The Early Church: Challenges, Sacrifices and Problems

## Part One: Food Rules and People

This is the first of a series of studies of the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ looking at some challenges and problems the early church went through: challenges to their thinking; sacrifices they made to maintain their faith; problems they encountered because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus. Along the way we consider what those problems, and the Church’s response, say to us.

**Overall text: Acts 10 verses 1 to 48**

**Opener:** List any books, films, television programmes you have seen or read that portray humans interacting with other types of intelligent life. You may think of Hobbits, Elves, Fairies, Vampires, Werewolves, etc.

**Question: If such other forms of life really existed, would you want to interact with them? Would you date a vampire? Would you fall in love with a werewolf?**

That’s a popular theme. That’s also part of our human condition. We want love to push through any boundaries: to reach out and connect with someone across nations, cultures, societies, despite the difficulties.

**Question: Can you think of any other stories about love that cuts across boundaries?**

For example: Romeo and Juliet. We cheer for the central idea. When two clans can’t get on, but two individuals find love and win through, we love it. When humans and vampires have a history of violence, but two people connect, it’s not just a love story, but against the odds. That seems to mean something to us.

So, what is it, in the human psyche, to which this connects? What if there’s a greater story, of love against the odds? A story not just about two individuals, but about two groups learning how to call each other family. Our planet is divided in many ways. So how would it be if those walls disappeared?

**Consider:** One of the greatest divisions through history has been between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). Jews are a people group, set apart by their ethnicity, birth, and calling. A clear division existed between Jews and Gentiles, and still does in many ways. Logically, if that division was removed, then every warring faction could get along. In fact, what if they not only get on but become family?

**Question: What is it that kept the Jews separate?**

You may think of rules. Most Jews believe the rules, that keep Jewish people separate - were from God. The Torah is the name for their Law, as found in the Old Testament. Through the centuries, many extra traditions and rulings have added to the Torah. Generally these make it hard for Jews and non-Jews to integrate.

**Example:** Dietary laws. These are what Jews call their laws about kosher food - what is ‘clean’ to eat from their viewpoint, and what is ‘unclean’.

**Question: Have you come across kosher rules? How do those make you feel? Can you imagine any issues that may stop you sharing a meal with others?**

When people around you eat food differently, table fellowship becomes hard. In ancient cultures, the best way to express fellowship was to eat a meal together. So, it was impossible for Jews and Gentiles to become a family together without abandoning the law that Jews saw as given by God.

This is in the Old Testament. But what if God said, ‘Yes, I designed that, for a while, to keep my people separate until the Messiah was born. He, then, could teach Jew and Gentile to get along. For that to happen, those rules now have to go.’

**Imagine:** You have grown up as a Jew, told you must obey this law sent by God. How would you feel if someone told you God has changed his mind?

**Question: Have you had to change the rules between you and someone else as your relationship alters?**

**Think:** If you’re a parent, think of your children. Were there any ways in which you changed how you dealt with your children as they got older? Is this because you changed, or because your child developed?

You don’t treat a 16-year old like a five-year old. So, think what you would have said to one of your children when they were five years old, as opposed to when they were a teenager, and then as an adult.

The early church seemed to understand the gospel of Jesus in a similar way. They saw it as God saying, ‘It’s time to move to a new way. I will create one people from these two divided groups, through the power of the cross and the Holy Spirit.’ People didn’t see it coming, because God changed something he established. Yet he always promised he would.

**Question: Can you think of any Old Testament passages that say God is going to change what he established and do something new?**

**Example:** Jesus had to teach that items like food laws had to go if they were to get along with each other. He taught about honouring each other as brother and sister; but, to do that, certain traditions had to be abandoned.

For instance, in Mark 7, he challenges dietary tradition. To those who claim you can be made clean or unclean based on what you eat, Jesus says, ‘No. What makes a person clean or unclean is not what you put in, but what comes out from the inside - your thoughts, words, attitudes.’

As he teaches that, he implicitly gives them freedom from the Jewish Law. Even his disciples find that too radical. In fact, Mark has to write that in parenthesis:

Mark 7 verse 19:

‘In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.’

**Question: How radical do you think that was?**

We may not understand the radical shift in thinking. But it was a powerful statement for understanding the impact of the gospel.

