

The God-Fearer Becomes a Spirit Filled Believer

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Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 00] Friends, please have a seat. I'll read you these words that you'll know well. In the same way, he took the cup also after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood.

New covenant in my blood. It should have been obvious at the last supper. It should have been obvious, actually, when Jesus died and the temple curtain was torn in two.

It should have been obvious when Jesus arrived and said, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near. It should have been obvious when Simeon took the child Jesus and blessed him, saying he would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles.

It should have actually been obvious 800 years earlier when the prophet Isaiah coined and penned those words. It should have been obvious when God promised to Abraham that through him all the nations would be blessed.

What should have been obvious? It should have been obvious that Jesus Christ, when he came, would bring about a new covenant that would not just be for the nation of Israel, but for every nation on earth.

[1 : 20] It should have been obvious at so many points in Jesus' life and ministry, as well as in biblical prophecy, that the floodgates would be opened for all peoples to come and enter into God's covenant.

Jesus said, this is the new covenant in my blood. It's not a totally new plan B of God. It's a continuation and fulfilment of the original plan of the same holy, righteous, saviour God.

Nevertheless, it's new in the sense there will be many points of radical change and discontinuity with what has come so far. And so today, friends, we're going to see how God implements this change.

And we're going to see how God is merciful in times of change. If I were God, you'll be glad I'm not. I would have, when Jesus died, flicked a switch from old covenant to new covenant, closed the temple and closed every synagogue and just said, it's over.

But what God actually does do, we see in the book of Acts, in his wisdom and mercy and patience, allows for a kind of a crossover period, I think, of one generation. And it's a period where the gospel is preached to those in the old covenant and then extends out in stages to all people.

[2 : 46] And in doing so, God is very merciful because what he's doing is he's going to undo 2,000 years of ritual and tradition that he had given his people so that his gospel purposes can be for all the cultures of the world, all the nations of the world.

And so what is obvious to us, that the gospel's for everyone, was not that obvious at the time. If you've been living with 2,000 years of God-given tradition, it's actually quite hard to see that you've got to let all of that go.

But the time has come. And so in today's story, friends, we're going to see why Christianity didn't remain a kind of sect within Judaism, but actually became a world force.

And now today we have billions of worshippers of Jesus around the globe. It's a momentous change that the book of Acts records for us today.

And I think this crossover period, which we're seeing in Acts, it does have an end point, which isn't in Acts, but it's actually predicted in Luke's gospel, and that is at AD 70, one generation after the death and resurrection of Jesus, 40 years later, the temple will be destroyed by the Romans in fulfilment of Jesus' own prophecy, that the temple would be destroyed.

[4 : 09] And at that point, I think, the gospel's planted root, the new covenant has been proclaimed to a whole generation of the old, and then the new covenant is the only way. So, friends, today it's great in a way.

We're celebrating the obvious. We're celebrating that the gospel is for everyone. We're going to see how radical and revolutionary this was at the time.

It begins with a man called Cornelius. We're going to look at a little bit that wasn't in the reading today, so you might want to have your Bibles open to page 894. We're told that Cornelius was a man of great honour and office in the Roman Empire.

He's a Gentile centurion of the Italian cohort. He was a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.

Cornelius is not a Jew. He's a Gentile God-fearer. He's a great example of one who's seeking God. And he's an example of one who's as close as you can get and yet excluded from the covenant of God.

[5 : 19] He's excluded from intimate dealings with God, say, in the temple, because he's not a Jew. In verse 22, later in the chapter, we read that Cornelius is well spoken of, of all the Jewish nation.

That is, a Jew would look at him and probably say, if only he was one of us, if only he was born into our race, he'd make a great Israelite. We could have used him. And so, friends, what we're going to see today is the conversion of Cornelius, but not just one person.

It's actually going to be his whole household and relatives and friends converted. He's the head of his household. And in a sense, we're going to see the first Gentile household come into the covenant of God.

And it's very clear that God is orchestrating all of this because God appears to Cornelius in a vision and tells him to send for Peter. And concurrently, while Peter is praying, God appears to Peter in a vision to actually prepare him for what's about to change.

So let's start with Peter. We meet Peter in verse 9, and he's having his quiet time on the roof of his house. He's praying while he's hungry, and Luke tells us that he is hungry.

[6 : 33] And while his lunch is being prepared downstairs, he falls into a trance, and God gives him a kind of vision, a picnic vision.

