

# Breakthrough to Powerful Leaders

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at [ChristChurchEastBay.org](http://ChristChurchEastBay.org). Today's scripture reading is from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 10, verses 1-17 and 34-48.

At Caesarea, there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing. He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.

One day, at about three in the afternoon, he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God who came to him and said, Cornelius. Cornelius stared at him in fear.

What is it, Lord? he asked. The angel answered, Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send man to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon, who is called Peter.

[ 1 : 1 3 ] He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea. When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told them everything that happened and sent them to Joppa.

About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat. And while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals as well as reptiles and birds.

Then a voice told him, Get up, Peter. Kill and eat. Surely not, Lord, Peter replied. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean. The voice spoke to him a second time.

Do not call anything impure that God has made clean. This happened three times and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the man sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.

[ 2 : 1 6 ] Then Peter began to speak. I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

You know what has happened throughout the province of Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached. How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 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.

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

[ 3 : 25 ] The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water.

They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church.

Nothing like the smell of kimchi on a Sunday morning. Who is happy that it's summertime? Yay, we made it. We made it to summer. And I'm working on some summer projects of some deferred personal maintenance.

I went the other day to Sight for Sore Eyes to get my eye exam. And I got a new prescription after seven years. Has this ever happened to you? You kind of wish, like, man, I should have gone before.

[ 4 : 30 ] I could have been seeing, like, why was that not a higher priority on my to-do list? Immediately improved vision. But anyway, I finally went. And I concentrated very hard on this eye exam because, you know, you don't want to fail that one.

And come out with some huge Coke bottle lenses. And so I focused very hard on this eye exam. And the doctor prescribed progressive lenses for me.

Which is basically a nice way of saying you're old and you need trifocals. So this word progressive is used in so many interesting ways, I think.

I think progressive is a way to try to make me feel that I'm enlightened, advanced in some way, on the cutting edge. In reality, I have to close one eye to read now.

I have to, like, hold the phone on my face to see. Is this the case with anybody else? Okay, well, trifocals enable you to see three different distances depending on where you look at the lens.

[ 5 : 28 ] You know, short, medium, and far away. So it's like, okay, here's my book and there's a plane and there are the rings of Saturn, I think is what. Isn't that how trifocals work? So anyway, you might see me with some new eyewear later this summer.

Very exciting, something to look forward to. But my job as a pastor is to help the church with her vision. To examine what it is that we can see and not see.

To think about where are we clear and where are we fuzzy. And then to give us corrective lenses, the corrective lenses of scripture to help us focus our vision on God.

And on the mission of God in the world. To give us 20-20 vision about the primary task of the church. And what is the primary task of the church? The primary task of the church is evangelism.

It's sharing the gospel. It's spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. And we're looking at this book, The Acts of the Apostles, which could also be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. The Acts of Jesus through the Holy Spirit among the apostles.

[ 6 : 34 ] And what we've seen so far is that beginning in Jerusalem, the gospel began to spread. And it spread out to unlikely people like the Samaritans. And then beyond that, it went to this Ethiopian financier.

And it went to the ends of the earth, all the way to Africa, through that man. Last week we saw that the gospel went to even Saul of Tarsus, this vile persecutor of the Messianic community.

Who's now become God's chosen instrument to take the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. And so the question for us today is where does the gospel go next?

And what we see today is the gospel goes to the Greco-Romans. It goes to a guy like Cornelius, who's a person of high rank and status in the Roman army.

And if you read all the way to the end of this book, the gospel goes all the way to Rome itself. To the nerve center of the culture. And from there, it's just one short step to everywhere else in the world.

[ 7 : 35 ] To Spain and Britain in the west. To Iraq, Iran and India in the east. That's where the gospel spread out from these places. And what I want us to see today, as we bore down into Acts chapter 10, is that Reformed Christians share the gospel and celebrate the Spirit.

That's my message for you today. That Reformed Christians share the gospel and celebrate the Spirit. And what do I mean by Reformed Christians? Well, Peter receives a revelation from the Lord himself.

And how does he respond in verse 14? He says, No, Lord. Certainly not, Lord. By no means, Lord. Never, Lord. Anybody ever respond to God like that?

