

The Great Commission

Let us pray together.

Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day. Thank You for the new life You are working in our hearts and in our minds. Father, teach us now from Your Word. Encourage and challenge us, we pray. Father, we know that very often Your Word is a sword that wounds us, but we pray that it may be a two-edged sword that will not only wound us and challenge us but also comfort and heal us. So be with us and teach us, we pray. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

In our last session I had moved away from the end of our section on postmodernism and consequences to asking a question. We talked about the issue of not just reaping, but learning to sow. We talked about the issue of the church's reluctance to be involved in outreach in the early chapters of Acts, and we asked the question, "Is God reluctant?" And I was answering that at the end of the last session. So let me just run through this outline of the beginning of the book of Acts. This comes from a series of lectures on outreach, and the book of Acts, as I have suggested, is a challenge to missions for every age of the church. I am not going to go through this in detail, because we have already gone over some of these things. I begin with Luke's words from the beginning of Acts, where he writes this to Theophilus: "In my former book, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach." And in giving us that introduction, Luke is basically saying that the book of Acts is a book about the further teaching and work of Christ after His resurrection and ascension. We call it the Acts of the Apostles; it really ought to be entitled "The Further Acts of Christ." That is what Luke has in mind, anyway, when he introduces the book in this way.

Our first point addresses the question of the Great Commission and the power of the Spirit, and we spoke about this in a previous session just very briefly. The Commissioner, of course, is Christ Himself—the crucified, resurrected, ascended, and returning Lord. But also He is true man; He is human, fully human. And as you look in the Gospels, you see that Christ is one who did His work in the power of the Spirit. Though He was the Son of God, He did not do His work as the one who, as the eternal second person of the Trinity, had infinite power. As Paul says in Philippians 2, He emptied Himself. And He did His work as a human person, as someone just like you and me. That is why Jesus says in the Gospels that He does not do anything of His own accord; He does only what the Father wants Him to do. And Jesus even says that He does not say anything of His own accord. He only speaks what the Father wants Him to speak and in a manner in which the Father wants Him to say it. He says, "My words are not my own words; they are the words My Father has given Me." So Jesus does His work and teaching in the power of the Holy Spirit as a model to you and to me, and that is what we are called to do: to live day by day, trusting in the power of God at work in our lives. We are to pray that He will give us His words, that He will enable us to speak them the way He desires we speak them, and that He will lead us to do the things that He wants us to do. So Jesus is the Commissioner, both the eternal Son of God—the second person of the Trinity—and the one who is fully human.

What was His instruction? As He spoke to His apostles there in Acts 1, He taught them about the kingdom of God and He told them to wait. We looked at this the other day. "Wait in Jerusalem until the power of the Spirit comes on you, and then be my witnesses to all the world. Go out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth."

And then we spoke very briefly last session about the beginning of the work of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the day that was the first fruits of God's harvest. And the Spirit comes, and we did not really

speaking about this, about the Spirit coming in the power of the wind. But wind there expresses the power of God's Spirit, the Spirit of God who moved over the face of the waters to bring life to the creation at the original creation of this world. The wind is the wind of the Spirit that blows on the valley of dry bones in the book of Ezekiel to bring new life to God's people, Israel, who were dead. So the wind expresses the creative power of God's Spirit, both in the original creation and in the new creation. Of course Jesus uses that language in John 3 when He speaks about the Spirit blowing where He will. So the wind is the creative power of God's Spirit. Fire is the purging and cleansing power of the Spirit. John the Baptist said, "I baptize with water, but there is one coming after me who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire." That is, Christ comes to baptize us with fire, the fire of the Spirit, which is a radical cleansing, to burn sin out of our hearts and lives, take it away, cleanse us, and renew us. So there is the cleansing and renewing power of the Spirit.

