

A CHANGE IN COVENANTS

Acts 10

For the second time, please join with me as I read Acts chapter 10 in its entirety...

Acts 10

There are two issues we want to specifically address from this chapter this morning:

1. The declaration that foods considered unclean may now be considered clean, and
2. How speaking in tongues came to the Gentiles

Both issues are related to **the bigger issue** of the inclusion of the Gentiles into God's church.

1. The declaration that foods considered unclean may now be considered clean

Although we are many chapters away from it, we will eventually read, in the book of Acts, of the apostle Paul being accused of opposing the law of Moses (Acts 21:28). Paul will defend himself against that charge, but the fact is, **there was some merit to the charge**...at least as seen through the eyes of the Jews.

Moses had prescribed for the nation of Israel a long, long list of rules that were intended to give a unique order to the people of Israel. And so everything was covered under these laws: everything from what one ate, to how one dressed, to how one trimmed one's beard. To be Jewish was to willingly submit to these many hundreds of laws. The lives of modern-day orthodox Jews still reflect a submission to this kind of order. Possibly the ultimate example of this, in modern times, being the hiring of Gentile elevator operators who, on the Sabbath, will push the buttons for the orthodox Jews needing to change floors. Two thousand years ago, Jesus addressed the idiocy of such a legalistic view of life, suggesting that the Jews of his day were "straining at gnats while swallowing camels." And such would still be the case today.

But what were the origins of the attack upon Paul that he was speaking against the law of Moses? It was, in part, rooted in what we just read here in Acts chapter 10 when Peter had a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven in which were all kinds of animals that were deemed "unclean." And with the appearance of the sheet were the words, "Kill and eat!"

Pork, of course, remains the meat that we most often think of as dividing the Christian and Jewish communities. Islam, like Judaism, condemns the eating of pork. But it must be **a hard go** for both Jews and Muslims in today's bacon obsession. Why we have become a bacon nation.

Comedian Jim Gaffigan has a great routine about eating bacon. He says, "I even like the name Bacon. You can't tell me the success of Kevin Bacon isn't somehow tied to his name. You're not going out to see Kevin Hotdog. Oh, who was in that movie? Kevin Bacon. Oh...sounds good."

Yes, bacon has come to rule the day. Why there is even maple-bacon ice cream if you haven't already had enough bacon for breakfast, lunch or supper.

And the church of Jesus Christ seems all for it. But does it all go back to this vision that Peter had one noontime in Joppa? It seems so. And with that vision, the entire system of Jewish law came into question.

Now, what we need to understand is that the words "law" and "covenant" in the Bible, are basically interchangeable.

Exodus 34:27-28

Here the words covenant and the Ten Commandments are used synonymously. For with a change in the covenants comes a change in the law. And it is that **CHANGE IN COVENANTS** or Testaments that has resulted in a change in laws.

Today, Christians openly speak about the Old Testament and the New Testament. But by that we mean the old laws (which were for Israel) and the new laws (which are for the church).

And with Peter's vision Peter the early church was being told:

- there is a change in covenants.

- Jesus talked about it. Jesus said, "a new commandment I give you."
- Jesus more than just hinted at this on the night that he was betrayed when he took the cup and said, "This is the NEW COVENANT of my blood, given for the remission of sins. Drink this, all of you, in remembrance of me."

So while Paul would later make the case that he wasn't speaking AGAINST THE LAW OF MOSES, the truth is, if you didn't buy into the idea that the Mosaic law was being replaced with the NEW COVENANT LAW OF CHRIST, **it sure would have sounded like he was speaking against the law of Moses.**

Hebrews 8:13

The bottom line is that the Old Covenant laws were meant for the Old Covenant nation of Israel. With the coming of Christ, a new era began: the era of the New Covenant. With that new covenant came a new set of laws, though this time the laws were not just for the nation of Israel but for the church, being composed of both Jews and Gentiles.

A vision of a sheet being let down from heaven full of unclean animals seems a rather **strange way** to help introduce that new covenant, but that is what God used. Peter heeded it, and later Peter would recount the vision to the apostles in Jerusalem. Hearing it they too would accept it. Again it seems like a strange way to introduce it to the church, but that is what God used.

For us today I think we should be careful to not flaunt our liberty (to eat pork, for example) in the face of those who still feel bound by the dictates of Mosaic law. When Christians, on Easter, have their HAM DINNERS, it has always struck me as an indirect slam against the Jews. So, eat your ham dinners, but don't boast of it to others, associating it with the resurrection of Jesus.

2. How speaking in tongues came to the Gentiles

The vision that Peter had of the sheet with the unclean animals was really of a dual nature. That is, while it showed that animals previously considered "unclean" God was now deeming clean and edible, it represented something

far bigger than anything pertaining to eating foods. It was meant to illustrate that the Gentiles, previously thought of as "unclean" could also now be part of God's covenant family.

But, as the Bible teaches that truths need to be verified by "**two or three witnesses**" a second witness, or testimony, needed to be given to this monumental understanding of God and his working with people.

And so when Cornelius and those with him came to hear and understand that even **THEIR SINS** could be forgiven through **FAITH IN JESUS**, the Holy Spirit came upon them and that was evidenced by their speaking in tongues.

Today, tongues still remain a **very divisive** issue in the greater church of Jesus Christ. Maybe not quite as divisive as it was 50 years ago, but it still is a problem...

- with some teaching (on the far end of the spectrum) that unless one has spoken in tongues one doesn't really have the Holy Spirit in one's life, and
- others teaching (on the polar opposite end of the spectrum) that tongues are not even for this age and that anyone supposedly speaking in them is either self-delusional or may have even opened themselves up to a demonic spirit.

