

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL TO CREATE A DIVERSE BUT UNITED CHURCH

Acts 11:1-18

INTRODUCTION

I doubt there is anyone in here who would say, "I'm looking to join a disunited church. I want to be part of a church where the members regularly fight with each other and carry grudges against each other and snub each other in public. I'm looking for a church where cliques reign and the people criticize each other behind one another's backs and won't talk with those with whom they disagree." Is there anyone in here who wants to join that kind of church? I don't think so. I'm pretty confident all of us would say that we want to be part of a united church. We want to belong to a church where people get along with and accept and indeed even love one another. We want to belong to a church where the people agree with one another about the important stuff and treat those with whom they disagree about less important things with respect and charity.

While all of us yearn to be part of a unified body of believers we also recognize that the potential for disunity and division is always present with us. The potential for division is always present in part because we are diverse people. The local church is made up of people who are different from one another in many ways and these differences always have the potential to become occasions of conflict and separation. Just think for a moment about the numerous ways that we in our little church differ from one another. There are the basic facts of our existence that distinguish us from one another: our marital status, our age, our gender, our economic status, our educational background, our vocations, and our ethnicity. We differ in many of our preferences: our sports teams, the style of clothes we wear, the kind of cars we drive, the TV shows we watch or don't watch, the way we spend our free time, the kind of foods we like to eat and the homes we live in.

The place where our differences have the greatest potential to interfere with our unity is in our values and beliefs. I think this is especially true for Christian people because we believe there is truth and there is error. We know that God likes some things and he doesn't like other things. Most of us, when we are making decisions about what we will do or not do are bringing God into the equation. Most of us have areas of our lives where we can say, with conviction, I am doing this because God wants me to do it and I am not doing this because God does not want me to do it. The moment we begin to claim God's endorsement of our values and our actions we put ourselves in the position of being in serious conflict with others. If I say God wants me to do this and you say that God wants you to not do the same thing, then for me to accept you and your choice feels as though I am either being disloyal to God or calling my own God directed value into question. Let me be specific to our situation. There are parents among us who believe God wants them to send their children to public school. Then there are other parents among us who believe God wants them to teach their children themselves in their own home. The potential for disunity between these two groups of parents is significant. This is just one example of dozens that could be given.

The fact is that it is Jesus who has put us into the same church together. At the same time, Jesus wants us, this group of very diverse people, to be united. In our passage this morning I believe we are shown how Jesus builds local churches that are made up of very diverse people but which are still unified. Notice that there is a significant threat to the unity of the church in the beginning of chapter 11. The church which is in Judea has heard that Peter has preached the gospel to a large household of Gentile people and that those people have received the word of God. So when Peter leaves the house of Cornelius in the seaside town of Caesarea and returns to Jerusalem a group of these Jewish believers challenge Peter. They want to know what he was doing hanging out with and eating with a bunch of Gentiles. In v. 3 the church is hanging on the precipice of becoming divided by ethnicity and religious practice. Yet, if you will look at the end of this episode in v. 18 you will see that it remains united. The whole church worships God for granting repentance unto life, even to the Gentiles. So in this story we are watching how it is that Jesus builds a diverse but united church.

MAIN POINT

Jesus builds a diverse but united church by...

I. Correcting with gentleness and firmness the misled within the church (vv. 1-4, 15-17)

First of all, let's make sure we understand who is involved in this controversy and what exactly the point of the controversy is. The news of Peter's going to this Gentile household and of their receiving the word of God has spread like wildfire throughout the entire church in Jerusalem and Judea. The critical point to remember is that up to Cornelius, every Christian was either Jewish by ethnicity and/or practice or closely associated with Judaism as the Samaritans were or was a full convert to Judaism. The people belonging to the church in Judea are ardent practitioners of the Mosaic Law found in the OT. In v. 2 notice that a group of Jewish Christians in Judea are identified as "the circumcised believers" (NIV) or "the circumcision party" (ESV). Literally it reads "those out of the circumcision". Every Christian male up to the conversion of Cornelius' household was circumcised. Yet it is not the entire church in Judea which is criticizing Peter. Rather, it is a subgroup of Jewish believers that are judging him for what he did. Why are they upset with him? They believe, based upon their understanding of the OT law, that eating what Gentiles eat is disobedience to God. In Leviticus 11 and other places God tells his people that there are certain kinds of food that if eaten will make the eater unclean, unfit for God. Therefore, since Gentile people eat these unclean foods if you went into the home of a Gentile and ate their food you were intentionally disobeying God and becoming unclean in God's eyes. So there is a group of very Jewish people in the Jewish church who are accusing Peter of disobeying God.

