

"GOD'S GIFT OF REPENTANCE"

A significant portion of this passage is essentially a repetition of what took place in chapter 10. We might be inclined to grow impatient when we come to the portions of the Bible where we see so much repetition. However, as I noted last week, the fact that Luke spends so much time on this matter testifies to its importance. The conversion of Cornelius was a watershed moment in the historical unfolding of God's plan of redemption. Though there were a few hints previous to this, this was the first time one of Christ's apostles brought the gospel to a Gentile. And that apostle received that Gentile into the Christian church without requiring him to become a Jew. It was an event that stirred up a great deal of controversy in the early church, controversy that can be seen in a number of other New Testament passages.

While the basic information conveyed in this passage is a repetition of what happened in chapter 10, there are a few differences. One of these has to do with the structure of this passage. Chapter 10 was a lengthy narrative that related two visions and had people traveling back and forth from one place to another, but this passage follows the basic structure of a courtroom hearing. It begins with a charge being made against Peter, follows with Peter's defense, and concludes with a verdict. This is the basic outline that we will follow in this sermon. And

as we work our way through these verses, I will point out some of the other ways this passage differs from the previous chapter. As far as the overall point of this text, Peter places a strong emphasis upon the divine initiative behind what took place when he went to Caesarea. For this reason, we could summarize the theme of this passage by saying that it teaches us that *it was entirely God's doing that the gospel was brought to the Gentiles.*

Accusation

The passage begins by telling us that news of Peter's doings in Caesarea reached the other apostles in Jerusalem. Notice, by the way, how Luke expresses this. He says that the apostles and other Christians "heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God." Their conversion is described as receiving God's Word. Luke equates conversion with believing what the Bible says about Jesus. Once again, we see the centrality of preaching to the spread of the gospel.

Luke is careful to tell us that it was not the apostles or even Christians in general who complained about what Peter had done. Instead, it was the "circumcision party" who criticized him. This is the first time we have heard about this group in the book of Acts, though it will not be the last time. They are the same people who are mentioned in chapter 15, where Luke tells us that

“some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.’” This group is also mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where he writes about how Peter’s fear of the “circumcision party” caused him to stop eating with Gentiles in the city of Antioch, something for which Paul rebuked him. These passages show us that the issue at hand for the circumcision party was that they did not believe that Gentiles could become Christians without also submitting to the law of Moses, which meant undergoing circumcision and adhering to the dietary laws. In this instance, the circumcision party criticized Peter because, by eating with Gentiles, he would almost certainly have eaten food that was not properly prepared, food that was not kosher.

Now, one of the things that is very interesting about this episode is something that would be easy for us to overlook. I am talking about the fact that Peter was held accountable for the things that he did in his apostolic ministry. When a charge was brought against him, he had to give a satisfactory explanation. This has implications for the Roman Catholic Church’s claim that Peter was the first bishop of Rome, the first pope. It is significant that Peter did not respond to the circumcision party by saying, ‘I’m the rock upon which Jesus is building his church. I sit in Peter’s chair. In fact, I am Peter! I have the authority to declare

what the church should believe and do. You must not question me.’ If Jesus really did appoint Peter as the head of his church, it would seem that Peter would have made some appeal to his papal authority in responding to this criticism. But there is nothing like that in this text. Instead, Peter had to give an explanation for why he went and ate with uncircumcised men.

This also has significance for another aspect of church government. It testifies to the church’s connective nature. Even though he was an apostle, Peter was not free to do as he pleased in his ministry. He was accountable to the broader church. This is one of the fundamental principles of the presbyterian form of government. While our government is not hierarchical in nature, every congregation and every presbytery is accountable to the others.

