

"If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" Acts 11:17

Peter's Report to the Church in Jerusalem

ACTS 11:1-18 *[1]Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. [2]So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, [3]saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" [4]Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, [5]"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. [6]As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. [7]I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' [8]But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' [9]But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' [10]This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. [11]At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. [12]The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. [13]He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; [14]he will give you a message by which you and your entire*

household will be saved.' [15]And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. [16]And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' [17]If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" [18]When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

The final scene of the account of Gentile conversion takes place in Jerusalem. Although it is largely a retelling of the story from Peter's point of view, its purpose is to establish the link between the church of the apostles in Jerusalem and the new mission to the Gentiles. There is no doubt that many Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would find such a revolutionary move controversial, so this scene presents a defense of its legitimacy and a justification for this new possibility for spreading the gospel. Peter is the bridge builder between the apostles in Jerusalem and the new expansion of the church beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

The apostles and Jewish believers in Jerusalem hear that the Gentiles have "accepted the word of God," welcoming the gospel message with their hearts. But when Peter arrives back in Jerusalem, some among the Hebrew Christians, "the circumcised," criticize him for eating with Gentiles, "the uncircumcised," disobeying the rules for purity and diet. In their view, any Gentile who wishes to join the believing community must follow the prescriptions of the covenant God made with Israel, including circumcision and following the provisions of the law. In response, Peter explains "step by step" what has happened, beginning with his vision and continuing through the conversion and baptism of Cornelius and his household.

The chief aim of the narrative is to convince the reader that what happened through Peter is truly God's action through the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter says that his vision happened three times and concluded with the explanatory voice from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Immediately the three men sent by Cornelius arrived and the Holy Spirit instructed Peter not only to travel with them but "not to make a distinction between them and us" (verse 12). The expression means that Peter must exercise no partiality against them because they are Gentiles. So with six Christian

brothers as witnesses, Peter went to the house of Cornelius, just as the Spirit directed.

As Peter proclaimed the gospel to Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit came upon them. Peter notes that the Spirit came upon these Gentiles just as the Spirit had come upon the apostles and the Jewish Christians at Pentecost (verse 15). That the same manifestation of the Spirit is given to them as was received by the apostles is the greatest indicator that God is giving salvation to the Gentiles (verse 17). This testimony of Peter to the church in Jerusalem causes the believers to praise God, rejoicing that God has given life to the Gentiles too (verse 18).

When Jesus gave Peter the authority to lead his church, Jesus enabled him to guide the practices of the community in ways which would have far-reaching consequences. This critical section of Acts shows that Peter is indeed the authoritative guide within the early church as he is moved by the assurance of God's Spirit to open the way of faith to the Gentiles. Though the apostolic mission to all parts of the world would soon be led by Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, this narrative makes it clear that Peter was the inaugurator of this mission. Paul's missionary activity could take place only after Peter's inspired and decisive action opened the door.

Reflection and discussion

• What is the reason for the change in attitude among the Jewish Christians as shown from verse 2 to verse 18? What seems to be the decisive factor that leads from criticism to acceptance?

• Why would God have chosen Peter to be the first to go to the Gentiles? In what way does Peter's entering the house of Cornelius demonstrate the importance of his role in the infant church?

• How does Peter's action prepare the way for Paul? Why can Paul's missionary activity take place only after Peter's inspired and decisive action opens the door?

• The church is called to be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. How does Peter's experience with Cornelius express these marks of the church?

Prayer

Lord of all people, you made Peter the bridge builder between the Jews and the Gentiles. Thank you for the unifying ministry of Peter among the community of believers. Make me an instrument of unity for your church.