

LIFE DISSOLVES PREJUDICE

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

About two years ago I was given eyes to see what a wonderful spiritual family we have in this church. I became more aware than ever before that we are really becoming a part of the body of Christ. Men, women, boys, and girls are coming together to worship, grow, and fellowship in him and each other. We are, moreover, a church that includes people from a multitude of different social and economic classes, races, cultures, and religious backgrounds. This all fits in with what our risen and ever-present Lord Jesus had in mind when he told his disciples that in the age of the Spirit he was going to build his church, and it would include not only Jews but also Gentiles from every corner of the world.

But as his church grew around the world, all Christians in each new generation from those multiracial and multicultural societies would have to work hard to preserve the "unity of the Spirit" (see Ephesians 4:3) within these many differences. In the midst of this joy I began to wonder what could destroy the unity of the Spirit of God among us. One real possibility was the sin of prejudice. I thought that fortunately I wasn't prejudiced, but maybe some of the rest of us struggled with that sin...Well, that thought lasted only as long as it took me to look up prejudice in my dictionary:

prejudice: *noun.* **1. a.** An adverse judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts. **b.** A preconceived preference or idea; bias. **2.** The act or state of holding unreasonable preconceived judgments or convictions. **3.** Irrational suspicion or hatred of a particular group, race, or religion [or class or culture]. **4.** Detriment or injury caused to a person by the preconceived and unfavorable conviction of another or others. ---*tr. verb.* **1.** To cause (someone) to judge prematurely and irrationally; bias. **2.** To affect injuriously or detrimentally by some judgment or act. (From *The American Heritage Dictionary*, Second College Edition, © 1982 by Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.)

Like me, you may need to look at that definition once again and then ask our Lord Jesus to search your heart to see if this sin is there. If it is, then we need to be willing to have him who is our life dissolve the prejudice---he is the only one who can do it---so that we can continue to enjoy the "unity of the Spirit" at this Christian fellowship and with other Christians around this community and the world. Acts 10 is a wonderful mirror for us to look into in this matter, because in it we will find a born-again Christian, Peter, who is filled with the Holy Spirit but who is struggling with a deeply rooted religious and racial prejudice. We will also see how God---Father, Son, and Holy Spirit---helps this Christian root out his sin of prejudice.

Before the cross, God the Father had revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Based on that revelation Jesus had then said, "...I will build My Church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." And then he gave Peter and the other apostles the "keys of the kingdom of heaven" to open the doors of salvation to the Jews, the Samaritans, and soon the Gentiles (Matthew 16:13-19).

After his death on the cross, burial, and resurrection, Jesus appeared to them to remind them that he would build his church in and through them. Then he laid out for them the way it was to be accomplished: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo [surely], I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20.) Just before he ascended into heaven he told his disciples, "...You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My [of Me] witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." (Acts 1:8.) Ten days later on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and the church---all Jews---was born. Over the next four years the apostles and other disciples faithfully

witnessed in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Then, as we are about to see, our risen Lord Jesus opened the floodgates of salvation to the Gentiles.

A word from God to Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile

Acts 10:1-8

Now there was a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort, a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually. About the ninth hour of the day he clearly saw in a vision an angel of God who had just come in to him, and said to him, "Cornelius!" And fixing his gaze upon him and being much alarmed, he said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now dispatch some men to Joppa, and send for a man named Simon, who is also called Peter; he is staying with a certain tanner named Simon, whose house is by the sea." And when the angel who was speaking to him had departed, he summoned two of his servants and a devout soldier of those who were in constant attendance upon him, and after he had explained everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

It was the year 37 AD, and the Roman Empire was being ruled by Tiberius (14-37 AD). One of Rome's most important military bases was located on the western shores of Israel in a seaport named Caesarea, after Augustus Caesar. This city was built by Herod the Great and was the capital from which a Roman governor administered the provinces of Judea and Samaria. You can still visit its well-preserved ruins and harbor today. In that Roman base was stationed this centurion named Cornelius who was a member of the Italian regiment or cohort. A regiment of the mighty Roman legion consisted of six captains or centurions responsible for one hundred men each. These regiments were used as guards for the governor as well as storm troopers he could send to any city in Israel to bring order to the restless Jews.

Cornelius was a man who knew how to take orders and give orders (see also Matthew 8:5-10). His Roman religious culture required that he worship Caesar. He was also surrounded by the temples to the many gods and goddess of his day. But apparently he was spiritually restless and became attracted to the Jewish God and his holy people (see Deuteronomy 7:6). Cornelius was (1) a devout man, (2) one who feared the God of the Jews, along with his family, (3) one who gave alms to the Jewish people and whom they held in high esteem, and (4) a man of prayer. But he had not converted to Judaism.