Regarding tongues, we spoke a little bit about that. Tongues at Pentecost is the reversal of the tower of Babel. In the tower of Babel, human languages are divided to prevent sinful human beings from becoming so powerful. It divides their power, spreading them out across the face of the earth to prevent them from seeking to give themselves their own name under heaven rather than trusting God. The tower of Babel is about humanity seeking to exalt itself over against God, and so God spread humanity across the face of the earth by dividing the languages. And Pentecost reverses that, where all these people from different nations are able to understand each other. And what it is, of course, is the creation of the new humanity. Christ is creating the new humanity from every nation on the face of the earth, who can indeed be won and who will be won through all eternity, rather than divided as the human race is now. And it is a tremendous tragedy when the Church does not exemplify that. That is why Paul keeps saying in the New Testament that in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, barbarian or Scythian. It is tragic when our churches are divided racially and culturally. That is not what Christ had in mind at all. Paul did not go out into the world and plant separate Jewish and Gentile churches. He knew nothing about homogenous growth church principle. It would have certainly been much easier for him to plant separate Gentile and Jewish churches. There was a greater barrier between them than ever exists between any of us today in American culture. It was a much, much greater barrier. But Paul planted churches that were both Jewish and Gentile, despite the challenges that it created, and it created lots of challenges. All the way through the New Testament letters you see those challenges written about.

So Pentecost is a new humanity created by the coming of the Holy Spirit, which we are called to put into practice in our own lives. It is also the first fruits of the many languages of the earth, that people from every tongue will come into the kingdom of God, and Pentecost is a kind of picture of those first fruits geographically. We talked last time about how there are people from every point of the compass there. And also, of course, they are from not only every point of the compass, but also from the various strands of humanity descended from Noah and his sons. Then we spoke about how the early church went out from Jerusalem at last, and I pointed out how reluctant they were to go. If you look through the early chapters of Acts, you see that the apostles are in fact transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. We see tremendously powerful preaching from this little group of people who were scared, discouraged, and afraid after the death of Christ. After His resurrection and ascension, on the giving of the Spirit they are really changed; they are courageous. You see Peter on the day of Pentecost and in the following chapters speaking tremendously boldly in the power of the Spirit. Even though they are put in prison and warned by the Sanhedrin to shut up and to stop teaching in the name of Christ, they boldly carry on. They preach, pray, and heal in the power of the Spirit, and they are completely changed people. They boldly face opposition and suffering, and yet there is something missing. What was missing was that they made no attempt to go out from Jerusalem. We saw as we read the account of Saul's persecution of the Church, recorded at the beginning of Acts 8, that the Church only goes out from Jerusalem when they are persecuted there. Even then, the apostles do not go. We saw how the first to minister in Samaria are

not the apostles who Christ had personally commanded to go, but other members of the church, including a deacon, Philip, who goes down to Samaria.

And that brings us to what I want to talk about in this session, and that is about the Gentiles. You might want to entitle this study on Peter “A reluctant evangelist.” He is a reluctant evangelist. We are going to look at this account in Acts 9:42-10:48. It is a wonderful account. Now here is another story that is, in many ways, very similar to the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. It is a story in which we see God remarkably at work in the most wonderful way in order to bring the Gospel to Cornelius and his household. And what we see all the way through this story is a contrast between the eagerness of God to save and the reluctance of Peter and of the Jews to proclaim the Gospel to Gentiles. Peter and his fellow Jewish believers, including the apostles, are not prepared to go out from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth—to the Gentiles.

I want to start by saying a little bit about Cornelius the centurion. Jesus had commanded the apostles to take the Gospel to Gentiles. Now, as you think about this story here, this is Peter’s first time to witness to a Gentile. It is his first occasion. Now you remember how clear Jesus was in giving the Great Commission, and I spoke about this last time. They were to go to the Gentiles. He gave them commission over and over again, both before His death and after His resurrection. They were to preach the Gospel to all the nations; that is what they were to do. He gave them this wonderful example on the day of Pentecost of what He had in mind, where there were both Jews and Gentiles from all over the place gathered in Jerusalem. And the Holy Spirit comes down with tremendous power, and there were Gentiles converted along with Jewish people who were there for the feast. Now, of course, that was not the first illustration that Jesus had given His disciples. There are several accounts in the Gospels of Jesus speaking to Gentiles and of their being converted, as well as Jesus speaking to Samaritans and their being converted. So this was not something new to them. They had seen Jesus ministering to Gentiles and Samaritans over and over again. And they had seen Jesus going into the houses of Gentiles. There are examples of that in the Gospels. So this is not something completely new to them. They have had it modeled in person for them throughout the ministry of Jesus, as well as their being commanded to go to Gentiles. Now here is our account of Peter’s first encounter and testifying to a Gentile. And it is very fascinating, in reading this account, to see what it takes in terms of the work of God, the work of Christ, to actually get Peter to this Gentile’s house.

