

Food for Thought

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- [0 : 00] And for some of you, this is the only time you're going to have a birthday to the next four years. So I want to give you a chance to celebrate it publicly.
- Is today your birthday? Is anybody here? Today is your birthday. There was one at nine o'clock. Anybody? All right. I'm going to pray for you anyway.
- Okay. So just let us pray. It's from the prayer book. Let's pray. O Lord, our Heavenly Father, mercifully hear our prayers.
- And grant a long and happy life to thy servants whose birthday we remember this day. May they grow in grace as their years increase and ever live so as to please thee.
- In the power of thy Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. And happy birthday to all of you. It is important for us as Christians and as people who populate this planet to constantly be grateful to God for all his blessings and for all the gifts that he's given to us.
- [1 : 23] There is so much beauty and so much fun in this universe, on this planet, for us to celebrate. But at the same time, there is so much trouble and so many problems in our world that we cannot celebrate.
- Our world is characterized by a number of isms. And John Stott tells us what some of those isms are.
- There are isms that are devastating. There are isms that are terrifying. There are evil in nature and practice.
- We know some of this by experience. And we know some of this intellectually. There are tribalism, nationalism, materialism, racism, classism, sexism, elitism.
- And sometimes we experience and manifest elitism in the form of cultural and educational snobbery.
- [2 : 41] These are things that characterize our world. And because you and I live in this kind of a world, we bring some of these things into the church.
- And whenever we bring any of these isms into the church, the result is also devastating. The purpose and plan of God is dangerously and negatively affected.
- And our witness is hindered. Let me illustrate. Mahatma Gandhi, in his autobiography, tells of his student days in England.
- He had been reading the Gospels and seriously began to consider becoming a Christian. Because in his reading of the Gospels, it appeared to offer a real solution to the caste system that divided the people of India.
- And so one Sunday, he decided to go to church. But when he entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat.
- [4 : 03] They said to him that he should go elsewhere to worship with his own people. And Gandhi left and never came back.
- And he said to himself, quote, If Christians have caste differences also, I might as well remain a Hindu.

End of quote. And there is no historical evidence that he ever came back to church. The word for this is prejudice.

The word for this is discrimination. And there is so much of it all over the world. I come from Nigeria, where there is so much ethnic differences.

But in a city like Lagos, you have churches for each different tribe. And it is not because they are worshipping in different languages.

[5 : 08] They are worshipped in English. It is because they want to stay with their own tribe. And of course, if you do not belong to the tribe, you are not seriously welcome.

And I think John Stott was also right when he wrote, All such discrimination is inexcusable, even in a non-Christian society.

In the Christian community, it is both an obscenity, because it is offensive to human dignity. And it is a blasphemy, because it is offensive to God, who accepts without discrimination, or who repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

In a sense, we could say that this was a state of affairs in the Jerusalem church, before Acts chapter 10. This was a church that was predominantly Jewish in population.

And of course, the Jewish population of the church had dragged into this church the good old tradition of historic prejudice against the Gentiles.

[6 : 29] As far as they were concerned, the Gentiles were dogs, they were unclean, and if ever they were going to become part of this Christian community, where there are Jews, they ought to be spiritually sanitized and turned into Jews, first and foremost, before they could become part of the Christian church.

And the good news is this, this was not the plan of God at all. It was not the plan of God that the Gentiles can only be admitted into the Christian community by becoming Jews, first and foremost.

God's plan was that the Gentiles will be admitted into the Christian community on equal terms with Jews. And God's plan was that the church was going to be a truly Christ-centered, truly multiracial, multicultural society.

Where the only basis of acceptance and belonging is repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and not cultural conversion. And so God is about to move forward in the plan that he has for his church.

God is about to move forward in his plan for the ministry of the church. And he has to prepare both the Gentiles and the Jews for this important spiritual turning point.

[8 : 04] And so God begins with Cornelius in chapter 10, verse 1. Cornelius was a Gentile and we are introduced to him as a Roman soldier, a centurion, a captain who commanded a hundred soldiers.

And as verse 2 tells us, he was a devout man who feared God with all his household. He gave alms liberally to all the people and prayed constantly to the God of Israel.

He was a God-fearer. And even though he was not fully, or he had not fully embraced Judaism, he was a noble and spiritually-minded Roman soldier.

He was seeking God. He was longing for the true God to serve him faithfully. And in a sense, he's a classic example of the kind of person, or Gentile, that Paul describes in Romans chapter 2, verse 7.

He's one of those who, by patient well-doing, seek for glory, honor, and immortality. And God, in his grace, will grant such people the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

[9 : 30] Cornelius' heart was hunting for God. His heart was yearning for God. And in response to this yearning of his heart, God granted him a vision.

In his vision, the Lord sent an angel to him. And in verse 4, Cornelius was afraid. And he said, What is it, Lord?

And he said to him, Your prayers and your arms have ascended as a memorial before God. And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon, who is called Peter.

And he gave him his address. Which is good to know. And I think this is crucial for us to understand at this point.

That even though this man was not yet saved through faith in Jesus, God commended him in his good works and devotion.