A second reason for their criticism is this: the OT law is very clear that in order for a Gentile person to become a member of the people of God and acceptable to God they had to embrace the entire OT law. This meant the males had to be circumcised; they all had to follow the food and other cleanliness laws and perform the various other ceremonies of the law. These Jewish Christians cannot imagine non-Jewish people becoming part of the church without them becoming Jewish by submitting to all of the law in the OT. The fact that Peter had baptized these Gentiles in the name of Jesus and thus accepted them into the church and treated them as though God fully accepted them without their taking on all of Judaism was in their mind a serious violation of God's word. These people are not being narrow-minded religious zealots. They have a legitimate point. God has spoken in the OT and has explained what it means to be a part of his people and so receiving these Gentiles as full members of God's people does require an explanation. However, you can also feel the personal attack they are making on Peter. They are calling into question his love for and obedience to God. They are challenging his authority as an apostle.

Notice what Peter does not do. He does not pull rank on these people. He does not say to them, "Do you know who I am? I'm the chief apostle. I had a private audience with the resurrected Jesus. Did he come to talk with any of you guys one on one after the resurrection? I preached the first Christian sermon and 3000 people became Christians at my preaching. I just healed a paralytic and raised a woman from the dead. How dare you question my integrity and my actions? I'm in charge here." Peter does not become defensive or pull out his apostle badge. What does Peter do? He submits himself to their judgment by giving an orderly account of what happened. He humbly explains to them what happened and why he did what he did. He is respectful and gentle but also firm and direct. He doesn't call them names or tell them they are wrong. He simply tells them his reasons for entering a Gentile home and accepting them as full members of the church on the basis of the HS's work. Don't miss this, those who are criticizing Peter are wrong and Peter knows they are wrong and aims to correct them. However, he does it by submitting to them. He does it by respectfully answering their questions.

The way in which the leadership of a local church makes decisions and then responds to criticism and questions is perhaps the most important human contribution to the unity of the church. Peter did what he did in response to God's word to him. His firm but respectful response to his critics was in part due to the fact that he had a clear conscience. He had done the will of God as far as he knew and was able to say so. While the leadership of a local church cannot claim the same sort of clarity of direction as Peter had through visions and angelic

visitors, yet we do have the word of God and the leading of the HS, just like Peter. In fact, if you will notice in v.16, the final piece of evidence that he sets forward is an appeal to the word of Jesus. He quotes Acts 1:5 as justification for his acceptance of the Gentiles into the church. So the first step in promoting unity is leadership who are fervent in their desire to lead the church in accord with the revealed will of God in his word and under the leadership of the Spirit. Leaders must know the word of God and have as first priority to lead the church in accord with it.

The second thing leaders must do is to be submissive to the congregation. When people have questions and criticisms leaders must not pull rank and they must not accuse people of being heretics or rebels for asking questions. We must take people's questions serious because usually people are asking questions out of their concern to do what God wants done. We must assume that those who criticize and question want the will of God as much as we do and thus we are seeking to know that will together. Part of the process for finding God's will as his church requires that various points of view are considered and evaluated through discussion. That does not mean leaders do not correct what we know to be misunderstandings and errors in understanding the word of God but it does mean we are to do it with gentleness and respect. This is what Paul tells his young protégé Timothy as he was being a pastor to the church in Ephesus: "The Lord's bondservant must not be quarrelsome, but kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition..." So I urge you to pray for the leaders in our church. Pray that we will seek the will of God by a careful consideration of his written word and a humble seeking of the leadership of the HS. Pray also that we will be humble and submissive to you as we are questioned and criticized. I also would urge you to ask your questions directly to us and to voice your criticisms to us. It is noteworthy that Peter and his accusers talked face to face. So don't spread slander and gossip, ask your questions directly so that we can gently and respectfully give an answer. I would also ask that you be willing to forgive us when we are not as humble as we ought to be in our response to your questions just as we will willingly forgive you when you question us inappropriately.

