

THE SPIRIT & THE CHURCH

Acts 11:1-18

Sermon for Peace Church

Sept. 14, 2008

PURPOSE - to encourage people to embrace God-directed change for the sake of the gospel, unleashing the Spirit and building the church through affirmation & accountability.

MAIN IDEA – The church affirms and holds accountable the work of the Holy Spirit.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the ways God's speaks to us is through Scripture. So let's open our Bibles to Acts 11 (pew Bible - p. 1711) – Acts 10:47 actually (cause that's where we ended last week)

1. In our reading through this book of the Bible, we left the apostle Peter at a place we can readily relate to!

He's been called by God to make CHANGES to his ministry for the sake of reaching more people – even cross culturally - with the message of Jesus.

Peter had a certain approach to ministry and, with it, natural parameters - those he could reach; those he couldn't. His ministry style related to how he ate and who he ate with. Biblically, eating & ministry are closely linked (Lord's Supper). God had to EXPAND Peter's ability to eat with more people – for the sake of sharing his knowledge & life in Jesus. Peter's ministry style had essentially groomed him just to work with covenant-people (then the Jewish nation) = those he knew, grew up with, went to school with. God needed to lead him into change – in order to reach further - even Gentiles.

- (i) CHANGE! – politically, it's a good word! Obama started with it – “Change we can believe in”, now the Democrats are charging the Republicans of co-opting it. Politically, change is a concept we embrace.

A. In other sphere's of life, we're not always as excited by it.

A man went to the doctor for a check-up – not feeling well. After the exam, the doc came to him – “You’re in terrible shape ... you gotta change your eating habits ... you have to eat more nutritiously ... immediately.” (“Well, my wife does most of the cooking.”) ...

... and stop working like a dog. Holding 2 jobs is too much, too stressful. You’re going to have to quit one, and let your wife know you’ll have to change your budget ...spend less on less income.

... and you need to relax more or you could be dead in a month. You should probably ask your wife to take your kids off your back so you can relax ... Unless you make some changes like that in your life, seriously - you’re going to be dead in a month.

- “Wow, doc!” ... Do you think you could call my wife and give her those instructions? It’ll sound more official coming from you!”

“Sure – I’ll give her a call while you’re driving home.

He pulls into the driveway. His wife’s waiting for him. She’s crying. She rushes to him. > “The doctor called me” she sobbed ... “He filled me in on things –It’s tragic! – you only have 30 days to live!”

2. NOT ALL CHANGE is embraced. Even as God worked with Peter, he had to give him a DRAMATIC VISION needed to move forward (the sheet with all kinds of animals, reptiles & birds in it). THREE TIMES Peter heard God’s call: “Don’t call anything impure that God had made clean” – THREE TIMES (God is patient, yet persistent)

Finally, Peter got it – with these wonderful RESULTS (ch. 10):

He goes into the house of a Gentile..

He travels / He moves.

(i) He was able to SHARE JESUS with a new people group! = He could share about God’s love on earth! = abundant life

A. That’s what the Church is about – “*Go (move), therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the Father, Son & Holy Spirit.*”

(ii) More than that, he witnessed the Holy Spirit drawing these Gentile believers into a life of praise!

THE RISK / THE CHANGE – done with God’s leading (that’s key!) – brought great reward

3. Chapter 10, verse 44 – **Read**

That’s what the church lives for. Those results are WAY MORE IMPORTANT than any change, any sacrifice one is asked to make – even one’s eating style and place.

Unless we grasp that, we won't want to change our styles

Unless we believe that, we won't look to others to lead us into change

Unless we believe that, we won't hunger in prayer for God's lead us into the changes He wants for us.

SALVATION comes = the anointing of the Spirit unto a life of praise in God's love – that's worth it all!

4. Now let's READ ON to see how Peter responds to the anointing of the Spirit and is responded to!

From this next passage, I want to highlight the church's ministries of AFFIRMATION & ACCOUNTABILITY.

Read 10:47-48 (AFFIRMATION)

11:1-18 (ACCOUNTABILITY)

II. AFFIRMATION – BAPTISM

1. Verse 47 – “*Can anyone keep these people from being BAPTIZED with water?*” – that's Peter's first response to the presence of the Spirit!

> “God has RECEIVED THEM, obviously! Church, let's show that we receive them!”

Peter checks in with the Jewish believers that he has come with. They give the thumbs up & they baptize with water in the name of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is the church's SIGN of WELCOME. It's a sign of AFFIRMATION.

We also refer to Baptism as a SEAL! = a STAMP of affirmation ... God has done a work in you. We affirm it, celebrate! - that's the work of the church!

