

**God Plays No Favorites**  
**January 13, 2008**

Acts 10:25-36; 44-48:

The minute Peter came through the door, Cornelius was up on his feet greeting him: and then down on his face worshipping him! Peter pulled him and said, "None of that. I'm a man and only a man, no different from you."

Talking things over, they went on into the house, where Cornelius introduced Peter to everyone who had come. Peter addressed them, "You know, I'm sure that this is highly irregular. Jews just don't do this: visit and relax with people of another race. But God has shown me that no race is better than any other. So the minute I was sent for, I came, no questions asked. But now I'd like to know why you sent for me."

Cornelius said, "Four days ago at about this time, mid-afternoon, I was home praying. Suddenly there was a man right in front of me, flooding the room with light. He said, 'Cornelius, your daily prayers and neighborly acts have brought you to God's attention. I want you to send to Joppa to get Simon, the one they call Peter. He's staying with Simon the Tanner down by the sea.'

"So I did it: I sent for you. And you've been good enough to come. And now we're all here in God's presence, ready to listen to whatever the Master put in your heart to tell us."

Peter fairly exploded with the good news, "It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from: if you want God and are ready to do as the Lord says, the door is open. The Message God sent to the children of Israel, that through Jesus Christ everything is being put together again, well God's doing it everywhere, among everyone."

No sooner were these words out of Peter's mouth than the Holy Spirit came to the listeners. The believing Jews who had come with Peter couldn't believe it, couldn't believe that the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on "outsider" Gentiles, but there it was. They heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, "Do I hear any objections to baptizing these friends with water? They've received the Holy Spirit exactly as we did." Hearing no objections, he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **ALL: Thanks be to God!**

There are many metaphors that try to describe what The Bible is like. Over my lifetime, I have heard several preachers say that The Bible is like a road map. I want to quibble with that image. This story from Acts and my own experience with God make me affirm that the Bible is more like a compass than it is a road map. A road map tells you exactly what route you will take to get from point A to point B. A road map lets you know exactly what to expect, whether or not you will be crossing any rivers or railroad tracks, how many miles your trip will take, what roads you will intersect. A road map provides us with a degree of certainty about exactly how we should proceed. A compass, on the

other hand, lets us know a general direction. It lets us know where we should be headed. The compass does not tell us what will be in our path and what kind of obstacles we will face. But it orients us in the right direction, with the proper focus.

The Bible is not like a road map because God does not tell us exactly what we have in store for our lives. I bet everyone here could tell a story about how God has surprised us, led us in a different direction than we ever planned for ourselves. If we are really open to following God, that means we will be confused sometimes. I try to follow God, but there are times when I feel completely clueless about exactly what I need to do to follow my Lord and Savior. And even though I like to have all the answers, it is perfectly normal to be confused; in those uncertain times, we rely on God to be our compass, showing us the way.

The Bible tells us that while we may not be able to control all the details, God is taking care of the big picture. I believe that God has a plan for our lives. Our own stubbornness and inattention to God's guidance can get in the way. Still it is very difficult, sometimes even impossible, to know what God has in store for us.

If we look at Acts 10, Cornelius and Peter would affirm that God serves, not as their road map, but as their compass. Cornelius is an officer in the Roman army. He works for a government that is not friendly towards this newly formed Christian community. Cornelius is a Gentile and an outsider to the faith. Yet Cornelius is intrigued by Yahweh; he is not circumcised, and thus not an official Jew, but Cornelius regularly prays to God and faithfully gives to the church.

In the midst of one of his prayers, God sends Cornelius a message. The Lord tells Cornelius to send for Peter, a man Cornelius has never met. The Lord does not elaborate on the reasons why. The Lord does not tell Cornelius what to expect when Peter arrives or what they should talk about with each other. Cornelius is confused. God has given him enough information to take the next step he needs to take in his journey of faith, but Cornelius does not know where he is headed. We should give Cornelius credit, for despite not knowing the exact path, he trusts in God and obeys.

Then the scene moves to Peter. He has a strange vision with animals and birds that Jews believed were ritually unclean. According to the Holiness Codes, Jews were not allowed to eat such animals, but the Lord tells Peter three times, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."<sup>1</sup> It seems silly to us to be unable to eat foods like lobster, scallops, or pork, but Jews considered Gentile dietary practices to be repulsive. Imagine what we would think if our neighbor ate squirrels and cockroaches. Philip Yancey suggests that the closest parallel would be if, "in the midst of a Southern Baptist convention in Texas Stadium, a fully stocked bar supernaturally lowered itself onto the playing field, with a booming voice from heaven urging the teetotalers to "Drink up!"<sup>2</sup>

If Cornelius is confused, Peter is completely befuddled. Peter understands that this is a message from God, but he has no clue what it means. His dream contradicts what he has known his entire life. Peter wonders, surely God would not contradict what

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 10:15.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, p. 148.

had been taken as a given in the Old Testament? But that is precisely what God does in Acts 10 because of the new covenant. God's revelation to Peter shows us that if we want to take *The Bible* seriously, we need to not just accept what tradition tells us about a particular biblical text. To really be open to God here and now means that we are willing to let the Holy Spirit teach us something new, even about some basic ideas that we have taken for granted.

