

## **Peter is Confronted Over Cornelius      Acts 11:1-18**

### **Introduction**

People seem to like nothing as much as a good scandal

I think it was Mark Twain who said that a lie travels half way around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes

But a lie has nothing on a scandal when it comes to the speed of its spread as a scandal actually has the ability to exceed the “speed of lie”

We can hardly turn on our television or radio or log onto the internet without hearing or reading about someone in the public eye saying or doing something amiss as their misstep is turned into the latest scandal

Scandals happen so frequently and change so quickly that it’s difficult to keep up with what it is we’re supposed to be outraged or offended by

And when people don’t actually do anything scandalous we’re not above inventing things to be scandalized by

One of my favorite faux scandals from 2017 was the one that involved President Trump at a photo op alongside Japanese Prime Minister Abe as they fed some Koi fish from small wooden boxes by spooning the fish food over a railing into a pond

Both men were shown smiling and feeding the fish and then the camera zoomed in on President Trump as he was seen dumping the remainder of his box of food into the water

People were outraged and he was accused of being arrogant and uncouth as people assumed he was acting in a childish manner

Some even claimed that he was guilty of endangering the fish by overfeeding them

Of course it was soon learned that the “scandal” was actually a case of creative video editing and in reality President Trump was simply following the lead of his host who had just done the same thing signaling the end of the photo op

We do love to be outraged by a good scandal and we can’t wait to pounce on anyone who we think has “colored outside the lines” and so violated our expectations

We all have the tendency to create our own lenses through which we see the world and the people in it and it can be very difficult to look at things in a different way from which we’ve always seen them

And of course we feel justified in doing so because we believe our view is the right view

### **Apparently, things weren’t all that different in the first century**

As we look at our text this morning we’re going to see that even the early church wasn’t able to resist pouncing as Peter generated a scandal when he went to Caesarea on God’s orders to witness to Cornelius and his household

And while technology has certainly increased the speed of spreading a scandal today, they weren’t exactly slow in Peter’s day either

Last week we looked at **Acts 10** where Luke recorded the account of Peter taking the gospel to the Gentiles

Our text this morning is **Acts 11:1-18** which is for the most part Peter’s telling of the same account in his own words

This is one of those passages that causes an expository preacher think about skipping over the next sequential block of the text in favor of something new instead of preaching the retelling

But then we realize that we need to examine **why** God determined to place the account in his Word and in doing so we find that there are lessons to be learned that are beneficial for the church –

Just as Paul writes in **2 Timothy 3:16-17** where he tells us that all Scripture was breathed out by God and is useful for us

**God isn't guilty of wasting his breath and he means for us to get something from every passage in the Bible**

If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to join me in Acts 11 as we begin to look at the text

Our passage begins with The **Confrontation** in verses 1-3

It continues with Peter's **Explanation** in verses 4-17

And closes with The **Capitulation** in verse 18 – feel free to substitute "surrender" for "capitulation" if you don't like my attempt at latter syllable alliteration

As we go through this passage let's determine to see through and past the specific details of the account to see the larger implications for us today

## **I. The Confrontation (1-3)**

Follow along as I read **verses 1-3** where we see the **confrontation**

**1**Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. **2**So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, **3**“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

At the end of chapter 10 we see that Cornelius and the rest invited Peter to stay in Caesarea for a while (**10:48**)

Presumably, he did so although we don't know for how long

Peter then headed back to Jerusalem on his own volition – there is no indication that he was summoned – he simply headed back home

Before he was able to get back we see that word of his activities had not only travelled the 50 miles back to the city of Jerusalem but that the news that salvation had been opened up to include the Gentiles had spread amongst the believers “throughout Judea”

It's not hard to imagine Peter as he travelled looking forward to getting back to Jerusalem

He was likely very happy about his new knowledge and eager to share all that God had revealed to him and to rejoicing with his fellow apostles over the wonder of God including the Gentiles in his plan of redemption

