

Did “the Church” begin at Pentecost?

A consideration of the attitude of Peter toward Cornelius and its bearing upon this important question.

The following pages are reprinted from an expository monthly entitled *The Berean Expositor*. It is re-issued in the present form in the hope that it will cause the reader to examine afresh the teaching of the Scriptures as to the place that Pentecost occupies in the purpose of God, and to consider the unique character of the revelation of grace to the Gentiles as found in the epistle to the Ephesians, a revelation made to Paul when Pentecostal conditions were suspended at the setting aside of Israel in Acts 28.

The vision that Peter had of the great sheet, and his subsequent visit to Cornelius, form part of the great movement that we see taking place in Acts 8 to 11, which prepares the way for the work of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. It will be found that there is nothing in Acts 10 to warrant the idea that Peter had a ministry among the Gentiles, for the vision of the sheet and the visit to Cornelius were exceptional. They accomplished their purpose, but Peter was left free to pursue his ministry among the circumcision.

The subject before us falls into four parts :

- (1) THE VISION OF CORNELIUS (Acts 10:1-9).
- (2) THE VISION OF PETER (Acts 10:9-24).
- (3) THE MINISTRY OF PETER (Acts 10:24-48).
- (4) THE EFFECT UPON THE CHURCH (Acts 11:1-18).

Just as we find that the burning words of Stephen anticipates the wider ministry of the apostle Paul, so it is possible that the way was partly prepared for Peter, by the work done among the Samaritans and in the interview with the Ethiopian by Philip. Speaking humanly, it is most certain that, had Peter not received this revelation from heaven, and had he not been instrumental in the conversion of the Gentile, Cornelius, the opposition that met Paul’s emancipating message would have been even more bitter and intense than it was. The God of grace is all-sufficient, and Paul would have endured to the end, whatever had happened to Peter, but God in His grace uses means, and Stephen, Philip and Peter were used to prepare the way for this new and wider ministry. There is a most marked contrast between the character of Cornelius and that of the heathen to whom Paul was sent. Cornelius is described as:

“A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway” (Acts 10:2).

Paul’s converts are described variously as:

“Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led” (1 Cor. 12:2).

“When ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods” (Gal. 4:8).

“At that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

Yet it is abundantly clear from Acts 10 that had he not had the vision of the sheet Peter would have called the devout, prayerful Cornelius “common and unclean”. How is this attitude possible if it is true that the Church began at Pentecost? Many commentators incline to the opinion that Cornelius was a proselyte, and it will be of service if we pause here to make sure that all our readers appreciate the status of a proselyte.

The word “proselyte” is made up of *pros* “towards” and *eleutho* “to come”, and is used by the LXX for the stranger or foreigner who came to dwell among the Jews and embraced their religion (Exod. 12:48,49; Lev. 17:8). In the New Testament the word refers to a convert from heathenism, but does not necessarily imply that the convert actually lives among Jewish people. These proselytes of Acts 2:10 came up to Jerusalem to keep the feast.

The initiation of the proselyte involved the observance of three rites. He must be circumcised; he must be baptized; and he must offer a sacrifice. The Jew looked upon the proselyte as though he were a newborn child. Maimonides says:

“A Gentile who is become a proselyte, and a servant who is set at liberty, are both as it were new-born babes, and all those relations which he had while either a Gentile or a servant, now cease from being so”.

There is a possibility that our Lord in His conversation with Nicodemus referred to this initiation. Calmet and his followers distinguish two kinds of proselytes, namely, the *Proselyte of the gate* - these observed the seven precepts of Noah, but were not circumcised; and the *Proselyte of righteousness* - these were converts to Judaism, who were circumcised and observed the whole law. Cornelius was “uncircumcised” (Acts 11:3), and therefore was not a proselyte, yet he is called “a devout man, and one that feared God”. The dispersion of the Jew throughout the Roman world had of necessity influenced Gentile thought, and there were accordingly some who, though uncircumcised and outside the Hebrew pale, were nevertheless worshippers of the true God. Lydia, a woman of Thyatira, is said to be one who “worshipped God” and is found at the place of prayer (Acts 16:13,14). At Thessalonica there were “a great multitude of devout Greeks” (Acts 17:4); at Athens Paul disputed with devout persons (Acts 17:17); and at Corinth Paul found a refuge in the house of one named Justus who “worshipped God” (Acts 18:7). It was to this class that Cornelius belonged, for if he had been a proselyte he would not have been looked upon by the Jew as “common and unclean”. This conclusion is further strengthened by Peter’s confession :

“Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: *but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him*” (Acts 10:34,35).

If preachers and teachers had perceived the truth which the latter part of verse 35 enunciates, in connection with the status of Cornelius, no problem would have arisen concerning justification by faith, and the fact that by works of righteousness no man can be saved.

We must now turn our attention to the vision given to Peter, which produced so great a revolution.

