

Sunday, July 8, 2007

When God Has More in Mind

“Take a Stand ... Take the Heat”

Acts 11:1-18

INTRODUCTION

Comments on what it means to take a stand generally; the kind of response that can often be expected; the specific situation we will be looking at today with Peter and the significance of the stand he took.

Almost two full chapters dedicated to this story; emphasis and importance is obvious.

1. **ANTICIPATE the challenges you will face when initiating change. (Acts 11:1-3)**

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

[SLIDE OF MAP – where Peter had been traveling in review]

In Lydda he healed a paralytic; in Joppa he brought back to life a woman who had died; in Caesarea he was surprised when a Gentile family who believed in Jesus received the Holy Spirit in the same way that he had. Spent time in highly populated Gentile regions.

He returns to Jerusalem to report what had happened only to find himself strongly criticized by the church and its leaders. People had received the Word of God ... yet the initial response of those in Jerusalem seemed to minimize this and maximize other issues.

So, why did Peter’s actions bring such heat?

- **His actions in Caesarea communicated that circumcision was not REQUIRED in order to become a follower of Jesus**

Circumcision is the physical removal of male genital foreskin; for Hebrew males during the first 8 days following birth.

For the Jews it was a physical sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham centuries earlier.

(Genesis 17:10-11) *This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.*

The early church co-existed alongside and even at times within Judaism both religiously, socially, culturally and relationally.

They both shared the Old Testament scriptures. NT not written.

These early believers had to work through the difficulties of what it meant to follow Jesus and what this new life should include, what it should look like, how it would differ from Judaism.

Many still believed that those who believed in Jesus were to follow the laws and traditions maintained within Judaism; one of these being circumcised as a demonstration of their faith.

Peter’s experience with Cornelius and his household, preaching to them, seeing them believe in Jesus as Messiah and Lord and then receiving the Holy Spirit, baptizing them w/out circumcising them upset the norm.

And so Peter finds himself returning to defend his actions ...

He also receives criticism because ...

- **He STAYED with these uncircumcised believers** (Mark 2:16; Luke 15:2; Gal. 2:12)

Peter stayed with Cornelius and his family following their baptism ... this was not acceptable and Peter even tells the family this (**read 10:28**)

The significance of this was that it meant that Peter had accepted the uncircumcised believing Gentiles just as he would circumcised Jewish believers. This would have raised some eyebrows and hit the tabloids for sure.

The Hebrews had been chosen by God to bring good news to Gentiles; they failed throughout OT and were in danger of repeating this same failure again at the very beginnings of Christianity.

Peter's "outrageous" actions brought him the same kind of critical response that Jesus had received during His life and ministry; Jesus found Himself in trouble all the time with the religious leaders because of who He often hung out with.

(Mark 2:16) *When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw Him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked His disciples: "Why does He eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"*

I wonder if Peter was remembering his years with his master and beginning to feel like he was in good company.

This potential for this kind of problem exists today in the church. Every congregation has its own traditions, customs, ways of doing things that have developed over the years that are not necessarily based on the scriptures but develop nevertheless (give some examples)

The problem is not that these things exist, they always will but that we become so familiar with them that we don't see them clearly and therefore we make them a mandatory requirement for a new believer's life ... in order to be a "real" spiritual person.

2. Peter **RESPONDS** to these challenges directly and truthfully. (Acts 11:4-17)

As we look at how Peter responds ... you put yourself in the place of a church leader, one who has lived with certain belief systems and traditions for years ... see how you respond to Peter's defense.

- **I ADMIT I was wrong (v. 4-10, cf. 10:9-16)**

God's vision, repeated three times had gotten through to Peter.

Things had changed. What was considered unclean (certain kind of animals) was no longer to be considered unclean if God says they are not.

He could not continue thinking the way he had, God had spoken.

He would soon learn that it was not really animals that were the point of the vision but people. He would soon find this out as visitors from Caesarea came knocking on his door.

Jesus was always with those who were considered "unclean": lepers, prostitutes, Gentile "sinners" by the religious establishment.

What about you? Do you have certain people who you deem "unclean"; beyond hope; losers, not worthy of salvation?

If God spoke to you this morning about them would you be like Peter and admit that you've been wrong? This is a big deal!

- **I immediately APPLIED what I learned (11-14; cf. 10:17-23)**

Chapter 10 tells us that when the three men arrived Peter was still struggling to figure out what the vision meant.

Even in the midst of his lack of clarity and even confusion he obeys God and goes with these men, traveling miles up the coast to be with Cornelius and his family.

If God spoke to you about someone who you saw as unclean, hopeless, unworthy ... how would you follow Peter's example and apply what you have learned?

- **I experienced the REALITY of my revelation (15-17, cf. 10:44-48)**

Peter realizes what God meant by the vision (10:28b, 34-35)

Cornelius and his family believed the good news about Jesus; they received the Holy Spirit and praised God like we did; we baptized in water; then I hung out with them for several days.

God had confirmed big time that a new day had come ... one where everyone was a candidate for salvation through Jesus; no barriers, no walls, no background, no past, no sin too great for entrance into this Kingdom.

3. **REMEMBER that God can change the minds of those who challenged you. (Acts 11:18)**

They listened to Peter, they accepted what he said and their criticism was quieted.

And instead ...

- They **PRAISED God in response to Peter's story**

They were now able to rejoice with him in what God had done!

- They **ADOPTED a new way of thinking**

They embraced the way God was now working; this would forever transform the way the early church and the future church would look at who would be in the kingdom; people from every tribe, tongue and nation; without exceptions; the Gospel would be a universal Gospel; not exclusionary but including everyone who would believe!

Closing Comments

Closing Song