

First Contact

2. Clean or Dirty? (Acts 10:1 -11:18)

You'll remember that last week we saw how the early Christians had to break out of their existing way of thinking to see that the purposes of God were much larger. Christianity started with the circumcised - Jews who had hitherto followed the demands of Jewish law.

The conversion of the Samaritans and the way in which they were shown so powerfully that they had received the Holy Spirit was a start in showing then that God was now acting in people's lives outside the orbit of Judaism.

But at least the Samaritans had an Israelite heritage and they could have some claim to be called part of the promises to Israel even though they did not keep Jewish laws and customs.

What was to happen next was even more incredible to them. They were going to be asked by God to now minister to Gentiles. Gentiles were unclean. As a Jew they didn't marry Gentiles, they didn't eat with them and they only dealt with them as necessary in trade and in government. As Jews, Gentiles were not their friends and as I mentioned last week that continues to this day. To Jews of that day as to orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews, they are the people of God, so why should they have anything to do with Gentiles.

We have to understand that there is a difference between man's traditions and what God says in His Word. Often it is a radical difference.

And here we have Peter at the house of Simon the Tanner at Joppa and he's praying:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I

have never eaten anything impure or unclean." The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.

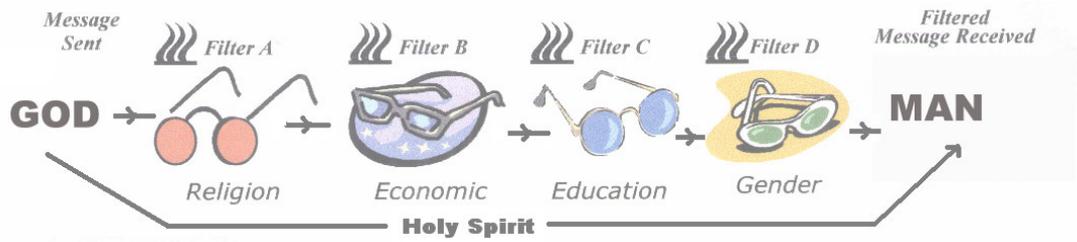
Can you imagine what Peter might have been thinking as he was told to kill these animals

Deut 14: 3 Do not eat any detestable thing. 4 These are the animals you may eat: the ox, the sheep, the goat, 5 the deer, the gazelle, the roe deer, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope and the mountain sheep. 6 You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews the cud. 7 However, of those that chew the cud or that have a split hoof completely divided you may not eat the camel, the rabbit or the coney. Although they chew the cud, they do not have a split hoof; they are ceremonially unclean for you. 8 The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses. 9 Of all the creatures living in the water, you may eat any that has fins and scales. 10 But anything that does not have fins and scales you may not eat; for you it is unclean.

The Torah forbade him to eat such animals and now God was telling him to go against everything he had been taught. It left him wondering what it was all about. Because as we shall see, it wasn't just about eating meat but went far deeper than that. The real issue was this phrase: *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.* No longer were these animals unclean, but more important, people were no longer to be unclean. They were to be befriended and brought to Christ.

What can we learn from this? Our perception of the world is not just shaped by scriptural truth but by our backgrounds. Peter had to go through a transformation of thought and he found it a struggle.

It's no different for us. We like to think we are people of the Word, but in fact our understanding of the Christian faith is often shaped more by things which may not have much to do with it. Take a look at this picture.



When God speaks to us, rather than listening to Him, we interpret His Word according to our values which may be religious or otherwise.

When Peter was on the roof, God was saying one thing and Peter's sunglasses were telling him no, not acceptable, that's not the way we Jews do it. And he needed to have his filter removed. That's why there is a line marked Holy Spirit because the Spirit needed to remove the blinkers on his eyes to see the new truth that God was teaching him about uncleanness. We see by the time he got to Caesarea that he had some mental assent to the idea but it was not until the Holy Spirit came on Cornelius and his household that he was truly convinced in his heart as it would seem from his account in chapter 11 when he put it all together with what Jesus had said.

We have the same problem and we need to be aware that it exists and ask God to reveal His truth through our blinkers. Let me give you some examples from my own life which will help you understand what I am talking about.

As someone brought up in the Brethren, going to university was a major challenge because I was taught that people from the "denominations" didn't understand the Gospel in the way that we did. "There may be a few born again believers but they were wishy-washy because they had not been taught properly from the Word. They certainly didn't if they were from the Church of England!" That's what we were taught and I know that one or two of you can identify with that.

The I arrived at College and found the Christian Union. It was full of young men and women on fire for God. They weren't wishy washy. They shared the same Gospel, their thirst for God's Word was insatiable and the teachers they brought in were great Bible teachers. What's more the vast majority of my student friends were Anglicans! Worse, I married one: in an Anglican church! That was my Joppa Roof experience or at least one of them!

