

ONE IN THE LORD

Acts 11:1-18 Revisited

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PROLOGUE

Today marks a kind of beginning for three different observances that share not only a coincidence in timing but are also related in meaning. Since 1908, this week has been known as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Since 1983, the third Monday of January has been set aside to remember the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This year, on January 20, Barack Obama will be sworn in as the first African American to be elected President of the United States.

These events remind us of the long-standing need to work to overcome prejudice. But they also offer us a glimmer of hope as they remind us of how the grace and mercy of God can bring about reconciliation and healing.

SCRIPTURE [These verses will not be read aloud here but portions will be read during the course of the sermon.]

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. {2} So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, {3} saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" {4} Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, {5} "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. {6} As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. {7} I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' {8} But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' {9} But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' {10} This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. {11} At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. {12} The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. {13} He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; {14} he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' {15} And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. {16} And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy

Spirit.' {17} If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" {18} When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:1-18 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God (Acts 11:1 NRSV).

In the Book of Acts (10) we read of the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman soldier. This was a landmark event. It showed that anyone, no matter their ethnic background, could relate directly to God through faith in Jesus Christ. It made clear that all those who trust in Christ are one in the Lord. So what does it mean to be one in the Lord?

1. ONE SET OF FACTS TO ADDRESS

One in the Lord means having ONE SET OF FACTS TO ADDRESS.

Now the conversion of Cornelius was so significant that the account of it is presented not once but three times in the Acts of the Apostles. The third time has as its setting a kind of trial. Peter returned to the Jerusalem Church where he was criticized for having dinner with Gentiles - a violation of ancient tradition.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" (11:2-3).

Notice that Luke, the author, does not speak of Jewish believers and Gentile believers rather circumcised and uncircumcised as if to emphasize that the difference between the two groups was superficial not substantive.

Peter did not really enter into a debate. He simply recounted the facts of what happened including this:

The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house (11:12).

Peter told the church that there were six Jewish believers who accompanied him to visit Cornelius and his household. According to the legal precedents in both Egyptian and Roman law, something that would have been familiar to virtually every Jew in the region,

seven witnesses proved a case. Peter was saying, in effect, “Look, I’m not going to argue. Here are the facts. There are seven witnesses. Case closed.”

The Christian faith is based on fact. Harold F. Bermel tells of a time when he was driving through Pennsylvania Dutch Country:

“[I was] with my daughter and her seven-year-old son. We passed an Amish horse and buggy, and my grandson’s curiosity was stirred. “Why do they use horses instead of automobiles?” My daughter explained that the Amish didn’t believe in automobiles. After a few moments, he asked, “But can’t they see them?”

In a sense the boy was on to something. There is a connection between faith and evidence. Faith is not credulity. Credulity means believing anything that comes along even if there is no evidence or even if the evidence is against it. In contrast, Peter writes (in the letter that bears his name):

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Pet 1:16 NIV).

John tells us:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands (1 John 1:1 NRSV).

Jesus himself implores us:

Believe on the evidence (John 14:11 NIV).

If Jesus did not come back from the dead then our faith is in vain and the only reasonable course of action would be to throw Christianity out the window. But the historical evidence surrounding his death and resurrection as well as the testimonies from the personal experience of millions of his followers all tell us that this statement is worthy of belief: Jesus is alive!

Peter and his companions could not deny that the same power, which did, in fact, raise Jesus from the dead, was at work in Cornelius and his family. The Good News is, we also can experience this power. Which leads us to the next point:

2. ONE MESSAGE TO BELIEVE ON

One in the Lord means having ONE MESSAGE TO BELIEVE ON.

Peter told the church that an angel had come to Cornelius and said:

“Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved” (11:13,14).

This was not a different message from the one that Jewish believers had received. This was the same message, the same Gospel or “Good News” of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NIV).

There was not one message for Jews and a different one for Gentiles. Just as there is not one Gospel for Americans and an entirely different Gospel for Chinese.