But things weren't to be as he expected and his critics were waiting for him with both barrels loaded

Back when I was still running my tool design company, I was called to a meeting up in Milwaukee with the promise of a new stamping die to design

I was understandably in a good mood when I walked in and was happy to be there

And then the man I was there to meet told me to set my briefcase down and follow him to the tool room

When I entered the tool room it was obvious that things were not going to be as I expected and I found that I had been brought there for a dressing down over problems with a past die I had designed that wasn't working as it should have

To say it was an unpleasant meeting given my expectations would be an understatement

### **Peter's meeting didn't go as he expected either**

When he arrived, he was hit with the charge of violating the Jewish practice of separation from Gentiles

In **verse 3** we read that their charge against him was, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

The ESV calls Peter's accusers, “the circumcision party”

The beliefs and practices of rigid, legalistic Judaism were still deeply ingrained in some of the Jewish believers

Consequently, they continued to believe that Gentiles were impure by their very nature and that they needed to become full-fledged converts, or proselytes, to Judaism in order to be saved and become Christ-followers

These members of the “circumcision party” still thought of Christianity as a sect of Judaism and to become a Jew a man needed to go all the way in following the Law even to the point of circumcision

**This was the major difference between being a proselyte and a God-fearer** and if one remained uncircumcised they might be tolerated but they were never fully accepted in Jewish circles

### ***The significance of eating together***

That fact helps to explain why they made such a big deal over eating together

In their minds, to eat with someone meant that you had accepted them fully and had entered into fellowship with them

That's why the religious leaders gave Jesus a hard time when he ate with "tax collectors and sinners" as we see in **Mark 2:16**

And the scribes of the Pharisees, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

It was a scandal in their eyes for Jesus to demonstrate acceptance of those types of people even though they were Jewish and it was even more scandalous to think of eating in the home of a Gentile

As we saw last week, associating with Gentiles wasn't expressly forbidden by the Law but doing so could render a Jew ceremoniously unclean

So in typical fashion, the Jews simply made avoiding going into a Gentile's home or eating with him a rule or law that formed a hedge around God's Law so as to not risk it

Having broken this taboo, Peter is now called upon to defend his actions in Caesarea

### **Once again we see that we haven't progressed all that much since the times recorded in Scripture**

We also have the tendency to hold ourselves and others to standards that go beyond what God actually requires

And we call them on the carpet to explain themselves when they violate our expectations

When I was a teen playing cards - even an innocent game of hearts was considered taboo

I remember being stuck in an airport while on a trip with a group of churches and playing hearts on the floor with some of the other teens from my church's youth group

We offended some of the adults by our actions and were made to put the cards away so as to not be a poor testimony

We respected our elders and did so but the point is that you cannot find anywhere in the Bible where it tells us that a deck of cards is evil or playing with cards is sinful

### **And we have the tendency to prohibit all kinds of things that God permits - just to be on the safe side**

In doing so we partake in the error of **Colossians 2:21** as we cry out, "Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch"

Believing that we are demonstrating wisdom in being more severe than God is

In **1 Corinthians 4:6** Paul warns believers to stay within the bounds of what God's Word actually says

I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, **that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.**

We all have the temptation to add what God's Word clearly teaches and we often do so without realizing it

Like Eve, we take God's command to refrain from eating and add to it a prohibition against touching because we see the wisdom in not even getting close to violating Scripture

So we add human wisdom, practicality, and logic that says if not eating is good then not touching is better

Then we add what we have **read** or **heard** or **experienced** or even **our own sense of how things should be**

Meaning of course that we know what God would have included in his Word if he had thought about our present situation

Because those things just seem right – they seem to make sense – **they feel biblical** – and before long we find that we have strayed from what the Bible actually says

And so we continue to “build a hedge” around God’s Word and add to it to build ourselves up and give us ammunition against our brothers and sisters in Christ when they violate **our** standards

