

The Flow of Thought from Acts 10-17 & the Exegesis of Acts 10:34-43

In this lecture we will be looking at the further development of Acts from chapter nine onward, and particularly chapter ten. I will be discussing the development of the thought in three units, but I think you can see that the development of the thought of Acts—external and internal expansion, external opposition and internal tension—is continuing to be addressed in the following chapters. Let me briefly go back into chapter 9 and then move on through chapter 17.

In chapter nine it is very significant that Paul is chosen as an instrument to carry the name of Christ before Gentiles and their kings, and—please do not forget—the chosen people of Israel. Even from the title of some books you may get the impression that Paul is an apostle to the Gentiles only. But Acts teaches us that Paul pursues the basic pattern that Jesus Himself pursued: bringing the Gospel to the Jews first and then also to the Gentiles. In chapter nine, and then moving into chapter ten, the external expansion theme is continued when Peter presents the Gospel to the Gentiles—to the household of Cornelius. It is very instructive to notice how Peter defiles himself for the sake of the Gospel; he goes into the house of a tanner. Tanners were considered unclean in some ways. They were still part of the people of Israel, but they were considered unclean. They were outside of the city gates close to the water, which they needed for their trade. Thus already while Peter was fellowshiping with a Jew, he was fellowshiping with a marginal Jew. Then Peter is instructed in the vision to eat unclean animals. With every step he is defiling himself, long before he puts his foot across the doorstep into Cornelius' house, which defiles him even more. Then Peter fellowshipes with Gentiles, and in so doing completely surrenders his understanding of purity. Thus the theme of this whole section is, “What God pronounces clean, man shall not consider unclean.”

It has been observed by a student that the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter eight precedes this section, and he is a Gentile. That is why I said, “the first group of Gentiles,” but maybe I did not say it clearly enough. As Philip presents the Gospel to the Ethiopian, he is presenting it to a Gentile. In chapters nine and ten, however, Peter is preaching to the first particular, representative group of Gentiles: the God fearers. First the Gospel was brought to the Palestinian Jews, then to the Diaspora Jews. It was then brought to the proselytes who had been circumcised, and, most likely with a baptism of purification, brought into the fellowship of the people of Israel. Then the Gospel was brought to the God fearers who were not circumcised. They were privileged to attend synagogues, but while they accepted the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—through prayer, alms giving, and the like—they did not actually convert to Judaism. Later on in Acts the Gospel will be brought even to the Gentiles who had no association whatsoever with the Jewish faith. Thus Peter's presentation of the Gospel to the household of Cornelius is not the first presentation of the Gospel to a Gentile, but it is the first of many times that the Gospel is brought to a representative group of Gentiles.

Peter defiles himself, and, nearly like a film in slow motion, the presentation of the narrative slows down for chapters 10 and 11 and gives a form of presentation that I have seen in the Old Testament as well. The story is narrated once and then the person who is in the story retells the same events to another audience. And that is exactly what is happening here. Peter tells the other apostles in Jerusalem, in chapter 11, what has happened to him in the experience with Cornelius' household. Because of this slowing down of the narrative, I believe there is an emphasis here. This emphasis is repeating the theme of expansion. A very important barrier has been cut through: the barrier of reaching into the areas that the Jews view as unclean. Chapter 11 concludes with the witness of the Diaspora Jews.

Chapter 12 references Peter's indirect witness to Herod. There is much on Herod Agrippa in chapter 12, on his pride, which caused his death. God is the God of history, and not only the God of the church. I

have had to learn that and see that. While God deals with His people, the church is a central focus of His work, but He is also the Lord of rulers and authorities. Thus it is very instructive to read in chapter 12 that God is sovereign over those outside of the church, like King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great and nephew of Herod Antipas. Herod Agrippa is praised as a god in Caesarea; he does not reject that praise, and therefore dies. Josephus gives a similar account of Herod's death. We see that God is the God of rulers and the witness that goes out to the rulers is complimented by the authority that God has over them.

