

The Church That Changed

Acts 11:1-18

Introduction

In our last discussion in our study of the “book of action” or Acts, we observed Peter in the crucible of change. Change, for any of us, is never easy. Perhaps you can identify with having recently changed:

- your geography; perhaps from the coast to dryer land, flat lands to mountains, dry weather to constant rain;
- your career; perhaps from an office career to a stay at home life with a newborn;
- from a full house to an empty nest, as one family recently told me, their only child left home for college.

I can still vividly remember several years ago, a change that occurred in our household. I took our oldest daughter to her first day of kindergarten. If you had watched us from twenty yards away, we would have made the picture perfect. She had on her new shoes and was carrying her shiny lunchbox and I was holding her hand as we walked from the parking lot to the school. However, if you had come within earshot, you would have discovered that we were actually arguing! She wanted me to stay in the car, saying, “Daddy, I don’t need you to take me to class, I can do this by myself,” and I was saying, “Listen, you might be feeling good about all this young lady, but I’m not, so why don’t you just allow me a little insecurity, okay?”

I remember that change. Some of you may be involved in changes from:

- single life to married life;

- married couple parenting to single parenting;
- a busy career to retirement;
- health to illness.

No change is easy. We naturally resist the rough waters, the upheaval, the emotions, the hardships that are all cousins to change.

One of the most difficult changes to make is a change regarding lifelong traditions and a past heritage. And, let me be even more specific. Changes are hard to accept when it comes to church; when it involves your relationship to Christ; when it affects how you worship. Let me give an illustration.

Our church sends cards to those who visit us from other cities, along with a letter thanking them for stopping in and joining us. We ask for their impressions and usually, a handful respond. Let me read the responses from two people who are from the same city and happened to visit on the same Sunday. Their responses to the questions on the card were vastly different.

- Question #1 – “What was your first impression of our church?”
 - Response from #1 – “Crowded.”
- Questions #2 – “What did you like the least from your visit with us?”
 - Response from #1 – “The sermon. There was no point to it. [Then this person makes a comment that makes the reason for this response clear.] There was no invitation.”

- Question #3 – “What was your favorite experience at our church?”
 - Response from #2 – “The depth of the sermon. This was an experience of true biblical teaching.”

What that tells us is that our church represented an uncomfortable change for the first responder. Frankly, I’ve been asked about the closing of our service as much as anything else. Many are used to every service ending with an invitation. However, our focus every Sunday is not on the unbeliever, but on the believer. The church in Acts and the Epistles met together, not for the purpose of evangelism, but edification. In fact, my job description according to Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 12, is,

for the equipping of the saints for the work of service . . .

My title of “poimenos,” in Greek, literally means, “feeder or shepherd”.

There are people in our auditorium who do not know Christ as Savior. That is why we usually close our service by inviting people to accept Christ – or to see me afterward, or to call the office. I long for people to come to faith in Christ as a result of our ministry, but the primary purpose for our gathering is clear from scripture. Hebrews, chapter 10, verse 25, says,

not forsaking our own assembling together, . . . but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

However, I recognize how different that must be to many of you. Just one little change in the service format can bring great consternation. Not to mention the musical instruments we might use, or the order of service that we do not print, or the choruses that we do sing. I remember one card simply reading, with an exclamation point, “Where is your robe?!”

Perhaps you have struggled with a change in a doctrinal point or a passage that deals with a change you need to make. If so, you have discovered the upsetting, even miserable conflict that comes with spiritual or religious change.

Fortunately, we are not the first Christians to encounter change. In our last study in chapter 10 of the book of Acts, we were provided with a behind the scenes look at a painful, confusing time for Peter. Some of his lifelong beliefs were for the first time, challenged.