Confession time – it’s kind of embarrassing but I once quoted what I truly believed at the time was in the Bible to make a point only to find out I was actually quoting William Shakespeare

I was having a talk with someone about a financial matter and I wisely told them, “Neither a borrower nor lender be”

Yep – I was pretty proud of myself for nailing that one and putting the kybosh on any ideas that person had about taking out a loan

But that quote isn’t in the Bible and the Bible never tells us to not borrow money

Oh, it has plenty to say about the *wisdom* of borrowing and what borrowing means and the necessity of paying back whatever one owes to another – but it doesn’t say that we are never to go into debt

The only ray – and it’s an admittedly feeble ray – of redemption that I have to cling to is that I was talking to my pastor at the time and he had to look it up to be sure before he informed me of my error

Misattributing quotes to Scripture is so widespread that most of us have fallen victim to it at some point

Try finding the phrase, “God helps those who help themselves” in the Bible or “Money is the root of all evil” or “God works in mysterious ways” or “God will never give you more than you can handle” and the list goes on

**We need to be diligent to check to make sure that we actually know what we think we know**

President Reagan once remarked of his political opponents that "It isn't *so much* that [they] are ignorant. It's just that *they know so many things that aren't so*.

We need to be diligent to make sure that can't be said of us when it comes to our knowledge of the Bible

We do love a good scandal and the opportunity to confront others and hold them accountable

Look at verse 1 again and see what the "circumcision party" had been told of Peter's activity

They "heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God"

It seems that perhaps they simply assumed the part about Peter having eaten with them - just to have a scandal

So Peter’s fellow Jewish believers, with perhaps his fellow apostles looking on, call Peter to answer for his alleged indiscretion of having eaten with Gentiles

## II. The Explanation (4-17)

Follow along as I read Peter's explanation found in **verses 4-17**

**4**But Peter began and explained it to them in order: **5**"I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. **6**Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. **7**And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' **8**But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' **9**But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' **10**This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. **11**And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. **12**And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. **13**And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; **14**he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' **15**As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. **16**And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' **17**If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

The **first** thing I want you to notice is that **Peter doesn't actually defend himself or his actions at all**

He simply tells them the story of what happened

These verses are just a somewhat shortened and rearranged version of the narrative that Luke wrote in chapter 10 as told from Peter's perspective as he naturally relates the events from a first person perspective

And he somewhat conspicuously leaves out the words of his sermon completely

In this retelling Peter relates how it was that he came to understand God's intention to include the Gentiles in his work of redemption as he includes the vision on the rooftop,

the mysterious command to rise, kill, and eat from the mixture of clean and unclean animals,

the arrival of the three men from Cornelius,

the Holy Spirit's command for him to go with them without hesitation,

how God had already worked to prepare Cornelius to hear the gospel,

God's activity in saving the Gentiles who were present,

and the gift of the Holy Spirit

In this we need to see that while those of the circumcision party were concerned with Peter's actions **Peter drew attention to what God did**

And his explanation wasn't based on the message he preached but on how God worked to bring salvation to the Gentiles

To read Peter's explanation he makes clear that he pretty much just had to get out of the way and let God do his thing!

**Second**, we see that while the Jewish believers in Jerusalem were guilty of adding to God's Law and judging accordingly, God causes Peter to connect what is happening with what he knows from God's Word

In **verse 16** Peter relates how he remembered that Jesus had promised them the baptism of the Holy Spirit during his farewell address some 7 years previous as recorded in **Acts 1:5**

Peter hadn't even finished his sermon, in **verse 15** he says he was just getting started, when God reached down and saved Cornelius and his household

Showing that **salvation is a gift that God gives to whomever, however, and whenever he pleases**

And with the same baptism of the Holy Spirit that God had given to the Jews at Pentecost God makes it clear that Cornelius and the others had also believed in the Lord Jesus Christ

In his explanation Peter really didn't defend himself or try to have a theological discussion with his detractors

He didn't pull rank on them as Peter the apostle

He simply told the story of what had taken place and asked "How could I stand in God's way?"

