

CORNELIUS

Sometimes in my enthusiasm for the Apostle Paul, some people get the impression that I don't think much of Peter. When I was young, meaning grade school through college, I thought a lot more favorably of Peter than I did of Paul. Among other things, Peter was interesting. Paul was usually presented as vague, obtuse, and pretty complicated in his thinking. Obviously I was taught by people who didn't know most of the right stories about Paul. In any case, Peter had a much better reputation and was far more influential in the early church than Paul was. As with many famous artists and musicians, it took the world a hundred years, and quite some time after the death of Paul, before it began to truly appreciate him.

But Peter was certainly no slouch as an apostle. And Peter did not have some of the advantages Paul had. He was not rabbinically trained, was not a Roman citizen, did not speak or write Greek easily, was not as at home in pagan surroundings or thought-frames as Paul was. In this regard, it is amazing how much Peter grew and learned, and how much he was transformed by his association with Jesus. Peter is famous for making mistakes, putting his foot in it, making the wrong remark at the wrong time. And we love it because Peter makes the mistakes we were about to make, thus saving us from the embarrassment. But how many times does Peter make the same mistake twice?

The low ebb of Peter's life came with a rooster's cry. But I think he never again denied his Lord. Certainly that was not for lack of threat or serious consequences. But we cannot get far into the life of Peter in one single sermon. Today I want to talk about Peter's association with a Roman Centurion named Cornelius. This story takes place after the Resurrection, and it reveals that Peter was helping to lead the infant church in some dramatic new directions. At least for me, the story of Cornelius is a huge new step in the church's life – and another conversion experience for Peter himself. How I wish the church had understood this revealing story even better. It would have changed the face and message of Christianity in ways beyond what our history portrays. It seems clear to me that Peter understood the deeper implications. I suspect that is what the Holy Spirit had in mind for the whole church. But even the Holy Spirit doesn't "win 'em all" – at least not the first time around.

In some Christian circles, it is implied or stated outright that we only have one conversion experience. As you already know, this annoys me. It is such a mismatch to our records of how the Christian Life unfolds. We are the unconverted, then we awaken (or are awakened) to the presence and love of God in Christ Jesus, and that converts us. Before that, we were not Christians; after that, we are Christians. Neat and tidy, but hardly accurate. This kind of single-shot approach to Christianity and New Life in Christ Jesus is a simplex formula approach. “*Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.*” (Acts 16:31 NEB) Actually, I *do* think this axiom is very true. I don’t like it put as a formula, or made to sound so wooden that we forget all about the personal dynamics of real love and growth and change. “Believe in” can be reduced down to some kind of intellectual assent, as if we could be saved by holding correct ideas or opinions about various things. That doesn’t cut it. But cut behind the verbiage to what the words point at, and the comment really is true. Faith means trust. If I believe in Jesus, I trust in the power and authority of His love to save me. Even more accurately, I trust in the power and love of God – revealed in Jesus – to save me, and to save you too, by the way. Well, my *believing it*, or even trusting it, does not save me, but it does make it possible for Jesus to reach me and start making some necessary changes in my life.

Paul and Silas were talking to the jailer at Philippi, and they had just saved the jailer’s life. Paul and Silas were not pushing it; the jailer wanted to know how to get in on what he was experiencing and feeling from them. Paul and Silas didn’t act like anybody he had run into before. He asked them point-blank: What can I do to find what you have found? “*Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved [you will find the New Life we have found], you and all your household.*” It was the middle of the night, but there was a beautiful little stream not far from the jail. After washing their wounds (Paul and Silas had been severely flogged), the jailer and all his household were baptized. Then the jailer took them to his home and fed them, and they all rejoiced together about what had happened. (Acts 16:30-34)

But we were talking about Peter and Cornelius (not Paul and the Philippian jailer). I don’t have an accurate count, but this is *at least* Peter’s fourth conversion experience. How many times Peter was actually converted (changed), we are not certain. And we aren’t talking about all the little ones that occur all along the Way, just the major, life-altering experiences. (The little adjustments that correct our aim on a daily or weekly basis are also very important. I don’t mean to minimize them or how essential they are to the Christian Life.)

Peter's big conversions that we can trace:

1.) Called from catching fish, to being a fisher of men.

2.) A rooster's cry.

3.) The Last Breakfast, where a great catch of fish reminded Peter of his first conversion. Peter had gone back to his old life, fishing. Now Jesus had come for him again. Three times Peter had denied; now three times he must affirm and confess his faith. Then Peter was reinstated. Did this not "convert" him at least as much as the first time? Yes, only even deeper, for he had experienced far more and understood far more than he did the first time.