On this particular day Cornelius was praying at the ninth hour (3:00-4:00 pm) when he saw, in a spiritual vision, an angel of God who came to him and called out his name. Cornelius stared at him in alarm. But note this soldier's response: "What is it, Lord?" The angel told him that God the Father had accepted his prayers and alms as a memorial before him. "God knows your name, and he knows your heart, that you are seeking him. He hears your prayers and sees your good works." The Lord God knew that this man hungered to know him. He knew he was a spiritual fetus, so to speak, having a form of life but still needing to be born again.

I am intrigued by what this passage shows us about how aware God is of all who fear him and of their need to be saved. This story of Cornelius and many more like it in the Scriptures should put to rest the question most people have thought of at least once in their lives: What happens to all the men and women in the world living in different cultures, under different governments, and in pagan religious systems who have never heard of Jesus? Will they go to hell when they die? The answer is found in Hebrews 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." As this soldier was drawing near to God, God was drawing near to him (James 4:8). And the reward would be an introduction to his son Jesus and the offer of eternal life through him.

This community is filled with men and women and boys and girls who are drawing near to God, but for many of us they are hard to see because the sin of prejudice has blinded us! We can't see them because of where they live, where they work, how they dress, where they worship, the color of their skin, their different cultures, their different social gatherings, or the gangs they belong to. But in spite of all those outward barriers, God sees each and every heart that is seeking to draw near to him. So God would like to cure our blindness and use

us to place his gospel into their open hearts.

Now, the angel of God was not sent to share the gospel with Cornelius. But he told him that the man who could share the gospel of Jesus Christ was at that moment lodging thirty-two miles south of Caesarea in the seaport of Joppa, in the home of Simon the tanner. So Cornelius was given instruction to send some of his men to find Peter in Joppa. Cornelius without hesitation did as he was told and sent two Gentile servants and one of his Gentile soldiers, who was also devout, to Joppa to find the house of this Jewish tanner. God could see that Cornelius, who could have had a deep hatred and prejudice against the Jews, did not, and that as a Gentile not only was he involved in their spiritual and social life, but he also was quite willing to send his Gentile servants to find this Jew he had never met and invite him to come to his home in Caesarea.

God was involved in getting Cornelius to meet Peter. Now we will see that our Lord Jesus needed to get involved in Peter's life before he met Cornelius so that Cornelius could hear about the gift of salvation that could be found in Jesus.

A word from the risen Jesus to Peter, a Christ-fearing Jew

Acts 10:9-16

And on the next day, as they were on their way, and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry, and was desiring to eat; but while they were making preparations, he fell into a trance; and he beheld the sky opened up, and a certain object like a great sheet coming down, lowered by four corners to the ground, and there were in it all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. And a voice came to him, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat!" But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." And again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." And this happened three times; and immediately the object was taken up into the sky.

In contrast to Cornelius, Peter was a born-again Christian from the Jewish race, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. He had been empowered by the Holy Spirit to take the first message of salvation to the Jewish people in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. But he still struggled with prejudice. Yet he will continue to take a leadership role in Acts 10. We find Peter staying in the seaport town of Joppa (modern Jaffa, a mile south of Tel Aviv). He was staying in the home of Simon the tanner. Notice that Peter was staying with a man who was totally involved with dead animals, which if touched by a Jew would make him ceremonially unclean (see Leviticus 11). But the Lord was getting Peter ready to get involved with those whom the Jews called unclean Gentiles. Like Cornelius the day before, he too looked for a time to pray. At the sixth hour (noon) he went up on the rooftop while he waited for lunch, for which he was hungry, and began to pray. At this point our Lord began the painful but necessary spiritual surgery on Peter's heart to remove hundreds of years of religious racism and prejudice that had been passed down as truth within Judaism, but that were in reality man-made customs.

Instead of seeing a vision like Cornelius, Peter fell into a trance. In the Greek this word is *ekstasis*. It was an ecstasy that came upon one in which one passed out of oneself and later came back to oneself. It was an altered state of consciousness resembling sleep during which voluntary movement was lost. There was a vision within this trance. In it the sky opened up and something that looked like a giant sheet seemed to be lowered by its four corners. When it touched the ground Peter could see all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. Some of the animals were kosher and could be eaten according to the dietary laws of Leviticus, but some of the animals were nonkosher and forbidden for eating. Now, since the day of Pentecost those laws had been canceled in the age of the Spirit. But that, while easy to say, was difficult to carry out.

