

LESSON 11

They Were Willing to Change

How do we tell growth from drift?

Peter began to speak: "Now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism, but in every nation the person who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. He sent the message to the Israelites, proclaiming the good news of peace through Jesus Christ — he is Lord of all. You know the events that took place throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how he went about doing good and healing all who were under the tyranny of the devil, because God was with him. We ourselves are witnesses of everything he did in both the Judean country and in Jerusalem, and yet they killed him by hanging him on a tree. God raised up this man on the third day and caused him to be seen, not by all the people, but by us whom God appointed as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him, that through his name everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins.

— Acts 10:34–43

Introduction

The movement that closed last week ended with the body learning to compete in honor. A body that has learned to lift the brother up has been trained to set its own preference down, and that training is exactly what the next three lessons require. The last movement, *The Growing Body*, opens in this lesson, and it opens with the hardest question of the three. The movement's anchor is Ephesians 4:15–16: *speaking the truth in love, the body grows up into Christ, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly*. A church can have the right heart and do the right things and still fail to grow. The last three lessons of this study name what keeps a body moving toward Christ rather than coasting or drifting. The first move in that work is the one Peter made in a Gentile centurion's living room. The Holy Spirit fell on the wrong people at the wrong moment, and the apostle's theology had to catch up with what God had just done.

The subtitle asks the question every congregation must answer sooner or later. *How do we tell growth from drift?* From a distance, the two look identical. Both involve a congregation changing what it once did, said, or assumed. The text answers the question by showing the difference walked out in front of the reader, and then by showing the body in Jerusalem confirming together what God had done in Caesarea.

The Setting: A Centurion in Caesarea and a Fisherman in Joppa

Acts 10 opens on two cities and two men. Caesarea was the Roman administrative capital of the province of Judea, the seat of the procurator, and the home of a Roman military garrison. Joppa was a fishing port forty miles south on the coast. Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian cohort, a career officer in the army of the occupying power. Luke calls him *eusebēs*, devout, and *phoboumenos ton theon*, a God-fearer. The phrase is a technical Lucan term for a Gentile who worshiped the God of Israel without becoming a full proselyte. He attended the synagogue, kept the moral law, gave alms generously, and prayed regularly, but he was uncircumcised and stood outside the covenant. He was a generous man, a praying man, and a Gentile man.

Peter was the apostle who had preached at Pentecost, walked across the Decapolis, and stood at the center of the Jerusalem church. He was also a Jew whose religious training had taught him from infancy that the dividing line between clean and unclean was the line his people did not cross. Two men. Two cities. The same God preparing both for what he was about to do. We have to feel how impossible the scene was before God arranged it. A Roman officer with imperial authority was going to send for a Jewish fisherman, and a Jewish fisherman was going to walk into a Gentile house. The world that knew them both would have called the meeting unthinkable.

Two Visions Meeting on the Road

At three in the afternoon Cornelius saw an angel of God in a vision and was told to send to Joppa for a man named Simon, who is called Peter (Acts 10:3–6). The next day, while the men from Caesarea were on the road, Peter went up on the roof to pray at noon and saw heaven opened and a great sheet lowered with every kind of animal in it, and a voice that said, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." Peter answered the voice the way a faithful Jew would have answered it: "No, Lord! For I have never eaten anything impure and ritually unclean." The voice answered him three times: "What God has made clean, do not call impure" (Acts 10:9–16).

What happens in this chapter is what God has done across redemptive history. He moves first. He prepares the receiver. He prepares the messenger. He brings them to the same room in his own time. Peter was still puzzling over the vision when the Spirit told him three men were looking for him and that he should go with them, hesitating nothing (Acts 10:19–20). The verb is *diakrinō*, here in a participial form Luke uses to mean making a distinction. The Spirit's command was the inverse of the lifelong instinct. Stop making the distinction you have been trained to make. God is doing something new. Walk into it.

The next day Peter walked into a Gentile home. He said to the room, "You know it's forbidden for a Jewish man to associate with or visit a foreigner, but God has shown me that I must not call any person impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). Notice what Peter did not say. He did not say the Mosaic categories had been wrong from the beginning. He said God had shown him something. The change was authorized from heaven, not derived from below.

What Peter Said When He Opened His Mouth

Acts 10:34 records the moment the dam breaks. "Peter began to speak: 'Now I truly understand that God doesn't show favoritism.'" Three Greek terms carry the verse, and each is worth a line.

The verb behind "I truly understand" is *katalambanō*, here in the middle voice, *katalambanomai*, meaning to grasp, to take hold of, to lay hold of with the mind. It is the language of a man finally seeing what was true all along. Peter is not announcing a doctrinal innovation. He is reporting a comprehension that has just landed.