Now, the first thing that God does here is make sure that, providentially, Peter is staying in the house of Simon, a tanner. A tanner worked at curing and preparing animal skins so that they could be used for clothing, rugs, wall hangings, and tents. That was a tanner’s job. But the work of a tanner was considered unclean by the Pharisees and teachers of the law. The tanner’s home was not in a part of town where a fine, upstanding Jew would have been prepared to go. No Pharisee or teacher of the law would have gone to the home of a tanner, because they would have made themselves unclean by doing so—at least they thought. So Peter is staying in a home where all around him are reminders of the clean/unclean distinction that God had given to His people Israel in the Law of Moses. And that clean/unclean distinction about food, animals, birds, and reptiles was given to them with the primary purpose of making the Jewish people a nation who were set apart by the holiness of their lives. They were not actually told not to go into the house of Gentiles or not to eat with them. Those were their additions to the law. They were told to observe these food laws as an illustration of their separation, morally, to the Lord from the nations. The Mosaic Law also constantly commands them to be kind and hospitable to Gentiles, to aliens in the land. But they forgot about that part of the law and just emphasized the part about what was clean and unclean; they had decided that all Gentiles were unclean and that they would have absolutely nothing to do with them.

So Peter is staying, by God's providence, in this house of Simon the tanner. And on the roof where Peter goes and waits for his meal, there would have been skins of all these animals drying. So he is literally surrounded by them, practically, as God speaks to him. Peter is being asked by God to think about what it means to be separate from the Gentile nations. That is what he is doing in that house, by God's providence. And he is thinking, if he has any appropriate memory, of all that Jesus said and did in His relationship with Gentiles. One of the other things we should notice is that Jesus had already taught the apostles that they should regard all foods as clean. Mark 7:1-23 contains very explicit teaching of Jesus when He and His disciples are criticized by the Pharisees for not washing their hands before a meal. And it was not a matter of cleanliness; it was a ritual washing that the Pharisees required people to do. Now it is a fascinating passage, actually, if you read Mark 7 and Matthew 15, because in the context Mark tells us that not only did the Pharisees and teachers of the law require this ritual washing of hands, but they also required the washing of all kinds of containers and vessels for cooking. Not washing in the sense that you wash up after a meal, but ritual washings. Now the Old Testament law did not require this. Why had the Pharisees and teachers of the law required it and required this ritual washing of hands? Well, it is really interesting and it is something I want you to think about very carefully. What the Pharisees had done was take the laws that were given for the tabernacle, the temple, and the priests, and applied them to everyday life and to everybody.

Now think about this, because this sounds really spiritual and perhaps that was genuinely their intention. In the Old Testament, in the law given to the priests working in the tabernacle and temple, they were called to have a ritual washing before they undertook their duties in the tabernacle or the temple, so that their sin would be cleansed, they might serve God, and they might be set apart to Him. And they were called by God every time they used these vessels, the cooking vessels—pots and pans—in the temple and tabernacle, to give them a ritual washing in order to cleanse them. This is to remind them that nothing that human beings touch is clean before God and that we always need to be cleansed when we approach Him. We need His forgiveness and His washing away of our sin. That is what those things pictured to them very, very clearly. Now the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in the 100 or 200 years before the coming of Christ had said, "But surely it is not just the priests but all of us who are called to be set apart to God." We are all His priests, and the Old Testament teaches that. Exodus 19:5-6 says all God's people are priests. So would it not be good if, to demonstrate our own devotion to the Lord and our own desire to serve Him in the whole of life, that we apply these laws for the priests to our own daily lives? So we will ritually wash ourselves before we eat just like the priests are required to do in the temple. We will ritually wash our pots and pans in our kitchens, just like the priests do when they are working in the temple, because we want to show God that we really desire to honor Him in the whole of life.