And a sheet falls from heaven, and on it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Now, we're supposed to think, well, these are non-Jewish foods.

These are reptiles. These are four-footed creatures. That is, the kind of animals that they weren't allowed to eat under the Levitical laws. And something happens that's quite radical.

A voice says, presumably God, get up, Peter. Kill and eat. This puts Peter in a very awkward situation.

It's a difficult experience. He says, By no means, Lord. I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean. The voice said to him, What God has made clean, you must not call profane.

[7 : 38] What would you do if you were Peter? Peter, your whole faith is built around this tradition of the food laws, that it defines you as a Jew, that those food laws were from God.

They were God-given markers. It's in the Bible. And yet this voice is telling him to disobey those biblical rules. What would Jesus do? He might have his WWJD badge on.

Well, Jesus was the perfect Jew. He fulfilled Israelite law to perfection. And so Jesus only ever ate Jewish foods. Even though we know in principle in Mark 7, Jesus declared all foods clean, Jesus never actually acted that out.

So this voice, God is telling him to do something that the Bible says not to do, and that Jesus didn't do. It puts him in a difficult situation. For Peter has to learn, the new covenant has truly arrived.

And these food laws no longer apply. Times are changing. God has declared them clean. And to hammer the point home, it seems to happen three times to Peter to make it clear that all foods are clean.

[8 : 53] But actually it's more than food. It's actually not about food. It's about people. Basically what happened, I think if you have these food laws, and you could kind of see this today a little bit, but it was more prominent then.

If you don't want to eat unclean foods, you can't eat foods mixed with, unclean and clean foods can't be mixed. And therefore you don't really want to eat any foods prepared in an unclean kitchen, or shop at an unclean shop.

And the net effect of these food laws was that Gentiles and Jews were separated by clean and unclean. And it was the, they saw all Gentiles as unclean, not just their food, but their whole existence as being unclean.

And so what God is showing Peter is that he's not to see Gentiles as unclean anymore. And so when Cornelius' messengers arrive, the spirit has to tell Peter, go with them without hesitation. Don't hesitate because of the food laws. Go with them. Or later Peter says in verse 28, he explains the vision himself. He says, So Peter explains the vision by saying it was about, not about food, but God was showing him that no people are profane or unclean.

[10:21] In the picnic vision, Peter saw all kinds of animals. But the point was, the gospel is now to go to all kinds of peoples.

No person by virtue of nationality is now outside the reach of God's gospel. And so Peter goes, after receiving Cornelius' men into his house, which was a radical step in itself, he goes with them and steps into Cornelius' house.

And what God is effectively doing is setting up a kind of evangelistic, blind date. And neither party really know what they're there for. So Peter enters the house and Cornelius bows down and worships him in effect.

And Peter says, No, we don't do that. I'm just a man. And Peter says, Well, God told me to come here. What do you want? And Cornelius says, Well, God told me to send for you.

What do you have to say to me? And it's a bit awkward, a bit of an awkward silence. And Peter thinks, Maybe I'll try telling them the gospel. And so Peter effectively tells them the same message he preached in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost.

[11:34] And you can see his convictions kind of changing as he speaks. Verse 34. I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation accepts anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Peter shows he's learnt the lesson that now is the time for the floodgates of God's new covenant to be open to all nations without favouritism.

He's not saying that God, in effect, accepts anyone who kind of has a sincere, vague belief in any country. Cornelius still needs to hear the gospel. It's about to be preached to him.

But it does mean if you are serious about coming to God, it doesn't matter what country you come from or what culture you come from. And this is the message.

Verse 36. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all.

[12:41] It's very similar to Acts 2.36. Jesus is made Lord in Christ, to God's right hand. Acts 10.36. Jesus is Lord of all. And you can sort of see the lights coming on in Peter's mind.

He has already preached. If Jesus is at God's right hand as Lord, and if God is God of all creation, then Jesus must be Lord of all creation.

There's a great Christian thinker of, I think, the 19th century Dutch guy called Abraham Kuyper. I think he was the prime minister for a while, but this is a great quote from him as a theologian.

He said, Isn't that a great statement of the Lordship of Jesus?

Lord over all. There is not one square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ does not cry, Mine. As Peter preached, Jesus is Lord of all.

[13:55] He's Lord of all. There is one way of salvation through that Lord. There is one way to God through the Lord Jesus at God's right hand.