Joppa! Did Peter ever think of Jonah? Was not Peter’s name “Simon bar Jonah”? Did not Jonah remonstrate with God because of His mercy to Gentiles? Were the problems of the expanding gospel forcing themselves upon Peter? We are not told, but we believe that he would have been neither human nor an apostle, if such were not the burden of his thought.

Falling into a trance upon the housetop he saw a vessel descending from heaven, and containing all the fourfooted beasts, reptiles of the earth, and fowls of the air, and a voice said to him: “Rise, Peter, slay and eat”. It is hardly possible for any Gentile to enter into the thoughts that would fill the mind of a Jew, whether Christian or otherwise, who received such a command. We can, however, acquaint ourselves with the law that governed this matter of clean and unclean animals and see what is written:

“These are the beasts which ye shall eat among all the beasts that are on the earth. Whatsoever parteth the hoof, and is clovenfooted, and cheweth the cud, among the beasts, that shall ye eat” (Lev. 11:2,3).

Then follows the long list of prohibited animals, with the recurring sentiment:

“They are unclean to you” (11:8).

“Ye shall have their carcasses in abomination” (11:11, see also 11:20,23).

Not only so, but:

“These are unclean to you among all that creep: whosoever doth touch them, when they be dead, shall be unclean until the even” (11:31).

All this prohibition is because Israel were a separated people,

“For I am the LORD your God: ye shall therefore sanctify yourselves, and ye shall be holy; for I am holy ... this is the law of the beasts, and of the fowl, and of every living creature that moveth in the waters, and of every creature that creepeth upon the earth: TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE between the unclean and the clean, and between the beast that may be eaten and the beast that may not be eaten” (11:44-47).

This instruction to “make a difference” is reiterated in the corresponding section of Leviticus, namely, chapter 20:

“I have said unto you, Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess it, a land that floweth with milk and honey: I am the LORD your God, which have SEPARATED YOU from other people. Ye shall therefore PUT DIFFERENCE between clean beasts and unclean ... which I have SEPARATED from you as unclean. And ye shall be holy unto Me: for I the LORD am holy, and have severed you from other people, *that ye should be Mine*” (Lev. 20:24-26).

It was in this atmosphere that the Jew was born, lived, moved and had his being. Practically from cradle to grave, from morning till night, waking or sleeping, marrying or giving in marriage, buying or selling, he was continually reminded that all the Gentiles were unclean, and that his own nation alone was holy unto the Lord. This separation to the Lord was seriously enforced upon his conscience by the scrupulous observances of the Levitical law.

If we observe the words that are used in the passages cited as translated by the LXX into Greek, we shall perceive many a connection with New Testament teaching that may have passed unnoticed. “Make a difference” in Leviticus 11:47 is *diasteilai*, and is found in Romans 3:22 and 10:12, where it occurs as the noun *diastole*. While accepted by us today as obviously true, Paul’s statement, “There is no difference”, regarding either sin or salvation, was, when first uttered, revolutionary in its effect. In Leviticus 20:24 and 25 the LXX uses two related words to translate “I have separated you”. In the first of the verses the word is *diorizo*, and in the second it is *aphorizo*. The word *aphorizo* is also used to translate the words “put a difference” in Leviticus 20:25. *Diorizo* does not occur in the New Testament, but *aphorizo* does. An examination of the ten occurrences of *aphorizo* in the New Testament will enable us the better to understand Peter’s attitude to Cornelius:

“The angels shall come forth, and *sever* the wicked from among the just” (Matt. 13:49).

“And before Him shall be gathered all nations: and He shall *separate* them one from another, as a shepherd *divideth* his sheep from the goats” (Matt. 25:32).

“Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall *separate* you from their company” (Luke 6:22).

“The Holy Ghost said, *Separate* Me Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 13:2).

“He departed from them, and *separated* the disciples” (Acts 19:9).

“Paul ... *separated* unto the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1).

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye *separate*, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:17).

“When it pleased God, Who *separated* me from my mother’s womb” (Gal. 1:15).

“For before that certain came from James, he (Peter) did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and *separated* himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision” (Gal. 2:12).

The last reference reveals that Peter had been attracted by the freedom enjoyed by the converts of Paul's gospel, and had ventured even to eat with them, but the old upbringing was too strong for him, and the coming of those of the circumcision caused him to separate himself once more, his dissembling causing even Barnabas to be carried away.

There are many passages in the Gospels, Acts and Epistles that show what an hold these Levitical laws had upon the Jewish conscience. Take the word *koinoo*, which means "to make common". This is sometimes translated "to defile" as in the following passages:

"Not that which goeth into the mouth *defileth* a man" (Matt. 15:11).

"To eat with unwashen hands *defileth* not a man" (Matt. 15:20).

"And when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with *defiled*, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft (margin *with the fist ... up to the elbow*, i.e. a ceremonious washing, not a washing that is required for ordinary cleanliness), eat not" (Mark 7:2,3).