I had no personal experience with that particular area of God's sovereignty until communism collapsed and East Germany became a nation without government. Eric Honecker, the communist ruler, had celebrated the 40th anniversary of communist East Germany two months before, and now he was a fugitive in his own nation. He had a vicious wife, the Minister of Education, who sought to systematically eradicate any Christian element whatsoever in education. If you confessed Christ you were certain not to qualify for higher education. It was a suppressant, vicious system and its ruler was getting ready for another long period of suppressant regime and, two months later, the power structure completely crumbled as if he were dropped like a puppet. He became a fugitive whom nobody wanted to take in. He ran around from one embassy to another until finally he found (and this is true!) a home with a Christian family who worked with orphans. They took him and his wife in for two months. This communist ruler and his wife sat at the table with brilliant children who could not pursue higher education because of Mrs. Honecker's communist regime. The family prayed together while these people, stone-faced, sat there completely catatonic. This family was worshipping the God of mercy, great deeds, and sovereignty, the Ruler over all rulers. Honecker and his wife were exposed to the Gospel for two months. I do not know what happened; Honecker is dead now. He was put on trial in East Germany—then unified Germany—and they let him go because he was a sick old man. Then he went to South America and died there. His wife perhaps is still alive.

I do not know what the witness is, but this little reference to Herod Antipas and his death should not just be looked at as a small, marginal point. The witness of the Gospel goes out; Herod knows about the Gospel and he rejects it. The sovereignty of God over rulers is a very important point. Do not confine the Gospel to the church. The Gospel even cuts through those barriers of high people in high places. Rulers are needy people, the same as you and me. They need the Gospel. We need to pray for them that they may come to a point of humbleness. It is a wonderful testimony I have seen in the history of my nation, how a suppressive ruler is brought to his knees. We need to not lose heart in praying for those rulers and those nations where similar vicious suppressive regimes are currently causing havoc in our world.

In chapter 13 external growth of the church is again evidenced: Paul and Barnabas spread the Gospel. The witness goes now beyond Antioch, which is the second base besides Jerusalem. The concentric growth of the church goes from base to base. The first important center is in Jerusalem, the second in Antioch. Later another important center develops in Ephesus, and then even further out in Corinth. There is general concentric growth, but there is also growth from one city to the next and from these centers again we have the expansion of the Gospels into the hinterland. There is external growth in chapter 13. Interestingly, in verse 13:11 and following, there is a little demonic opposition to that advancement. There are not many references in Acts to opposition of the spread of the church from the invisible demonic world, but there certainly is here and elsewhere. We should remember that the church and the proclamation of the Gospel are opposed by Satan and his demons. The people did not look for a demon behind every bush, but we need to be aware of Satan's schemes. We must not overemphasize, nor underemphasize, that the spread of the Gospel may encounter this form of external opposition—not just opposition from the suppressive powers of people. One example of this sort of opposition in Acts is

the curse pronounced upon Bar-Jesus, the Jewish sorcerer; such themes are sometimes mentioned in Acts. We have already spoken of Simon the sorcerer in Acts eight. Again, chapter 13 is a section on external growth. This chapter includes Paul's speech in Pisidian Antioch to Jews and proselytes, which is a catalyst for further expansion. Acts 13:46-ff shows that Paul preaches to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. Please do not follow those interpreters of Acts who say that after a certain point Paul stops going to the Jews and then turns only to the Gentiles. I can show you that pattern of Paul going to the synagogues, the Jews, in Acts 13, 14, 17, 18, and 19, and following all the way to the end of Acts. He does not abandon the call to the Jewish people to turn to their messiah.

Acts 14:1-20 again continue the theme of external growth and the fact that God confirms, by signs and wonders, the apostles' message of grace. Let us look again briefly at the teaching of the apostles. This is the most significant aspect of signs and wonders in Acts: to confirm this apostolic teaching, witness, and ministry. The conclusion of chapter 14 is a section on internal strengthening. There is not only external growth, but also internal strengthening, which serves to advance further external growth.

There is a crisis that brews for a while and now arises very prominently in Acts 15. The crisis is severe and fundamental, and is made evident because barriers have been broken down. Had the church remained solely Jewish, the crisis would not have arisen. If they had said, "the Gospel is for Jews only. We will stay among ourselves," the problem would not have arisen. We must be aware that this expansive message will create problems. The reason is that the differences among people become visible as the message goes out and as you are to seek fellowship: *koinonia*. The message goes out, the barriers are broken down, and suddenly there is a problem. The Jewish people are saying, "If you, Gentile, are not circumcised, you cannot be saved. It is not just a matter of Jewish people being circumcised; if you are not circumcised, you cannot be saved." And circumcision, in this debate, stands for the whole for keeping the law. Thus it is not just an issue of circumcision; rather, the Jews are saying that the Gentiles must follow the law of Moses to be saved. There is a sense of magnanimity among some of the Jewish believers to say, "Okay, we will allow the Gentiles in under one condition: that they keep the entire law as we do." These are called the Judaizers, those who are inclined toward the Gospel, but there is a very serious flaw: they believe salvation is found through keeping the law. I must read to you this wonderful passage, when Peter stands up in this first council that is called to deal with this major internal tension between the different groups within their ranks. Peter stands up and addresses them in the council in Jerusalem. He says (15:7),

Brothers, you know that sometime ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the Gospel and believe. [Now comes the fruit of the slow motion presentation in Acts 10 and 11] God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as He did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? [We could add with Paul: not because the law is bad, but because we are sinful] No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we [Palestinian Jewish, law-abiding people] are saved just as they are.

