

“WHAT GOD HAS MADE CLEAN”

In this passage, Luke recounts the last of the three most important events in the book of Acts. We see their significance by the amount of space that Luke devotes to them, as well as by the fact that he talks about them several times throughout the book. The first of these events was the day of Pentecost, when the ascended Christ empowered his church for its mission by pouring out his Spirit upon the disciples who were assembled in Jerusalem. Pentecost is the event that makes the rest of the book of Acts, and even the rest of church history, possible. The second key event in Acts is the conversion of Saul, which we studied a couple of weeks ago and which we will hear Paul relate two more times in the later chapters of Acts. The third key event is another conversion: the conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius. This conversion is significant for a different reason than why Saul's is so significant. Saul would go on to be the apostle and great missionary to the Gentiles, as well as the author of a good portion of the New Testament. As for Cornelius, we don't know anything about him beyond what is recorded for us here. But his conversion marked the first time that one of Christ's apostles would preach the gospel to a Gentile. This was foreshadowed in the ministry of Philip several chapters back, where Luke told us about Philip's preaching to the Samaritans and to an Ethiopian court official. But

this is the first time that we see one of the apostles bringing the gospel to a full-fledged Gentile. It marks a significant turning point in redemptive history, telling us something about Israel and its ceremonial laws as well as something about the nature of the New Testament church. In this passage, we see that *the coming of Christ resulted in the inclusion of the Gentiles in the covenant people by means of the proclamation of the gospel*. Now at first, this may not seem to have much relevance for us today, aside from the obvious fact that most, if not all, of us are Gentiles as far as our ethnicity is concerned. However, as we study this passage tonight, I think we will find that there are a number of ways in which it helps us to better understand what it means to be a Christian.

Cornelius' Vision

The passage begins by telling us about a centurion named Cornelius. He lived in the city of Caesarea, a coastal city that was located southeast of Galilee. Caesarea was the seat of the Roman government in Judea, and for this reason it was largely a Gentile city. Cornelius is described as “a devout man who feared God”, gave alms, and “prayed continually to God.” This description indicates that Cornelius was one of those Gentiles who became very interested in the Jewish religion, participating in it as much as they could without taking the steps

that were required to become a full convert, which would mean undergoing circumcision, following the dietary laws and the laws about ritual cleanness, making the temple and its worship central, and renouncing all other gods.

Luke tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to Cornelius in a vision. Notice what this says about the significance of what is taking place here. Not only does God appear to Peter in a vision, but he also appears to the one to whom he is going to send Peter. When the angel appeared to Cornelius, he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God." The word "memorial" refers to a kind of sacrifice, indicating that Cornelius' prayers belonged to the category of piety that is described in Psalm 40, where David says, "Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but you have given me an open ear." Cornelius had an open ear. He listened to God's Word and responded to it in faith and obedience. His prayers and his acts of charity were done in response to what he had heard preached from God's Word in the synagogue. The angel was not saying that Cornelius' good works caused God to extend grace to him. On the contrary, these good works were the result of the grace that God had already extended to Cornelius. They were works done in faith, even though he had not yet heard the gospel preached in its fullness. For this reason, I believe that Calvin is correct when he concludes that "Cornelius

must be put in the catalogue of the old fathers [that is, believers of the Old Testament era], who hoped for salvation of the Redeemer before he was revealed.”

Peter’s Vision

After telling us about the angel’s instructions for Cornelius to send for Peter, Luke turns his focus to what happened to Peter in the city of Joppa. We are told that Peter grew hungry while he was praying and was given a vision that had to do with food. In the vision, he saw a tarp coming down from heaven, filled with both clean and unclean animals. And then he heard the Lord instructing him to kill and eat the things that were found in the tarp.

In order to make sense of this vision, we need to take a few moments to consider the meaning of the Old Testament’s dietary laws. Under the Sinai covenant, the clean/unclean distinction was God’s way of symbolically teaching his people that they were his holy people, a people set apart from other nations to belong to God. Even with regard to the kinds of food that they ate, they were to be different than the people around them. This is why Peter was so adamant about not eating the creatures on the sheet. He understood the symbolism of the clean/unclean distinction.

By giving Peter this vision, the Lord was showing him that a change was taking place in terms of how his covenant people were to relate to the people of the world. It is not that the covenant people are no longer called to live as those who have been set apart from the world to belong to God. It is not that we are no longer called to live holy lives. That is something that is always true for God's people. Instead, the change has to do with the fact that the covenant community is no longer to be equated with Israel as a political entity. In other words, the church is still *religiously* distinct from the world, but it shares a *common culture* with unbelievers.

