

Peter and Cornelius...Opposites Who Changed Each Other

Acts 10

Peter and Cornelius were unlikely candidates to be friends . . . or to have any sort of relationship for that matter. Peter was a Jew. Cornelius was a Gentile. In those days Jews and Gentiles kept their relationships far apart. But these two men came together in Christ.

This was the beginning of what the church of Jesus Christ is all about. It is people who come together in Jesus Christ who otherwise would never have had anything to do with one another. It is the story of what the church is today around the world and locally as well. It is the story of Jews and of Gentiles, of people of every race and national background, of young and old, of rich and poor, of educated and ignorant, all kinds of people who otherwise would probably never even speak to each other, who have come together simply because they hold in common a relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ.

That's what happened with Cornelius and Peter. They came together and became friends, but they became friends for a specific purpose and that was for change. And so God brings us together in Christ to change. Using Acts 10 for a base, let's look at how this happens from three different observations.

First of all, two characters came together who would otherwise be apart if not for their bond in Christ. The first character was Cornelius. His name did not distinguish him at all. Lots of male Roman babies born after 82 B.C. were named Cornelius. That was the year Roman general Publius Cornelius Sulla liberated 10,000 slaves who were enrolled under his family name. "Cornelius" was as common a name in Rome then as "Anderson" is in Minnesota today.

Cornelius was a soldier, a centurion, which means he had 100 men under his command. That was not a high rank but it was a good rank. It was roughly equivalent to being a captain in a modern

army, although a captain today is a commissioned officer and a centurion in the Roman army was a noncommissioned officer.

What distinguished Cornelius more than his name or his rank was that he was what the Hebrew people called a God-fearer. He was one of a number of Gentiles who were disillusioned with their own pantheistic religion of the Greek and Roman world and were attracted to the Old Testament Septuagint and Synagogue. They liked the Hebrew monotheism but were not circumcised, were not adherents to the Law and certainly were not proselytes to Judaism.

Most significant of all, Cornelius was a Gentile. The best definition for a Gentile was a "non-Jew." It was not a complimentary description when it came from Jewish mouths!

Character number two was Peter. His name did distinguish him. He was originally named Simon, but one day Jesus had turned to Simon and called him "Peter the Rock." It was a nickname at first but it stuck until he was better known by "Peter" than his given name of Simon.

Peter has been criticized through the centuries, especially in Protestant pulpits. We have argued against him being the first pope. We have analyzed his impetuous personality and have condemned his defection from Jesus on the eve of the crucifixion. What we need to remember is that Peter was a zealous fol-

lower and a close friend of Jesus Christ; he was a powerful preacher; a worker of miracles; he had a most significant role in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ from its initial small beginning to what eventually permeated the entire empire.

While you may or may not feel comfortable with the notion that he was the human upon whom Jesus founded his church, let me say that if ever there was a man suited for such a role, it was Peter!

God will not be contained by any church or group. The Holy Spirit will do it his way and not our way.

But what distinguished Peter especially was that he was a Jew. We Gentiles cannot fully understand or appreciate what that meant. To be born a Jew was to be in the line of Abraham, to be chosen, to be special, to be privileged, to be different. It was at the same time a racial, ethnic, religious and spiritual designation all rolled into one. To this day the very idea of being a Jew enables persecuted people to stand against overwhelming odds and to fight seemingly impossible battles.

Nowhere was Jewish-ness more crystallized than among the Pharisees. The very word Pharisee means separate ones. The Pharisees dominated the religious landscape of Peter's day.

Peter was a Jew and he loved it. Yet, the time had come for change. It is hard to imagine that Cornelius and Peter would ever have met had not God brought them together to change them both. It happened in a way that many of us would be skeptical of today . . . through Cornelius having a vision and Peter going into a trance.

Periodically I have people tell me about their modern visions and trances. I have had people tell me things from wonderful to weird. I am never quite sure what to say or how to react. I fear that if either Cornelius or Peter had come my way to seek my counsel with the experiences of Acts 10 I might have told them to forget it . . . or to seek psychiatric counsel!

But God used a vision to tell Cornelius about Peter and a trance to prepare Peter for Cornelius. God knew they needed each other in order to change. There were no Christians in the Italian regiment who could tell Cornelius about Jesus Christ. There were no Jews in Peter's circle of friends who would break all the traditions and enable him to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentile world. They needed to come together to comprehend the Christ and to be changed by him.

Sometimes God startles us with truth in unusual places and people. Just when we think we have everything down pat we find that things are not always as we thought them to be.

But their togetherness in Christ made problems for both of them. Cornelius was a Roman. Romans were the conquerors. Jews were the conquered. There was great hostility and anger be-

tween the Romans and the Jews. One could never be sure which Jew was a collaborator and which Jew was a zealot with an assassin's knife hidden in his cloak. Association with Peter could mean risking his life.

Certainly Cornelius knew that it was not good for his career. What would they think in Rome when it came time for his promotion? Wouldn't it appear on his record that he was close to Jews and that he actually joined this new sect of so-called "Christians"? Was it not rumored that these Christians secretly met to eat flesh and drink blood? Was it not hinted that there was a special love they professed for one another that included men for men and women for women?