Peter is a Christian, but he's a Christian who needs to be reformed. He's brash enough to contradict Jesus on at least four occasions. The first of which, Jesus says, You know, the Messiah must suffer and be killed.

And Peter says, No, Lord, never. Because Peter wants a Christianity without the cross. On the second occasion, Jesus says, I need to wash your feet.

[ 8 : 44 ] And Peter says, No, Lord, never. Because Peter wants a Christianity without cleansing. And without the conversion that leads to the cleansing from sin. On the third occasion, Jesus says, All of you disciples are going to abandon me in my hour of greatest need.

And Peter says, No, Lord, never. Even if all fall away, I will never fall away on account of you. In fact, I'll go with you to prison and to death. And Jesus says, Well, actually, Peter, before the night's over, you're going to disown me three times.

Because Peter wanted a Christianity without the cost of discipleship. And here on this fourth occasion in Acts chapter 10, Jesus gives this revelation three times about food.

And about the people who eat that food whom Peter considers unclean. Namely, non-Jewish, uncircumcised Gentiles. And this vision is meant to say that God wants to accept and include these people.

And three times Peter says, No, Lord, never. Because this guy who wants a Christianity without the cross, and a Christianity without cleansing and conversion, and a Christianity without the cost of discipleship, he also wants a Christianity without the inconveniences of mission.

[ 10 : 02 ] Without outreach. He wants to keep the faith to his own race and his own nation. You ever find yourself saying, No, Lord, never.

Maybe you don't reject Christianity as a whole, but you edit Christianity down. Ever want to eliminate some of those elements of Christianity that irritate and annoy you?

Or remove those ingredients that you find distasteful and unpalatable? Many 21st century people like Peter want to redefine Christianity in their own terms and create alternatives and deviations from Jesus' gospel.

For example, postmodern people say, No, Lord, I want a Christianity without doctrinal truth or orthodoxy. I want a Christianity without ethics and moral imperatives and holiness and obedience to Jesus as my Lord.

I want a Christianity without the hassle of, you know, belonging to and loving a church. I want a Christianity without the bother of all these people.

[ 11 : 09 ] I want a Christianity where I can practice mercy and justice, but only with the people with whom I happen to agree. Well, if you're a no, Lord, never Christian, like me, like Peter, how is it that we can be reformed?

And the answer is through divine intervention, divine revelation. Cornelius and Peter are praying about 32 miles apart, about 21 miles apart, and through prayer, God perfectly synchronizes their lives.

And he says to Cornelius, Send for Peter. And he says to Peter, See this picnic blanket with all these foods that represent the Gentile peoples. I want you to stop thinking about them as unclean pagans.

I want you to stop thinking about them as impure idolaters of false gods, and I want you to start reaching out to them with the gospel. And God has to hit Peter over the head with this like three times to get it through.

And I don't have all the time to go through the deep biblical theology that's behind the story, but basically Peter's problem that the Lord is wanting to reform is that he's lost sight of, and he's become blurry in his vision about the wider horizons of the mission of God's people to be a light to the nations.

[ 12 : 31 ] He's twisted this doctrine of being chosen by God into a doctrine of being the favorites of God. And so it fills him with racial pride, with national pride, that causes him to look down upon Gentiles as somehow beneath him, as people to be despised.

And he doesn't share his home with them. He doesn't share his table with them. And that is, of course, a massive barrier to the gospel going out. It's a massive barrier to building a multinational, multiracial, multicultural church.

And so how does this no-Lord-never-Christian come to be reformed? Well, it takes divine revelation. Three times Peter hears the voice of the resurrected Lord Jesus speaking through the Holy Spirit these words in verse 15, Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

And Peter becomes a Christian who's reformed according to the word of God. We didn't read this verse, but in verse 28, Peter says, God has now shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.

And then we did read verse 34 where he says, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts people from every nation. And therefore, he forbids me to judge on the basis of external appearances.

[ 14 : 03 ] Now, Peter is the lead apostle of the church. And this is the watershed moment of Gentile outreach, the turning point of Gentile inclusion. And so the Lord uses extraordinary means to reveal himself and his purposes.

He reveals his will in a vision, right? He reveals his voice, his word in a voice. And even still, Peter is reluctant and resistant.