Reviewing God’s Revelation to Peter

Turn to Acts, chapter 10. We will briefly review our last discussion in order to refresh our memories. Peter is in the home of Simon the tanner. While there, praying, verses 11 through 16 tell us,

and he saw the sky opened up, and an object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him, “Get up, Peter, kill and eat!” But Peter said, “By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean.” Again a voice came to him a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” This happened three times, and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

There are several things to mention from these verses:

- this vision from God, if obeyed, would directly conflict with earlier revelation from God; that is, Old Testament dietary laws;
- this vision from God, if followed, would dramatically change the course of first century Christianity, which is exactly what is happening, by the way;
- this vision from God, if applied, would develop new thinking toward the Gentile peoples of the world.

Now, if you remember, following that vision, the servants of Cornelius arrived at Simon the tanner’s home asking for Peter to come with them. Cornelius was a Gentile man who feared God, though not yet a Christian. He had also received a vision from God that Simon Peter would come and explain the terms of New Testament Christianity to him and his household.

As we studied last time, Peter came into Cornelius’ home and preached to him and all the others. After they received Christ by faith, he ate with him and fellowshiped with him.

What shocking developments! Developments most of us cannot appreciate because we do not know the tradition, the heritage, and the lifestyle that Peter was setting aside for the sake of obedience to God.

It did not take long for the word to travel back home that Peter was way out of bounds. Look at chapter 11, verses 1 through 3.

Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

In other words, "Peter, we've put up with your shenanigans before. We know you're impulsive and we've put up with most of it, but Peter, this time you've gone too far!"

Did you notice in these verses, that they do not begin by asking Peter questions; they do not ask for his point of view; they do not even quote a verse of Old Testament scripture? Instead, they go right to the jugular. While Peter had been away, the jury had already met, decided, and the verdict was in – Peter was in sin!

Now notice the first phrase of verse 4,

But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,

Stop at this point! Is this Peter we are seeing here?! Peter – short fused, emotional Peter?! Peter – the swinger of swords and the one who chops off of ears?!!

Imagine this hostile scene where Peter is accused of hypocrisy and inconsistency and ungodliness. How do you treat people who accuse you when they are wrong and you are right?

Reviewing Peter's Response to the Church

I would never have imagined learning a lesson in tactfulness from Peter. Before we read Peter's response though, let me give you three observations.

Peter restrained his actions and emotions

1. The first observation is that Peter restrained his actions and emotions.

These leaders have just "unloaded their guns" on Peter; they have "pinned his hide to the wall," and they are dead wrong! Peter knows it too. He has seen the vision; he has spoken with God.

I would have expected verse 4 to begin with the words, "But Peter began yelling at them . . .".

Instead, verse 4 tells us that Peter began to explain to them in an orderly sequence. Peter is under control.

Proverbs tells us:

- ". . . he who restrains his lips is wise." (10:19b);
- "A gentle answer turns away wrath . . ." (15:1a);
- ". . . the slow to anger calms a dispute." (15:18b).

Peter showed respect toward his accusers point of view

2. The second observation is that Peter showed respect toward his accusers point of view.

This was a volatile issue all by itself. Let me give a historical vantage point that reveals just how much more explosive the situation was:

Peter's trip to Caesarea took place around 40-41 AD. During that time, the political situation in Jerusalem was incredibly tense. The Roman emperor's name was Caligula. In 40 and 41 AD Caligula had become insane. He killed most of his family members; he had people tortured while he dined; and most tragically, he declared himself a god and had temples built and sacrifices offered to himself. He decreed that a statue of himself be placed inside the Jerusalem temple. He sent Petronius and a large force into Judea with orders to set up his likeness in the temple, and to use the sword if necessary. Josephus, the Jewish historian who lived during this time, recorded that when Petronius reached the shore of Galilee, tens of thousands of Jews met him and begged him not to place the emperor's statue in the temple. They succeeded in getting Petronius to write Caligula and ask for the command to be rescinded. A few months later, the potential catastrophe for Judaism was avoided when Caligula was assassinated.