A familiar, personal voice said, "Arise, Peter, kill and eat." Now at this point the Jews had had the Levitical laws in their lives for some fifteen hundred years. When the Jews became followers of Jesus their Lord, the final Passover Lamb, it took them some forty years to break away from the temple worship services, prayer services, dietary laws, and sacrificial system, as well as their deep-seated racial prejudice against Gentiles. The

two historical events that helped them the most were the Jerusalem Council in 45 AD and the destruction of the temple by the Roman legions in 70 AD. But at this point a ham sandwich was still unclean to Peter even though he was now a Christian living in the age of the Spirit (see Acts 15; Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8; Galatians; and the Letter to the Hebrews.) So at this moment we find the reluctant disciple Peter telling the risen Jesus in his best legalistic voice filled with pride seeking to defile what God had made clean: "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean." Our Lord Jesus reminded Peter, "What God my Father has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." And then a most amazing thing happened: Apparently three times the sheet came down to Peter, three times he was told to take the formerly unclean animals and kill them, and three times he resisted. He had denied Jesus three times at his trial and now he was refusing to obey the risen Jesus another three times! He never did kill and eat any of the unclean or clean animals before the sheet was taken back up into the sky.

Peter was a born-again Christian Jew, and it was his traditional background that blinded him and filled his heart with the pride that kept him from being free in the Spirit. But the lesson our Lord wanted to teach Peter at this time, just before the gates of salvation would be opened to the Gentiles, was that the Gentiles whom the Jews called unclean were not unclean in the sight of God (see Acts 10:15, 28; Mark 7:18-19). According to God's calendar it was time to move out into the Gentile world with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The root of prejudice is pride: "If...you are fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself [Leviticus 19:18],' you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors." (James 2:8-9.)

Look at all the ethnic cleansing going on in Bosnia and the prejudices occurring in South Africa and central Africa at this moment, not to mention the hatred building up over generations between the Jews and Arabs. All this conflict is there because of the pride and prejudice in the hearts of men. But isn't the same thing going on in this community---Stanford, East Palo Alto, Palo Alto, Mountain View, Menlo Park, Atherton, and so on? Here as well men and women are showing partiality toward each other based on class, social status, race, culture, intellect, religious expression, and political differences. Each of these prejudices divides us. But on the other hand, once godly men and women see the sin of prejudice in their hearts, they want that sin removed by our Lord Jesus.

God the Father was involved in getting Cornelius to meet Peter. Our risen Lord Jesus needed to get involved in Peter's life so he would meet Cornelius and Cornelius could hear about the gift of salvation found in Jesus. And now we will see the Holy Spirit get involved.

The voice of the Spirit

Acts 10:17-33

Now while Peter was greatly perplexed in mind as to what the vision which he had seen might be, behold, the men who had been sent by Cornelius, having asked directions for Simon's house, appeared at the gate; and calling out, they were asking whether Simon, who was also called Peter, was staying there. And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. But arise, go downstairs, and accompany them without misgivings; for I have sent them Myself." And Peter went down to the men and said, "Behold, I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for which you have come?" And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was divinely directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and hear a message from you." And so he invited them in and gave them lodging.

And on the next day he arose and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. And on the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. And when it came about that Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, "Stand up; I too am just a man." And as he talked with him, he entered, and found many people assembled. And he said to them, "You yourselves know

how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. And so I ask for what reason you have sent for me." And Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.' And so I sent to you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Once Peter came out of his trance, he remained greatly perplexed as to the meaning of the vision. Then Cornelius' servants arrived at Simon's gate and called out the name the angel had given them, Peter. At that moment the Holy Spirit got involved in this mission and told Peter that three men (two servants and a devout soldier) were looking for him and that he should go with them without misgivings, "for I have sent them Myself." Peter would not only need to be filled with the Spirit, but also to be taught and led by the Spirit. So Peter met them, and they shared what had happened to their master and the fact that they were under orders to invite him to Caesarea and meet this centurion. Peter invited the three Gentiles in for the night, although it was unacceptable according to Jewish custom. Then early the next morning Peter and six of his Jewish brothers (see Acts 11:12) joined the three Gentiles. The party of ten left Joppa and walked the thirty-two miles up the coast. Where there is now a nuclear-powered electrical plant by the Mediterranean Sea, they turned left and walked west for a half-mile, then turned right and walked north another quarter-mile to Caesarea by the sea.

The Jews hated the Romans because they had to live under an occupying army, pay taxes to Caesar, carry their bags if commanded, suffer cruel treatment daily, fight continually to keep their temple and Jerusalem free of Roman idols and symbols, and watch many of their brothers suffer the cruel punishment of being publicly beaten and crucified. The Jews looked on the Romans as less than animals, and so unclean that if they touched one in the street they would be considered unclean themselves and would have to rush home and wash. And no Jew would ever be found in the home of a Gentile, let alone a Roman soldier. Nor would a Jew be found praying with Gentiles in the temple because of the "middle wall of partition"; Gentiles faced the threat of death if they sought to cross it in order to enter the Jewish section.