II. Saving sinners of every sort by his Word and Spirit (vv. 5-17)

Peter corrects these people by recounting in an orderly way how God led him and Cornelius together and then saved the Gentiles through the gospel and by the Spirit. This is now the third time that the story of God's leading Peter and these Gentiles together has been told by Luke in his narrative. If you are at all familiar with your Bible you will recognize this as a very common and to our modern sensibilities, a very annoying habit the Bible has. In our story telling we would leave out vv. 5-16 because we know the reader has heard the story already. Why does the Bible give us all the details over and over again? Repetition is the way that the Bible emphasizes what is important. This thrice repeated story tells us that this is one of the main events in the book of Acts. Just as God gave Peter the vision of the sheet being let down from heaven with all the unclean animals in it three times so he would get the point; so Luke records this story three times so we will get the point. By the way, there is another thrice repeated story in Acts: the story of Saul's conversion from the Christian killing Jewish zealot to the courageous apostle to the Gentiles. Thus for Luke, these two conversions are central in understanding God's work in the world.

Another feature of the Bible's repetition of stories and events is that, usually, there is a slight difference in each retelling that helps us see another aspect of the significance of the events. In this case, there are three new things we find out. In v. 12 we find out that there were six Jewish, that is circumcised, Christian men who accompanied Peter into the home of Cornelius. Thus there are seven Jewish witnesses to these events. Again, if you know anything about the Bible you know that seven is a critical number, it is God's number. Thus the number of witnesses emphasizes that this is God's action. In v. 14 we find out that the angel that appeared to Cornelius told him that the message Peter would bring would be the means through which he and his entire household would be saved. Thus we find out that while Cornelius' prayers and giving to the poor were noticed by God and approved of by him, yet he was not saved prior to his hearing the gospel and receiving the HS. There is no salvation for any human being outside of Christ. It is only by the regenerating work of the HS and

explicit faith in the person and work of Jesus as he is revealed through the word of God written and preached that men, women and children can be saved.

The third new piece of information that we receive in v. 16 is that when the HS came upon all the Gentiles who were listening to him preach the gospel and they all spoke in tongues, he remembered what Jesus had told him and the other 10 apostles after the resurrection: “John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Peter baptizes with water these Gentiles and treats them as full members of the church because he remembers what Jesus said, as recorded in Acts 1:5. Peter recognizes in seeing the HS’s baptizing of these Gentiles and remembering this word from Jesus that everything has changed. The baptism of John belongs to the old order of things, when the spiritual kingdom of God which the Messiah would bring was foretold and prefigured with physical symbols. Just like the food laws symbolized the defiling effect of sin and the cleanliness rituals prefigured Christ’s cleansing from the defilement of sin so John’s baptism with water of those who repented prefigured the immersion of all of God’s people in and with the HS. Thus, Peter concludes in v. 17, based on the word of Jesus that if he would have refused to baptize these regenerated and believing Gentiles he would have been fighting with God himself. If he would have refused to stay with them and to eat the “unclean” food they served him, he would have been resisting God. The entire sequence of events climaxed by the Gentiles receiving the HS in the exact same way he and the other 120 original members of the church had received the HS at Pentecost shows that God has saved these uncircumcised and unclean people without their submitting in any way to the Law of Moses. They are equal and full members of Christ’s church even though they live a radically different lifestyle from the Jewish members of the church.

Here is the point that Peter is making and which preserves and promotes the unity of the church: God has saved the Gentiles without their becoming Jewish and Jewish people without their becoming Gentiles just as God has saved Democrats without their becoming Republicans and Republicans without requiring they become Democrats and God has saved homeschooling parents without demanding they send their kids to public school and he has saved public school parents and children without requiring that they become homeschooling parents and children and God has saved those married couples who use birth control and those who do not use birth control and God has saved Chinese people without requiring they adopt the customs of the west and... shall I go on? When you criticize and condemn other born again, believing Christians because they don’t embrace your lifestyle and your preferences you are in danger of fighting against God and dividing and destroying the church of God. Does this mean that we embrace as true Christians everyone who professes faith in Jesus without any regard for what they believe and how they live their lives? Absolutely not. However, we must not draw lines where God has not drawn lines. We must deal charitably with everyone who professes an orthodox faith in Jesus and gives evidence of a sincere love for God and for God’s people. The ground of our unity is the saving work of God in Christ, not our political, cultural and lifestyle choices.