Now this sounds wonderfully spiritual, does it not? What they were saying, and it is something we teach passionately in this seminary and in our Reformed heritage, is that there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular. All of us are holy to the Lord, not just the priest. All of us, in all of our life, are to serve God. That is what they were trying to do. But according to God that, of course, is true. All of you are holy to the Lord, all of you are His priests, and all of you are set apart to His service. Your home is just as much to be holy to the Lord as the temple. But they had no business making laws that God had not given and applying them to the people. In fact, the Law of Moses forbids God's people to add to His laws. That is presumptuous, even if the intention appears to be holy and spiritual. That is a good lesson for us, because today in the evangelical community we are constantly adding to God's commandments. We want to say to people, "Well, we want to be holy to the Lord in the whole of life. So we are going to make laws about what to eat, touch, taste, handle, watch, and read, because we want ourselves and our children to be holy to the Lord." But God never gave us these commandments, and His Word forbids us

to add to them. That is why Jesus speaks so passionately against the Pharisees and teachers of the law, because they added to the Word of God those things that God did not command.

Paul comments on this in Colossians 2:16-23. He says, “Such rules have an appearance of wisdom,” and of spirituality, we might add. But he says they have absolutely no value in restraining the indulgence of the sinful nature, because God did not give them. They are just human rules and human religion. They are worldly. That is what Paul says. All the rules that we add to God’s Word for the governing of our churches and lives, to make ourselves more holy and separate from the world, are actually worldly. That is Paul’s charge. They are worldly, because that is what human religion is. It is making up rules to make ourselves acceptable to God and to serve Him. That is what all religions are all over the face of the world, all through history, but that is not what Christianity is. See, the purpose of the rules, or the legalism, is to stop us from being worldly. But Paul says actually doing it is worldly.

There is a little aside there, but coming back to Mark 7 and Matthew 15, Jesus goes on to talk about the food laws that were actually given by God. And He basically says regarding those food laws about clean and unclean animals, “You have misunderstood them. Their purpose was to call you to a set apartness of life, not to be like the Gentile nations around you. You completely misunderstood it, because what you have taken it to mean is that what goes in you makes you unclean.” And Jesus says, “That is not what makes you unclean. What makes you unclean is never the food you eat, no matter what it is. What makes you unclean is what comes out of your heart: adulterous thoughts, hatred, bitterness, malice, anger, pride, and envy. That is what makes you unclean. Nothing that enters your mouth will ever make you unclean.” And then the Gospel writers add a comment: “By saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.” Jesus had already taught Peter and the apostles that all foods were clean long before this occasion when Peter has this vision on the roof of Simon the tanner. Peter had already heard this teaching from Jesus’ own mouth, and Jesus had shown to him the example of eating with Samaritans, Gentiles, and all kinds of other unclean people. What do you think they were eating those several days they stayed in the Samaritan village of Sychar, in the home of Samaritans? They were not eating kosher food, and there are other examples of this in the Gospels as well.

Jewish law at the time of Christ said that to even touch a container, cup, jug, plate, or vessel of any kind that a Samaritan had touched made you unclean before God. Jesus breaks that law as soon as He asks the Samaritan woman to get Him a drink of water from the well. He is breaking the law; that is why she is so astonished and says, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?” Jesus just sets the law aside, because it was not God’s law. These were not God’s laws. The food laws were, but they had misunderstood them, and Jesus declared them set aside and fulfilled. He declared all foods clean. So that is the first thing. The providential setting in which God has placed Peter should give Peter plenty of opportunity to reflect on what Jesus had already taught him and what he had seen Jesus modeling.

Second, we have a vision of an angel coming to Cornelius. This angel comes to Cornelius and tells him to send men to Joppa, that is Haifa today, to the house of Simon the tanner. The angel tells Cornelius exactly where the house is, this house of Simon the tanner by the sea in Joppa. And he tells him to bring Simon Peter back with him. We need to reflect a little bit about Cornelius. He is an extraordinary man. He is not your typical pagan; he certainly was not a typical Gentile or a typical Roman commander, a centurion in the occupying armies. He and all his family are described as devout and God fearing, and he is someone who gave generously to those in need and prayed regularly to God. He is a man who worships at the local synagogue, though as a Gentile he would never yet have been invited to eat in the home of a Jew. Nor would any Jew from the synagogue—where he worshipped and gave so generously—have ever invited him into his home. They would not visit him and he could not visit them. No Jew would have dined at his table, or he at theirs, despite his passionate commitment to the local

synagogue and to its people. It is not possible for us to imagine an easier Gentile for Peter to have his first outreach to. These are Peter's first baby steps in becoming an apostle to the Gentiles. And God, of course, is moving Peter as gently, but at the same time as firmly, as He can to change his attitude toward Gentiles. Christ is leading him gently to a place where he should have been long before and a place where he has no excuse for not being already.