In the Bible, we see God giving his people dietary restrictions regarding clean and unclean animals at those times when he calls them to live in holy cultures. The two examples of this are Noah and his family while they were on the ark and Israel under the Sinai covenant in the Promised Land. In those two situations, the people of God were both *religiously* and *culturally* separate from the unbelieving world. But there are other points in redemptive history when God's people are *religiously* separate while called to share a *common culture* with unbelievers. In those situations, the dietary restrictions are removed. This is what we see taking place with Noah and his family after the flood and with the church after Pentecost.

This helps us to see that when God gave Peter this vision and commanded him to eat both the clean and the unclean animals, he was telling him that the church after Pentecost was not going to be a culturally separate institution. It was still holy, but it would no longer be identified with the people of Israel in an ethnic or political sense. In a cultural sense, the Lord had made the Gentiles clean. Now, the gospel could be brought to all the peoples of the earth.

Peter Preaches the Gospel to Cornelius

It is interesting that the Lord did not interpret the meaning of this vision for Peter. Instead, Luke tells us that “Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean.” It was only as Peter obeyed the Lord’s command to go with Cornelius’ messengers that things were made clear to him. Even when he first arrived at Cornelius’ house, he still did not know why he was there. But his perplexity would soon be resolved. The important thing was that Peter was there. And he was there because he had obeyed the Lord.

This is a point worth pondering. There are always going to be things that remain unknown and uncertain to us. We should not allow ourselves to be troubled by that. What matters is that we do what God’s Word clearly tells us to

do. And as we walk in the path of obedience, the Lord will make our way clear. He will show us what we need to know when we need to know it.

This is what we see happening in verse 34. After Peter hears Cornelius' explanation of why he had summoned him, the lightbulbs start going off in his head. He says, "Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." It is important to point out that this statement does not mean, as some have claimed, that a person can be saved without having a knowledge of the gospel and without having an explicit faith in Jesus Christ. A Roman Catholic scholar named Karl Rahner has argued along those lines, referring to such people as "anonymous Christians." And we find a similar teaching in the current Catechism of the Catholic Church, where it says this: "Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation." (CCC 847) If this teaching were true, then why was it necessary for Peter to go to Caesarea to preach the gospel to Cornelius? And why does Peter explicitly say in his sermon to Cornelius' household that "everyone who *believes* in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins

through his name"? These things make it clear that Peter's statement in verse 34 simply means that God accepts anyone who professes faith in Christ, regardless of that person's ethnicity. It does not mean that a person can be saved without hearing the gospel and placing his trust in Christ.

This passage also demonstrates that the means by which the gospel is spread is the preaching of the Word. Think about this for a moment. The Lord sent an angel to appear to Cornelius in a vision. That angel was certainly capable of preaching the gospel. After all, the word "angel" means "messenger." So why didn't God have the angel tell Cornelius about Christ? Why not save Peter a trip? Because angelic preaching is not the method that Christ has instituted for how he brings the gospel to people. He works through the ministry of the Word. As Paul says in Romans 10, "faith comes from hearing" and "how are they to hear without someone preaching?" It is very interesting that even in the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the conversions of Saul and Cornelius, the Lord still worked through human preaching to bring the gospel to these men.

Peter's message is a good summary of the key elements of the gospel message. He talks about Jesus' public ministry, about his becoming a curse for us on the cross, about his resurrection and his commissioning of the apostles to give eyewitness testimony to the resurrection, about the fact that Jesus is the judge of

the living and the dead, and about the promise that all who believe in Jesus receive forgiveness of sins. The focus of the sermon is upon Christ and what he has accomplished within history. And the sermon ends by explaining why these things are significant for us. This is the pattern that our preaching and our witnessing should follow. The focus is not to be on our experience of Christ but on Christ himself.

While God worked through Peter's preaching, he was certainly not bound by it. This is made clear by the fact that Peter didn't even get to finish his sermon. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who were present and caused them to speak in tongues, just as the Spirit had done with the disciples who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The wall that had divided Jews and Gentiles for so many years had finally been torn down.

The gospel continues to be proclaimed to people of all races, languages, and nationalities. And while some of the specifics of how the Lord worked to bring Cornelius to faith in Christ were clearly exceptional, God still works through the same basic method to bring people to saving faith today. He works through the preaching of the Word. As Michael Horton puts it, "Preaching is central, not

because we value the intellect to the exclusion of the emotions and the will, but because it is God's action rather than our own." [*Christless Christianity*, 218] This is why Reformed churches like ours have always placed a high premium on the preaching of the Word. And it is why it is so important for us to be praying for those who are engaged in the ministry of the Word. William Still stressed this point in his classic book on pastoral ministry, where he tells ministers, "you must early seek to establish the connection in your people's minds between your living ministry and their prayers... Happy the people (however tiny the nucleus) who begin to see, or can be made to see, that they have the makings of the ministry, if not the minister, in their own hands by prayer." [*The Work of the Pastor*, 120] The gospel that we preach really is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. We see that power at work here in Luke's account of Cornelius' conversion. And we continue to see it at work today in the life of everyone who calls upon Jesus Christ in faith.