisan philosophy can transform a heart into Jesus' image, and no political party is the expression of the Kingdom of God. That's not its purpose. God calls his Church to transform the world by the power of the Gospel. People need to see the Kingdom of God reflected in the church, not a voting bloc. If we lose that, we lose our purpose.

How to bond with those God is drawing:

Listen. Peter spent days with Cornelius and his friends. He said, "Tell me why you called me" -- then he listened. Spend time with people of a different party or a different race. Listen to their story and their perspective. Eat together. Invite an immigrant to tell you what it is like growing up. See them as a person not as a position. Remember you don't have to agree on politics in order to love each other through Christ. You don't have to like their music to love them in Christ.

Ask to see through God's eyes. God told Peter don't call "unclean" what I have made pure. When you are talking with someone who is "other" to you, remember that God loves this person. Ask him to show you *what he loves* about this person. Fill in the blank -- "One thing God loves about this person is _____." Don't try to stamp out differences, appreciate them. "Isn't it interesting that God's family has all these different people?"

Worship Jesus together. Praying and worshiping together points us toward our common Father and Savior. We realize that we all need Jesus. That's why Peter told Cornelius **v. 26, "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."**

Serve together. I've always been struck by how deeply bonded people become serving in the military together. In a war, people from all backgrounds learn to depend on each other for their lives. Their common mission is much more important than their individual differences.

Jesus' disciples were diverse politically and economically, but they shared the same mission. For example, Matthew worked for the Roman occupying forces. Simon was part of a group that assassinated people who worked for Rome. Yet, they both followed Jesus, so they saw the same miracles. They learned how to pray together. They learned to preach Jesus' resurrection and see people be transformed. They were in the Upper Room together when the Holy Spirit fell. And they suffered persecution together, dying as martyrs for Jesus. Go on mission trips together. In your group, serve together. You'll bond.

Learning to embrace a larger family is part of the process of learning to follow Jesus. It leads us to spiritual health and opens us up for a move of God.