Now, third, there is a vision for Peter, a vision of animals. Cornelius sends his men, and while they are on the way and in fact drawing close to the house where Peter is staying, Peter is up on the tanner's roof praying. It is probable, as I said, that he is surrounded by the skins of clean and unclean animals spread out to dry on the flat roof. But the vision explicitly shows both clean and unclean animals, and God tells him to get up, kill, and eat. Now Peter, as we see on many other occasions in the Gospels, does not immediately respond positively to the Lord's directions, or even understand the meaning. He says, "Certainly not. Nothing unclean has ever passed my lips." I am sure that was not true, after he had spent those times with Jesus in that Samaritan village and visiting various Gentiles, but that is what Peter thinks for the moment as he reflects on his life and his desire to rigorously observe the food laws. But, basically he says, "Lord, no. I am not doing what you tell me to do." That is Peter's response. "Surely not, Lord." And the Lord reminds Peter of what He had already taught him, that he is not to call anything impure or unclean that God has made clean. Jesus had already declared all foods clean. Now, to make sure that Peter understands on this occasion, this happens three times. Peter is left there wondering about the meaning. While he is wondering about the meaning the Holy Spirit speaks to him directly, and this is our next point in terms of what God does.

Downstairs the men from Cornelius arrive inquiring if Peter is at the tanner's house. And the Holy Spirit tells Peter that some men have come looking for him and says to him, "Peter, get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them." So Peter is in no doubt about what he is supposed to do. The men are there in obedience to God's commands; He sent them, and Peter is to go with them. Peter is being led by the hand every step of the way. Peter goes downstairs, and this is the next point. He gets an invitation from the Gentiles. Now notice that Cornelius is very carefully chosen. One of the men who goes is a devout, God-fearing soldier. So here is a man who already believes in the God of Israel, and Peter goes downstairs and asks them, "Why have you come?" It does not occur to him that he has a responsibility to share the Gospel with these men. But they tell him and carefully recount everything that happens, so that this Jew will know that God has sent them. And so Peter invites them in, and then he goes to the house of Cornelius, and that is our point here. He goes to the house of Cornelius, and when he gets there, Cornelius, who is very excited about what he is going to hear, has gathered a great crowd of people. He has gathered his relatives, his household, and friends, and there are a lot of soldiers there, who I am sure Cornelius has been seeking to bring to know the God of Israel for many years. He is a devout and committed man. And he is so excited when Peter arrives that he falls at Peter's feet in reverence. "You are God's messenger to me." And Peter tells him to get up, saying, "I am just a man, too," and then he goes inside.

Now think about Peter's response and his first words in response to Cornelius inviting him in. Verse 27 says, "Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people." Just think about his first words, and think about what it would have been like to listen to these as a Gentile who was gathered in that house. You have stopped your busy schedule and you have come here excited to hear a messenger from God; he is going to tell you something you need to hear. And it is difficult to imagine words that are more thoughtless in the circumstances. They are honest, but they are thoughtless. They are not exactly courteous. Peter's first words are "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him." He starts off basically saying, "I should not be here. You people are unclean, and this is the first time I have ever done anything like this." I am not sure how well you

would welcome somebody who came into your house and said that. Of course it is not against God's law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or eat with him, and again Peter had seen Jesus doing this many times. But that is how he begins. And then he says, "But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. Right up until this minute, that is how I have thought about you." That is really what he is saying: "You are impure. You are unclean. That is what I have thought. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. I wanted to, and all my life that is what I have done. But now here I am, so may I ask why you sent for me?" You see, Peter still does not get it; he does not know why he is there. What is he supposed to be doing there? Jesus repeatedly had said, "Go to the Gentiles. Tell them the Good News, make disciples of them, baptize them in the name of Christ." And Peter says, "Well, what am I doing here with all you people, where I have been very reluctant to come?" And so Cornelius tells Peter, and of course this is the second time he has heard this story, because he heard it from the soldiers and others servants who Cornelius sent. Cornelius tells the story of what had happened for the second time. I am sure he did not intend his last words to be ironic, but I think Luke intends us to read them that way. He says, "We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." What had the Lord commanded Peter to tell them? Well, the Great Commission. That was the Lord's command to Peter some considerable time before this occasion. And so Peter is here and finally he understands. "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and who do what is right." And then he starts proclaiming the Gospel. What happens, of course, is wonderful. He starts proclaiming the Gospel, and then the Holy Spirit falls on these people.

