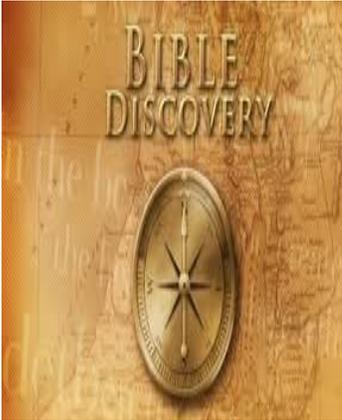


May 15, 2016

Acts 11:1-18

Love Associates with the Wrong People



The old adage on communication was “telegraph, telephone, and tell another”. In our modern age, we’re now connected by various electronic contacts. Twitter, Facebook, even texting are essential to the current social fabric of our nation – or so we’re led to believe! One thing I fear is many times the focus of such communication is gossip – the telling of things that should never have been uttered in the first place! Sadly our society is firmly entrenched on the scheme there’s no such thing as a bad “juicy story”.

Today as we Celebrate Pentecost, imagine what it was like to hear what happened in the early years following start of “*The Way*” – the sect of Jewish believers who practiced the teaching of Jesus Christ? It hadn’t taken long for news to reach Jerusalem of an extraordinary event. The word was that Cornelius, “a Centurion in what was called the Italian Regiment” [Acts 10:1] and his entire household had received God’s Spirit and had become Christians! What should have been received as great news, the marking of a great event for the new movement; what should have been received as evidence the movement was reaching beyond the boundaries that had kept them in a small group was received *let’s say* not so well.

The news was greeted more with a protest meeting than a victory rally. This newest convert to Christ - Cornelius - wasn’t Jewish! The faithful couldn’t get past the point Peter had eaten a meal with a Gentile. Ceremonial law had been violated. Throughout the faith community word spread, Peter had tampered with tradition and was being brought to task for his action. Peter associated with the wrong people! No one seemed to question how Christ would save a world where one person was forbidden to eat a meal with another. The protesters didn’t pause to figure out this dilemma. The big issue was tampering with tradition.

The “circumcision party” led the protest. Their position assumed Christianity was a movement within Judaism. First and foremost these new believers needed to conform to the life and practice of Judaism as they knew it. A person was a Jew first. This was more important than their affirmation of Jesus as Messiah. In modern terms within the church today, it would be like insisting anyone who wanted to accept Christ needed to walk the way we walked, talk the way we talked, acted the way we behaved. We would place on new believers the yoke of years of tradition they’ve never been exposed to so that they would then look like us. We’d insist they had to be like us! Is that what Christ wants His church to do? Is that a prerequisite for accepting Christ? Paul wrote, “*If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*” [Romans 10:9] Notice there’s no plus sign at the end of that statement? Jesus tells us to “*go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation*” after which He immediately instructs, “*whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*” [Mark 16:15-16] Again there’s no indication of any further requirement to fit in to a mould cast by tradition more than that we’re to be “*imitators of God as His dear children.*” [Ephesians 5:1]

In fact, as we examine the life of Jesus, it was at Matthew’s house, where Jesus sat with tax collectors and sinners who came and ate with Him and his disciples. When challenged by the Pharisees, his response was simply yet profoundly, “*I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.*” [Matthew 9:13] Jesus extends fellowship to individuals and the text says nothing about their interest in the gospel or their repentance or their willingness to put faith in him. It demonstrates that He reaches out to them just as they are, drawing them to His compassion and grace. It allows for the changing of hearts to be left to our

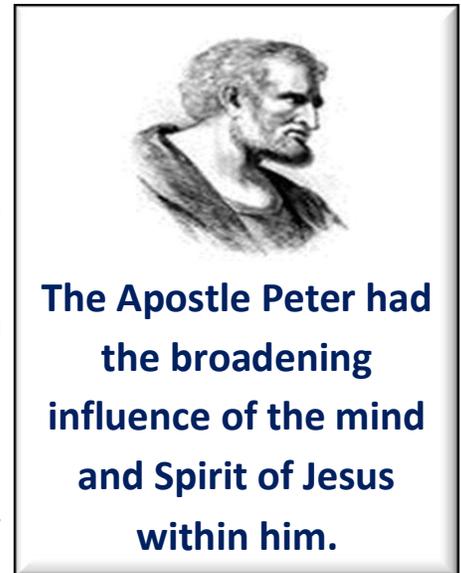
Within the Church today...



We’re to be “imitators of God as His dear children”.

