

E. Peter's Defense in Jerusalem (11:1-18)

Cornelius and his guests responded to the extraordinary turn of events in his home with a plea to Peter to stay on in Caesarea for a few days (10:48). Luke says nothing further about those days together, but doubtless Peter used them to instruct and encourage these new Gentile believers in the gospel they had embraced (cf. 2:42).

Apparently Peter continued his travels in the region after departing Caesarea (9:32), because Luke recorded that the news of the Cornelius episode preceded his return to Jerusalem. In fact, by the time he came up to Jerusalem, the news had spread throughout all Judea (11:1), indicating that Peter had continued his itinerant ministry for some time. At any rate, as soon as he returned to Jerusalem he was immediately confronted about the incident.

1. Luke refers to Peter's accusers as "those who were circumcised" (NAS), a designation some have taken as singling out a particularly zealous contingent of Jewish believers among the saints in Jerusalem. But the broader context suggests that Luke was speaking more generally, employing this description for the sake of emphasis: First of all, it draws attention to the fact that the Jerusalem Church at that time consisted entirely of ethnic Jews and proselytes; all the Christians in Jerusalem were circumcised. But secondly, it highlights the issue of concern for these disgruntled believers.

Not only in Jerusalem, but throughout Judea and Samaria multitudes had embraced Jesus as the Messiah, but that didn't in itself move those believers away from their Jewish convictions. God had promised a Savior to Israel, and now many of Abraham's descendents were embracing Him in faith. *They recognized that Yahweh had fulfilled His word in providing a Messiah, but they didn't understand the true nature and scope of that fulfillment.* For the Jewish early Church, Jesus Christ was the Savior, but the Savior of Israel. His salvation might, in many cases, extend to Gentile persons, but only insofar as they became circumcised and baptized proselytes to Judaism.

For the early Jewish Christians, circumcision was still a crucial identity marker for Yahweh's covenant people, even though that community was also now identified by faith in Jesus as His Messiah. None of those contending with Peter would have argued that righteousness comes through obedience to the Law; all had come to Christ seeking to be justified through faith in Him as the gospel proclaimed (cf. Galatians 2:11-16). *But that didn't change the fact that God's people had always been identified by circumcision as the sign of their cleanness and consecration.* So, at that time, all the disciples of Jesus bore the sign of circumcision, and it followed that those who didn't were still to be regarded as unclean and unholy. Stated simply, the saints in Jerusalem had exactly the same convictions as Peter had held at the time of his vision (11:2-3).

2. By charging Peter with going to uncircumcised Gentiles and eating with them, the brethren were implying that he had violated the law of separation and rendered himself unclean. In their minds, Peter was guilty of sinning against the God he purported to serve. Peter answered their charge by rehearsing the events that precipitated the encounter in Cornelius' house; the truth was that he had acted according to divine command (11:4-14).

Peter's explanation must have provoked in his accusers the same initial disbelief and bewilderment he had experienced at the time of his vision. It wasn't merely that they had been wrong in their condemnation of Peter's actions; Peter was insisting that the same God who had demanded Israel's separation since the giving of the Law at Sinai had now brought that definition and obligation to an end. Far from a personal decision – let alone a sinful one, the God of Israel had orchestrated and commanded Peter's encounter with Cornelius; not entering his house would have been an act of disobedience.

As with Peter at the time of his vision, the initial inclination of these Jewish believers would have been to conclude that God was abrogating His own Law. But God hadn't reversed His position or made an arbitrary declaration; *He had cleansed that which was formerly unclean* (11:9). Peter – and now the entire Jewish Church – could no longer righteously regard and pronounce the Gentiles unclean because God had remedied their uncleanness by ending the covenantal estrangement between Him and them (ref. again Ephesians 2:11-22; cf. John 10:14-16, 11:45-52; also Luke 13:23-30).