4.) The Cornelius incident would convert Peter from a man who thought God was just for the Jews, into a man who thought God was for everyone. How we should long and pray for all Christians to experience the "fourth conversion," so that God (or Jesus) will no longer be just for Baptists or Catholics or people in The New Church. And even in The New Church we have to be careful about getting too cocky. We don't want to pick up where the UCC left us off: "All are welcome, except for those who do not think that all are welcome." That's a lot of people. In many UCC churches, all are welcome except for white males, especially if they are wealthy or successful. Why does Jesus make it so hard!?

5.) "*Quo vadis?*" (Whither goest thou?) was a fifth conversion for Peter. This time it sent him back to Rome to die – to be crucified upside down. Of course, we notice that Peter had already escaped Rome; he was already out of there and free. Why did the Spirit send him back?

Today we are talking about the fourth conversion – the incident with Cornelius. Why does Peter have this vision (trance) of a great sail-cloth coming down from heaven? There is no way Peter would go eat with Cornelius if he had not had this revelation. Even here we stumble onto a little item many have never noticed. Suddenly we realize that Peter is not just a rugged, redneck peasant fisherman, like he has so often been portrayed. "*He heard a voice saying, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.'*" (Acts 10:13-14) Never? This is a very religious, very committed, very disciplined "son of the commandments." This may be a "simple fisherman" in some careless people's view, but Peter is also a serious and practicing Jew. He will not break Torah. He will not break kosher rules. He will not eat with a Gentile. That is, he will not unless

the Holy Spirit prepares the way. And let us not slough over it: To prepare the way, in this case, means to break Peter loose from everything he has been taught, from everything he has considered “godly” from the time he was a little boy. If you eat with a Gentile, you will no longer be a faithful Jew – a son of the commandments. And you will no longer belong to God.

In short, this is a huge and daring move – a life-changing conversion for Peter. And when he sets off to visit Cornelius (a Roman Centurion, a pagan, a Gentile), knowing he will go in and eat with him ... well, if he is wrong about the vision or its meaning, he will have cut himself off from Israel, and away from God. It seems simple to us, because we all assume Peter was correct to be doing this. But Peter is quite literally taking not only his life but his eternal soul into his hands. Peter will risk it all to be true to his vision, and to all he has learned and pondered from his walk with Jesus up to this time. Many people live their whole lives and never go through such a major transformation. It is, as we say, an earth-shattering experience to have our major belief systems shattered – to realize that some of our most trusted convictions are incorrect. When that happens, either we fall apart, or we grow into some new convictions that are much “larger” than those we held previously. For a while we struggle with what a friend of mine calls “spiritual vertigo.” Some of us never stray more than a few yards from all the opinions, stances, and prejudices we were handed by the culture and customs that surround us from birth. I suspect none of us go into a conversion experience if we can possibly help it. It is much too disorienting – much too uncomfortable. Do we imagine that Moses *wanted* to see a burning bush; or that Isaiah *wanted* to see that vision of the Lord; or that Paul *wanted* a light on the Damascus Road to blind him and change his life forever? Lots of people pretend a religious aura that serves them well in this world. But being truly religious is *never* our idea; it is never a human desire or construct.

Anyway, couched in the repetition and flair of the near-eastern way of telling a story, Peter goes from Joppa to Caesarea to be a guest in the house of Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Why does Peter have this vision when he is in Joppa (south side of Tel Aviv, in our time)? No reason. It doesn't matter. It's only a coincidence that Jonah set sail from Joppa to escape from the Lord's calling to go to Nineveh. Peter must have been sorely tempted to run away from the Lord's call to go eat with a pagan soldier in the city that was the center and headquarters for the Roman Empire for that entire region.

But Peter does not run away. He goes to the house of Cornelius. And to Cornelius' astonishment, Peter enters the house and, against all Jewish rules and customs, acts as a gracious guest and dines in this nonkosher household.

Then Peter makes a very good speech. But the high drama is that while Peter is still speaking (still being the gracious guest and all), something happens that even Peter had not foreseen: The Holy Spirit comes upon all the Gentiles who are there – that is, on Cornelius, on his household, and on his guests. Oops! That is not supposed to be possible. That is breaking all the rules and expectations. That is accepting the nonacceptable. That is way beyond even the vision that broke Peter past the clean-and-unclean-foods law.

Despite all his former convictions, it is already clear to Peter what is happening: The presence of the Holy Spirit is setting Christians apart from other Jews. The Holy Spirit is re-forming and redefining the fellowship of the Christians – the “family” of the Resurrected Jesus. Despite the fact that Jesus was a Jew, as are all His disciples/apostles/followers, now the Holy Spirit has fallen on non-Jews, making them part of the fellowship of Christians – including them as members of the “family” of the Resurrected Jesus, even though they are not Jews. And that, my friends, blows all the ceilings off, all the windows open, and all the rules to smithereens.