Sometimes, though, things can get lost in translation. Not long ago, *The Los Angeles Times* had a listing of signs that were attempts at communicating a message in English to English speaking visitors such as Americans:

In a hotel elevator in Paris: "Please leave your values at the front desk." In a hotel in Zurich: "Because of the impropriety of entertaining guests of the opposite sex in the bedroom, it is suggested that the lobby be used for this purpose." On the door of a Moscow inn: "If this is your first visit to Russia, you are welcome to it." Announcement in a Russian newspaper: "There will be a Moscow exhibition of arts by 15,000 Soviet Republic painters and sculptors. These were executed over the past two years." In a Bucharest hotel lobby near the elevator: "The lift is being fixed for the next day. During that time we regret that you will be unbearable” (B. Paul Greene).

The Gospel has been translated into hundreds of different languages. There are different ways of speaking it but it is the same message.

But the New Testament does not simply tell us to believe this message but to believe ON this message. Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer:

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31 KJV).

This is from the King James Version. It may sound archaic but it is accurate. The key word is *epi* - a Greek word meaning “on.” This sounds funny in modern speech so newer translations will say “believe IN” instead of “believe ON” though the latter is the more literal rendering and, possibly, the more theologically sound.

Think of it this way. The difference between believing in the message of Christ and believing on the message of Christ is the difference between saying you believe an elevator can take you up to the top floor and actually getting on the elevator and going to the top floor. The first is an opinion about the elevator. The second is a personal commitment. Faith is not just an opinion about Jesus but a relationship in which you are personally committed to Jesus. You believe On the Lord Jesus.

3. ONE SPIRIT TO EMPOWER US

One in the Lord means having ONE SPIRIT TO EMPOWER US.

Peter told the church that the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and the other Gentile believers in the same way the Spirit had come upon the Jewish believers and concluded:

If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17 NRSV).

The Apostle Paul would later make this more explicit:

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, {5} one Lord, one faith, one baptism, {6} one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all (Eph 4:4-6 NRSV).

It is sometimes said, “There are three kinds of people in the world - those who can count and those who cannot!” But the truth is we are not to count different classes of Christians. We may have different gifts but it is the same Spirit who empowers us. We may have different ways of serving but it is the same Lord who is served (see 1 Cor 12:4-7). Martin Luther said, “The works of monk and priest in God's sight are in no way whatever superior to a farmer laboring in the field, or a woman looking after her home.”

The differences we often make between clergy and laity are not biblical. Ginny Dow tells of a time when her father was in the hospital:

He had a stream of visitors from the church. One day two men stopped by. Their quiet conversation was interrupted by the other patient's peppery language from behind the curtain. Before leaving, the visitors read some Scripture and prayed. After they left, the roommate loosed another string of

expletives and then sheepishly confessed to Dad, "If I'd known one of those guys was a [pastor], I'd have watched my language." "Oh," Dad replied, "they're...deacons...from the church. I'm the [pastor]."

We are to differ by function and not by status. Each believer is empowered by the Holy Spirit for service.

CONCLUSION

During the 1950s, Malawi experienced a Rwanda-like upheaval. There were several Presbyterian missionaries working there and an effort was made to rescue them by airplane. The missionaries were to create a sign out of white stone in a large open field. An "X" meant they wanted to be rescued, in which case the pilot would land the plane. An "I" meant they did not, in which case the pilot would fly on. The missionaries made a large "I" but they also added some other letters and numbers to spell out "Ephesians 2:14." This verse says, in part, "He has made the two one." When Paul wrote those words he was talking about Jewish and Gentile believers. There were not to be two groups but one family of God. Nineteen centuries later, what the missionaries were saying was this, "We are staying with our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are not two groups of Christians here. There is only one."

"We are One in The Spirit" is a popular Christian song from the late 1960s. In the mid 70s I was part of a young adult group that sang this song at the conclusion of every fellowship meeting. The group was made up of people from many different kinds of churches but we recognized we were all part of the one family of God. By the grace of God we were living out the meaning of the song. The opening portion of the song goes like this:

[Verse 1:]
We are One in The Spirit,
We are One in The Lord.
We are One in The Spirit,
We are One in The Lord.
And we pray that all unity may one day be restored.
[
Chorus:]
And they'll know we are Christians by our love,
By our Love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Let us strive for unity among all our sisters and brothers in Christ. Let us pray as though it all depends on God. Let us love as though it all depends on us.