They are given the Spirit in exactly the same manner as the apostles were on the day of Pentecost, and it is very evident what the reason for that is. God wants it to be absolutely clear to the apostles, and to Peter as the leader of the apostles, that the Gentiles are being brought into the Church at exactly the same level as all the Jewish believers and the apostles themselves. They are not going to be second-class citizens in the Church. They are going to have the power of the Spirit indwelling their hearts, cleansing them, renewing them, and empowering them in exactly the same way as the apostles and the Jewish believers. That is why God does this and gives this external manifestation of the Spirit's presence, the speaking in tongues. God wants it to be absolutely clear. The same thing happens with the first Samaritan conversions. There is such a dramatic external manifestation of the Spirit's presence that this man who is there, Simon the sorcerer, wants to give the apostles money so that he can do the same thing himself. "I will pay you for the ability to do this." But with the first Samaritans and this first gathering of Gentiles here, there is this extraordinary manifestation of the Spirit's presence to make sure everybody knows that the Gentiles are being fully included in the Church. They are not to be regarded as second-class members of the Church of Jesus Christ. And it is very clear that God forgives them, accepts them through Christ, empowers them with the Holy Spirit, and indwells them with the Spirit. And notice the response that Luke draws our attention to in verse 45: "The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God." Look at the reaction of the Jewish believers. They are amazed by this even though this was exactly what Jesus promised, as well as what Jesus commanded.

Now notice Peter's response in Acts 10:47: "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?" He is quite aware that there are lots of people who would want to keep them from being baptized with water. "'They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have,' so he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. And they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days." So Peter stays in this Gentile house and he eats their food. Now you think about that, and think about Peter's problem years later in the churches of Galatia, where he stops eating with Gentiles because of the pressure of the Judaizers who have come from Jerusalem. You would not have thought Peter ever

needed to learn this lesson again after this occasion, but he did. Like you and like me, he was slow of heart to believe in and respond to God's calling.

Then notice what happens in chapter 11. You would think that now the Great Commission is on the way, and everybody is going to be very excited. Finally we have understood what Jesus wanted us to do. We have started doing it, Peter has been there, and the Holy Spirit has come on these Gentiles. What a fantastic thing! But notice what happens at the beginning of chapter 11: "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem the circumcised believers criticized him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'" That is their first response. It is not, "This is fantastic; the Gentiles believed. You have got it finally, Peter, and we get it." But they criticized him for eating with Gentiles. That is the only thing they can see. "Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened. 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' I replied, 'Surely not Lord.'" He is telling them that this was not his idea. "'Surely not, Lord. Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, then it was all pulled up to heaven again. "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter, who will bring you a message by which you and all your household will be saved.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as He had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" Peter is making it very clear that he would not have done this unless he had been constrained in all these ways by God to go. Peter could not oppose Him. Verse 18 continues, "And finally when they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'" Even the Gentiles.

Now, what is so remarkable about this, and what is so sad about this, is that when God originally called Abraham, the father of the nation, He called Abraham to be a blessing to all the nations through all the generations of Israel. That was their calling. God selected them to be His chosen people, to be the people through whom the Messiah would come to bring blessing to all the nations. But He also selected them that they might be a blessing to all the nations. That was the calling of Israel throughout its history, which it miserably failed to do, because it saw itself called to live a separate life. It was not a life separated to God in holiness, but a separate life. And that is, of course, the problem here. The fundamental point here, of course, is that as you look at this account in Acts 10-11, who is the eager evangelist here? It is God. He is the one who is at work here in a wonderful way to bring the Gospel to these Gentiles. He brings the Gospel to these Gentiles.

Did this mean the Church then started a mission to the Gentiles? No, it did not. You remember last session I said if you look further down in Acts 11, you see how the first real outreach to Gentiles began. It was those believers from Africa and Cyprus in the city of Antioch in Syria who began to reach out to Gentiles really for the first time. And God was delighted, of course, because this is what He had been wanting all the time, and lots of people became believers. And then it is from that church in Antioch that a mission goes out with Paul and Barnabas into the Gentile world. But it is an extraordinary account of the reluctance of the Church to obey the Great Commission and to go out into the world.