And then God reveals his way by bringing representatives from Cornelius at the exact moment that Peter is puzzling out the meaning of this vision and this voice.

And so what we see here is that Peter's reformation comes through revelation. And so what are the ordinary means? The non-extraordinary means that God wants to use to get through to ordinary people like us today, put simply, it's the Bible.

It's the written word of God. It's the prophets of the Old Testament, the apostles of the New Testament. Our reformation comes through the revelation of God's inspired, authoritative scriptures.

[ 15 : 14 ] And it's through that firm word of the scriptures that we get fresh words from the Spirit. And this is how God reforms us, changes us, shapes us, and molds us who are no Lord, never Christians.

This is how God intervenes to cure us of our nationalism and our racism like Peter. It's how God deals with the ugly sin of discrimination and favoritism that keeps creeping its way into the church in all these ugly forms where we judge people on the basis of externals.

Skin color, culture of origin, biological sex, educational status, wealth, class, social position. It's how God deals with tribalism in Africa.

It's how God deals with casteism in India. It's how God deals with apartheid in South Africa and in the United States. All such discrimination and favoritism on the basis of externals and appearances is inexcusable in the Christian community, not because that's a fashionable ideology today, and not because that's trending in the zeitgeist, but precisely because it's the truth of God revealed in his word.

Peter wanted to shape Christianity according to his cultural preferences and prejudices, but Peter himself needed to be shaped according to the Lord's prerogatives and purposes.

[ 16 : 43 ] If you're a Christian, if you believe that Jesus is risen from the dead, we have no right to disagree with him. We have no right to contradict him, and we need to fall as Christians down before him every morning of every day and repent of our no, Lord, never attitudes and outlooks.

And instead of saying no, Lord, never, we need to say, yes, Lord, whatever. Whatever is in your mind is true. Whatever is of your will is good.

Whatever is written for us in your word, I will believe and I will do. That's what it means to be a reformed Christian, reformed according to the word of God.

And reformed Christians, we see in this text, reformed Christians go and share the gospel. Reformed Christians share the gospel. Peter is reformed by the word of God, and what we didn't read is that as a result of that, he goes out and he invites these Gentiles into his home and to his table.

And then the next day, he gets up and he goes and he enters their homes and he eats at the table of Cornelius, which is the first time Peter's ever done this in his whole life.

[ 18 : 02 ] And what does he offer to this large household of about 50, 75, 100 relatives and friends, these non-Jewish, Gentile, Italian, spiritually receptive and seeking people?

We read in verse 36 that Peter gave to them the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

He gave them the gospel of Jesus who brings peace and reconciliation with God. My heart broke a little bit last summer when I heard the question, what is the gospel really?

Not because that's not a great question, but because it came from someone who'd been a member of Christ Church for a very long time. And somehow we had not done a good job of bringing clarity to that person's mind and conviction to their heart about the answer to that question, what is the gospel?

And so I want to remedy that here today by looking at Peter's gospel summary in verses 38 to 43, which is just a beautiful expression of apostolic Christianity.

[ 19 : 10 ] And it centers on the historical Jesus, and it unfolds the successive stages of his saving career, right? His life, his substitutionary death, his bodily resurrection, his exaltation as the king.

And basically the gospel is the good news that this Jesus, the crucified yet risen one, is the Lord of the whole world.

That's the gospel. And this living Jesus, having conquered over sin and death, he went and he spent those next 40 days with Peter and with the disciples, and he was teaching them his gospel.

He was teaching them all the details and the content of his gospel that he wanted them to take out and share so that what we hear from the lips of Peter is directly from the lips of Jesus himself.

And I want to focus in today on that one part of Jesus' gospel that we're probably most prone to say, no, Lord, never to. And that's in verse 42, where it says, He, Jesus, 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.

[ 20 : 24 ] Jesus talked about judgment more than anybody else in the whole Bible, and he said over and over that God the Father has appointed me as the judge of human beings at the end of time so that the destiny of all people is in my hands.

This is an example of Jesus' teaching from Matthew 13. He says, The Son of Man will send out his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil.