We do not worship the words in the Bible; we worship the God who is revealed in *The Bible*. That God we follow is bigger than what we can understand or control. Peter learns that just when he starts to think he knows what God expects of him, God is ready to throw a curve ball. "A God small enough for us to understand is not a God big enough for us to worship."<sup>3</sup>

And I believe that we take *The Bible* more seriously when we invite the Holy Spirit to guide our reading of Scripture. So as our understanding of God grows, through the Holy Spirit, we can challenge long-held assumptions. For example, Christians for centuries have used the Bible for all sorts of horrible abuses, including owning slaves, subjugating women, and promoting fear and guilt against non-Christians. Thank God that the Holy Spirit led us into new understandings that are more consistent with God's will. God's encounter with Peter shows us that it is possible for the Spirit to lead us deeper into the truth.

Each day in first century Palestine, a Jewish man would begin his morning prayers by giving thanks to God "who hast not made me a Gentile... who hast not made me a slave... who hast not made me a woman." Peter's encounter with God on the rooftop helps him see that prayer is just plain wrong. The Jews may have been faithfully following the laws from Leviticus, but they have neglected what really matters and forgotten the big picture.

Peter and Cornelius are brought together, neither is quite sure why at first. God does not give them a road map of what to expect: God simply gives Peter and Cornelius enough information so they meet. Their encounter starts awkwardly: Cornelius bows down and starts to worship Peter, who easily may have said, "This guy just doesn't get it. He's worshipping me, like a silly Gentile would. I don't need to listen to him." How often are we tempted to shut people out and ignore them because of some way they do not measure up to our standards? When Peter hears Cornelius' account, God's plan becomes clear. Peter and Cornelius need each other. Sometimes it is the people who are the most different from ourselves that teach us the most about life and God. Those who are different broaden our horizons, and allow us to look at the same situation in a new way.

Acts 10 gives us a model for how we as Christians are supposed to make decisions, through a practice called discernment. The theological conclusions we reach through discernment are rarely self-evident. Discernment requires both being open to God and being willing to try to make sense of our lives in light of our convictions about

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<sup>3</sup> Tim Tyson, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, p. 177.

who God is. God speaks to Peter and Cornelius in Acts and I know that God is still speaking to us today.

Today we are ordaining and installing our new elders for the class of 2010. I have no idea exactly what God has in store for you as an elder. God does not give us a road map, but God has given you enough information to get you here today. Just as it was not an accident for God to bring Peter and Cornelius together, I have faith that you are not here by accident. What we are tempted to call coincidence is when God chooses to remain anonymous.

One of the best books that I've read in the last five years is called Blood Done Sign My Name, which tells the true story of a family of Methodist ministers serving in North Carolina during the racial and social upheaval of the fifties and sixties. One of those ministers, the Reverend Earl Tyson had a court date one day. He ended up sitting next to a kind black man named Earl King. The deputy told Earl to move, but he remained seated next to his new friend. During their conversation, King encouraged Earl by saying, "You don't worry. The Lord will provide for you if you will let him."

Earl's congregation in Louisburg, North Carolina was angry with him for sitting next to a black man, and they forced him out of their pulpit. Afterwards, he tried to apply to Duke Divinity School (he hadn't been to seminary yet), but they would not admit him because he was too much trouble. The bishop would not give him another church in North Carolina, so he was forced to move to Virginia.

Later that year, Earl applied to school at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. The dean asked Earl what he thought about race and he replied, "I am called to treat every person as my brother or sister in Christ, regardless of color." Then the dean asked, "Since you are a North Carolina boy, what on earth brings you to Virginia?" Earl told him the entire story of what happened to him at the courthouse and how his congregation ostracized him. Then the dean smiled and the interview was over. Earl later learned he had received a full scholarship to Union Seminary. Earl remembered King's words. "You don't worry. The Lord will take care of you if you'll let him."<sup>4</sup>

It is unfortunate that Earl Tyson had to go through such hardships, but the Lord provided for him. All of us face hardships in life and sometimes we wish we didn't have to face those unpleasant times, but you'd better believe that I would not trade for anything the lessons that God taught me through those hardships.

Elders in the class of 2010, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in for a wild, unpredictable ride in this adventure we call life. What God showed Peter and Cornelius is that even when life does not seem to make sense, even when we seem to experience setbacks, God has a plan for our lives. And, as Earl Tyson discovered, "the Lord will take care of us if we let him." The Lord taught Peter that God plays no favorites. What fresh new insight or piece of good news does God have to teach us? The Holy Spirit is alive today, not giving us a detailed road map, but pointing us in the right direction. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Tyson, excerpts from p. 194-196.