The Jews thought they were God's favored people because they had descended from Abraham. But they were called out to be God's people only to demonstrate the relationship he wanted to have with all nations. John R.W. Stott in *The Spirit, The Church, The World* wrote: "The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as 'dogs,' and developed traditions which kept them apart."

But on the other side of the coin, the Romans couldn't stand the arrogant Jews and their religious sensitivity, their religious laws, and the crowds at the times of the feasts in Jerusalem which could turn into a riot in a minute.

So in the midst of this tense social and religious climate, two natural enemies were about to meet. But Cornelius was waiting for Peter with his relatives and close friends, and when Peter entered, he met him, fell at his feet, and worshiped him. It was unheard of, almost unreal; it shows us the spiritual hunger in the heart of Cornelius and his faith in the words of the angel from God. And Peter said, "Stand up; I too am just a man." Then Peter in total honesty and a spirit of humility---but a little lingering prejudice---said, "I am here because of a vision I had. But you yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. [This was really a violation not of the law, as we have seen, but of Jewish custom.] So why am I here?" Then Cornelius explained his vision and the orders the angel had given him to go and ask Peter to come. "Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord [Jesus]."

Peter began his message of salvation by telling these Gentiles that he now realized that God was not one to show partiality toward Jews or Gentiles, but would welcome all who feared him. Then (in verses 34-43) he gave almost the same message he gave on the day of Pentecost, telling them that God sent his Son Jesus to

bring peace between God and man and between fellow men. Then he told them how Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit and went about doing good and setting people free from the oppression of the devil. He told them that Jesus then went to the Roman cross for our sins, but that God raised him from the dead. His resurrection was witnessed by those who believed he was both the Son of God and the only one willing and then able to offer anyone, Jew and Gentile alike, the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life if they placed their faith in him.

The gates of salvation are opened to the Gentiles

Acts 10:44-48

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy spirit just as we did, can he?" And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Peter never got to finish his sermon at Pentecost, and he never got to finish it in Cornelius' home either. For God saw the hearts of Cornelius and his relatives and friends. And as they listened they opened up their hearts to invite Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of the living God to come into their hearts and forgive their sins. By that simple act of faith they were given the gift of eternal life, and they also received the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit. It was a Gentile Pentecost. The Jewish men who had come with Peter saw all this happen, and they were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit, which apparently they had experienced just four years earlier in Jerusalem, was now being poured out upon the Gentiles. The evidence of this outpouring of the Spirit was that the Gentiles were speaking in tongues and exalting God as the born-again Jews had on the day of Pentecost, the birth of the church.

The Holy Spirit's ministry consists of five things. (1) He convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment through believers (see John 16:7-11). (2) He is involved in regeneration. Faith is required in order for the Holy Spirit to give new and eternal life. The word of God provides the content for faith; it is not faith in faith, but faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior as he is revealed by his spoken and written word (see Titus 3:3-7). (3) Once a person is born again, the Holy Spirit indwells them (see 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Believers are given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who empowers them to live godly lives (John 14:16-17). (4) The Holy Spirit then places or baptizes the new believer into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ with all the other believers (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Christians acknowledge that spiritual reality by being physically baptized with water. (5) Finally, God seals Christians with the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 1:13-14)---we can't get out of our relationship with God!

The spiritual gift of tongues was a sign for the Jewish Christians, and in this case it appears that Cornelius and his family and friends, who all spoke Latin, may have broken out in pure Hebrew to praise the Lord! It was a language they had never learned, one that kept Jew and Gentile separated. (Speaking in a heretofore unlearned language and praising God occurred on the day of Pentecost and were two of the five marks of the true gift of tongues as recorded in 1 Corinthians 14.) When the Jews heard the Gentiles speaking their own language, they were convinced that the Gentiles had been given the gift of salvation from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Peter said, "You know, this was just like our experience four years ago, only the three thousand men who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah in Jerusalem were Jews instead of Gentiles. And when they were baptized by the Holy Spirit we simply baptized them in water to symbolize their spiritual identification with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection to newness of life (see Romans 6)." And so these Gentiles were baptized in water in the name of Jesus Christ in keeping with the Great Commission of our risen Lord as recorded in Matthew 28:19-20.

Our Lord Jesus taught Peter one of his most value spiritual lessons in this experience. As he had shown him by the vision, he should not call any man unholy or unclean, regardless of their religion, race, culture, or

class. God is willing to save any man, woman, boy, or girl who fears him, in any culture around the world. And he is able to do it by introducing them to his Son Jesus Christ through his disciples like you and me, once we confess our own sin of prejudice to him.

As this church becomes more and more multiracial, multiclass, and multicultural, may we not be found harboring the sin of prejudice, favoritism, or partiality; but having confessed it, may we then be set free to obey our ever-present and loving Lord Jesus when he said: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35.)

Catalog No. 4365
Acts 10
Fifth Message
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April 17, 1994

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