3. The work of God in Christ was to eliminate the covenantal distinction between Jew and Gentile, but this was a matter of *fulfillment*, not abrogation or replacement.
 - a. The Sinai Covenant had formalized the filial relationship between Yahweh and Israel, thereby establishing them as His unique people. By covenant, Yahweh set the sons of Israel apart to Himself as He promised to Abraham; in that way Israel became the divine interface in the world – as it were, the human “sanctuary” of the Living God; the place where Yahweh could be encountered. And so, while men outside of the nation of Israel could come to Yahweh and enter into covenant relationship with Him, they could only do so by entering into the covenant household of Israel. Relationship with God is a covenantal phenomenon, and the covenant belonged to Israel; *communion with God meant union with Israel*.
 - b. The Jewish Christians of the early Church understood these truths, and that was precisely the reason Peter's actions were so troubling to them. For Peter hadn't fellowshiped with Gentile proselytes, but with Gentiles as such; he had embraced as “clean” men who were outside of the covenant commonwealth of Israel. But what these saints needed to recognize was that things were different with the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the messianic age.

Things had changed, but not because the principles articulated above had been altered or abrogated. *The reason for the change was that Israel itself had realized its preordained fulfillment*. Cleanness remains a matter of covenant identity and fidelity; in that way, it is still confined to union with the covenant “son” that is Israel. But now Israel – and the covenant in which it had its identity and life – has been fulfilled in the *True Israel*. He is the covenant (Isaiah 42:1-7, 49:1-13), so that relationship with Yahweh depends upon “entering into” Him. **Christological fulfillment is the reason the covenant household now extends to Gentiles as such and not merely proselytes to Judaism**. Now as then, all men have a share in the “Israel of God” only by being part of His “covenant son” (Galatians 3).

4. This was a transformation so radical that only God's overt attestation would convince the fledgling Church of it. This is precisely what the Spirit did with Peter, and Peter was now bringing that testimony to bear with his accusers. The Spirit indicated this transformation by orchestrating the encounter between Peter and Cornelius, but removed all doubt by His activity in Cornelius' house. Once He fell upon the Gentiles in exactly the same way He had the Jews and proselytes on Pentecost, neither Peter nor his companions could deny the obvious. Those six men needed to share Peter's experience, not for his sake or even their own, but ultimately for the Church's sake: God was transforming His covenant household, and the existing members of that household needed to understand and embrace that truth. And so the Spirit who caused a plurality of Jewish witnesses to observe the Gentile Pentecost led those same men to return with Peter to Jerusalem in order that "every matter should be confirmed by two or three witnesses." Peter may not have known he was going to have to make a defense to the Church, but God knew.
5. With the other witnesses standing by, Peter recounted what the Spirit had done in saving Cornelius and his house, being careful at the same time to emphasize that he, too, had needed to be convinced of this new paradigm. He understood his accusers' convictions because he had shared them, so much so that the Spirit's supernatural intervention and attestation were necessary to transform his thinking. Not until Peter witnessed the Spirit fall upon the Gentiles did all the pieces fall into place; then at last he really understood.
 - a. John had introduced Jesus to Israel as the One who would baptize men with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:15-16), and Jesus reaffirmed that aspect of His messianic mission to His disciples (cf. John 14:16-26, 20:22 with Acts 1:1-8). As He promised, the Lord baptized them with His Spirit, along with the others with them in the upper room and then the Jews and proselytes in the street (2:1-4, 37-38). But that wasn't to be the end of it, as Peter himself indicated by his citation from Joel and his words of exhortation to the gathered crowd (2:14-17, 38-39).
 - b. Luke's account implies that Peter had some sense that the Gentiles were to be recipients of the Spirit. But if that was indeed the case, he either misunderstood what that entailed or had lost sight of it by the time he arrived in Joppa. By his own admission, it was not until he observed the Spirit falling on Cornelius and his guests that he connected Jesus' promise of the baptism of the Spirit with the Gentiles (11:16). Only then did he really understand that Yahweh's gift of His Spirit through His Son – a pledge made known to the sons of Israel and affirmed to them – is the equal inheritance of all the nations of the earth.
6. Once Peter discerned God's purpose and work, he recognized that it was futile to deny it or seek to withstand it (11:17). The Father, in His Son and by His Spirit, would prevail to accomplish His will; Peter's obligation of faith and obedience – as also the saints in Jerusalem and everyone who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ – was to affirm, proclaim and advance it. He had done so by baptizing with water those baptized in the Spirit (10:47-48), and he was doing so by bringing his defense that day. Peter couldn't withstand God's will and work, and neither could His Church; they, too, were compelled to give Him glory for granting also to the Gentiles the repentance unto life (11:18).