**Example:** Look at Matthew 19 verses 1 to 11, and compare that to Deuteronomy 24 verse 1 to 5.

**Question: How has Jesus changed those commands about divorce and remarriage that came through Moses?**

He calls people back to God’s original intent for Adam and Eve. What does this mean? Jesus seems to propose one new humanity - no Jew or Gentile, slave or free, and so on. All Christians are one in Christ, no matter their ethnicity or background. But even his disciples didn’t understand it properly at first. This is seen in the book of Acts. The young church - composed of both Jewish and Gentile Christians - works through the radical implications of the gospel.

They had three options, to create some form of functional movement:

**One:** two-track Christianity. Jews keep the Torah and Gentiles don’t. Two separate groups, not quite living as one family. This option was rejected by the early church.

**Two:** Gentiles convert and become Jewish, then keep the Torah. This option was also rejected by the early church.

**Three:** Jews walk away from their traditions, their Torah, and say, ‘Jesus leads us into a new way of living, where we live among, and in unity with, our Gentile brothers and sisters.’ That’s a radical unity, never seen before.

## Verse Study Part One:

Look at Acts chapter 10. The story of two conversions - of a Gentile called Cornelius, and the conversion of the thinking of the Apostle Peter, a Jew. Notice that Cornelius is centurion in the Roman army. He is neither a Jew nor a Christian.

**Read Acts 10 verses 1 to 8.**

Acts 10 verse 2 says Cornelius was,

“a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.”

One day he had a vision of an angel of God, who came to him and said,

‘Cornelius.’

Verse 4:

“He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.”

What is this saying? It seems to say, ’Currently you are outside of God’s people - neither a Christian or Jew. BUT God sees your heart and your living. And he’s pleased.’

**Question: Does this mean you can be saved - receive salvation and know the assurance of life after death with God - by doing good works?**

Christians say, ‘No. You can’t get saved by good works.’ That’s true; but Cornelius still needs the gospel. God sees, understands, and appreciates those who seek him and live in a way that aligns them with the life of love.

So the angel says, ‘Your good deeds are a memorial offering to God.’ The Jews had, for centuries, been offering animal sacrifices to get right with God. Yet this says that living a righteous life is, in some sense, like burning a sacrifice. God is pleased, yet wants to take Cornelius further - into salvation through Jesus.

The angel gives instructions.

Verse 5:

“Now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter.”

Simon is to tell the gospel to Cornelius. But, what’s the problem?

Peter doesn’t yet know that he is allowed to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. Up to this point, he and the other disciples have taken the gospel to only Jewish people. God wants to change this attitude in Peter.

**Review verses 1 to 8. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study Part Two:

**Read Acts 10 verses 9 to 23.**

Cornelius sends men to get Peter; and, as they travel, God seems to deal with some of Peter’s understanding of this question of exclusivism.

Verse 9:

“The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance”

So, he’s tired, hungry, on the roof, and gets a vision about food.

Verse 11:

“and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air.”

**Question: What is the problem here for Peter?**

Peter had been raised to follow kosher law. This is clearly non-kosher, outside what was acceptable for Jews to eat.

Verse 13:

“There came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat."”

‘Here’s food. Make a choice. Kill something.’

**Question: Is this God testing Peter? Or is it God now saying the old rules about kosher have gone because of Jesus?**

God is saying, ‘I want you to do something that, in scripture, I’ve told you to never do.’ How would you feel if you were Peter? Peter said he is following Jesus. The old ways, the Old Covenant of Law, have gone. Now God is leading Peter to the realisation of the implications into which the New Covenant - the gospel - will lead.

Verse 14:

“But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."”

**Question: God told Peter to do this. So, why does Peter refuse?**

Peter seems to think, ’This is a test to see if I’m faithful to the Torah. And I am.’ He even boasts about his piety.

‘I have never...’

Whenever someone starts with those words, they’re often boasting of their negative morality. ‘I am holy because of the things I NEVER do.’ But is holiness all about what we don’t do?

Verse 15:

“The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.””