I tell you that so that you can know and feel, a little more deeply, the context of this event. Not only has Peter been "hobnobbing" with a Gentile, which is bad enough, but he is trying to include in the church a Roman centurion! Cornelius was a ranking officer in the Roman army; a man who was part of the empire that at that very moment perhaps, is marching toward

Jerusalem to desecrate the temple and spill blood if necessary.

Emotions are running high; religion and patriotism are offended. The feeling was, “Peter, you are not only unfaithful to the God of our fathers, but you are treasonous and unpatriotic as well.

Peter evidently respected their reasons for being so upset; he understood what it must have looked like from their vantage point.

Peter recognized his accountability to the church body

3. The third observation is that Peter recognized his accountability to the church body.

Had Peter been the head of the church, infallible in his actions, he would never have had to answer to church members, or leaders. He could have said, “I did what I did and I said what I said, who are you to accuse me of wrongdoing?!”

Instead, we see Peter giving a full explanation to the church family in Jerusalem. And, he did not rebuke them for calling him on the carpet.

Now, with that in mind, let us follow along as Peter carefully, yet directly, answers their accusations. Look at verses 4 through 16 of Acts, chapter 11.

But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,

“I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me,

“and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air.

“I also heard a voice saying to me, ‘Get up, Peter; kill and eat.’

“But I said, ‘By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

“But a voice from heaven answered a second time, ‘What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.’

“This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

“And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

“The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.

“And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, ‘Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here;

“and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’

“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.

“And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

In other words, as some have called it, Peter is saying, “This was sort of a Gentile Pentecost. They evidenced that same sign gift that we did when the Holy Spirit descended.”

This was indeed proof that the Gentile church and the Jewish church were one. They had received the same Spirit. Continue to verse 17.

“Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”

Peter declares, “Did you expect me to stand in the way of God’s working?”

He is also implicating the question to them, “Will you stand in God’s way?”

The question was, as one author phrased it,

Would they loosen their grip on the past and accept God’s new plan for the Gentiles? Would they re-learn centuries of practice and teaching?

To put it simply, would the church change??!!

Can you imagine that moment in church history? It was a defining moment. The Jewish leaders must

have looked at each other; at Peter; and at Peter's six witnesses who had come with him from Cornelius' home, which, by the way, was twice the number of witnesses required by Mosaic law. It was an incredible story, dripping with unimaginable changes. But the flush receded from their faces and their anger subsided and smiles began to appear on the faces of many of them!

I find it interesting that Luke writes of the vast history of the New Testament church in this "book of action," in order to cover decades of ground. He typically provides sketchy details; he is forced to be concise, yet, he devotes nearly two chapters to this incident. Why?

Looking beyond the obvious reasons, Luke was a Gentile. And, this moment in church history revealed the incredible, personal truth that Gentiles were allowed in. They were full fledged members of the church of Jesus Christ.

Notice the verse next verse, verse 18.

When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

Now, I do want to insert that not everyone was happy about this. There is a tragedy in this that some refused to change; some refused to accept the Gentiles full privilege in the church because they had not come by way of the synagogue. In chapter 10, verse 45a, the Jewish believers are referred to as,

All the circumcised believers who had come with Peter . . .

A narrower designation occurs in chapter 11, verse 2b,

. . . those who were circumcised took issue with him,

Literally, this means, "those of the circumcision".

Herein lies the subtle implication of the seeds of dissension within the church. This will become a faction that Paul later refers to in the book of Galatians, chapter 2, verse 12b, as, "the party of the circumcision". They had gone from resisting change to actually forming a dissenting party, or faction, in the New Testament church. They wanted to mix Judaism with the gospel. They would not change; therefore, they would never be able to rejoice in the truth of the gospel as recorded in John, chapter 1, verse 17,

For the Law came through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

Application

Let us apply this passage more specifically. How do we:

- keep from becoming unbalanced in what we believe and how we live?
- distinguish between godly disciplines and legalism?
- determine what to keep and what to change?