I checked the Lancaster Bible College's Statement of Faith this past week to see if their position on tongues may have changed from what it was years ago. It has not changed as they state (speaking of spiritual gifts), "Other gifts were temporary and were given in the Apostolic Age for the purpose of founding the church. These include the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, miracles, healings, tongues and interpretation of tongues."

It seems to me that even if one disagreed with that statement, **part of it is truly correct**, namely, that tongues were given "for the purpose of founding the church." For that is **EXACTLY** what was going on here in Acts chapter 10.

Imagine, for a minute, that you were Jewish and you were living in the first century and you knew Peter and highly regarded Peter. And Peter tells you that he had a vision – 3 times, in fact – of a sheet being let down from heaven full of unclean animals and a voice saying, "Kill and eat." And Peter

says to you, "I'm convinced, as part of the New Covenant that Jesus was talking about, we are to no longer think of ourselves as being under the old laws as to what we can eat or not eat." Added to that may be that your neighbor is a Gentile and he's lately been making up some pretty good burgers topped off with cheese and bacon. You might just by it.

But to suggest that this would mean the Jewish church was now supposed to open its doors to that same unclean neighbor and his friends, or to the Roman armies – talk about swine! – and all just because Peter had a vision. Well, that would be perceived, I think, as a "bridge too far."

And so God did something that **couldn't be manipulated, or lied about, or contrived or made up.** He took the same SUPERNATURAL EXPERIENCE of himself that the apostles had had back in Acts chapter 2 on the Day of Pentecost (wherein THEY spoke in tongues) and gave that EXACT SAME EXPERIENCE to the Gentiles – to Cornelius and those with him.

This was INSURMOUNTABLE EVIDENCE.

This was MIRACULOUS – a true SIGN from God.

And that is EXACTLY how Peter and those with him saw it.

Acts 10:47

In the next chapter (chapter 11) Peter will recount the events of chapter 10 and there again make the same conclusion...

Acts 11:15-18

THIS was BIG news.

Eating meat that was previously considered unclean...well, that's news. But not as big news as that God would accept the Gentiles.

If you will jump ahead in Acts, for a minute, way up to Acts chapter 22, we have the account of Paul speaking to the people of Jerusalem regarding his conversion. Let's pick up the narrative there...

Acts 22:17-22

Paul had a hearing with the people UP UNTIL THAT POINT THAT HE MENTIONED THE GENTILES. The point being that the prejudice against the Gentiles was DEEP and DEEPLY ROOTED in the Jewish psyche. In our age we speak of racial prejudice and bigotry but the prejudice and bigotry of the Jews of the New Testament era was HUGE.

So, getting over the idea that one could now eat pork was one issue, but an inclusion of the Gentiles into God's great work...**that** was just too much to swallow. And even among those who had come to name Jesus as the Messiah and Lord, it was this issue – the inclusion of the Gentiles – that proved to be a great stumbling stone to many. They could accept that Jesus brought in a new covenant. But that God's people were to now accept the previously godless Gentiles as brothers and sisters...oh, man, it was HARD.

So God had ordained speaking in tongues – something that the apostles had never done before (and apparently was unknown before this time) – to be the "sine qua non" – the sign above all others, the indispensable mark, of the Holy Spirit's presence in both the Jews and the Gentiles.

So at least that portion of the Lancaster Bible College statement of faith that suggests that tongues were "foundational" to the establishment of the church is correct. Indeed, I don't know anyone who would disagree with that point.

And now for some application...

1. As the bulk of this congregation is made up of Gentiles, we should be ever thankful that for all the prejudice that may have existed back in the era of the early church, praise God there was a willingness to change.

- Praise God that Peter heeded that vision that he had
- Praise God that Cornelius also heeded the vision he had
- Praise God that the early church opened itself up to the notion that the gospel really was for the whole world

For if the early church had refused to accept the notion that the gospel of Jesus Christ was truly for the whole world, Christianity would have remained a branch of Judaism that most likely would have faded away long, long ago. Instead, today, Christianity is the largest of all religions, with adherents in every part of every country on the face of the globe.

2. Like King David, who desired to honor the line of Saul for the sake of Jonathan – and who then brought Miphibosheth into his household to sit at his table – I believe there is an opportunity for us to honor the line of Abraham for the sake of Peter and the apostles by us now offering our house, our building, to the Seed of Abraham Fellowship. Sure, it is just token, but it is, I think, of the right heart to do so...to say to our Jewish brothers and sisters, "What we have, is because your ancestors were kind to us. So what we have, we now offer to you." I personally am VERY EXCITED that we can be doing this and are doing this.

3. There is no room for bigotry of any sort within the church today. It was a kind of bigotry that had initially kept the gospel from going to the Gentiles. But once that bigotry was hurdled, it is sad to admit that the church has exhibited other forms of bigotry – racial bigotry being the foremost – through the centuries. It has been my personal experience that in our nearly 40 years of church life in Lancaster County, I have never seen a single case of racial bigotry in the church. I have never heard a racial joke or a racial slur. And that is as it should be.

4. I am sorry that the use of tongues remains a divisive issue; I can't help but believe God is sorry as well. It seems to me that tongues were **given out of necessity**: first, to make the gospel known (Acts 2, where people all heard the gospel in their own native language) and then, secondly, to confirm the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church (Acts 10). In much the same way, tongues have come to individuals who have **been in need** of them: as a confirmation or affirmation to them. That most of church history's great leaders never spoke in tongues doesn't prove anything other than that maybe those leaders were **not in need of them**. I personally believe those churches, Bible schools, and seminaries that have deemed tongues as something only for the founding of the early church have put themselves in a box, a box that is itself a form of bigotry. At least that is how I see it. And that is all I have to say about the matter at this time.