- (i) Think of what that would have meant to Cornelius
 - = I belong, I matter, I'm one with these guys in new life
 - I share their calling

... We all need that kind of affirmation – Baptism is not the only way we do that – notes, words, hugs, time, attention, coffee ... too add to this ministry of affirmation

BAPTISM begins it all. The Church's official welcome in response to the work of the Spirit.

2. Let me comment here about BAPTISM. As I just indicated, we call those waters a SIGN & SEAL.

(i) A SIGN is not the reality. It points to the reality

(i.e. RR Crossing sign is not the railroad tracks. It points to the tracks)

The picture on a cereal box is not the cereal (show). You don't eat the box. The box describes the cereal. It's given to make you anticipate. It's given to understand the nutrition of the cereal. It's given to make you open the box. The cereal is the reality.

(ii) In Cornelius' story we see the REALITY / FOOD / NOURISHMENT that all baptism is about! THE HOLY SPIRIT – that's reality. A new heart – a heart of praise / joy / exuberance in God! – that's the reality we're after.

A. Baptism, in Cornelius' case, AFFIRMS that reality.

It SEALS it. Makes it OFFICIAL. / Stamps it!

3. Now in our ministry, we not only baptize those who come into the new life of the Spirit; we also baptize the children of believers.

It may have been – we're not told – that there were children in Cornelius' household. If so, Peter would have baptized them as a sign of welcome into God's covenant (just as sons were circumcised in the Old Covenant). God welcomes the children of believers and wants them to know in this way that new life in the Spirit is for them.

(i) In this case, baptism is given in ANTICIPATION of the Spirit's reality.

(ii) In the case of believer's baptism, the sign is given in AFFIRMATION of the Spirit's reality.

Baptism is the SEAL of a PROMISE – that we believe in as parents and look to God for – regeneration – a life of praise.

4. Either way, the WATER is only a sign & seal. The SPIRIT is reality. The SPIRIT matters. What happens to Cornelius is nourishment in the Spirit. That's SALVATION.

TWO APPLICATIONS:

(i) YOUNG PEOPLE – you who’ve been baptized. Your baptism does not save you. Jesus saves you THROUGH FAITH! The rebirth of the Spirit you need, just like Cornelius.

a. On the back of your bulletin I’ve printed some teaching from Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade. It’s about the Christian and the Holy Spirit. If you want to enter salvation, you need to read this through (look up the Bible verses).

Jesus said – Only those born again of the Spirit shall enter God’s Kingdom. Are you?

Paul wrote – Be filled with the Spirit? (Eph. 5) Are you?

The Spirit-filled life comes by thirsting for Jesus, repenting of worldliness & secret sin, asking forgiveness, and TRUSTING in the Spirit for a new heart.

ALL CHRISTIANS MUST BE ANOINTED OF THE SPIRIT, AS CORNELIUS WAS.

5. Recognizing that the Spirit is reality and the water a sign helps us too in working with Christians who have a different understanding of baptism – those who believe that the sign should only be given AFTER the Spirit touches a person.

This is important because in our shrinking globe & increasingly diverse & CONNECTED world, Christian traditions will have to work more together. It’s an issue that shouldn’t divide us from the work of evangelizing and discipling others.

a. BOTH traditions agree that Spirit-baptism is what saves, not water baptism.

In our covenant tradition, we administer baptism to the children of believers as the SEAL of God’s PROMISE.

In the believer-baptism tradition, baptism is a seal of an EXPERIENCE of the Spirit.

For both, baptism AFFIRMS & WELCOMES. It is the work of the church.

III. ACCOUNTABILITY

Let’s read on –

1. After baptizing Cornelius, his family & friends, Peter remains with them a few days and then heads back to church HEADQUARTERS – Jerusalem.

His reception there points to another ministry of the church - ACCOUNTABILITY.

READ ACTS 11:1-18

- (i) Word about Gentiles coming to Christ had already spread from Caesarea to Jerusalem, faster than gossip in a highschool!

Peter gets there and is called on the carpet.

A. There's a good part to this. We need to be held accountable for our actions & teaching. It's part of the Christian life.

- As a church, we're accountable to Classis
- As a pastor – to elders / Classis
- As members – one to another ... ultimately to elders

If you are missing from church for a few weeks, it's love that prompts an elder to give you a call.

2. The METHOD used here, albeit, does seem to be lacking.

The leaders of the church come to Peter with CRITICISM & ACCUSATION: *"You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."*

- (i) If you need to hold someone to account, start with a question, not an accusation.
 - Start with an "I" pronoun, not a "you": *Here's something I don't understand ... I heard you went to this place – is that correct? Why?*

= much better than, YOU DID THIS ...

