

The Bridge to the Gentiles is Erected in Jerusalem!

Text: Acts 11:1-18

Introduction:

Having been ordered to go and preach the Gospel to Gentiles in Caesarea, Peter had come to learn a valuable lesson. He had learned that God is not a respecter of persons, and that all people are welcomed into the fellowship of God's people, regardless of their ethnic background, and whether or not they have been circumcised. The Mosaic, ceremonial/dietary obligations, which the Jews were called to observe since the time of Moses, were no longer prerequisites for fellowship with God and His people. In Christ, all people are freely welcomed into the kingdom of God by faith, and this faith must ultimately manifest itself in the production of "works of righteousness," coming out of a sincere "fear of God." A "new man" in Christ, is God's ultimate design in redemption. And so, the gentiles, who were unclean in the Old Covenant, can now be sanctified (made clean) in Christ.

When the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius (and his companions), evidenced in the miraculous way in which they spoke foreign languages (that they had not learned before), it was clear to Peter and his Jewish companions, that God was welcoming the Gentiles into the fellowship of His church. This being the case, they could not forbid them the rite of baptism. And so, Peter ordered that they be baptized in the Name of The Lord. And following this, yet again, in violation of former Jewish law, Peter stayed with these gentiles for a few days.

But now, Peter was to head back to Jerusalem, where a report of his work among gentiles had already gotten back. And a contention arises against him, by those of the "circumcision" (those Jewish Christians, who were yet convinced that apart from circumcision, a person could never truly be saved). And so, with the help of the Jewish witnesses, who saw the Spirit's work in Caesarea, Peter must now convince those in Jerusalem, of the very lesson, which he had learned in these recent events, namely, that, in Christ, even the uncircumcised could be baptized into the church, simply by exercising a genuine faith in The Lord Jesus Christ. And upon fulfilling this mission in Jerusalem, God will have sovereignly accomplished a major milestone, in the life of His church. A bridge to the Gentiles will be forever erected in Jerusalem.

I. The Bridge to the Gentiles is Erected in Jerusalem

"Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the Word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" (vs. 1-3)

Again, we get a powerful glimpse into the first century, Jewish mindset, here, do we not? The line of separation; the circumcision dividing line was so thick, that the Jews just could not see past it. A wonderful thing was happening among the gentiles; the heathen were receiving the Word of God and embracing Christ, but they couldn't get past the fact that Peter had actually eaten and had fellowship with them. And I say this, not to be critical at all, but rather, to highlight once again, how major of an issue this was, in the life of the early church! Recall Peter's words, when he first met Cornelius, in verse 28 of chapter 10, "Then he said to them, 'You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation.'"

And Peter, rather than taking a contentious swing at his accusers; recognizing from where he himself had just come, patiently explains to them, all that had just happened. But brethren, before we move on to consider Peter's defense, consider a principle that we might just take from these first two verses. Let us be cautious not to cloud or overshadow, the glorious work that God is doing in the hearts of unbelievers, by failing to keep the "main thing," the "main thing." The Pharisees missed the glorious work being done in the hearts of tax collectors and sinners, because of their failure to recognize God's delight in showing mercy, more than ritualistically fulfilling the ceremonial laws. And they failed to rejoice, in even the delivering of the diseased from physical bondage, because of their overarching focus on keeping the Sabbath Day to the minutia of the letter (Indeed, beyond the letter!). And here, these circumcised could not appreciate the wonder of what was taking place among the gentiles, because they were cemented to dietary regulations. How might this apply to us? Brethren, when we cast off those who presently do not grasp or embrace all of Reformed Doctrine, as second class citizens; when we disfellowship with other blood-bought believers because they are not where we are doctrinally, do we not hold in contempt, the glorious work of the Spirit, even in their own salvation and redemption? Let us not fail to rejoice in, and marvel over, the work of grace in others, whatever stage of sanctification and doctrinal growth, they have reached, if the evidence of Christ is truly in them. All of doctrine is important, and those who cast doctrine aside as insignificant, are in gross error and are prone to moral collapse, but we want to avoid having "pet doctrines," which

eclipse our hearts and minds from seeing lost or "young in faith" or even "theologically ignorant" (not in an insulting way) souls through the eyes of a patient and gracious Christ, who meets all of us at some level of theological short fall. Let us never lose sight of the wonder and glory of lost sinners, miraculously redeemed and converted by the simple Gospel of Jesus Christ!