Defense

This brings us to the speech that Peter made to defend himself in the face of the circumcision party’s criticisms. He begins by recounting his vision in Joppa and the Lord’s command for him to go with the men who had been sent by Cornelius. Then he tells about Cornelius’ report of his vision, in which he was told, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” Perhaps you

noticed that this is stated a little differently here than it was back in chapter 10. Here we are told that the Lord told Cornelius that Peter's message would bring salvation to "you and all your household." This is a significant statement. It stands alongside the household baptisms that are recorded in the book of Acts as evidence that the principle of family solidarity that applied in the Old Testament period still holds true in the New Testament era. That is, when God established his covenant with Abraham, he commanded him to place the sign of the covenant, which was at that time circumcision, upon his children. The reason why we believe it is necessary for believers to present their children for baptism, which is the covenant sign that replaced circumcision, is because the New Testament is devoid of any language suggesting that the rules for membership in the church have changed from what had prevailed for the two thousand years from the time of Abraham to the first century A.D. On the contrary, there are numerous passages like this one, where the children of believers are explicitly included in the covenant community. As Peter said back in chapter 2, "the promise is for you and for your children."

Another minor difference between Peter's retelling and what Luke records in chapter 10 is that Peter says that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon these Gentiles brought to mind the word of the Lord that said that "John baptized with

water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Here we see that Peter was interpreting what was happening around him through the lenses of God’s Word. He realized that this was the fulfillment of what God had promised.

Peter concludes his speech by underscoring the fact that what had happened in Caesarea was clearly the Lord’s doing. The same Holy Spirit who had been poured out on the Jerusalem disciples had also been poured out on Cornelius and his household. Peter rightly saw that he would be setting himself against God if he objected to their inclusion in the church.

Verdict

This brings us to the verdict, or the response to what Peter said in his speech. I love the way Luke describes this. First, he says that everyone fell silent. A hush fell over the crowd as they processed what Peter had just told them. And then the silence was broken with shouts of praise. These believers rejoiced in what the Lord was doing. They glorified God for pouring out his Spirit upon the Gentiles. Of course, we know that the circumcision party did not feel that way, for they continued to raise their objections. But the majority of those who were present were overjoyed to see the Lord taking those who once were not a people and making them the people of God.

I want to call your attention to the statement that these believers make at the end of verse 18. As they give glory to God they say, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." There are several things to say about this. First of all, this tells us that repentance, like faith, is a gift that is given by God. God *granted* repentance to the Gentiles. They would not have been able to repent if it were not for the fact that the Spirit of God granted repentance to them. Listen to how this is expressed in our Shorter Catechism: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience." [WSC 87] Notice how this answer begins. It calls repentance a "saving grace." It is a gift. It is only because of the convicting work of the Holy Spirit that any of us comes to have a true sense of our sin and of the mercy that is offered to us in Christ.

Notice also that in both Acts 11:18 and the catechism repentance is "unto life." To repent of your sin involves seeing sin for what it is. It involves seeing the way of transgressors as the way of death and turning away from it to receive the new life that is promised to those who believe in Christ.

It is also significant that these Christians would sum up what it means to be a Christian by saying that it involves being granted repentance that leads to life. The fact that they describe salvation this way tells us that repentance is an essential element of salvation. No one can be a Christian who has not turned away from his sin and set himself to endeavor after new obedience. This is not to say that Christians no longer sin. Both Scripture and experience tell us otherwise. It is only to say that a true Christian is someone for whom sin is now a mortal enemy, an enemy to be resisted by whatever means necessary.

The fact that repentance is a gift given by God is something that should instill a great deal of hope in us. I have to admit that there are times when I look at some of the non-Christians that I know, some of whom might think of themselves as Christians even though their profession of faith is not bearing any fruit, and as I look at them I begin to doubt that there is any real possibility that they will be saved. Many of them have heard the gospel multiple times, some were even raised in a good church, but they still persist in living their lives on their own terms instead of following Christ. I sometimes think that there is no possibility of repentance for such people. And do you know what? As far as

they are concerned, that conclusion is right on the mark. They cannot repent. No one can repent of their sins unless God grants them repentance that leads to life. But the good news is that God is still in the business of granting repentance to people. So do not give up hope on your non-Christian family members and friends. Keep praying for them. Keep witnessing to them. You do not know what the Lord may do.