III. Impressing his church with his grace (v. 18)

After Peter finishes his defense his critics stop their attack and join in with the whole church in worshipping Jesus. The united church is the worshipping church. What is worship? Worship is the spontaneous and outward expression of joy in God. The entire church in Judea which is Jewish is impressed with the gracious work of God in saving sinners and so joins their voices in an outward expression of their amazement at God. In particular they are impressed with the fact that God has given to the Gentiles repentance which leads to life. There are so many cool things to see here that are meant to provoke our astonishment and joy in God’s grace. First, up to this point in the telling of this story there has been no mention of the human response to the gospel of Cornelius and company. The emphasis has been entirely upon what the Triune God has done to make this event happen and to convert them. But here, for the first time we are told they repented. When we are told they did repent we are also to understand that they did believe. This is a very common literary device used in the Bible that an entire complex event is summarized under one part of the event. Thus conversion is regularly described as people repenting, or believing, or being baptized, or obeying the gospel, or receiving the word and so on. This means you will not go to heaven without repenting of your sins and believing in Jesus. Second, repentance is turning away from sin and from falsehood and false worship. It always signifies and includes not

only a heartfelt sorrow for sin and unbelief but an actual turning from these things. We know that these Gentiles did not repent of eating pork and they did not repent of not offering sacrifices at the temple and they did not repent of not being circumcised. So what did they repent of? They repented of actual sins, like idol worship and pride and sexual immorality and hatred and racism and gossip and disobedience to parents and fear and gluttony and drunkenness and so on.

The third thing to see and really the most important thing to see is that the whole church recognizes that it was God who gave them the repentance and faith that they exercised. The only reason Cornelius and his household repented of their sins and believed the gospel is because God himself gave repentance and faith to them as a gift. Repenting and believing is not something that sinners can do. Sinners only repent when God himself sovereignly takes out their hard hearts and gives them hearts of flesh. Sinners only see sin for what it is and have a godly sorrow for it when God gives them eyes to see and a heart to feel it. Human beings are not free to repent and believe. Human beings, in our natural state are willing slaves to sin. We naturally hate God and we cannot be sorry for that hatred unless God himself gives us hearts that are sorry and do turn from our hatred. Salvation from beginning to end is the work of God. He does not merely give us Christ to believe in but he gives us the faith to believe in Jesus. Thus whenever you see a person repenting of their sins and believing in Jesus your heart should be full of joy and amazement at the grace of God. Why do you think that most of Paul's letters says things like this in Colossians 1:3-4, "We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints..." Paul regularly thanks God for the faith and love of Christians because he knows the only reason Christians have faith and love is because God gives these things to them. Our first response whenever we hear of a sinner repenting and believing in Jesus ought to be joyful praise to God. When you meet a Republican who believes in Jesus, you should worship God. When you meet someone who loves rock 'n roll music who believes in Jesus you should give thanks to God for his grace. When you meet a Bear's fan who has been given repentance you should worship Jesus. Can you imagine how united our church, any church would be if our first response when we met those different from us who believe in Jesus was glorifying God for this display of his mercy in that person's life?

The fourth cool thing to pay attention to in v. 18 is that the repentance that God gives ends in or results in eternal life. The Jewish church recognizes that they and the Gentiles are going to live forever in the presence of God. They recognize that all who repent and believe by the grace of God share in the divine nature, are partakers of eternal life, will live together forever. This is a cause of celebration. We are the redeemed people of God together, forever. So what do you think, 10,000 years from now as we are worshipping our Lord Jesus for his amazing grace will it matter that some of us were Republican and some were Democrats and some homeschooled and some sent their kids to public school and some liked hip-hop music and some despised it? My dear friends, we need to think about what will matter in eternity when deciding what matters here. This amazing grace of God is what should preoccupy us. The fact that Jane and I have homeschooled our six children is not even worth mentioning in comparison to what God has done to save Jane and I from our sins. So let's be a people who pay attention to the grace of God and not to our petty differences. Let's be a church who is impressed with the gracious work of God in saving poor sinners like us and so worship God together for his grace. Let's not be impressed with our own preferences and prejudices but with God's giving repentance to sinners.

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