And so, Peter responds by reiterating all that had happened, so as to compel those of the "circumcision" to recognize the warrant and necessity of baptizing even gentiles, in accordance with their faith alone, in Christ alone, requiring none of the Jewish ceremonial observances from them. And brethren, as we read this, we will find it to be somewhat repetitive, from the standpoint of Theophilus, and all who would read the Book of Acts (including us), throughout all of history. And I believe that there is an important reason for this, especially considering that all of God's Word is "God breathed," and "Holy Spirit inspired." It would have been very easy, and convenient, for Luke to simply state here, "And then Peter reiterated all that had happened to him and Cornelius, to the Jews," leaving the reader to simply reflect upon that which Luke had already written in the previous paragraphs. But no! Luke retells a significant portion of that which brought Peter and Cornelius together (the visions). Why is this? Why repeat what he has already written in detail. I believe the reason for this is simple, and in line with a pattern that we see throughout all of Scripture. There are times when God would repeat things in Scripture, to the minutest detail even, as a means of adding His own exclamation point to the information that He is transferring to His people. And so, the repetition here is a means of highlighting and magnifying the great importance of the Jew/Gentile merger that is taking place here. And when you read through the rest of the New Testament (Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans...etc), you can see that this was certainly no small matter in the first century! For them, it was a matter of breaking thick, hard, frozen ground. For us, it ought to be a matter of awe and wonder, and great rejoicing, in what *God* has done to save His people, from all ethnic backgrounds and walks of life, from the power and penalty of their sins, which have found all of us in Adam! The fall has affected everyone of us, who bear this flesh! But the harvesting and ingathering of God's people, from all over this dark, corrupt and dying world, is a matter to be profoundly pondered, leading us to fall on our knees, in awe before our great God. It ought to lead us to worship. It ought to lead us to the Apostle Paul's conclusive doxology in Romans 11:33-36:

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! 'For who has known the mind of

the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?' For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen!"

[Read verses 4-17]. We will not re-comment on verses 4-14, as we have already worked through these verses, when the events actually transpired. But, it is worth noting that Peter gives a little additional information here, concerning a thought that went through his mind, when he had witnessed the manifestation of the Spirit's power in Cornelius and the gentiles. In fact, we can presume that the Holy Spirit brought the thought to mind, in Peter. When the Holy Spirit had fallen upon the gentiles, in the way in which He fell upon the Apostles at Pentecost, Peter remembered a particular statement that Jesus had made, during His earthly ministry. In verse 16, Peter states, "Then I remembered the Word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" In remembering this statement, Peter, by the Holy Spirit, further realized that this very promise, which was fulfilled at Pentecost, was also fulfilled in Caesarea, at the moment the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon these gentiles. And this is critical, because, if the gentiles were baptized with the Holy Spirit, which was the substance to which water baptism pointed, how could they be forbidden the outward sign, which was simply an outward declaration of the inward substance? In other words, the greater reality had occurred (They were baptized with the Spirit), how could the lesser reality (the mere outward sign) then be withheld? "John indeed baptized with water," but something greater will happen, the Lord Jesus declared. "But you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." The statement itself is comparative in nature, saying, "What John did was good, but something far better is coming..." And so, in remembering this, Peter saw that the "something far better had come," in this case, and so, how then could the lesser sign be forbidden?

And that is why he says in verse 17, "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on The Lord Jesus Christ..." (If we received the blessing, and that, in accordance with our faith in Christ alone), "who was I that I could withstand God?" "How could I stand in the way of that which God was declaring in very plain language? They received the same baptism as us, and we both received this, having faith in Christ alone. Who am I then, to dare step in, and forbid them the accompanying outward sign, which we ourselves have received, in accordance with our faith?"

Having made his case then, all further accusations and arrows of contention, immediately stopped. The evidence was compelling and irrefutable, and upheld by Peter and six additional witnesses. And so, we are told in verse 18, "When they heard these things they became silent." The finger pointing stopped and their mouths were closed in awe. "...And they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.' Mission accomplished! Here, our great and awesome God has done the unthinkable! He has built a bridge to the Gentiles, right here in Jerusalem! As the Apostles are here laying the foundation of the church, they are surprised to find, that the infrastructure will now be made up of many different colored stones!

And from here, by and large, Luke will record the extension of the Gospel, spreading all throughout the Gentile world, especially through the ministry of the Apostle Paul!

Note, as this Jew/Gentile link is formed, and set to only grow stronger from here, we find a pattern given in Peter, which will be the primary way in which God speaks to His people through all future generations, especially when the Canon of Scripture is complete. [Read verse 16a again]. As we immerse ourselves in God's Word and in prayer, we will find ourselves supernaturally "remembering" throughout the course of our walk with the Lord!

Note as well, that God is the One, who grants repentance unto life. Repentance, while done on the part of man, is itself a gift from God. Repentance must be granted, or it will never take place.

AMEN!!!