

Peter Answers the Circumcision – Acts 11:1-18

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Introduction

1. The conversion of Cornelius is a landmark event in the history of gospel expansion. Luke's record of these events and the aftermath is very important to our understanding of God's purpose for the gospel and the church.
2. Some time elapsed between Peter's trip to Caesarea (Acts 10) and his return to Jerusalem (Acts 11). Acts 10 ends with a request that Peter "remain for some days" (v. 48). How long he spent in Caesarea and where he went from there we do not know. Enough time passed, however, that the report of his visit circulated widely throughout Judea (Acts 11:1).
3. Many commentaries view this incident as merely a struggle between Jewish legalism and Christian grace. Those who confront Peter are seen as Pharisaical legalists. The truth is that Peter had the same mindset, a God-instructed mindset that has dominated Israel for 1500 years.
4. Some see it as a matter of God's freedom. They argue that God is sovereign and that He can bring a Gentile directly into a relationship with Himself through Jesus Christ, apart from any prior commitments to Jewish beliefs and practices. In other words, God is free to ignore His own rules.
5. The real significance of this confrontation
 - a. Jewish believers did not understand the true nature of Christ's coming nor the extent of its effect. Up until now, the church was Jewish in nature. Believers, ethnic Jews and proselytes, still observed the Sabbath, practiced the traditions, worshipped at the temple, and kept the law. They believed that Christ came to save Israel (Matthew 10:5, 6). Gentiles could come to Jesus, but (so they assumed) only if they converted to Judaism. That meant that they would also have to be circumcised.

Peter's challengers were not concerned that he preached the Word to Cornelius' household, only that he, a Jew, violated the law by entering his house and eating with him. Circumcision was the issue. The Jewish church leadership—the apostles—still believed that circumcision remained the identifying mark of the covenant. This challenge also proves that Cornelius, while a God-fearer, was not a proselyte.

- b. The Jewish believers also did not understand the scope of Christ's fulfillment of God's O. T. Word—salvation is to include people from every nation (Revelation 9:5). The lesson of this text is that the church is not a part of ethnic Judaism. Neither is the church separate from Israel as if Christ has one purpose for Israel and another for the church. Neither is the church a replacement for, nor is it merely an extension of Israel. The church is the fulfillment of Israel. The church is the true Israel.

I. Peter's Confrontation in Jerusalem

A. Their quarrel with Peter (vv. 2, 3)

1. Peter's accusers—the circumcision party—ethnic Judaist Christians (v. 2)

- a. Their attitude—they *criticized* (*diakrino*, to make a judgment) Peter—to discern the right or wrong of a situation; discriminate. They were doing exactly what the Holy Spirit forbade Peter from doing.
- b. They did to Peter what the Spirit forbade Peter to do concerning Cornelius. The Spirit corrected Peter—“do not make a judgment” (10:19; 11:12; *diakrino*); Peter obeyed and went “without objection” (10:29).

2. Their concerns

- a. Previously: the Hellenistic Jewish believers created a level of hostility from the Jewish community in Jerusalem that resulted in the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8-7:56). They also troubled the status quo in the Samaritan conversions.
- b. Their present concern: Peter, a Hebraist Jew, went to uncircumcised men and ate with them, which was against the law of Moses (v. 3; 10:28). The leading apostle, Peter, has gone much further than the Hellenists in disregarding the traditional laws of Judaism by directly associating with uncircumcised Gentiles.
 - 1) In doing this, Peter had made himself ceremonially unclean. He was sinning against the Lord while in His service.
 - 2) Peter had also seriously endangered the church’s relationship to the Jewish nation. The danger they perceived was that whatever good still existed toward the church in Jerusalem would quickly dissolve.

B. Peter’s explanation (vv. 4-17)

- 1. He argued that he was merely part of divinely initiated events.
 - a. Peter detailed rehearsal of the conversion of Cornelius is the third of four, making it very important.
 - b. The crux of the issue: what God made ceremonially clean was not to be judged as unclean. Peter, at first, objected to the command to slay and eat. Perhaps he thought that he was being tested. The Holy Spirit affirmed that he was to go to Cornelius without discrimination. Peter was not to object again.
- 2. Peter’s only part was to deliver the message.
 - a. Peter did not even finish that message when the Spirit overtly manifested the salvation of Cornelius and others. How much more he had prepared to say is no known. He apparently had a good deal more for he said, “As I began to speak,” *etc.* (v. 15).
 - b. Peter did not lay hands on any of them to receive the Spirit as he did in Samaria (8:17).
 - c. Peter did not even pray for any of them to receive the Spirit (8:15).
 - d. Peter did not ask or command anything of them. God’s Spirit did everything at His own will. How could Peter “stand in the way” (v. 17)?
- 3. Peter was not alone. He was accompanied by six men of the circumcision providentially providing witness to Peter’s defense.

C. The response of the circumcision (v. 18)

- 1. They ceased pressing their complaint.

2. They glorified God by acknowledging His saving of Gentiles.

II. What the Event Means

A. Communion with God requires union with God's covenant institution.

1. God chose Israel to be His sanctuary in the world. To accomplish this, God set Israel apart for Himself, separating them from other nations to keep them pure. Gentiles could join themselves to the Lord, but to do so, they had to cut off their Gentile connection (circumcision). However, this phase, as long as it was, lasted only until Israel realized her fulfillment in the Seed promised, Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16).
2. The church, being the body of Christ, is now God's sanctuary. Communion with God requires union with His New Covenant institution, the church (2 Peter 2:9, 10). When the Spirit fell on the Gentiles who were hearing the Word of God (Acts 10:44; Galatians 3:2), Peter remembered Jesus' word: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (v.16). That settled the issue.

B. The Spirit of God is fulfilling the purpose of God in saving a multitude from every nation through Jesus Christ.

1. God secured the salvation of Gentiles in spite of deeply rooted Jewish prejudice
2. Salvation requires repentance and faith, which God sovereignly grants.

Lesson

Grace is God's empowering His people to do His will (2 Corinthians 12:9; Philippians 2:13). The Spirit of God was given to do this enabling work (Acts 1:8). Like Peter, the Lord is able to transform our thinking to bring us into conformity with His will and purpose. What place do you occupy in the church and the forward progress of the gospel?