Peter is there – he believes it and will go with it – and it is magnificent that he can expand his horizons so dramatically. Most of us stay pretty small and tiny within the frameworks that we were handed and grew up with. Nevertheless, even Peter will have to struggle hard to keep – to hang on to – and keep *true* to what the Holy Spirit has shown him. Cornelius is one man with one household, and he lives in Caesarea – that is, in the heartland of Israel. The full repercussions and applications of what Peter has been shown cannot dawn on him all at once. Peter will venture clear to Antioch, where it starts to seem too big and confusing for him to be so “far out” – so “new” and different from all he was raised to believe and trust. So at Antioch, Peter begins to pull back from the Gentile believers. Under serious pressure from the Jewish Christians at Antioch, Peter starts to crumble. Maybe Gentile believers really should convert to Judaism – be circumcised, become kosher. Maybe he should have told Cornelius that converting was the next step to a *truly* Christian life. After all, wasn't Judaism the highest and best religion in the world? Wouldn't everybody benefit from learning and keeping the laws of God,

the traditions of Moses? How could there be any conflict between Judaism and Jesus? Maybe he had been too hasty; maybe he had just been tired or weary and blown his vision clear out of proportion to what the Spirit really intended.

Getting together and talking things over is not always the way to truth. Sometimes it just muddies the waters and takes away the clarity and inspiration that the Spirit has provided. But it is familiar and comfortable for Peter to be back with “his own kind” in Antioch. These are Christians, no doubt about it, but they have all come from Jewish backgrounds. And they are helping Peter to understand things from a much better perspective, a more familiar perspective – one that incorporates the blessings of Judaism with the blessings of Jesus. These are Jews who cannot abide straying so far from “the faith of their fathers.” “Give me that old-time religion.” But how old? Are we going back to Peter and Cornelius, or just back to what is safe and familiar and comfortable?

In the beginning days of the church, there is only one man who sees it clearly enough to keep faithful against all the pressure, all the threats, all the arguments, all the voices railing against him. He even faces down Peter, there in Antioch – Peter who has the huge and unquestioned reputation as the top apostle of the Risen Christ. And it will be Peter’s humility that saves the day, as Peter realizes that he himself has become scared and gone cautious. That one man, of course, is Paul: the murderer of Christians, but also the man who had seen the Risen Christ on the way to Damascus. And now Paul had spent years pondering it all – rethinking everything he had ever learned or been taught as a faithful Jew (even under Gamaliel). And Paul will not compromise on this one – not ever – no matter how much he is beaten, stoned, threatened, cursed, damned, or rejected. The love of God, in Jesus Christ, is for everyone! We *do* have to repent of our old lives and our old ways. We *do* have to go open – willing to receive the new love and status and identity we are offered in Jesus Christ. But the love of God, in Jesus Christ, is for everyone! Not everyone wants it. Be careful – don’t go soft in the head: Not everyone wants it. But it is for everyone who *does* want it.

Okay, so let’s back up a bit. Why is this story of Cornelius here in the book of Acts? Well, it’s a great story. It shows Peter’s spiritual journey and further awakening. It brings a prominent Gentile family (household) into the faith. (Don’t we wish we knew where Cornelius and his family worshipped after that? Were they really received into “the church”?) But maybe now we should also notice that we are reading

from the two-volume works of Luke, and Luke was not present at the time of Cornelius' conversion. Luke is reflecting back on all these events – writing near the end of Paul's life, and I claim near the end of his own life. And Luke is not a Jew! Luke is a Gentile convert who ran into Paul in Troas during the second missionary journey. Why do I care? Because of perspective. There are many themes and wondrous stories being told in the book of Acts. One of the *major* themes (most will insist, once they have noticed) is that Acts is telling stories about who is being included in the Christian movement. And it is quite startling who is being included.

Am I taking too long? Just one other incident (Acts 8:26-40): Philip (the evangelist and deacon (Acts 6:5)) has been directed by “an angel” to go south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. On this road, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, an official of Queen Candace, who is heading back to Ethiopia from Jerusalem. The eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah. (What does that tell us? That the Ethiopian is devout, spiritually hungry, actively seeking, on serious pilgrimage.) He is reading from early in the “suffering servant” passage (Isaiah 53:7-8) and wants to know: “Who are we talking about? What does this mean?” So Philip tells him about Jesus. The Ethiopian eunuch is much impressed, and he wants to become a follower of Jesus.

