

Have you ever been part of a group, entity, gathering that had a selection process, some way to determine who's in? It could be a college application (I know those well this year), rush week for Greek life, the adoption of a child, the NFL draft, or even eHarmony.com (which keeps you from having to be rejected face-to-face, which I also know a lot about). What about church? Ohhhh, probably didn't like the sound of that one, and rightly so. But 2,000 years ago, that question needed to be answered. Who does this Jesus-centered Gospel movement include? Who's in, how are they to be brought in, and how are we supposed to live with one another once we're in?

We know the answer to those questions, but they are worth repeating and answering today. Our faith is condemned as "exclusive", based on a misunderstanding about who the Gospel is for. And the divisions in our world are severe, real, ruthlessly persistent, and do not discriminate between the secular world and the church. We are not immune, but we are also not left powerless against it. The world is looking for an answer to its brokenness, and we have it. In fact, we, in part, ARE it, but only if we decide we really want to live it out. It is a decision that will impact the power of our witness and strength of our unity as we live in a world in desperate need for the Gospel. So, let's turn to Acts 10 and see who's in and how they are brought in.

The Gospel goes to those in whom God is already working. Our entire perspective on Kingdom advancement would change if we realized God is already on the move preparing the way for us.

[Acts 10:1-5] At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.

Up until now, with the exception of the Ethiopian eunuch, the spread of the Gospel had only been among Jews who had chosen to follow Christ, and many thought it would or should be this way. But, if you turn all the way back to Genesis 12, God told Abraham that someone from his line would bless all the world, that his salvation would extend to all the nations, and this passage is the fulfillment of that. Cornelius was a Roman centurion, in charge of 100 soldiers stationed at Caesarea (usually the first stop on an Israel tour). More importantly, Cornelius was Gentile. Luke describes him as a God-fearer, someone who was not a Jew and didn't participate in all Jewish practices, but who worshiped Yahweh and was involved in their synagogues. Cornelius feared the Lord, lived generously, and prayed continually. This was a man who genuinely sought the one true God, and God showed up to make himself known.

These first five verses should be incredibly encouraging to us. Most importantly, unless I'm really missing something, 99.9% of us in this room are Gentiles. The salvation that arrived in a manger in Bethlehem came not just for the nation of Israel, but for you and me as well. Hallelujah! Secondly, here we see God at work in the heart of a man and his friends and family **before** any of the disciples show up to proclaim the name of Jesus. God is like a gardener tilling the soil of his heart to prepare for it to receive the seed of his Word or like a builder of a house

who is pouring the foundation before the frame goes up. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." God is drawing the heart of Cornelius so that, when he hears the Gospel, he will respond.

What comes to mind when I say "evangelize"? Do you think of all the people who will say no or of the person eager to say "yes!" I was talking with Mike Congrove this week and he's heading to South Sudan soon and he spoke of the people he shares the Gospel with who have already been drawn by God and say, "I've been waiting for you!" Once our staff committed to spending more of their time in relational discipleship with one or a few others, people started approaching them to ask for time! **God is not asking us to thaw out frozen hearts. He's already doing that.** We can go with the expectation that he will connect us with them. As Henry Blackaby says in *Experiencing God*, "Find out where God is at work and join him there." **Imagine how that perspective would change your prayer life.** Instead of begrudgingly saying "God I know I'm supposed to share my faith...help", we can say, "God, I know you're already on the move! Connect me with the person you're already drawing to yourself and give me the words to say that helps them choose to put their faith in you." When we take that approach, evangelism simply becomes a lifestyle! People will be eager to hear what we have to say, just as Cornelius will be eager to hear what is said to him.

The Gospel goes through those in whom God is already working. Those closest to God will be used most often to bring others close to God.

[Acts 10:9-15, 19-20] ⁹ The next day...Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common"...¹⁹ And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. ²⁰ Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them."

