GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

The Good News reveals that Jesus unites divided people

Acts 11:1-18

Although Luke only wrote two of the New Testament's books (Luke and Acts), his pair occupies as much space as Paul's thirteen letters. A good reason motivates the volume of Luke's writing – he wrote to affirm Theophilus' conviction about the Good News concerning Jesus (*Luke 1:1-4*). That purpose means Luke's writings offer insight into the meaning and application of the gospel ("gospel" and "good news" translate the same Greek word *euangelion*).

We have been moving through the major sections of Luke's writings, considering what insights they offer into the Good News. So far, we have explored:

- Luke 1-2: **The Good News is about Jesus' kingdom and rule**.
- Luke 3-9a: **The Good News about Jesus is for everyone**.
- Luke 9b-19: **The rejection of the Good News of Jesus' kingdom and rule**.
- Luke 19:41-23:56: **The Good News of Jesus' kingdom and rule focuses on his death**.
- Luke 24: **The Good News of Jesus' resurrection launches his kingdom and changes everything.**
- Acts 1-7: **The Good News about Jesus reveals that he exercises his kingdom and rule through faithful people**.

Today, we will consider the next block of material in the book of Acts – Acts 8-12. While that section records the spread of the Good News about Jesus into the regions of Judea and Samaria (*cf. Acts 1:8*), it also reveals a problem – Jewish prejudices prevented the spread of the Good News into Gentile regions. In Acts 10, God removed that roadblock by dramatically revealing **the Good News that Jesus' kingdom and rule unites people.**

Peter and Cornelius

Luke opened the book of Acts by recording the apostles' commission to witness for Jesus throughout the world (*Acts 1:8*). However, Luke's narrative of the apostles' activity revealed that they tended to witness only among their own people in their own lands. Luke's record of Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius records God confronting the prejudice that kept the early Jewish Christians from fulfilling the mission Jesus entrusted to them. But God did not confront the prejudice directly. Instead, He employed confusing visions and dramatic miracles to expose prejudice without explicitly naming it. Consider:

- Luke introduces his story of Peter's visit to Cornelius' home by writing a narrative that compares the two characters.

    - Cornelius, a devout and God-fearing man, received a vision from God while he was praying. He responded with immediate and unquestioning obedience (*Acts 10:1-8*).
    - Peter, a devout and God-fearing man (*Acts 4:19-20; 5:29; 10:9*), received a vision from God while he was praying. He responded by arguing with the vision's instructions (*Acts 10:9-16*).
- The comparison of the two figures reveals the curious way God interacted with them.
    - While God gave Cornelius a vision with clear instructions, He showed Peter a vision with a perplexing teaching that Peter did not understand (*Acts 10:17*).
    - God did not explain Peter's vision but expected Peter to 'figure it out.'
    - God's indirect way of communicating a crucial message to Peter pairs with the equally unexpected way He confirmed it – He "poured out"[1] the Holy Spirit on Cornelius, "just as" He did with Peter on Pentecost (*Acts 10:44-47; 2:1-4*).
- Luke's account of Peter and Cornelius reveals that God's curious actions were intended to dismantle the segregating prejudices stopping the spread of the Good News. For example, consider Peter's comments about what God wanted to teach him:
    - **"God shows no partiality"** (*Acts 10:34*); He creates all humans "in his image" (*Genesis 1:26-28*).
    - **"Anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"** (*Acts 10:35*); obedience determines God's relationship with individuals, not cultural, national, racial, or socio-economic differences.
    - **No one should "call any person common or unclean"** (*Acts 10:28*); obeying God means honoring the unity He creates among all humans.
    - Because **Jesus "is Lord of all,"** he creates peace between all (*Acts 10:36-43*).

Applications

As God expected of Peter, Luke invites readers to meditate on God's interactions with Cornelius and Peter. The contrasting way God interacted with Cornelius and Peter offers several insights:

- Because God "made man in his own image" (*Genesis 1:18*), "it is not good that man should be alone" (*Genesis 2:18*). **God created us to live in relationships like He enjoys with Jesus and the Spirit**.
- **Divisions are symptoms of our brokenness; unity is the gift God gives to us through Jesus that evidences the reality of his kingdom and rule** (*Ephesians 1:10; 2:1-3:10*).
- Peter's assumptions about who belongs in Jesus' kingdom were more rooted in his culture rather than in God's teachings (*Acts 10:28, 34-36; 11:1-18).* **Do not underestimate culture's prejudicing influence on the way we think about, and treat, others.**
- Peter, along with the other apostles, had been given explicit instructions to witness for Jesus "to the end of the earth" (*Acts 1:8*). Because he stayed within the familiar cultural boundaries of Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, he kept the message of Jesus from spreading into Gentile areas. **Our failure to obey affects others' obedience.**

[1] All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

Evening discussion

Paul opened his letter to the Christian community in Ephesus by writing about God's plan in Jesus, a plan that God developed "before the foundation of the world" (*Ephesians 1:3-4*). It is "a plan," he wrote, "to unite all things in [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth" (*Ephesians 1:10*). While His plan has a creation-encompassing scope, it focuses on uniting individuals into "one new man" who can serve as His "holy temple" (*Ephesians 2:1-22*). The Jesus-caused unity that God creates among divided people reveals His "manifold wisdom" to all the creation, prompting its submission to Him (*Ephesians 3:1-10*). Thus, unity is not a 'perk,' nor is it a negotiable item based on our assessment of the people surrounding us. Instead, **unity is an essential feature of God's plan for Christians.**

Given unity's place in God's purposes for the church and for the creation, **what place does unity have in our efforts to share the Good News about Jesus?**

Discussion questions

What insights does the Bible offer that help us understand why unity occupies such a crucial place in His eternal purposes?

_____
_____
_____
_____

God is not alone in His desire for unity; we desire the same thing. Rome sought to unify the world under its *Pax Romana.* Nations formed the United Nations to promote peaceful cooperation among the world's nations. Unity inspires art and music, such as Michael Jackson's *"Heal the World*" and John Lennon's *"All You Need Is Love."* Why do you think human efforts to promote unity fall short?

_____
_____
_____
_____

In what ways do you think our efforts to create unity differ from God's plan to create unity?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Paul wrote that God's plan for unity requires our participation (*Ephesians 1:3-4; 4:1-6*). But we are the ones whose disobedience creates disunity (*cf. Genesis 3-11; James 3:16*). Why do you think God plans for our participation, especially considering our role in creating the problem His plan addresses?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Unity requires community. What implications does the communal character of God's plans for the church offer for the ways we should think about, and practice, evangelism?

_____
_____
_____
_____

If, through Christian unity, "the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (*Ephesians 3:10*), then we can assume it also serves a crucial role in teaching people about Jesus. How can we display our unity as a church family to people, and how do you think our unity can be used to teach people about Jesus?

_____
_____
_____
_____