There are not a thousand different ways to God. There are not two ways. There's not one way for Jews and one way for Gentiles. There is one way to God. This is eminently fair and just of God because it shows that he doesn't show favoritism.

If there are a thousand ways to God, there'd be different difficulties and it would depend on who you knew, whether you got a good way or a bad way or a hard way or an easy way. No, there's actually one way to God. The narrow path is actually the most open path because it's the path for all.

And the path is Jesus. Peter reminds Cornelius of the basic gospel facts that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, how he went about doing good, healing all who were oppressed by the devil for God was with him.

What's the gospel? Well, Peter tells them, we are witnesses that all he did in both in Judea and Jerusalem, they put him to death by hanging him on a tree under the curse of God.

[15:08] But God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who were chosen as witnesses and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

Jesus is Lord, the one who died under a curse for human sin, the one who was raised by God in victory. Jesus died and rose again and Peter says he didn't appear to everyone.

He appeared to his hand-picked apostles, who ate and drank with him. And Peter will now tell Cornelius the two most important things that anyone could know about Jesus or Christianity. He's about to tell Cornelius that Jesus is the only judge and he's the only forgiver. He says, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.

Judge of everyone, both the dead and the living. There's no one else, I don't think, in any other category. And also he's the forgiver. 43, all the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness in his name.

[16:23] The two most important things to know about Jesus are that he is judge and Lord and that he is forgiver saviour. So judge and saviour or Lord and saviour, the two great titles of Jesus.

Your Christianity is false if you don't have those two aspects of Jesus. What we have in effect is the heart of Christianity. Jesus is the Lord and he's the saviour.

And how do I become a Christian? Well, I repent and put myself under his lordship and I put my trust in his forgiveness as saviour. So, Lord and saviour, repentance and faith.

I think Christians sometimes only tell half a story. So we say to people, are you feeling guilty? Would you like to be forgiven? Jesus is a great saviour. And a bit later we tell them the fine print that they also have to repent.

And it's sort of like the catch in the deal. But actually the true gospel is Jesus is Lord and saviour. We're up front that you need to repent and put your faith in him. In fact, it's only half the good news if you only have a saviour and not a lord.

[17:31] Because I think part of the predicament of not being a Christian is that you are bound up in all kinds of enslavements to lusts and desires and idols and to have one lord and to sweep those away and have one lord is actually true freedom.

So it's a great place to be. So we want to say Jesus is Lord and saviour. Now, an amazing thing happens. It will never happen at Holy Trinity.

Now it might, but... Two things actually. The sermon is interrupted. That's the one thing that won't happen at Holy Trinity. But the interrupter, and I'd be open to this, the interrupter is God himself.

While Peter was speaking, verse 44, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles.

You see, God is so keen for the gospel to go to all nations. He doesn't even wait for Peter to finish his message. But the Lord Jesus sends the Spirit and it is poured on the Gentiles and they have a Pentecost-like experience to vouch that God is accepting people from all nations into the new covenant.

[18:52] The floodgates are now open and the new covenant is truly here. You see, friends, we have to remember the trouble this would have got Peter into.

See, there's no theology of having a pope in the New Testament. So Peter's not a pope. He's going to go back and say, I just baptised some Gentiles and he's going to get in trouble.

They're not going to respect his authority. They're going to say, why did you baptise Gentiles? And he's going to say this. He's going to say what he says here, verse 47. Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?

So he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ and they stay for several days. You see, the giving of the Spirit in a visible seal of speaking of languages and of prophesying the wonders of God is God's way of actually giving his authority to this event to saying, this is my will that Gentiles are baptised and are drawn into the same church.

The new covenant has arrived. Anyone can repent and trust in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. It's for anyone and everyone. And this is a real pattern in the book of Acts, I think.

[20:13] This event of people believing and then receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues. And it really occurs in three main places which correspond to the salvation geography that Jesus had mapped out for them in chapter 1.

In Acts chapter 2 in Jerusalem they receive the Gospel and the Spirit and they speak in tongues and prophesy. And then Jesus said you'll go to Samaria to the covenant cousins and they seem to have a visible experience of the Spirit.

And now finally in Acts chapter 10 the Gospel goes to the ends of the earth as Jesus planned out and they visibly receive the Spirit and speak in tongues and prophesy.