They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be whitting and gnashing of teeth. And you're like, whoa, yikes, where's the Jesus that I really like? You know, that seems like a harsh and brutal Jesus.

How in the world is that good news? Well, I want to provide a counterpoint here, and that is from Czesław Miłosz, who was a Polish Nobel laureate, and he was a professor at UC Berkeley, and he wrote an essay called The Discreet Charm of Nihilism.

And in that essay, he wrote, Religion used to be the opium of the people. To those suffering humiliation, pain, illness, and serfdom, religion promised the reward of an afterlife.

[ 21 : 33 ] But now we are witnessing a transformation. A true opium of the people is the belief in nothingness after death, the huge solace, the huge comfort of thinking that for our betrayals, for our greed, for our cowardice, and our murders, we are not going to be judged.

And I think in that light, Jesus' gospel of justice is actually really good news, really hopeful news when you think about all the wrongs of history and the wrongs of society, right?

When you think about mass shootings, like all the time now. When you think about discrimination in the law, when you think about inequities between the rich and the poor, and unfair housing and education, and the list just goes on and on.

Jesus assures us that a day of justice, a day of reckoning is coming when God is going to put the world to rights. And that satisfies us, I think, when we think that the wrongs of other people are going to come to justice, doesn't it?

But it's less exciting to think that I'm going to be included in that. It's less exciting to think that each of us here has an appointment to stand before this majestic figure and give an account of our lives that will not be optional, will not be voluntary.

[ 22 : 54 ] It's going to happen whether we like it or not. And so the question I want to ask today is on what basis, on what standard, will Jesus judge us?

And this is so easy to misread. I want to give us some corrective lenses and clear up our vision because you could read in verse 2 where it says, Cornelius and all his family were devout and God-fearing, and he gave generously to those in need, and he prayed to God regularly.

And you could think, well, if I'm like Cornelius, and I do these basic practices of prayer and fasting and giving alms generously to the poor, and I practice virtue, and I do all the things that Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount, then God will judge me as good and acceptable on the basis of what I do.

Or you could read in verse 34 where Peter says, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

And a modern person reads that and says, Aha! Religious and theological differences are irrelevant in God's mind. And Peter is an early advocate of the view that all religions are basically the same.

[ 24 : 06 ] They all lead to God. God simply accepts us as we are. But if we read our late Western postmodern prejudices into this text, we would imagine that this whole episode about Cornelius and Peter is meant to get rid of all distinctions and to cause us to embrace this 18th century principle of laissez-faire tolerance for everyone.

But the question is, is that really the gospel that Jesus gave? Is it that God runs this world like a democracy? Is it that God validates and accepts everyone's opinion and everyone's chosen lifestyle is okay?

If God accepts us the way that we are and if Cornelius' honest, pagan convictions are sufficient, why does he seek out the synagogue?

Why does he fuss with trying to be devout and God-fearing? And if that's enough, why does he send for Peter to tell him about Jesus? Why not just stay the way Cornelius is?

Because Cornelius knows what we all know in our hearts and that is that if there is a God and if he is our judge and even if he judged us only according to our own personal, internal standards of our own consciences, we would not measure up.

[ 25 : 32 ] If we have any self-awareness, we know that we've lived far from perfect lives. And what if God were to judge us not according to our own low standards, but according to his high standard of holiness, his high perfect law of self-giving love for God and other people, you're like, man, this is horrible, horrible news.

How is this good news? Well, you have to understand that in order to understand verse 43 where the good news comes. That all the prophets testify about Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

If you put your trust in Jesus, you can look upon your judge's face and you can see your Savior there. We need not fear the certain just judgment of Jesus since he is also the gracious and merciful one who bestows forgiveness and pardon and amnesty for all the terrible self-centered lives that we've lived.

We have a choice, right? We can face our judge on the basis of what we've done or we can face our judge on the basis of what he has done for us on our behalf, in our place, as our substitute, and our representative, and our mediator.

Because Jesus lived the righteous life of self-giving love for God and neighbor that all of us were created to live. And Jesus died that cursed death in the darkness and forsakenness that all of us should have died.

[ 27 : 11 ] And when Jesus hung on that cross, God poured out his wrath on him for every single wrong that we committed, however small in our view or however heinous.