Remember, this was volatile Palestine! The leader of this sect was crucified under orders of the Roman governor. It surely meant problems for Cornelius to entertain Peter and to follow Peter's Christ. Yes, it was one thing to be a God-fearer, but quite another to become a Christian!

Yet, it was worth it. It was worth it to change from polytheism to monotheism. It was worth it to no longer call Caesar "lord" but to call Christ Lord. It was worth it to no longer have to carry the burden of his own sins but to have them all washed away by Jesus Christ. It was worth it to no longer live with uncertainty and doubt but to have the guarantee that forever in heaven was God's promise to him. It was worth it because Cornelius was a devout man who feared and sought God.

But there were problems. And not just for Cornelius! Changes brought problems for Peter, too. If anything, his problems were far greater!

Peter was always a devout practicing orthodox Jew. He had never touched, much less eaten, a piece of pork or a slice of vulture or a chunk of lobster. It took him three showings of the trance video before he could get his stomach settled.

Peter couldn't believe his senses when he heard God say, "*Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.*" He insisted, "*Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.*"

I hardly know what to compare it to, but let's try this. When the Olympics were in Seoul, Korea, there was a national campaign to minimize serv-

ing dog meat, one of the favorite foods in Korea. To us dog meat is repulsive. In the same way, to Peter it was repulsive to think of eating reptiles, pork or shellfish. After all, God had forbidden that in the Old Testament.

But it was more than taste and culture, it was also conviction. It would be more like a teetotaler being offered a beer or the Surgeon General being told to smoke a cigarette. This was downright offensive to Peter.

And then there was Peter's ministry! He had been commissioned by Jesus Christ himself to make disciples, to win the lost, to establish and build the church. But what would this change do to his ministry? Would he lose all credibility with his Jewish friends? Would he ever again be allowed to speak in the synagogue or preach in the temple? Would some who had become Christians revert to Judaism when they heard what Peter had experienced? While the problems were great, Peter also considered the command of God and obedience to his command to be worth any problem that would arise and any price that needed to be paid.

I have wondered what I would do. Suppose I took a noon nap at a friends' house, fell asleep and saw a vision from God. Suppose the vision gave a different understanding of the Bible than what I had always believed and taught. What a dilemma! How would I tell the church? Would I have to resign the pastorate? I fear that I would be tempted to keep God's communication quiet, to live life as usual, to maintain the status quo rather than go with God's special word to me.

Have you ever wondered the same? Or, are you so convinced that you have the complete truth that change is inconceivable and a new perspective is impossible, even from God?

When Cornelius and Peter came together in Christ it was the making of problems for both of them! And so it is for us. Change is seldom easy. New truth is slow to be accepted. Change is something we are far more likely to resist than to celebrate. Yet, did not Luke and the Holy Spirit give

us the watershed story of Acts 10 for us to celebrate the biblical relationship of Cornelius and Peter coming together in Christ, together to change?

God brings us together in Christ to change. We've considered this proposition from observation #1, God bringing together those who were otherwise apart; from observation #2, the making of problems for both; and now from observation #3, causing changes for many.

The course of Christianity changed when Peter saw that sheet with unclean food. It changed when he accepted the revelation as coming from God. It changed when he opened the door to Gentile messengers, allowed them in, shared his meal and entertained them overnight. It changed when he went to Cornelius, when he forthrightly and succinctly proclaimed the gospel message. It changed when the Holy Spirit came on Gentiles and they spoke in tongues. And it changed when Peter commanded that uncircumcised Gentiles be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Some call this the Gentile Pentecost. Whatever it was called it was monumental. No longer was salvation just for Jews. No longer were circumcision and kosher cooking signs of a covenant relationship with God. No longer was Christianity a sub-sect of the Jewish religion. Now the gospel was for everyone. Now the world could

be evangelized. Now Christ's commission could be fulfilled.

The changes were great and the cause for celebration was worthy of celestial shouts! Those changes have echoed down through

the centuries until our generation. Because of what happened in Acts 10 we can share the gospel with strangers eating Sausage McMuffins at McDonald's and we don't even need to raise the topic of circumcision or worry about ethnic origin. We can just tell the good news of life eternal through faith in the crucified and risen Christ.

My concern in all of this is simple: Are we still coming together in Christ to change? Are we

God brings us together with those who are different so that he can effect his changes for good in our lives.

open to the wind and will of the Holy Spirit today? I fear that too often we come together to reinforce the way we are. Change is suspect; tradition has become sacred. We are comfortable in the way things are, even defensive when someone challenges the status quo.

Denominations and traditions today have replaced the differences of the first century. Let us remember that God will not be contained by any church or group. The Holy Spirit will do it his way and not our way.

Sometimes we are astounded at the freshness and newness of God, the way he brings the most unlikely Peters and Corneliuses into our lives to become our friends and changes us in ways we never dreamed.

Please understand . . . I am not suggesting that there be any compromise of biblical truth or of orthodox faith. Absolutely not! But I am suggesting that God brings us together with those who are different so that he can effect his changes for good in our lives. We need to be open to those changes and we need to celebrate the Cornelius/Peter biblical friendships God gives us together in Jesus Christ!

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson