

May 2, 2010

Acts 11:1-18

1 Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, 3 saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" 4 Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. 6 As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' 10 This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. 11 At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. 12 The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; 14 he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' 15 And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

18 When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

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I don't know if this is a true story or not, but because it isn't about Presbyterians, I like to think it is true. About thirty years ago the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) refused to ordain an African-American as a bishop in their church. I don't know why, maybe it would have messed with their beliefs about the importance of genealogy, but I suspect that this man thought racism lay at the foundation of the decision, and since there were no other African American bishops in the LDS, it appeared that he might have a point.

Naturally it was disappointing to be refused the position. It hurt. I presume that he was otherwise qualified, so apparently, the color of his skin was the reason that he had been denied the position. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. He became so angry that he hired a lawyer. The next thing that the LDS knew, they were being served the appropriate paperwork in what promised to become a class action lawsuit.

Did you know that religious organizations are notoriously exempt from a good deal of civil and human rights legislation? For me it is the greatest irony that in religious circles-- where we love to profess ourselves to be most open and loving and welcoming-- we are free to deny equal rights to those who do not meet our standards; who just don't

measure up. Case in point is the Presbyterian Church, USA. Other cases in point are numerous religions and denominations that deny equal status to women. Roman Catholics come to mind. Various Orthodox churches and dozens of conservative Protestant denominations come to mind. Non-Christian faiths such as Islam and Orthodox Judaism come to mind.

As the story goes, not long after the President of the Latter Day Saints was advised of the upcoming litigation, he announced that he'd received a message from God. In it God revealed his plan that African Americans should be permitted to become bishops in the LDS. Excuse my cynicism but wow! It was a miracle! And who knows? Maybe it was.

But like I say, I don't know that it's true. I'm fairly certain that discontents from other denominations have tried and failed to have various categories of people like themselves *included*. So far most denominations have been able to withstand the assaults of unhappy, excluded members; so we should thank God that the LDS was "directed by the Spirit," not to litigate this thing. If only the same could be said of other faiths, such that God's call could not be fenced in or walled off and equal rights denied to church members.

It gives me absolutely no comfort to remark that in this respect we are not too different from the earliest church. It gives me no comfort to note that this is a tradition that has survived for nearly two thousand years; and that it is admittedly a shameful tradition, but one that some are proud to assert-- and in our assertion to deny those who have been called by God, and have been given the gifts-- by God-- to do the work of-- for example-- ministry.

Now just like I don't know how true the LDS story was, it happened thirty or so years ago; I don't know how factual this story is about the Holy Spirit's work in Caesarea, and the presence of the Holy Spirit, "falling upon" the men. But the story is in the Book of Acts for a reason and this is what I believe the reason was.

The earliest Christian church was composed exclusively of Jews. Jesus was a Jew, although technically he was not a member of the earliest church. Simon Peter, James, John, Andrew, Judas and the rest were all Jews. And while none of them were very high up the ladder of the Jewish religious system, in other words nobody would ever mistake any of them for rabbis or priests, let alone high priests, these fellows all had a basic knowledge of the Law and of the rules of Judaism-- especially those that were enforced. They knew as well as the Jewish officials that non-Jews need not apply; and they believed that the only difference that existed between themselves and the other Jews, the institutional ones they claimed had hung Jesus on the cross, was that the Christians believed Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ. The other Jews thought it was an insane notion to assert that the Savior of the world was the son of a carpenter from Galilee.

For the Jews it was as clear as crystal. There were writings that they believed to be holy. Among other things, those writings contained a code of laws, and those laws were enforced by their Bible which, was the Old Testament; but not only the Old Testament. Authoritative writing included the various interpretations that had come down across the

generations that made the Jewish Scripture a document that was very much alive. But it was also pretty clear to many Jews that some things would never change and one of those things was the belief that non-Jews were unclean, and any Jew who had anything to do with non-Jews became unclean himself and was required to do various rites of purification to become clean again .

This was one of the reasons why they thought Jesus was such a trouble maker. When he told that story about the man who had been beaten, stripped, and robbed and was seen lying by the side of the road by a ritually *clean* Jewish priest and a ritually *clean* Levite both of whom should have known better, but chose not to get involved-- that was bad enough, but then to have a non-Jew, an *unclean* Samaritan, to come forward and do the right thing was insupportable. To suggest that a Samaritan might out perform a Jew where righteousness was concerned was outrageous! They were Gentiles for goodness sake. They *were* unclean! Case closed!

In his poem *Mending Wall*, Robert Frost made the point that when you build a wall you have to consider not only what you are walling in to protect, but also what you are walling out to avoid. And while I don't believe that Frost ever had a great love for the church, he was a man of faith, a man of the earth and I have to believe that he was inspired by something greater than himself when he wrote those words.

But let's return to the part about the Bible being authoritative to the Jews. There is no doubt in my mind that the Jews believed that their Bible was as important and as valuable as we believe our Bible is. It was the seat of authority for their belief and practice. Whenever they had a question about how to live or behave or relate, they simply headed for the Temple or the local synagogue and asked one of the priests or rabbis, or Pharisees or Sadducees, or scribes, to tell them what the Scriptures said. Their Bible was at least as important to the Jews as our Bible is for us. And because the first Christians were also Jews and believed the same thing-- with one exception-- about the Bible that the other Jews did, imagine how the Christians received the reports from Caesarea that Peter was baptizing people who were not Jews into the church.

Don't bother imagining! I'll tell you. It went over like a concrete duck with the early Christians in Jerusalem. That's because not only did you have to believe in Jesus but you also had to be a Jew in every other respect, obedience to the Law, reverence for Scripture, male circumcision, and non-Jews were second class citizens. They were unclean.

Like all great things, the Bible can be incendiary. It can be used as a tool to free people, but it can also be used as a tool to imprison, even enslave them. How many people have seen their lives change for the better because of enlightenment gathered from among the sacred pages. How many million Africans' enslavement was justified by holy scripture? How many Indians died in the Americas because they were seen as latter day Canaanites who stood in the way of God's will-- that white skinned Europeans and their descendants should own and rule the land?

So long ago I ceased worshipping the Bible, but (you'll be glad to know!) I use it a lot. Let's not throw the baby out with the bath water! The Bible is the tool box of my calling, just as it is of you in your calling. But we must be very careful when it comes to the authority of the Bible especially when it is cited at the expense of Holy Spirit. As it was by our ancestors to justify the genocide of American Indians and the enslavement of Africans, as it was by the Christians in Jerusalem when they discovered that Peter had been baptizing Gentiles in Caesarea.

Obviously we need to approach the authority of the Bible with the care of someone who has been ordered to defuse a bomb. Because if we are not careful we might find that instead of using the Bible as a tool for life, for freedom, for *thou shalt*, and for walls knocked down; we might be found to have used it for death, for imprisonment, for *thou shalt not*, and for walls built up.

In Jerusalem, the early Christians believed in their Bible, but found that their understanding was all about enslavement. When the Spirit rocked Simon Peter's world the Bible was redefined, life, freedom and yes triumphed. The Spirit of God triumphed and in that victory washed away centuries of human tradition.

Thinking about it nearly takes my breath away!