**Consider:** Peter probably thinks he’s passed the test by saying, ‘No way,’ but the voice rebukes him and says, ‘It’s time for change.’ Three times Peter has to be rebuked about this. It’s a huge shift. By verse 17, Peter hasn’t fully embraced this. He’s simply shifted from being negative to being more open. ‘Is this really from God? Can God be moving on in his dealings with his people?’

Verse 17:

“While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate.”

**Question: Why did they stop at the gate?**

Centurions were instructed in the ways of people who lived in the countries to which they are sent. Cornelius seems to respect Jewish religious boundaries. So they stand at a distance, not wanting to cause offence.

Verse 18:

“They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.”

The Holy Spirit says, ‘Go and talk to these men.’ Remember, Peter is still reeling from this vision. It has implied that faith is now about following Jesus, not just following rules. Jesus taught this, but Peter hadn’t understood the implications.

Verse 21:

“Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?””

They tell him about Cornelius. So Peter invites them in.

Verse 23:

“The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the believers from Joppa went along.”

**Review verses 9 to 23. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study Part Three:

**Read Acts 10 verses 24 to 48.**

Think about Peter. He is told by God to proclaim God’s mercy and grace to a people with whom Peter had been taught not to associate.

**Question: Does that remind you of anyone from the Old Testament?**

There’s a fascinating parallel here with Jonah. Jonah is told by God to proclaim God’s mercy and grace to a people Jonah hates. He tries to run, and spends three days in the whale. He has to be told three times to do this. He doesn’t want to, because he is afraid the Ninevites will repent. He doesn’t want God to be that merciful to such Gentiles. Do you see the pattern with Peter?

**Consider:** Peter is staying in Joppa. Where has that name appeared before?

Joppa is the same town that Jonah was in when he was told to go to the Ninevites. This seems to show that the seeds of God’s heart, revealed to Peter, were planted throughout the OT. So, Peter goes to Cornelius’ house. There, Cornelius has invited all his family and friends. Peter starts talking, processing this as he goes.

Verse 28:

“He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile.’

In other words, ‘I shouldn’t even be here.’

‘But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.”

Now he gets the point!

**Question: Is this just about food? If not, what’s it about?**

This seems to be about fellowship: table fellowship, getting together. It’s about people: ‘To me, you’re not unclean any more.’

**Notice:** God loves using people in partnership with himself. He could have sent an angel to Cornelius’ house and proclaimed the gospel. But humans are made in God’s image, and God wants to do things together with us. So, he uses angels and messengers to get us ready to partner with him and get the job done together.

Cornelius tells his story. Then he says,

Verse 33:

“So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God...’

He’s saying, ‘I believe God is here. He’s prepared this.’

‘...to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.””

Peter’s going, ‘I don’t know what to say. It’s all new to me. Could it really be what God said, take and eat, that the dividing walls are broken down?’ So, look at verses 34 to 42. This seems to be Peter’s concentrated version of the gospel.

**Question: If so, can this help us in how we present the gospel today? In what way?**

Example: Notice it starts with humility, where he’s at, with his confession. He’s gone from pride - ‘I never,’ - to, ‘I’ve been told off by God and I’m working it out. So I’m telling you a gospel that I’m being challenged by, and invite you to join me.’

Isn’t that a great attitude? It’s not us and them. It’s not, ‘I’m in the light and you’re in darkness.’ It’s, ‘God’s at work, in many places, and I have the honour of filling in the gaps for you, as God challenges me with the same message.’

He then proclaims Christ, not just as Saviour, but as Lord.

**Question: What does it mean for Jesus to be someone’s Lord?**

You could say the gospel means Jesus will save, but only because, first and foremost, he is Lord of all.

Verses 42 to 43:

“He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.’

Peter implies that when you die you will go to meet Jesus. He’s the judge.

‘All the prophets testify about him...’

‘I see this now.’

‘...that everyone who believes in him - trusts him - receives forgiveness of sins through his name.””

Everyone. Trust him, that’s the total of what Peter says people have to do to be saved. He grew up in an atmosphere of having to fulfil the Law, leap through religious hoops, to get right with God. Now he seems to have learned the lesson. Yes, God is honoured by good deeds, so don’t stop doing them; but, in order to remove your sin and find forgiveness, just trust Jesus. Then follow him as your Lord. That’s Peter’s story.