The Ethiopian says, “*See here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?*” And the answer is? The answer is what the Ethiopian has been hearing all his life: “Sorry, but you are maimed. I cannot bring you fully into the courts of our God. You can hang around the outer courts, but you cannot be granted full membership.” (Leviticus 21:16-23) That is what the Ethiopian expects to hear. That is what he has always heard before. But unbelievably, that is not the answer this time. This time, they both go into the water, and Philip baptizes him.

Then, as we've already mentioned, a Roman Centurion is baptized – Cornelius and all his household. And what is the key, the core principle? Peter says it best: “*Is anyone prepared to withhold the water of baptism from these persons, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?*” (Acts 10:47) Then he orders them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

That, my friends, blows all the ceilings off, all the windows open, and all the rules to smithereens. There it is! A core story at the core of true Christendom: If the Holy Spirit accepts anyone, who are we to reject them? There is no higher affirmation. There is no greater or superior

membership in the Christian church – the faith family, the fellowship – than baptism. And we do not withhold baptism – full forgiveness, new identity, total love and acceptance – from anyone whom the Holy Spirit has received and accepted.

So then we get to struggle, like Peter did, to keep what we have been shown. Have you ever known a woman who has received the Holy Spirit? (I have.) Does a woman who has received the Holy Spirit have full membership in Jesus' church? Has she any restrictions in the faith fellowship? If the Spirit has chosen her as one of Christ's own, then who has authority to limit, question, or put any special restrictions on her worth, her value, her service, her acceptance among us? Yet some still say she should be silent, she should not be ordained, she is still inferior to men. But in the name of the Holy Spirit, they are wrong! How do we know? We know the story of Cornelius. And we heard what Peter asked us: *"Is anyone prepared to withhold the water of baptism from these persons, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?"*

Have you ever known a homosexual who has received the Holy Spirit? (I have.) If the Holy Spirit has chosen them, loved them, and redeemed them, do they have full membership in Jesus' church? In our time, right now, we have churches, even whole denominations, all over the landscape that are struggling mightily with gay rights, and issues of whether homosexuals can be married or ordained. And many are still saying that homosexuals cannot be accepted as long as they remain homosexuals. But in the name of the Holy Spirit, they are wrong! How do we know? We know the story of Cornelius. And we heard what Peter asked us: *"Is anyone prepared to withhold the water of baptism from these persons, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?"*

As an aside: Most conservative Christians claim that the Scriptures are entirely on their side in rejecting homosexuality as a viable way of life. And most liberal Christians keep silent about the Scriptures, appealing to compassion and understanding and other humanitarian arguments, because they think the Scriptures will not support them in this case. What? Do we suspend Scripture any time we cannot get it or force it to agree with us? It is not a light or guide to us – only a mascot, when convenient?

The tenth chapter of Acts (and numerous other passages as well) does indeed light our way to the understanding that we may and must include gay people as fully one of us, and one with us. If the Holy Spirit

has received them, who are we to reject them? And the Holy Spirit has indeed received many of them, so homosexuality cannot be seen as the barrier to – or an excuse for withholding – Christian love and total acceptance. By the way, this obviously includes baptism, and baptism is the highest ranking status there is in Christendom.

Have you ever known any category of person wherein no individual among them has ever received the Holy Spirit? We do not receive the Holy Spirit by category, by the way – a little thing lots of folk are getting careless about in our time. We receive the Holy Spirit as individuals, not as categories. (It gets tricky, for some, when we come to Buddhists, Muslims, etc.)

One last question: Have you ever known a heterosexual white male with wealth and property who has received the Holy Spirit? That is the category most in question in our time. The pendulum swings, and humans have a tendency to correct one problem by creating another. Look at the membership of any mainline Protestant church in our time. What is the rarest category of member? White males between the ages of twenty-five and forty. They are the rarest category among us. And just as they have become nearly extinct in our churches, we have decided to make them the least welcome – the most criticized, judged, accused (often wrongly), and rejected. Intriguingly, this is the category (adjusted to our culture) from which Jesus and His twelve apostles came.

My mother used to say that she could walk into any congregation on a Sunday morning and tell you within ten seconds whether it was a viable and healthy church, a declining church, or a sick and withering church.

If forty percent or more of the congregation was grown males, it was a vital and healthy church. If twenty to thirty percent of the congregation was grown males, it was a struggling church, probably in decline. If under twenty percent of the congregation was grown males, it was an ailing and probably a dying church.

We pay very heavy prices for not following the lead of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit receives anyone, so do we. After all, the Holy Spirit is our Risen Lord. We are the followers, not the designers, controllers, creators, or rule-makers. We don't have a lot of faithful choices, so we say to the Holy Spirit: "Any friend of yours is a friend of ours."