You remember last time I spoke about various examples of the Church being reluctant throughout Church history, and I will just run through those examples here. We looked at Israel in the Old Testament and how reluctant Jonah was to go on his mission to Nineveh. I did not mention another example, which is how missions first went to the Goths, who were a Germanic people who lived up in the southern part of what was the Soviet Union. The fourth century is the first time the Word of God was translated into a Germanic language. We still have bits and pieces of the Bible in Gothic. When I was studying, I studied the English language and literature at university, and I specialized in medieval and ancient Germanic languages, and also Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, and Gothic—because that is the first one. And the only texts we have for that are translations of the Bible.

Ulphilas was the first missionary to the Goths and, just like some of the examples I told you last time, he was taken captive by them. That is how he ended up being called as a missionary to them. And I gave the example of Aedesius and Frumentius being shipwrecked on the southern shores of the Red Sea, being taken to the court at the capital in Axum in Ethiopia, proclaiming the Gospel there, and founding the church there. I gave the example of the apostle Thomas. Patrick going to Ireland is a similar kind of example. Patrick was taken captive by the Irish and then went back to them as a missionary. I spoke about the example of the Vikings coming and burning, pillaging, murdering, raping, and taking people from the monasteries captive back to Scandinavia, and that is how the church started there. The worst example we could possibly think of is this next, which is the crusades, because that was not a mission at all. Instead of going to proclaim the Gospel to the Muslims in Palestine and elsewhere, the medieval church started a series of crusades against them to recapture the Holy City, Jerusalem, and slaughtered enormous numbers of Muslims. And you will discover today, if you ever talk to a Muslim about the Gospel, they will raise the crusades as an objection. That is what the church did. Now, there is no point in replying to a Muslim by saying, “Islam itself has always been a militant religion.” The only way it spread across the face of the world is by holy war. That is how it spread to almost all the nations that are predominantly Muslim today, by war and by seeking to impose Islam by the power of the sword. It is precisely what is happening in the Sudan today when Christians there are enslaved and murdered. That is what fundamentalist Islam is about today, spreading Islam by holy war. And there is no point in a Christian responding, “Well, that is what you do, so it is all right that we did it too.” It is absolutely inappropriate. The Christian must be prepared to confess that as sin and recognize that what the church did in the Middle Ages was dreadfully sinful and totally opposed to the commands of the Word of God.

There is no excuse for the crusades, for the inquisition, or for the appalling murders of Jews. Very often on the way on their crusades, the soldiers of Christ, as they called themselves, would stop in European cities and murder a few hundred or thousand Jews as an offering to God as they went on their way to kill some Muslims. And if you ever talk to Jewish people, you have to be prepared to acknowledge that things the church has done in the past were really wicked. Do not ever excuse them. It is one of the wonderful things about God’s Word. It is why it is so encouraging to us. We read God’s Word and it never makes excuses for the failures of people who call themselves God’s servants. It declares their sin straight out. And it is one of the reasons that we are able to identify with them. The fact that the New Testament is so straight about Peter’s weaknesses is an encouragement to you and me. The Old Testament recounts the sins of Abraham, the lies he told about his wife and his cowardice, and the sins of David, his adultery. Those things are encouraging to us, to know that God forgives the sins of His people. But the Bible is absolutely straight about them; it never excuses them. It is honest, and we must be honest about the failures of the church.

So if you are talking to a Muslim, you have got to be prepared to say, “That was wrong, and I am sorry.” It is the same with any other sins in which the church has been involved. Another appalling example

here would be slavery in the history of the United States and the nation from which I come, England. We did not send missions to Africa. We sent slave ships. It is not exactly obeying the Great Commission and being obedient to the commandments of God. You have got to be prepared to say to the Lord and to say to people, "That was wicked and wrong. I am prepared to acknowledge this as sin, confess it as sin, ask God's mercy, and apologize to you." You have to be prepared to do that. That is what Scripture calls you to do. We are never to excuse the failures of the church in the past. If you do, or if you try to, people will stop listening to you immediately. You will never be able to speak to a Muslim, Jew, or African American who wants you to address the issue of slavery and the history of the slave trade. Unless you are prepared to say that it was wrong and that we as God's people fail to obey His Word, you will not get a hearing, and you should not get a hearing.