

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Acts 10:34-35

Gentiles Receive the Good News

ACTS 10:23-48 *[23]The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him. [24]The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. [25]On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him. [26]But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal." [27]And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled; [28]and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. [29]So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"*

[30]Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me. [31]He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. [32]Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' [33]Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

[34]Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly 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]You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. [37]That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: [38]how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. [39]We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; [40]but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, [41]not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. [42]He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. [43]All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

[44]While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. [45]The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, [46]for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, [47]"Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" [48]So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

Peter takes the first step in opening the church to the Gentiles by walking through the open door of Cornelius' house. Cornelius has prepared for Peter's arrival by inviting his close friends and relatives to hear him. At Peter's arrival, Cornelius considers him a messenger of God and falls at his feet in homage. But Peter graciously instructs Cornelius to stand up because he faces a fellow human being (verse 26). Whatever Peter has to offer this Gentile officer, it does not come from himself.

At the house of Cornelius, God is breaking down the barriers that for so long have been assumed to be God's will. Peter tells the assembly of the risk he is taking: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile" (verse 28). The Jews had erected firm barriers against Gentiles because of the need to maintain the purity of their beliefs and worship and to prevent them from being infiltrated by pagan doctrines and

practices. But Peter goes on to explain that God has revised his understanding: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." Peter now realizes that the barriers between Jews and Gentiles no longer serve their original purpose, as God is bringing about a new age of salvation for all in Jesus Christ.

Peter's sermon is the last example of his preaching in Acts, and it is his only speech addressed to a Gentile audience. He begins with a stunning proclamation: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality" (verse 34). God treats everyone on the same basis, and people from every nation have the same potential access to God. Peter highlights only two characteristics of the person who is acceptable to God: "anyone who fears him and does what is right" (verse 35). In other words, those who treat God with reverence and treat people with justice are ready for the saving revelation of God through Jesus Christ. This monumental statement of God's non-partiality among those he calls to faith reverberates down through the history of the church. God sends the Holy Spirit upon all who accept the good news, and God forbids human partiality or prejudice from limiting his saving work.

The proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is effective for those who are ready to receive it. It becomes a saving message for those who are open and realize their need for God. Cornelius had been seeking God for a long time. He has already begun to pray and to do good for those in need. God has been preparing his mind and heart for the message he is now receiving from Peter. Through the preached gospel, Cornelius moves from an open seeker to a confirmed believer.

Summarizing the essentials of the Christian message, Peter emphasizes that Jesus is "Lord of all" (verse 36). The great commission given by Jesus to his disciples, to preach the message of salvation "to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47), is beginning to be realized as the saving news extends beyond Jerusalem and is destined for all the nations of the world.

As Peter is still speaking, proclaiming forgiveness of sins to everyone who believes, the Holy Spirit is given to Cornelius and the other Gentiles who are listening to Peter (verse 44). The Jewish believers who have come with Peter are amazed that "the gift of the Holy Spirit" has been poured out "even on the Gentiles" (verse 45). The coming of God's promised Spirit is the sign of the new era, and this event has rightly been called the Pentecost of the Gentile world (verse 47).

Peter understands the significance of the moment and he instructs that the Gentiles be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (verse 48). Jews and Gentiles are equal in Christ; their need and God's answer to that need is the same. Peter receives hospitality and shares table fellowship for several days with these uncircumcised Christians. He is God's primary instrument of this epoch-making work, showing that the Gentiles too are chosen for salvation, baptism, and membership in Christ's church. The way has been prepared for the gospel to go out into the entire world.

Reflection and discussion

• Why does Luke show that the meeting between Peter and Cornelius is a climactic moment in the development of Acts? How is their encounter a critical moment for the early church?

• The Spirit of God is about the business of tearing down barriers that divide people. What walls of prejudice and bias prevent the gospel from being truly universal today?

Prayer

Lord of all, you taught your church to transcend nations, races, genders, and all divisions. You know the ways in which my mind and heart need conversion. Lead me to see other people as you see them, and to offer them the love that you have for them.