The narrative again focuses on Peter and Luke wants us to see that all of what will happen is preceded by Peter drawing near to God in prayer. The understanding of this vision and assignment will require great faith, courage, and discernment. This vision he's given is of a sheet with a lot of different animals on it. He is told to get up, kill and eat, but Peter resists (he's good at arguing with God). Peter knows the Law, including all of its dietary restrictions. The Jews had been set apart to be God's chosen people, to receive his revelation and promises, and to be a light to the nations. Their set-apartness included a limited number of allowable foods. But here, the voice tells Peter that it's not his call, it's God's, and all food that used to be called common (unclean) has now been made clean (acceptable). Now, in case you need a reminder about all the ways the Gospel is awesome: #1, we have been reconciled to God to be with him forever. Also in the top ten? Bacon is now on the menu!

What's this all about? Peter will figure out this is about more than just food, but food is an important part of it. In biblical culture, breaking bread with one another was an expression of fellowship, unity and acceptance. We saw that in chapter 2. But if Jews and Gentiles couldn't eat the same foods, they would be separated at the table of fellowship and this beautiful people called the Church would struggle to be one. God is removing one obstacle in this moment and will soon remove an even bigger one through the ministry of Peter, who is the right man for this.

The more we know the heart of God the more we can understand the plan of God. Peter is being asked to participate in a seminal moment in the spread of the Gospel, one that will be met with resistance, but one that changes the trajectory of the Kingdom. It won't be easy, **but Peter is close to God and has been prepared.** I remember spending time with our offensive coordinator in college and the more I listened to him the more I understood the game plan. Peter sat at the feet of Jesus for years and has been reliant on God and empowered by his Spirit since the day of Pentecost. He is ready.

Are you spiritually ready to be used by God? Is he wanting to send you out, but you aren't prepared for it? God's will will be done. He's going to use someone. Why not you? When we are close to God, our will is aligned with his will, our eyes begin to see what he sees, heart feels what his feels, we have compassion for those he cares for, and we rejoice in our own salvation so that we want it for others. **If you want to be used by God, it starts by getting serious about your own discipleship.** Peter was close to God to be used by God. You can be too.

The Gospel goes out to bring all people in. Who's invited? Everyone. Peter goes to see Cornelius, hears what God told him, and realizes everything is about to change.

[Acts 10:28, 34-36, 43-45] ²⁸ And he said to them, "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..."³⁴ So Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."³⁶ As for the word that he sent to Israel, (he) preach(ed) good news of peace through Jesus Christ..."⁴³ To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."⁴⁴ While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.⁴⁵ And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.

Over the years, the God-ordained separation between Jews and Gentiles became sinful ethnic hostility. But Peter has connected the dots and recognized God saying no food shall be called unclean to mean no person shall be called unclean. That means **the good news of Jesus is for all people.** As John 3:16 says, God so loved the whole world that he gave his only Son. **The whole world.** He then makes the bold, shocking, and exciting move to enter into a Gentile's home and delivers the revolutionary message of the Gospel. Jesus is the Prince of Peace who came to make peace not only between man and God but man and man. He did it by dying on the cross for our sins and rising three days later in victory, and Peter tells them, and us, that if we believe in him, we will be forgiven of our sins and be with God forever.

Look at what happens when a faithful follower meets someone being drawn by God to talk about Jesus! Peter doesn't even finish what he's saying. **That's how good this good news is!** They all believe, and God confirms it by pouring out the Holy Spirit on the new believers. Peter and his companions will remember back to the day of Pentecost in chapter 2 and know what happened to them now happens to Cornelius and his crew. Gentiles are included in the new age. They are participants in the New Covenant. They are part of the Church.

[SLIDE: Ephesians 2:13-16] ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ 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, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.