Luke's word for "favoritism" is *prosōpolēptēs*, literally a face-receiver, a person who lifts up the face of one over the face of another, a respecter of persons. The word and its cognates appear across the New Testament as a quality God does not have (Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 3:25; James 2:1). Peter anchors his understanding in a settled attribute of God, not in a new mood God has just entered. The doctrine was always true. The application is what has just come clear.

The term behind "is acceptable" is *dektos*, the term for a sacrifice God accepts. The Septuagint uses *dektos* throughout Leviticus for what the priest brings before the Lord, and Paul uses the noun form in Philippians 4:18 for the Philippians' gift to him. In every nation, the person who fears God and does what is right is *dektos* to him. Peter has not flattened the gospel. He has located the gospel within an attribute of God the prophets named centuries earlier. The work Peter is about to describe in verses 36–43- Jesus anointed, killed, raised, appointed judge, and preached for the forgiveness of everyone who believes- is the gospel that the God who plays no favorites has now sent through the door to a Gentile centurion's household.

The Spirit Outruns the Argument

What happens next is the turn the whole chapter rests on. Peter has not finished his sermon. He is still preaching when the Holy Spirit falls on everyone who is listening (Acts 10:44). The Jewish believers who came with Peter are astonished, because the gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles, and the room hears the household speaking in tongues and exalting God (Acts 10:45–46). Peter draws the only conclusion that can be drawn: "Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). He commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The work was done. The door was open. The Spirit had outrun the argument.

This is the pastoral heart of the chapter. The change was not voted in by a council. It was not negotiated between factions. It was not driven by a felt need in the Caesarean community to be more inclusive. It was authored by God, confirmed by the Spirit, and witnessed by the apostle whose theology required it. Faithful change in the New Testament happens after God has acted, not in advance of him. The body's work is to recognize what the Lord has already done and to bring its language and its practice into alignment with the act.

Defending the Challenge Back Home

Acts 11 is easy to treat as a footnote. It is half the story. When Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (Acts 11:2–

3). The objection was a serious one inside the existing categories. Peter did not dismiss it. He explained the matter in order from the beginning (Acts 11:4): the vision in Joppa, the voice from heaven, the three men at the gate, the Spirit's direction to go without hesitation, the household full of relatives and close friends, the sermon, the Spirit falling, and his own remembered word from the Lord, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:16). He closed with the question that closed the matter: "If, then, God gave them the same gift that he also gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?" (Acts 11:17). The Jerusalem brothers heard the report, became silent, glorified God, and said, "So then, God has given repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles" (Acts 11:18).

Mark the chain. God acted. The apostle reported. The body listened. The body recognized God's work. The body changed its mind out loud. This is how faithful change works in the New Testament. It is not a one-man revelation forced on the body. It is the body submitting together to what God has already done, because of evidence the body itself can examine. The same chain runs again in Acts 15 when the Jerusalem Council ratifies what Acts 10 and 11 had already secured. The body does not initiate the change. The body confirms it.

Growth and Drift: How to Tell the Difference

The lesson's pastoral edge sits here. The schedule's question is the right question, and it has to be answered carefully, because the same word, *change*, gets pressed into the service of opposite errors. On one side, change becomes a virtue in itself, and any congregation that still does what it did ten years ago is presumed stale. On the other side, change becomes the enemy, and any congregation that examines a long-settled practice in light of fresh attention to Scripture is presumed to be drifting. Acts 10 and 11 cut a clean line between the two.

Faithful change runs in the direction the text just ran. God initiates. Scripture authorizes. The Spirit confirms. The body recognizes God's work after the fact and brings its practice into line. The mark of faithful change is that the body can show where Scripture redirected it. The verses can be pointed to. The Spirit's confirmation can be described. The recognition is corporate, not executive. Peter did not invent the breakthrough in Joppa. He received it. The Jerusalem brothers did not negotiate the doctrine. They acknowledged what God had already done.

Drift runs the opposite direction. It begins with cultural pressure. The surrounding world has decided something is now unacceptable, or it has decided something is now mandatory, and the church feels the weight of the new air. Drift looks for proof texts after the decision has been made in the heart, and it treats the Spirit as a stamp on a conclusion reached without him. Drift does not call itself drift. It calls itself growth. The mark of drift is that the body cannot show where Scripture redirected it. It can show where the culture redirected it, and it can show where the proof texts were assembled afterward to make the new conclusion sound biblical. The order is reversed. Drift moves from culture to text. Growth moves from text to culture.

The distinction is not always easy to make in the moment, and the lesson should not pretend otherwise. The disciplines that protect a body against drift are the disciplines this study has been building. A body

that has practiced humility (Philippians 2) will examine its own motives before it pronounces on someone else's. A body that has practiced honor (Romans 12) will listen seriously to the brother who raises a concern. A body that practices eager learning (Acts 17) will read the text before it reads the news, and a body that respects its leaders (Hebrews 13) will not run ahead of the elders God has placed to keep watch over the work. The disciplines of the body keep growth and drift apart.