A. CRITICISM starts from a base of mistrust & division. Questions ask for understanding and build unity.

- (ii) Changing ministry approach for the sake of the gospel, like Peter had done will raise eyebrows, even criticism. It's better to ask questions.

2. Here's how Peter responds to his accusers:

- (i) One, PERSONAL TESTIMONY – He shares how the Lord spoke in a vision. If we make changes for the spread of the gospel, we want to know that they've begun here, in our hearts – from our relationship with God.

Peter received this vision while in PRAYER – not coincidental – Conviction is drawn from within, through prayer.

PRAYER OPENS CHANNELS FOR DIRECTION

(ii) Two, Peter defends his actions with the CONFIRMATION OF CIRCUMSTANCE: “Look”, he adds, “Even while God was telling me not to call anything impure that He has made clean ... RIGHT THEN! these 3 Gentile men sent from Cornelius knock at my door! And they tell of an angel who sent them to find me ... “it’s probably a God-thing”

- Cause God does confirm with circumstance

But that’s not all we look for:

(iii) Three, “Most important of all”, Peter goes on, “When I shared Jesus with them, THE SPIRIT CAME DOWN – and I remembered His promise to baptize with the Spirit.

“God gave them the same gift that he gave us. Look at the fruit of this ministry change! God’s in it!”

Divine blessing attends God’s leadings. We look for that in whatever ministry changes we need to take.

3. Peter’s witness won the day – and Spirit-born PRAISE AGAIN finishes our passage:

When they heard this, they raised no further objections and praised God saying, “So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”

Peter & Cornelius’ – A MAJOR STORY IN THE BOOK OF ACTS - ends with the church AFFIRMING / HOLDING ACCOUNTABLE / AND THEN AFFIRMING AGAIN.

IV. CONCLUSION

These ministries of the Church are with us this morning in the meal we now partake in.

1. Like Baptism, the Lord’s Supper is a sacrament of AFFIRMATION.

- It’s a sign & seal of God’s love for you in Jesus Christ (move to table)

(i) This meal is God’s WORD in Jesus made VISIBLE.

He loves you to the point of giving His whole self for you to the point of death.

A. Last weekend I watched the movie, *The Kite Runner*. I had read the book a few years ago. In the story is a Christ-figure – a pure-hearted servant boy, Hassan. For the love of his half-brother - AMIR, he gives everything to get him a kite (a symbol of freedom / life in the Spirit) – even to the point of being beaten & raped.

Such is Christ's love for you & I – to give us life in the Spirit.

The bread is His body, broken for you ... as often as you eat it, remember me.

He loves you to the point of shedding His blood for you.

A. The cup is His blood shed for the forgiveness of sins ... take and drink.

In the sacrament, the Word of God comes to you – AFFIRMING LOVE. At those places of deep need in your life, where you need love, ask the Spirit to minister to you.

2. The meal too is an act of ACCOUNTABILITY.

- God's Word commands us to eat the meal in a "worthy manner" (1 Cor. 11:27)

(i) In the *Kite-Runner*, Hassan's beating & rape is watched by the one he loves (AMIR). Hassan even knows he's watching – yet does not cry out. But Amir does nothing but watch.

The plot of the story is AMIR trying to come to grips with this love and his guilt in not standing up against the abuse Hassan endured.

A. As Christians, we receive the gift of Christ's love for us – but not without it changing our lives – so that we become like Him:

IN THE WORDS OF OUR LITURGY OF PREPARATION:

Let us search ourselves to determine whether we love our neighbors as Christ commands. Do we unselfishly live for the welfare of others? Do our lives reflect the godly virtues of obedience, fidelity, integrity, justice, humility and contentment? Do we seek reconciliation with our neighbors in all cases of offense?

THIS IS A MEAL OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Those who live in self-righteousness, who hope in works or virtues of their own, and who do not show love to God and neighbor, have no true place at the Lord's Supper.

Yet we should not be deterred by any sin lingering with us against our will. As we find faith & hope in the gift of this sacrifice, and love within us, we ought gladly to obey our Lord's command and come with full expectation to God's open house of mercy.

3. Let's pray: *Gracious God, we love and adore you in Christ our Lord. We thank you for reconciling us to yourself in Him. We rejoice in being received as your children.*

Prepare us by your Holy Spirit for the sacrament. Help us to come in the assurance that by it we shall be spiritually revived, and strengthened in faith, hope and love, through Christ our Lord. Amen.