Heavenly Father – not with us! If we would follow Jesus, we’d be less concerned about our good reputation, about crossing our “T’s” and dotting our “I’s” worried for the opinion of the world. Gary Burge, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College and author of such books as *“The New Testament in Antiquity”* says, “I think that Jesus’ reputation was just the opposite. The complaint against Him was that He spent time with people without pre-conditions.” Darrell Bock, senior research professor of New Testament studies at Dallas Theological Seminary refers to the woman caught in adultery and the woman at the well, two individuals who didn’t approach Jesus and brought nothing to the table. They certainly weren’t seeking salvation when their lives crossed the path of Jesus. Bock says, “Jesus is encouraging people who are taking positive steps, but He associates with all people with no strings attached,”

To Peter’s credit he doesn’t join the circumcision party, he doesn’t cave to tradition and withdraw from going where his Lord sent Him, even when it means rubbing shoulders with the “unclean” and “unhealthy”. Just think, if Peter had succumbed to these petty whims, who knows the limitations placed on the message of Jesus. Consider where we’d be today. While Peter didn’t have the background or worldly experience of the Apostle Paul, having spent his life as a fisherman, never having gone beyond the hills of his own country, the Apostle Peter had the broadening influence of the mind and Spirit of Jesus within him. He had caught the Spirit of his Master, and being filled with God’s Spirit, he was led to think beyond the narrow limits and confines of the traditional Jewish mindset. God’s Holy Spirit, now empowering the previously impetuous Peter, led him to make decisions that even the most learned might stumble over; might be unprepared to make. Paul had struggled in Corinth and here he was faced with a group that could split the community, perhaps in such a manner that forward progress would be virtually impossible. When party loyalty becomes more important than loyalty to Christ, energy destined for growth dissipates quickly.



However, we also learn from Peter in his response to them.

- **He didn’t belittle or ridicule them for their lack of understanding.**
- **He never puffed himself up at their expense.**

Rather he explained in detail what God had done. Peter understood the importance of the group rules. If he was to draw them into a new understanding of the great commission, he knew they needed to be convinced that his vision was from God. He told them of his experience with the vision to go and eat. Peter understood because he had already struggled with the issues now being presented to him by the Jerusalem Council. God had

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prepared him to have peace with going and telling the Good News to Cornelius. Peter tells them of the voice that spoke from heaven, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*”. On first brush, it’s an instruction to accept non-kosher groceries. However, the deeper intent is to convict us of our need to recognize we’re all sinners saved by God’s amazing grace. That it’s a gift from God who tells us, “*I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake*” [Isaiah 43:25]. How then can we call others impure which through the penetrating work of God’s Holy Spirit into their hearts, God has made clean?

Just as dissension and division obscured the importance of the conversion of Cornelius, we can become blind to the wonderful work of God’s Spirit moving through our communities, miss the amazing transformation of lives touched by the love of Christ, and fail to respond to the great salvation being poured out on lives today. Just like those in Jerusalem so many years ago, even today as we celebrate the birth of

God's church with the outpouring of His Spirit upon His people, rather than rejoicing over hearts surrendered to Jesus, do we argue over the unimportant. For the Jerusalem crowd it was that Peter had shared a meal with this new Christian who happened to be a Gentile. What will be our argument?



What distracts us from welcoming the work of God in our midst?

Denying the validity of Cornelius's conversion would have limited the Christian movement, would have denied God's readily evident confirmation through the Holy Spirit coming upon all in Cornelius' house who heard the message. It might have shriveled up in those beginning years.

Dare we restrict God's Spirit as He moves today?

Should we judge the ways of God? Our Lord tells us *"Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon"* [Isaiah 55:7]. God's mercy is available to all who accept Jesus as their Saviour. Who are we to restrict such access?

Peter showed great courage in defending his action before the powerful Jerusalem Council. Yet Peter wasn't the first person criticized for his association with the wrong people. As we've seen, Jesus was criticized by the scribes and religious authorities for his association with sinners. Jesus loved all so that his followers would love everyone. We're to show our love of God – for God - by loving others! We don't love only those who've gotten their act together, those who've been blessed by never making any 'societal errors', those who've always been correct in all their actions. God's grace is available to everyone – the good, the bad and the ugly! It's about God's grace, not our performance. The ministry, the mission of the church isn't based on reaching out to only the right kind of people. The instructions given to Peter during his vision, given through him to the Jerusalem Council, given through God's Word to you and me, give lasting proof of the openness of the Christian life. The followers of Christ are not limited by ancient traditions but are instructed to reach out to everyone that they might come to the saving grace of Jesus Christ!

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to everyone that they might come to the
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Blessings,
Pastor Dave