The punishment was administered, the price was paid, and justice was rendered. On Good Friday, today, Jesus experienced Judgment Day for us and in our place.

And he made it possible there for us to be in a reconciled relationship with God. He himself is the good news of peace with God. And everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, the Lord of peace, will receive a welcome at once, at once, into this family whose home has written in bold, golden, shining letters above its home the word forgiven.

And we can live from that place of being forgiven. We can live from that place of no condemnation where we've left all of our fear, all of our guilt, all of our shame at the foot of Jesus' cross of judgment.

And we can live with freedom and we can live with power and we can live with confidence because we know that we have the life of God, the eternal life, the divine life, the abundant life of God dwelling in us.

[ 28 : 41 ] If you're exploring Christianity, if you're inquiring about who Jesus is, whether you believe this or not, I hope that I've helped to make it clear what the gospel of Jesus is and what it means.

And if you are a Christian, this is the gospel we're called to cling to, it's the gospel we're called to stake all of our confidence on and to cherish with every fiber of our being that Jesus is the judge of all and He's ready and He wants to be the forgiver and the Savior of all who will believe in Him.

Christ Church, do we cherish this gospel? And do we cherish it to such a degree that we're willing to be awkward, willing to cash in some of our social capital and commend this gospel to the people like Cornelius whom God is calling us to share it with because that's what Reformed Christians do.

They share the gospel. Reformed Christians share the gospel and they celebrate the Spirit. I've spent all my time talking, I'm going to land the plane now, but I just want to point out how this story ends.

It's beautiful. I love what happens because Peter's talking and God just interrupts Peter with this word of forgiveness and in verse 44 it says, while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message because they not only heard it, they believed it.

[ 30 : 07 ] They assented to it. They said yes in their heart and they put their confidence in the one about whom this gospel is about. Have you done that? Because when you do that you find yourself gripped.

You find yourself changed from the inside out. You find yourself aware of a new power and a new presence inside of you because Christianity is not a set of doctrines, not a set of ethics that you take up.

Christianity is the converting power of the Holy Spirit that takes you up. Right? And now you can see hopefully what verse 34 means when it says God does not show favoritism.

What that means is that there is no ethnic, geographical, cultural, moral barrier that stands in the way of anyone and everyone receiving this new life of the Holy Spirit.

And can you see now what verse 35 means when it says God accepts those from every nation who fear Him and do what is right. It means that Cornelius' Gentile nationality and ethnicity is acceptable to God so that he does not need to become a Jew but it does not mean that Cornelius' own righteousness is adequate so that he has no need for the justifying, regenerating power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

[ 31 : 28 ] In what way is Cornelius and his house acceptable to God? They're in an acceptable state of repentance and readiness to hear the message of salvation and have the recreating power of the Holy Spirit enter into their lives by faith.



Because God invites us as we are every flavor of Gentile in this room. Maybe we have some Jewish people in here too. But He invites us as we are but He does not leave us as we are.

When we respond to His invitation that involves a complete transformation that's wrought by the person of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

When Cornelius, this devout, God-fearing, upright, sincere, generous, virtuous man, hears the gospel, the penny drops because He says, I am not enough for the judgment.

My good works, even my best works are not going to stand up under the scrutiny and justice of this judge. I need to repent and believe what that judge has done for me and boom, at that moment, the gift of the Holy Spirit came and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit was poured out from above and He and His whole household were born again with the new life of God.

[ 32 : 53 ] And that can happen for us as well. Has it happened for you? Do you have the person of the Holy Spirit living inside of you? If you don't, you're not in Christ and you're not a Christian.

But if you do have the Holy Spirit, then you confess in the Spirit, you walk in the Spirit, you pray in the Spirit, you rejoice in the Spirit, you're led by the Spirit, you live according to the power of the Spirit, and you celebrate the ripening fruit of love and joy and patience and all the other fruit that the Holy Spirit causes to grow in us as He makes us more and more like Jesus Himself.

He invites us as we are, but He does not leave us as we are. And that's what Reformed Christians do. We share the gospel and we celebrate the presence of the Holy Spirit in us and among us.

And I pray that the Holy Spirit, maybe even today, would fall fresh on our hearts and in our lives. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.