The following quotation will give some idea of the intensity of feeling that arose in connection with this matter of eating with a Gentile:

"He who eats with an uncircumcised person, eats, as it were, with a dog; he who touches him, touches, as it were, a dead body; and he who bathes in the same place with him, bathes, as it were, with a leper" (*Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, 29).

The bearing of all this upon the words and attitude of Peter in Acts 10 is most evident from the following references:

"Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is *common or unclean*" (Acts 10:14).

"... What God hath cleansed, that call thou not *common*" (Acts 10:15).

"... Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man *common or unclean*" (Acts 10:28).

Here are the words of Peter himself. If we accept the chronology of the Authorised Version, this incident occurred *eight years after Pentecost*, and Peter is still by his own confession "A man that is a Jew". He, at least, did not believe that "the Church began at Pentecost". Not only was he still a Jew, though a believer, but he was still under the Law. "It is an unlawful thing" said he. How then can we tolerate the tradition that the Church began at Pentecost? He told Cornelius to his face that he would have treated him as "common and unclean", for all his piety and prayers, had he not received the extraordinary vision of the great sheet. Yet at Pentecost:

"All that believed were together, and had ALL THINGS COMMON" (Acts 2:44).

When taken with Acts 10 this is absolute proof that *no Gentile* could have been there. *Yet the tradition that the Church began at Pentecost persists!*

Peter, moreover, makes manifest his state of mind by adding, "Therefore came I unto you *without gainsaying*, as soon as I was sent for" (Acts 10:29). Can we imagine the apostle Paul speaking like this even to the most abject of Pagans? No, the two ministries of these two apostles are poles apart. Further, Peter continued: "I ask therefore *for what intent ye have sent for me?*" (Acts 10:29). Can we believe our eyes? Do we read aright? Is this the man who opened the Church to the Gentile on equal footing with the Jewish believer? He asks in all simplicity, "What is your object in sending for me?" Again, we are conscious that such words from the lips of Paul would be not only impossible but ridiculous. He was "debtor" to wise and unwise, to Jew and Gentile, to Barbarian and to Greek. Not so Peter. He was the Apostle of the circumcision (Gal. 2:8), and therefore the call of Cornelius seemed to him inexplicable.

“*For what intent have you sent for me?*” - Can we imagine a missionary in China, India or anywhere else on the broad earth, asking such a question, or asking this question in similar circumstances? Any Mission Board would ask such a missionary to resign his post, and rightly so. No! every item in this tenth chapter is eloquent of the fact that Peter had no commission to the Gentiles.

At last Peter “began to speak” (Acts 11:15). Let us listen to the message he gives to this Gentile audience:

“... Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons (first admission): but in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him (second admission). The word which God *sent unto the children of Israel* (note, not as Paul in Acts 13:26), preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (He is Lord of all:) (third admission) ... published throughout all *Judaea* ... in the land of the *Jews*, and in *Jerusalem* ... preach unto the *people* (i.e. the people of Israel) ... whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins” (Acts 10:34-43).

One cannot but be struck with the attitude of Peter. He does not preach directly to the Gentile audience, he rehearses in their hearing the word which God *sent to Israel*, saying nothing of a purely gospel character until the very end.

But for the further intervention of God we cannot tell how long Peter would have continued in this way. It is doubtful whether he would have got so far as inviting Cornelius and his fellows to be baptized, as his own words indicate:

“Can any man *forbid water*, that these should not be baptized, which *have received* the Holy Ghost *as well as we?*” (Acts 10:47).

The upshot of this work at Caesarea was that even Peter was called upon to give an account of himself:

“The apostles and brethren that were in *Judaea* heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to *Jerusalem*, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and *didst eat with them*” (Acts 11:1-3).

We find no remonstrance from Peter to the effect that seeing that the Church began at Pentecost, the conversion of Cornelius should have been anticipated and be a matter for rejoicing. No, Peter patiently, and humbly, and apologizingly, rehearsed the matter, even to the pathetic conclusion: “What was I, that I could *withstand God?*” (Acts 11:17). Why should Peter ever think of withstanding God, if he knew that the Church began at Pentecost? It is abundantly evident that neither Peter, the other apostles, nor the brethren at Jerusalem had the remotest idea of any such thing:

“When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, THEN hath God ALSO to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18).

We learn from Acts 15 that the response of Peter to the call of Cornelius played a considerable part in stopping the extremists at Jerusalem in their attempt to shackle the Church of the Gentiles, and proved to be a preparation for the great ministry of Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. In this we rejoice, and see how the purpose of grace gradually unfolds as the narrative proceeds.

We commend this study to the reader, and ask him particularly to weigh the words of Pentecost: “All things common” with the words of Peter: “Common and unclean”, and their bearing upon the question: Did “the Church” begin at Pentecost?