By the way, these problems are not problems of this century only. Controversies related to the Christian life and walk have received far more attention than they have deserved. For instance, in the second century, a young man asked a church father how he could follow Christ more diligently. The answer was written,

Forsake colored clothing . . . remove everything in your wardrobe that is not white . . .

(evidently, this was taken from Revelation where the saints will be robed in white),

. . . Stop sleeping on a soft pillow and taking warm baths . . .

(so far, I am striking out . . . how about you?),

. . . If you are sincere about following Christ, never shave your beard. To shave is to attempt to improve on the work of Him who created us.

The question arises from this passage in Acts, "How do you keep from being driven by non-essentials – and thus, ignore the essentials?"

How do we determine what to do as a believer and what not to do!!!! Let me suggest some ways.

If the scriptures warn against it, do not play around with it

1. First, if the scriptures warn against it, do not play around with it.

Do not use this passage on Peter's vision as license; do not throw all your stuff on that sheet that descends from heaven and say, "That's not unclean anymore; in fact, nothing is. I can do anything and go anywhere and say anything . . ."

Be careful that you do not let just anything come into your life and then say, “Well, I’m under grace.”

Being “under grace” does not mean that you can use grace to cover impurity, or a lack of godly discipline, or a tolerance of sin. Paul said, in Romans, chapter 6, verse 1b through 2a,

. . . Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! . . .

If the scriptures forbid it, do not try to justify it

2. Secondly, if the scriptures forbid it, do not try to justify it.

For example, I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 3, says,

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality

This tells us the Bible forbids sexual relations outside of marriage, so do not justify it by saying, “We love each other . . . we’re going to get married . . . surely God understands . . .”

If the scriptures are silent about it, do not go door-to-door with it

3. Thirdly, if the scriptures are silent about it, do not go door-to-door with it.

Do not turn what God may be doing in your life into a public crusade. In other words, some practice or discipline may be for your life, but not everyone else’s.

Learn the difference between a biblical command and a personal preference. There is nothing wrong with personal preferences – I wish Christians had more of them – but just remember they are personal!

I am wearing a suit instead of a robe, for example. I am called Stephen or Pastor, instead of Elder Davey or Bishop, and that is not because scripture speaks to either way of doing it. In fact, any one of those titles would be biblically acceptable, but I simply have a preference.

Did you know that in the third century, there was quite a controversy on the physical posture to have when praying? Let me read this article on praying,

In AD 220, Tertullian, a well known church father, set down some guidelines for praying. He said if you lifted your hands

toward heaven when you prayed, they did not need to be washed every time before prayer – since they were spiritually clean. Tertullian also believed it was wrong to sit when conversing with God in prayer. (Have you ever been to a church that practiced standing whenever you read the scripture? Well, Tertullian would have been offended that you stood to read the word of God, but did not stand when you prayed to God.)

Likewise, he strongly believed you should never kneel in prayer on Easter because that was a day of celebrating the risen Lord.

Another famous church father, Clement of Alexandria, also in the third century, believed you should pray with eyes open toward heaven. (He would have a real problem with “heads bowed and eyes closed”.)

Other believers taught that prayer was most spiritual if you stretched out your arms horizontally in the cross position as you prayed, in order to mimic the crucified Christ.

Do you kneel? Fall prostrate? Hands up – washed or unwashed?

The controversy on the posture of prayer raged for more than one hundred years, until the Council of Nicea declared that congregational prayer in the church should be offered standing up.

Do you know what the problem was? The scriptures do not command any particular posture; they are silent on the issue and these men went door-to-door with their personal preference.

If the scriptures encourage it, do not try to ignore it

4. Fourthly, if the scriptures encourage it, do not try to ignore it.

Find out more from the scriptures; study the implications. Perhaps God is addressing a needed area of change in your life.

If the scriptures teach it, do not try to live without it

5. Finally, if the scriptures teach it, do not try to live without it.

Do not try to live without it!

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/8/1997 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 1997 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.