In doing so, Peter demonstrated that he was obedient to the commands of God and that he was mindful of the teaching of the Lord on the matter of baptism of the Holy Spirit and what it meant

And that's exactly what we need to do

We must live our lives in obedience to God each and every day with sensitivity to his leading and a commitment to obedience when his leading is made known

We must use the Word of God to direct us as we confirm what we believe God is saying to us because God will never, ever contradict the clear teaching of Scripture

And we must surround ourselves with like-minded believers and live our lives in such a way that those godly men and women will readily testify to our fidelity in all things

### III. The Capitulation (18)

When Peter completes his telling of the account and poses his rhetorical question his accusers had only one possible response

And in **verse 18** we see the capitulation or the surrender if you prefer

**18**When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

While they had been guilty of using false criteria to launch a false accusation of wrongdoing against Peter when they are confronted with the incontrovertible evidence of God’s working they give in

They had to admit to the utter foolishness of standing in the way of what God was doing

Even Gamaliel in **Acts 5:39** expressed how unwise it would be to be found to be opposing God

First we see that they stopped talking – they stopped their accusations

#### **When God is speaking clearly the best thing we can do is to close our mouths**

Job demonstrated this when God broke his silence to answer Job’s challenges in **Job 40:3-5**

**3**Then Job answered the Lord and said:

**4**“Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth.

**5**I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.”

Peter’s accusers likewise had nothing to say to Peter’s clear explanation of what God was doing

They, and that includes Peter, had been **ignorant** of what God’s plan had been from the beginning in spite of the abundance of evidence they had written down in the Old Testament

This was not a new idea – God first revealed his intention to include the Gentiles in **Genesis 12:3** when he told Abram

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you **all the families of the earth** shall be blessed.”

It seems that once they stopped talking their silence gave them opportunity to think and the result was that they glorified God

#### **Salvation belongs to God and he gives it to whomever he will**

Jonah had to learn that lesson when he was sent by God to the people of Nineveh to preach their need for repentance

Sadly, when Jonah saw that God had spared those he found unworthy of mercy he became angry unlike Peter’s accusers who properly admitted the reality before them and gave God the glory for it

#### **We need to notice though that their surrender was only partial**

While they capitulated on the question of salvation their future behavior will demonstrate that they were not fully in line with the fellowship aspect of all believers being a part of the same body

The issue of inclusion and fraternization will continue to be a distraction in the church for years to come – especially in Paul’s ministry

And the question will lead to the convening of the Jerusalem council that we will look at when we get to Acts 15

Sadly, we will also discover that Peter has yet to fully appreciate the truth of all that God had done and what he expects as a result



## **How I wish that we could say that we no longer have this problem in the church today**

But proper application continues to be elusive

Perhaps this is because we often fail to truly understand biblical truth at its universal level that goes beyond the specific instance we read in the Bible

Most of you know my wife, Kathy, worked for many years as a teacher's aide

She will tell you one of the frustrations that she experienced as she followed the kids from class to class is their seeming inability to apply what they just learned in one class to the next class

For instance, they couldn't seem to apply what they learned in English class to help them understand how to interpret a word problem in math class

And when she would point this disconnect out to them they would reply, "But this isn't English this is math"

Proper application of Scripture is crucial to living a life that is pleasing to God and we need to endeavor to fully explore what the Bible says and drill down to see if there is a universal truth that applies beyond the incidental

Jesus had to use his **Sermon on the Mount** to divest his hearers of their narrow application of the Law as he showed them to go beyond the letter of the Law to the necessary heart attitudes behind it

Sure, they could say that they had never murdered anyone but could they say that they had never been angry enough to commit murder in their heart?