[10 : 33] And I think sometimes for us, it is difficult for us to acknowledge that even in pagan societies and in non-Christian societies, there could be people who do good works.

And there are. And it is good. Even though their good works are not salvific. And it is appropriate for us as Christians to acknowledge that those are good things that they are doing.

as the angel acknowledges the good works and devotion of Cornelius. So he is commended by the angel of God and he is commanded by the angel to send for Peter.

And immediately verse 7 tells us Cornelius, being a good soldier, obeyed and sent messengers to Joppa 35 miles away down the coast to get Peter.

So in a sense, God has prepared Cornelius. He is ready. But there is something else to do. God has to prepare Peter, the Jew.

[11 : 47] Peter's prejudice against the Gentiles must be confronted if God is going to go in the direction that he wants to go for his church and his ministry.

And so what God does is also to show Peter a vision. And we pick it up at verse 11. So Peter is hungry, he goes upstairs to pray.

And as he went upstairs, he fell into a trance and saw the heaven opened and something descending like a great sheet let down by four corners upon the earth.

in it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him saying, Rise, Peter, kill and eat.

But Peter said, No, Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean. it's a terrifying vision.

[12 : 53] On this sheet were all kinds of animals, clean animals like oxen and sheep or clean animals like buzzards and owls and seagulls and lobsters and insects.

And I think Peter found the horse revolting. And of course the command to kill and to eat must have shocked him very greatly. As a faithful Jew, he was not supposed to eat any of this according to Leviticus chapter 11.

And of course when he protested, God's response was also very much confounding. Verse 15, And the voice came to him again a second time, What God has cleansed you must not call common.

And of course the question in the mind of Peter was this, How could things that have been unclean for thousands of years suddenly be clean?

God had told them many years before that these animals were unclean. And how can they be suddenly clean? And of course this whole thing happened twice again and it was taken up into heaven.

[14 : 17] It was indeed a bizarre experience. It was a horror of a nightmare for the apostle. And God intended it to be like that because that's exactly what it is.

It is a horror. And so what is God doing here? What is the point of the vision? I suggest that the four corners of the sheet probably correspond to the four points of the compass north, south, east, and west.

And the contents of the sheet indicate the millions of people who populate the earth clean and unclean religiously.

and God has put all of them together in this revolting mess. And I think what God seems to be saying here is that all of mankind, those that are religiously clean and those that are unclean are bound up together in one sinful bundle.

The Bible says all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Millions are blind spiritually, we are alienated from God, and we are spiritually, in a sense, creeping things.

[15 : 39] And as Peter was standing above this whole site, surveying all of that, he began to spit out revulsion and rejection and disgust.

And of course, without a change of attitude, in the life of Peter and the Jerusalem Church, you and I would not have had the benefit of receiving the gospel today.

That attitude of revulsion and rejection and disgust needed to be taken away in order for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles.

Peter's prejudice against the Gentiles must go, and your prejudice also must go, God, in order for God to accomplish his purpose for his church.

And so, as Peter was thinking about this and pondering what is going on, what God was doing here, the messenger from Cornelius came by, and the Lord said to him, I want you to rise, go with them, for I have sent them.

[16 : 50] and the Bible says the next day, they left and came down to Caesarea. And so when Peter arrived, he was received, and then the vision was retold again by Cornelius, and Peter opened his mouth, and began to preach the gospel to them.

He told them about the life and ministry of Jesus, he told them about the death and resurrection of Jesus, and he told them about the return of Jesus as the judge of the living and the dead.

Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. And in verse 43, he summarizes and offers salvation to them.

He says, to him, Jesus, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him, receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Everyone, Jews and Gentiles, and everyone means everyone. And so, as he was speaking, one of the things that every preacher with love happened, God interrupted the sermon, and that it's good for the congregation, for God to interrupt the sermon.

[18 : 20] God interrupted the sermon and poured out his spirit upon the Gentiles with the evidence of speaking in tongues, just as it happened to the Jews on the day of Pentecost.

God of course, there were no altar calls, there was no invitation, no special pleading, no decision cards to fill out.

They simply heard that everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins, and they responded in faith, and were born again on that spot. And God confirmed their regeneration by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

At that moment, they were baptized into the body of Christ. See, the facts are all out at this point, and they cannot be denied.

By giving them the gift of the Spirit, God has declared at this point, that Gentiles are now part of the covenant community of Christ, without the benefit of circumcision.

[19 : 28] Gentiles can become, and they have now become, part of the Christian church, without having to become Jews first. And it is very, very important.

Jews and Gentiles now are on equal ground. So the wall of division is visibly broken, and Peter's question makes a lot of sense.

Is there anyone here who will forbid them from getting baptized with water? If God has baptized them with the Spirit, is there anybody here who has a good reason why they should not be baptized in water?

And he commanded them to be baptized. And so that was the end of the first Gentile worship, the first Gentile evangelistic service, the first Gentile service of baptism, and the follow-up began at that point.

what we have here is a great story of conversion. Peter is converted to see the picture of the church as a multiracial, multicultural, Christ-centered, non-homogeneous community.

[20 : 45] Peter needed to be converted to that truth. He was converted to the view that Gentiles can become part of the church without having to become Jews first.