We are saved by grace alone. Peter is clearly not a Judaizer, but rather he is clearly one who joins with Paul and the others in the Jerusalem Council to affirm one basic truth. When God calls us to one messianic fellowship, to one people, it is by His work alone. He calls the shots—we do not. And we must conform to that determination of God alone. And on that basis we meet and have fellowship; on that basis we congregate. We must not establish a division that obstructs that which God has established. It is so easy to say all of those things, but that is exactly what is happening. We are always seeking to

establish divisions that distinguish us from others when in fact we are all humbly receiving the goodness of God in our lives; we are beggars. As Luther said very late in his life, “That is all we are, beggars.” Thus this particular section of the apostolic council affirms—does not establish, but affirms—the Gospel truth that salvation is by grace alone. This sounds very Pauline, but I have just read to you a section from Peter’s speech. In chapters 10 and 11 of Acts he had to learn the lesson that we cannot establish conditions of salvation. God’s way of salvation is generous and open, and His grace is open to all whom He calls to Himself.

The final conclusion of this Jerusalem council is that there are a few laws which all must follow. Please do not misunderstand. The few laws, or instructions, given at the end of the apostolic council are not reversals of this question, as if they were saying, “If you want to be saved, you do have to abstain from sexual immorality and from blood, etc.” The four instructions given at the end of chapter 15 are useful and important to keep for fellowship. “Do not engage in these things lest you offend your Jewish brethren and they be turned away from fellowship with you.” There are some instructions given, but they are not reversing the instruction in the beginning, that there is salvation only by grace. This apostolic council that deals with internal tension in such a major way affirms, and very clearly re-establishes for the church, salvation is by grace alone, not by keeping the Mosaic law.

I do not know if in the practice of your churches you should imitate an apostolic council. I think that is certainly something reserved for major councils of churches where they debate issues of that kind. When you have problems in your local church, from my experience in Germany, I would advise that you do not have public meetings where big decisions are made. What we did when there were really sticky issues was say, “Let us come together and discuss these issues without any decision that has to be reached, without any pressure of coming to a conclusion in the church.” We took debate out of church meetings into times where we could sit together and say, “Okay, now we need to debate all of this and we will see what conclusion we reach.” We did not want to try to move toward a decision in the church before we could really understand each other. Now, that sounds very democratic, and obviously there are some issues that are basic truths that should not be negotiated, but this one was an issue that needed to be discussed in this way in the church, and it was wonderful. We had very peaceful times in the church where important decisions had to be reached. These times of really listening to each other without pressure were wonderful. Perhaps that is a way of problem solving in marriage, in family disputes, and in misunderstandings among friends: really listening to each other without pressure.

There is another section on internal strengthening at the end of chapter 15 and the beginning of 16. The disagreement here must have been major as we note the separation between Paul and Barnabas. Then there is a further expansion in chapter 16. Opposition rises again in 16:22. Chapter 17 moves into further expansion: into Thessalonica, Berea, and then Athens. The interesting thing here is there is a pattern in chapter 17: the town is named, there is a reference to meeting in the synagogue, and then further opposition to the disciples’ preaching is described. This brings us to chapter 18, and following, which we will look at in a little while.

Let me first make a few remarks on one major speech within this section that we have just looked at, to see how the message is continuing and how it is being presented. We will focus on Acts chapter 10, the witness among the Gentile God fearers. We have a little of this context already. I am purposefully giving you these flow-of-thought overviews and then focusing on a particular area. We will now focus on 10:34-43. Here Peter presents the Gospel to Gentiles. You now know the immediate context of this speech: the “defiling” progression of Peter. He is actually following God’s course, but in his understanding he is defiling himself. The interesting surprise we have when we look at this speech, or sermon, is that, as Peter preaches to the household of Cornelius, there are not so many references to the

Old Testament. You see, we have moved away from a particularly Jewish context and into a Gentile context. You can very roughly divide Acts into sermons that address Jews—making reference to the Old Testament—and Gentiles—making reference to nature, as in Acts 17.