Looking to Jesus

The body learns faithful change by watching the One who led it.

Consider how he stretched out his hand and touched the leper no one would touch, and said, "I am willing; be made clean" (Mark 1:41). The clean made the unclean clean, and the categories never read the same way again.

Notice how he ate with tax collectors and sinners at Matthew's table and answered the critics, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick" (Mark 2:17). He changed the picture of where the kingdom looked for its first guests, and he changed it at the table.

Remember how he marveled at the faith of a Roman centurion in Capernaum and said in front of his own people, "Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with so great a faith" (Matthew 8:10), and prepared the body for the day another Roman centurion in Caesarea would receive the Spirit through the same gospel.

See how he praised the faith of a Syrophoenician mother who would not be turned away and healed her daughter from a distance (Mark 7:24–30), tracing the line of grace across a boundary his disciples had been keeping with their elbows.

Think of how he stood in his hometown synagogue, read from the scroll of Isaiah, and announced, "Today as you listen, this Scripture has been fulfilled" (Luke 4:21). He reset the meaning of the text by his own person, and he did it from the seat of teaching where any change would be hardest to receive.

Look at how he answered the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" with a parable about a priest, a Levite, and a Samaritan, and reframed neighbor-love around a man the lawyer's people called an enemy (Luke 10:25–37). He did not flatter the lawyer. He gave him a story that left no room for the old definition.

Recall how he told the disciples, "I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. There will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16), and named the change the Father had already authored, before any of his hearers were ready for it.

He died on the cross and the temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). The whole architecture of approach to God was changed in a single moment, and the change was made from heaven, not from below.

Consider how he stood with the eleven on the mountain in Galilee and sent them into all the nations to make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:18–20), committing the church to a change that would not stop until every people on earth had heard.

The pattern is the Lord leading the body into the change grace was already authoring. The body grows by following him there.

A Final Encouraging Word

We began this study by working on the heart. We spent most of this study working on the hands. Now, we're working on the body's life across time, and time tests every congregation. The first test is this one. Will we let God change it where God wants to change it, and will we resist change where God has not authored it? The answers are not symmetrical. Sometimes the resistance is faithful, and sometimes the change is faithful, and the body needs the disciplines this study has been building to tell the difference. Peter could not have walked into Cornelius's house without the vision, the Spirit, and the apostolic memory of how the Lord had worked before. The body cannot make faithful changes without those same anchors operating together. Scripture in front. The Spirit confirming. The body recognizing. The leaders keeping watch. Each one is a guardrail against the drift the surrounding world is always inviting.

The question that opens this morning will not stay abstract. Next Sunday we walk to Berea in Acts 17, where Luke says the Christians were more noble because they received the word with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily. That is the discipline that fuels Acts 10. A body in the text is a body that can recognize when the text has redirected it. The Sunday after that, we walk to Hebrews 13 and watch the body honor the leaders God has placed to keep watch over its members' souls. That discipline protects Acts 10. Between those two disciplines, Acts 10 sits as the test case. A body in the text, under its leaders, is a body that can be changed by God and not by culture.

Your congregation has probably been doing this work for years. You have examined practices that needed examining honestly. Practices that needed keeping have been kept faithfully. Conversations that began as objections have ended in shared submission to what the text said. Brothers and sisters who at first could not see what God was doing have heard the report, gone to the text, and recognized God's hand. None of it has been automatic. Every step has been the slow work of a body letting Scripture and the Spirit do what nothing else can do. The same work continues this week. Read the text. Examine the report. Listen for the Lord. Walk forward where he is calling you forward. Hold your ground where he is calling you to hold. The God who sent Peter to Caesarea has not run out of ways to grow a willing body. To the glory of God.

For Discussion

1. Acts 10 turns on a sequence of divine initiatives: the angel to Cornelius, the vision to Peter, the Spirit directing Peter to the door, the Spirit falling in the room. Why does Luke spend so much narrative weight on God's prior action before he tells us what the church decided?

2. Peter's confession in Acts 10:34 begins, "Now I truly understand..." What does that opening tell us about how a believer comes to see something Scripture has already taught? Where have you found yourself, in your own walk, finally understanding something you had read for years?

3. In Acts 11 the Jerusalem brothers criticize Peter, listen to his report, and then change their minds together. Walk through that scene as a model. What in that exchange is missing from the way many Christians today process disagreement inside a body?

4. The lesson distinguishes between change that begins in Scripture and change that begins in cultural pressure. Without naming current controversies, what tests would you apply to a proposed change inside the body to tell which kind it is?

5. Growth and drift both look like a congregation changing what it once did. Looking back on your own walk, what helped you catch drift while there was still time to turn, and what did you only recognize afterward?

6. The movement's question is how the body keeps growing. Where, specifically, do you sense the Lord asking your congregation to grow in this season, and what would faithful submission to that growth look like for the brother or sister sitting next to you?