And in a sense we can call this, we can call Peter's conversion an ecclesiological conversion.

It was an ecclesiological conversion. Cornelius himself was also converted. He was converted to see that in spite of his good work, in spite of his devotion, he needed Jesus Christ in order for him to be saved and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

He needed Jesus Christ in order for him to be fully acceptable to God. And we can say that Cornelius conversion is a Christological conversion.

He was converted to God's view of Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior. Savior. I want to conclude by asking us four questions this morning.

[21 : 58] And these questions are food for thought according to the title of the sermon. First, are we converted to God's view of the church?

Are you converted to God's view of the church? God's view and God's desire for the church is that the church be a truly Christ-centered, multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural community.

A community in which we are no longer strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone.

Christ has made us one. He has broken down the wall of hostility and division through the blood of his cross.

And as Paul, writing to the church in Colossae, said, here in the church there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian and Scythian, slave and free man, that Christ is all and in all.

[23 : 19] In other words, people become members of the church not by becoming like me or becoming like you. People do not become members of the church by eating the food that I eat or wearing the clothes that I wear or looking like me or looking like you.

They become members of the church through faith in Jesus Christ and striving to become like Christ all of us together.

God's church is not culturally homogenous. God's church is God's church for everyone. God's God's church for us and I think I would like to comment St.

John's at this point. You know, when I tell some of my friends that I am an associate rector in a church that I think is about 98% white, some of them are sound and surprised.

And why are they surprised? It is because the Christian church has still not learned the lesson of Acts chapter 10. There should be no surprise about that. But I want to commend this congregation for our desire to be the kind of church, the multicultural, the multiracial church that God intends the church of Jesus Christ to be.

[24 : 47] We are not yet perfect in that. We need to keep growing in that. Let this be a place where we do not shut people out.

And let me also speak to us individuals seated here this morning. It is possible for us as individuals to create what I would call our own sheet, another sheet from heaven with four corners.

It is possible for each of us to create our own sheet full of educational, cultural, and spiritual rejects.

People that we consider unclean for all kinds of reasons. And we cry out every time we see them, by no means, Lord, they are not my type. I don't want to have anything to do with them.

And so who are the unclean and common people in your life, it is dangerous. You remember the story of Jonah?

[25 : 59] Jonah the prophet was asked to go to Nineveh and preach to them, and he refused to go, because he couldn't see them becoming Christians, becoming fearers of God, and he did not.

And you know what God did to him? God put him in the belly of a fish, fish, and as Jonah was swimming around in the slimy pit of that fish, God was saying to him, Jonah, I want you to see how terrible and how ugly your self-indulgence and your prejudice looks like before me.

It is a dangerous thing when we move in that direction. Second question, are we converted to God's view of salvation?

God's view of salvation is that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by works, lest any man should boast. There is no other name by which we must be saved, only the name of Jesus.

No one comes to the Father except by me, says Jesus. And there is no other mediator between God and man except the man, Jesus Christ, says Paul the Apostle.

[27 : 22] Cornelius had to be converted. Even though he was good and devout and God-fearing, he needed to hear the good news of Jesus in order to be saved.

I wanted to look at chapter 11, verse 14. Acts chapter 11, verse 14. This is Peter recounting the story.

And he says that the angel said to Cornelius, send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter. He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.

Send men to Joppa to bring Peter, who will tell you the message by which you will be saved. In other words, with all his good and devoutness and God-fearing nature and practice, he was not yet saved.

And I think it is important for us to recognize that. That good works, as good as they are, will not bring salvation to anybody, even if they go to a Christian church.

[28 : 31] It doesn't matter where they go. Whether it's a mosque, or a synagogue, or a Christian church, good works does not save anybody. It is through faith in Jesus Christ.

And that was a message that Peter needed to understand as well. Peter needed to understand that Gentiles are not going to be saved on the basis of circumcision or becoming like Jews.

First, they can only be saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone. Peter needed that conversion. And we do in our church.

Third, are we converted to God's view of the gospel? God's view of the gospel is that the gospel is for all peoples and for all nations.

And this gospel is so powerful that it changes lives. We live in a multicultural society, a pluralistic society, and we are given the impression that people are fine.

[29 : 41] And the truth of the matter is that they are not. They have seen us in this one big sheep that came down from heaven, and they need to be saved. And this gospel is for all of them.

And so who are the carnivores in your life? Those good people who you think ought not to hear the gospel because they are so nice, they are so wonderful, such a lovely pagan.

That's not the way God looks at it. They need the gospel as much as the worst sinner needs the gospel. In fact, the more religious, the more problematic.

And so their gospel is for everyone. It is for the young, it is for the old, it is for the mentally impaired, it is for everyone. The gospel is for halots, for bisexuals, for homosexuals, for polygamists, for adulterers, it is for those who are addicted to drugs.

It is for everybody. And so faithful Jews and faithful Muslims and faithful new ages need the gospel. To everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sin.

[31 : 02] Finally, are we converted to God's view of ministry? Are we converted to God's view of ministry? Who is God's instrument in this ministry of proclaiming the gospel?

it is not the angels. The angels do not worship.