I found the same the other night as I worshipped with others in Norwich Cathedral. The worship was quite different to what we

have here. The organisers put in a number of worship styles and ways of approaching God in prayer from traditional to modern because they respected that people came from a variety of backgrounds. So we were exposed to everything from loud worship music, to African spirituality, to silent prayer and Taize worship (with some in Latin!).

There would have been a time when I would have been uncomfortable with some of the things I heard, saw or even did on Friday night. But I went determined to listen to what God was trying to say and do, which is why we were there.

If we want to move forward as a church I believe God wants to get rid of our sunglasses, whichever hue they are, and listen to the voice of God and to start embracing what He wants however much that seems novel and different.

Peter walked in the presence of Jesus Himself. He might have been with Jesus for three years but in Joppa and beyond he needed to learn to walk in the Spirit and to do what God called him to do however strange that may be. That meant he could accept new people - like Cornelius. And we have to be ready for Joppa Roof experiences.

When we were out the other night, we were joined by some young people at the Buttercross. They were young girls who enjoyed singing "Shine Jesus, shine" and even sang it out loud in the Market Place when they walked away. They talked through prayer. How irreverent! The problem is that for teens and twentysomethings and thirtysomethings, most have hardly been inside a church, they have no understanding of God or reverence or our ways. They don't have the same respect for authority and tradition as we were brought up with.

What do we say? Don't come back until you're dressed properly? Do as we do or don't come? That's what many good, sound evangelical Baptist churches have done for the last 50 years. And you know what? Young converts have not come back.

If we want to see converts then it is from these people and they are going to come into our church. And Jesus says love them, accept them. *Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.*

Our challenge is to accept them and learn to find God's way with them. Theologians have a fancy name for it. It's called contextualisation. We take the timeless, unchanging Word of God and make sure they are able to understand it in their culture and language. It's called cross-cultural mission and it isn't just reserved

for overseas mission or evangelism amongst minorities. Listen to the language of our children, or even thirtysomethings - it's different to us older folk. We need to learn it, understand it and communicate the gospel in it - because they don't understand it - **at all**.

And how did Peter know that God was in this. As last week, the Holy Spirit was poured out on these people:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

The power of the Holy Spirit affirmed that what Peter had experienced was right. Gentiles could become Christians and what God had made clean could not be impure. It was a massive change in the history of the Church.

But this story also breaks some other misconceptions too. You'll notice that Cornelius does not become a Christian because of great missionary work by Peter. As we saw last time, the disciples were poor missionaries - they had to be pushed out of Judea by persecution!

It isn't much better this time. It is the Lord moving in Cornelius' life which is the start of this. It shows us that people's growth in spiritual knowledge is just that and that they often don't live in darkness and ignorance. Long before Peter came onto the scene the Holy Spirit had been working in Cornelius' life.

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, "Cornelius!" Cornelius stared at him in fear. "What is it, Lord?" he asked.

He had already started to pray to God regularly. He hadn't become a Jew, he'd already learned that he could get to know God without being a Jew - which was certainly an advance on most Christians at that time. But was he a Christian? No - he hadn't accepted Christ.

But the Spirit was working and one day, as someone who was searching he gets a visit from an angel - a really special visitation from God.

The Spirit was working in his life. This illustrates something important you need to know about how people can become Christians is that YOU CANNOT make anyone a Christian. You can't even open their minds by persuasion. This course isn't about your striving - but about the Holy Spirit!

John 16:7 Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. 8 When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement: 9 in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; 10 in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; 11 and in regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

1 Cor 2: 12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

Therefore ALL evangelism is based on the Holy Spirit. It doesn't start with doing a course, or going out in our in our strength. It starts in God's presence.

What set off this huge change in Cornelius' life were two praying men, Peter and Cornelius and God visited them both with revelation - one regenerate and the other unregenerate - but not for much longer.

Sometimes we believe that if we have schemes for evangelism, if we do certain things in certain ways that people will come to Christ. I believe we learn two things here

1. All evangelistic witness starts on our knees as we listen to the voice of God and as we then gain a burden for the lost. Peter was praying, opened and ready to receive from God and therefore ready to receive change in his life. If you desire to see people saved in Swaffham, maybe your friends, neighbours, family - then pray without ceasing.
2. Evangelistic witness begins in people's lives long before you speak to them. It's the Spirit that saves. It is He that works in people's lives to convince them of sin, righteousness and coming judgement. Let's never be arrogant enough to believe that

conversion depends on us and what we say. But let's also realise that as God's people we are called to share the gospel too. And God is preparing ripe fruit for us,; people in whose hearts and minds He has already begun a work in

That's the challenge of Cornelius. As we come as a church to share the Gospel let's be prepared to listen to the voice of God, cast off our prejudices, pray day and night for the lost, but also believe that God is preparing ripe fruit for us.



*Preached at Swaffham Baptist Church 8/6/03
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