Curiously, Acts 10 does not fit into either of those categories very clearly. Peter's speech in Acts 10 includes a very expanded middle section of reference to the person of Jesus Christ, and I wonder why. If you ask that question you may get an answer. Why do we not have many references to the Old Testament? Why is there not much reference to nature? The answer I would give you is this: reference to nature is only necessary where there is no understanding of the God of creation. In Athens someone needed to come and say, "You Athenians are creatures made by a mighty God." Among the Jews, the reference is not made to creation because their more pressing need is to understand how the Gospel of Jesus Christ relates to the Old Testament. These God fearers worshipped the God of creation. They believed Genesis; they knew the references to God's glorious creation. They knew Psalm 19. They were not that concerned that Jesus would be the fulfillment of the Old Testament; they needed to know Jesus Himself. So here we have basically a sermon that preaches who Jesus is, and in an amazingly detailed way. In such a detailed way, in fact, that the structure of this sermon can be, and has been, taken to be a rough outline of the Gospel of Mark.

I have argued elsewhere for the close connection between Peter and the Gospel of Mark. Papius makes clear reference to the fact that Peter gave his Gospel to Mark and Mark wrote it down. Thus Peter's speech may mark the beginning of the Gospel genre. This speech has the form, followed in the book of Mark, of beginning with John the Baptist, and then explaining Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. In this sermon we see a blueprint—not complete, but still a noticeable blueprint—of the Gospel of Mark. Acts 10:37, the anointing of Jesus with the Spirit and power at His baptism, seems to have especially influenced Mark's Gospel. Remember, the common structure of the Gospels is to begin with John the Baptist, and the main content of Peter's speech begins in 10:37 with mention of John. Acts 10:38 describes Jesus as an itinerant preacher, moving from one place to another and healing. Verses 38-39 describe the disciples as witnesses; this provides a reference to Jesus calling His disciples whom He has instructed, that they may say, "I was there, I heard, and I saw." Then 10:39b speaks of the death of Jesus, followed by His resurrection in 10:40. Verse 10:41 mentions Jesus' appearances to His disciples before the ascension, and then 10:42 speaks of Jesus as judge. Thus there is a sequence from the baptism of Jesus under John the Baptist; to His ministry, discipleship, death, and resurrection; to the appearances of the resurrected Jesus; and then to Jesus as judge of the entire world.

Peter's speech concludes with a call to believe in Jesus, but he does not say much before the Spirit of God descends; Peter's speech is interrupted by the outpouring of the Spirit. Those in Cornelius' household believe; they see that Jesus is the one sent by God. They do not have to have creation references; they do not demand Old Testament prophecy and fulfillment. There are some allusions to the Old Testament that I do not want to refer to at this point, but it seems that the most powerful part of the speech for these Gentiles is Peter's testimony to the resurrected and vindicated Jesus. They see that God has involved Himself so directly in the history of mankind that they come to faith; they turn to God. The household of Cornelius comes to Christ as a representative group of God-fearing Gentiles, joining Palestinian and Diaspora Jews. Later on the Gospel will be preached in Athens to Gentiles with no interest in the God of the Jews. So these God fearers are sort of a middle group—a very interesting group that has already been greatly instructed. Perhaps you can get a sense for the inexcusable, but understandable, sense of jealousy on the part of the Jewish people who had done good work with Cornelius. You see, the fact that they were God fearers means that they had been reached by Jewish synagogue members who had presented them with the truth of the creator God and with the truth of His work, love, and call. But what they did not have is the culmination of seeing the Gospel and the fact that

this Jesus is the one who is appointed as judge. We do not have time to look into the details of this wonderful speech of Peter, but I want you to remember that this speech is a very interesting structure of Gospel presentation. As we study how the apostolic witness went out, you can see a little of how things began here in this Gospel presentation. Now, as Cornelius and his household believe, they sit down for a fellowship meal. Having attended to the teaching of the apostles, they have a fellowship meal during which Cornelius will most likely implore Peter to tell them more about the one who is vindicated, who is their Judge, who has saved them and brought them into a reconciled relationship with God. And then Peter would tell more; all that Jesus had given him he would present to them. It is a wonderful movement of evangelism, instruction, strengthening, and encouragement in the Gospel.