They had never actually committed the physical act of adultery but they had done so in their imaginations

And so forth

I believe that we often miss the complete application of the Bible due to simply not seeing clearly but there are occasions where we must admit to having an "intentional myopia" as we excuse ourselves based on a very narrow adherence to the specific

Whatever the reason, the Jewish believers saw only the salvation aspect of what God was doing and they left the lesson of inclusion, fellowship, and full acceptance for another day and another situation

## Conclusion

Peter had followed the leading and direction of God in going to meet with Cornelius

In doing so, he had to set aside a lifetime of belief that was taught to him concerning centuries of well-meaning but mistaken separation between Jews and Gentiles

He had thought he was doing well and living in the manner that was pleasing to God but when God showed him his error he yielded and went

Errors creep in either through the inventions of our own minds or from established, generational belief that doesn't quite square with the truth of Scripture

Typically, we add to what the Bible says in ways that are completely innocent of malice or wrong intention in ways that sound so "right" that we have a hard time believing that they aren't really in the biblical text

That's why we need to be diligent to be in and under the Word and to be as noble as the Bereans as we search the Scriptures daily to check for ourselves that what we are being told and what we think on our own are correct

And we need to recognize and admit our errors and additions and root them out of our thinking

Peter did and he was given the privilege of opening the door of the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles

Peter's accusers were guilty of the same error toward the Gentiles as Peter had been

And loving a good scandal they were quick to pounce on him and demand an explanation when he came back to Jerusalem

A lot of what they did in this confrontation was unbiblical

We aren't told this directly but it isn't too hard to imagine that they had spent some time together gossiping and building a coalition to confront Peter as soon as he arrived - and if they did they were wrong to do so

Clearly, they had believed the worst about Peter when the news came to their attention and they had not given him the benefit of the doubt

To the extent that we can determine tone from the written page they had made up their minds and rendered a guilty verdict against Peter and were expecting to watch him squirm as they were proven right

There is no sense whatsoever that these accusers went to Peter with heavy hearts, with reluctance or humility or meekness

There is no sense that they were really hoping that the news had been wrong - all of which would have shown a biblical approach to confrontation

And in this they were unbiblical in their approach and being unbiblical means that they sinned in these aspects regardless of anything Peter might have done

**There is never any justification for us to engage in unbiblical problem solving**

But some of what they did was exactly what they should have done

In the end they confronted the one who they thought was in error and asked for an explanation

And it appears that Peter was allowed to explain without any further challenge or interruption as they listened and considered what he had to say

And in the end they accepted that God had clearly directed Peter's steps and that God had given salvation and baptism of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles - as hard as that was for them to swallow

They either didn't understand fully all of the implications of God's action or they didn't yet agree with them but they acknowledged what God had done, stopped objecting, and glorified God

We need to do the same when we have questions

**We need to go to the person involved and seek to come to an understanding** - not having first taken the matter to others in order to build a coalition or even to as we like to say, "try to determine if I'm right to think this way"

Which is honestly just a calculated but transparent means of sanctifying our gossip

**And when we meet with the other person we need to do so with a heart that desires to understand, to discover what is right, and to find harmony**

Peter's explanation is also instructive as he didn't jump to defend himself

He simply told what God had done at each step of the way and asked how could he be expected to disobey

**If we have demonstrated fidelity in obedience to what God has told us we won't need to go out of our way to defend ourselves**

it was impossible for his detractors to miss that God had orchestrated this entire episode and in the end they silenced themselves and proceeded to give God the glory

And that's precisely the reaction we should have when our preconceived notions are answered

**We must be quick to put them aside and replace them with the truth to God's glory**

But we often find this to be quite difficult as our greater desire is to win the argument and to have our prejudices maintained so that we can continue to cling to them than to be right

We love a good scandal and often we look for ways to have our delicate sensibilities offended just so we can react

After all, how else with others know just how noble we are?

**But we need to make certain that what we are offended by is in alignment with what offends God**

**And we need to be ready to turn on a dime and follow God when they are shown to be amiss**

Let's pray