

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Our reading today ends happily, but how sad is the beginning! Rather than rejoicing that the Gentiles had "received the word of God" (11:1), "those who were circumcised" in Jerusalem (which would have consisted of all the church's leadership) were upset at Peter for eating with Gentiles! Even more tragic is the fact that eating with Gentiles was not forbidden by the Law of Moses, but only by the tradition of the Jewish elders. This would not be the last time in church history when the love of tradition (or pet doctrines) would supersede love for people. May the Lord help us to be innocent of such pharisaism.

Peter corrected those who took issue with him very gently, and naturally so, knowing that he would have agreed with the nature of their complaint prior to his recent experiences in Joppa and Caesarea. What had happened, however, had clearly been the work of God. Thankfully the Jerusalem elders had the humility to admit their misunderstanding, resulting in a landmark moment in church history: Gentiles could become God's children, heirs of eternal life, through Jesus! Still to come, however, was a related controversy concerning Gentile believers' obligation to keep the Law of Moses.

When Peter recounted his story before the Jerusalem council, he reported something that we did not read in the original story recorded in Acts 10, namely that the angel who appeared to Cornelius had said to him, "Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household" (11:13-14). As I wrote yesterday, it is difficult for me to accept the idea that Cornelius needed to be saved from a sentence of hell, otherwise we would have to conclude that God might send a sincere, God-fearing, continually-praying, almsgiving, believing Gentile to hell just because he had not believed a gospel that he had never heard, a gospel that had he heard it, he would have immediately believed. So I still must maintain that when Peter visited Cornelius and his household, they became saved in the sense that they were then born of the Spirit and incorporated into the body of Christ, having become spiritual children of God.

In the end, the Jerusalem elders concluded that "God [had] granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." Does this statement prove, as some claim, that God sovereignly grants the ability to repent to certain individuals whom He has predestined for salvation and that God does not sovereignly grant the ability to repent to those whom He has not predestined for salvation? It is tragic that such a question even needs to be asked. The conclusion of the Jerusalem elders was not, "God has granted to a limited number of pre-selected Gentiles the ability to repent" but, "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." That is, God has granted to all the Gentiles, just as He has granted to all the Jews, the opportunity to repent and gain eternal life. And of course, God does more than simply grant an opportunity to the human race to repent. He actively works to influence them to repent through creation, conscience and the proclamation of the gospel. No one can or would come to Jesus unless the Father draws them (John 6:44).