And elsewhere in Acts there are lots of other conversions and you don't really see that pattern in the same way of Jesus vouching publicly the gift of His Spirit.

Because the point is that the Gospel is now going out the Old Covenant has ended and it is for all nations. Peter needed the visible evidence in order to back up accepting them in the church.

[21 : 23] We can now say finally Peter can say after 2,000 years God has poured out His Spirit on all flesh. Or in Pentecost he said everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

And now that is actually true. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord can be saved. The light to the Gentiles is shining. The dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is broken down.

The Gentiles have been grafted into the people of God. Friends, this is a great day in the life of the early church that the Gospel is now for all peoples.

It was a hard thing for Peter to get. It was hard for the church to get. And Peter, when he goes back to report it, does get into some trouble. And in the rest of Acts we do see the unfolding of the tension of figuring out what does it mean to be one church as Jew and Gentile.

And in fact, if you read your New Testament, almost every letter in the New Testament deals with. How do you work out being one body as Jew and Gentile? It would have been left to their own devices.

[22 : 30] They would have created two churches, two denominations. But Jesus wants them to be one body in him. So friends, the first challenge, I've got two challenges for you.

And the first one is this. We need to be thankful that we are included in the covenant of God. We need to be people of great gratitude because if this hadn't happened, then today most of us would be worshipping out in the car park and those of us of the right bloodline would be in here.

And that would not be a good state of affairs. The mercy of God is that now all people can accept the gospel like Cornelius in his household and be joined into one body.

So friends, to lack gratitude is a dangerous attitude before God. So be thankful to God. Secondly, friends, my second challenge is that I think we make the kind of same mistakes as Peter and the church made in being resistant to God's will of mission today.

I think Christians are very good at drawing the lines of inclusion around themselves but kind of no further. We're very good at saying the gospels come to Australia but getting the gospel to the Middle East, that's someone else's problem.

[23 : 50] Well, that's wrong. We're very good at saying the gospels come to my household but getting it to the other houses in my street, someone else's problem. See, that's wrong. You know, we say the gospels come to me and my Christian prayer buddy at work but no one else at work.

That's wrong. Christians are very good at drawing the lines of inclusion just around themselves so they're in but they don't reflect the heart of God which is that all people would call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

You know, and I know that we do some things but I wonder, I fear that they're only token. You know, we support a missionary but do we have a right to a missionary to see how they're going? Do we take a personal interest in the missionaries that we support? You know, we pray for evangelists and encourage people in evangelism but when do we talk about Jesus with our friends? We pray for people around the world to become Christians but do we pray for those in our family who are hard to the gospel? You know, we enjoy our comfortable church but do we get involved in the mission of our church in our community?

[25 : 05] Friends, for the early church to be one church Jew and Gentile was hard work and many of the Jewish Christians would have longed for the good old days when it was just us and we had our culture and it was comfortable but this was a very radical change for the early church.

I think being a mission-minded church is hard work. Being an inviting church is hard work. Being a kind of inclusive, welcoming church is hard work.

Friends, will you be part of Holy Trinity only for what it does for you or will you be partners with Holy Trinity in the mission that we are involved in to Melbourne and to the world?

May all of us reflect the mission heart of God that he wants his gospel to go to all the nations of the world. Let's pray for that. We thank you, God our Father, so much that as an outworking of the gospel going to Cornelius to this one household, there are now billions of Christian worshippers around the world.

We thank you, Father, that we are mostly Gentiles here today. We are no longer excluded from citizenship among your people. Dear God, we thank you that we are no longer foreigners to the

covenant of promise.

[26 : 24] We praise you that we are no longer without hope and without you and the world. Father, we thank you that your people are no longer marked by food law or ritual but by the name of Jesus and by the gift of your spirit.

Lord God, may the name of Jesus and the gift of your spirit mark us out today as belonging to you. We thank you, Father, that the gospel is for anyone and everyone.

Thank you, Father, that you want evil people like Saul of Tarsus to hear the gospel and be saved. Thank you that you want moral people like Cornelius to hear the gospel and be saved.

Father, we pray that you would not let us be comfortable or resistant to your gospel mission but help us to make committed sacrifices so that we can be part of your mission to our city and to the world.

Father, we pray that you would make Holy Trinity a truly welcoming place. May every one of us make great efforts to invite, to include, to share and to welcome.

[27 : 31] May we reflect your welcome in the gospel to the whole world. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.