The Gospel is ultimately the work of Jesus Christ reconciling enemies. We all began as enemies of God and he reconciled us back to himself. Jesus also reconciled one-time enemies of Jews and Gentiles to one another. If God can make these two groups one, God can reconcile all people to one another. **There is nothing he can't overcome.** The Church is to be diverse in its makeup, equal in standing, and united to one another as a testimony to the world. We are to be the safest place on earth, welcoming, loving, and accepting anyone from all walks of life, and inviting them to belong our family. We are to point one another to God and run to the cross in humility when conflict threatens to divide us. 2,000 years ago, the world would have been shocked and drawn in when they saw Jews and Gentiles living and loving in unity. **We can have that same impact today.**

Is there anything that would keep you from welcoming someone into our church? We must guard against any self-righteousness, bias, or prejudice that would contradict the glorious truth we see in this passage. It could be ethnic, political, ideological, spiritual. Can you worship with someone who looks different than you and worships differently than you? Can you have community with someone who voted differently than you? Can you walk with and encourage someone who is struggling to follow Jesus faithfully? If you're not sure, remember that the ground is level at the cross and we are all equally desperate for the grace and mercy of God.

We also need to guard against the prevailing ideology of the day, whether you call it progressivism or Marxism or identity politics, because this ideology breaks us all into our different subgroups and pits one group against another. It believes there cannot be unity and peace cannot exist between groups, and that is antithetical to the Gospel. This ideology manifests into things like cancel culture, which is so vial because it demands atonement without offering forgiveness and redemption. It leads to Columbia University this week declaring they will be having separate graduation ceremonies based on income level, race, ethnicity, and sexuality. And as it marches on, it can make us suspicious, scared, resentful, prejudiced, and hostile towards one another, backing away from one another, and leading to division, not unity.

Does that mean our differences are irrelevant? Absolutely not. I had a wonderful conversation with someone from our church this week about if the Gospel erases our difference, and the answer is no. God made each of us unique. We'd be boring if all that went away when we trusted

in Christ. But God enables unity within our diversity because **the** most important thing about each of us individually and collectively is Jesus. It's our oneness in the midst of all of our God-glorifying differences that makes the Gospel so compelling and such a testimony to a broken and divided world. **When you choose to worship and covenant with people who are different than you, and it is a choice, you show the world the difference Jesus makes.**

Do the voices you listen to inform or enflame? Every voice in your life is an influence, and for the Christian, they either move us towards God or away from God. They either give us life or drag us down. We live concurrently in two ages: the Information Age and the Age of Rage. They are related. Do you know rage is addictive? It releases dopamine. That means rage is like a drug; a quick rush, but ongoing damage. I'm convinced the vast majority of the media and social media is not your friend. They stoke the flames of anger, agitate you towards some other group, trigger a dopamine response, and tell you to come back later for another fix. And if we live in that cycle, we will be a clanging symbol to one another and compromised in our witness to the world.

In this passage, there is one dominant voice. God's. We need to pay attention to that. When God's voice is the primary voice in our life, we move towards him, are filled with hope and joy, and make our life about his purposes. When our lives are filled with the loving voices of God's people, we are spurred on to love and good works. Evaluate the voices speaking into your life this week and see if they leave you hopeful and joyful or hateful and enraged.

How often do you speak/think about "us and them" instead of "us"? The world is so divided and demands we choose sides. If we give in to that, our hearts will struggle to have compassion for "them" and we'll be reluctant to offer the good news of Jesus. Additionally, we'll bring that in here and struggle to remain united. The church is a family, and like all families we'll have our difficult moments. But when we think of "us", we will humble ourselves to fight for unity, to seek reconciliation, to repent from wrongdoing, and the world will notice.

This section ends in chapter 11. Peter returns to Jerusalem, is confronted about eating with Gentiles, and he tells them the whole story of what happened.

[Acts 11:18] ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

They fell silent because the majestic truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is for all people. We can be a beacon of God's glory and leave this loud world in stunned silence when we tell them that God loves them, and this good news is for them too. And we can glorify God and leave them in stunned silence when they take a look at us and see a diverse people living and loving in unity. God is at work out there. Let's join him. God is at work in here. Let's join together in love and humility and follow him.