

God Accepts People from Every Nation: What About You?

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[0 : 00] I grew up in a small Highland village called Gullspey, very long away from cosmopolitan Edinburgh or Glasgow. Because of my family circumstances, I only very infrequently get a chance to go home.

But whenever I do, I feel like I've never really been away. The people I grew up with might look a little bit older than we did when we were in school together, but to them I'm still a local.

And I often ask myself the question, how long do you have to live in a small Highland village before they'll accept you as one of their own?

And it seems to me the answer isn't in terms of years or even in decades, but centuries. It's only after your family line goes back for centuries in the village that they'll accept you.

But once they do accept you, it doesn't matter that you move away and only return in holiday or when you retire, you're still a local. And that sense of acceptance in your village never leaves you.

[1 : 02] Now Acts chapter 10 focuses on the question of acceptance. Does God only accept a certain type of person from a certain ethnic background?

You will know that the Book of Acts is all about how after his resurrection, Jesus sends his spirit to work through his apostles to bring the good news of his gospel to all people everywhere.

The key verses, Act 1, verse 8, where Jesus says to his apostles, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

And so the whole Book of Acts describes how the Holy Spirit works in power through the apostles to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jews, then the Samaritans and then to the nations.

The book begins on a hillside outside Jerusalem, but it ends in Caesar's palace in Rome. The risen and exalted Christ through his Holy Spirit is working through his apostles to bring the gospel to all nations.

[2 : 16] Now thus far in the Book of Acts, the apostles have been proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea and even as far as Samaria. But there remains to be crossed the greatest of all ethnic and cultural barriers, that between Jew and Gentile.

You see, the Jews and the Samaritans didn't like each other, but there was Jewish blood in the Samaritans and they shared a common heritage. But to ethnic Jews, Gentiles may as well have been another species.

For thousands of years they'd kept their distance and they'd put countless barriers between them to keep themselves pure. But the evangelistic program of the risen Jesus is that the apostles are to be witnesses to the Gentiles also.

That is Russell reminded us in his prayer they are to make disciples of all nations. Now for the disciples, all of whom were ethnically Jewish, this presented a huge problem.

How can they be faithful to the Jewish law which had erected these huge barriers between Jew and Gentile and at the same time be faithful to Jesus and his program?

[3 : 33] The idea that God could accept Gentiles wasn't just crazy, it was blasphemous to the religious Jew of the day and these early Christians, they desperately needed to learn something new.

Acts chapter 10 is God's wake-up call to the early church and to its chief apostle Peter. The key verses, it seems to me anyway, are in verses 34 and 35, when after his contact with Cornelius, Peter says, truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

In other words, God's acceptance, it reaches beyond the borders of the apostles comfort zones, it reaches to all the nations of the earth.

You don't have to be able to trace your family tree in Israel all the way back to Moses, Aaron or Abraham to be accepted by God. All you need to do is to fear him and do what is right, words which we'll explore more in a moment.

Peter and the other apostles needed to realize this, if Jesus' program of world evangelism was to be realized.

[4 : 55] The Old Testament, Tau De Bebel read in Genesis chapter 11, with all its confusion and dispersion, it had to be reversed and all the nations brought back into oneness through faith in Jesus Christ.

So this then is a chapter which focuses on the question of acceptance. And the question all of us here need to ask ourselves, whether you've been in church for 50 years or whether this is your first ever time in church is, can God accept me?

And if He can, on what basis? If God can accept anyone, then what does that mean for the way in which Christ's church works?

Well, there are four features of God's acceptance. I want us to think through on this day, when through baptism we're going to be accepting little sorely into this church, and God has accepted him into his family.

First, God accepts who we would not. Secondly, God accepts how we could not. Thirdly, God accepts what we will not.

[6 : 06] And fourthly, God accepts when we do not. I cannot stress that the question we should all be asking ourselves today is this. Can God accept even me?

And if so, on what basis? So the first question, or the first statement we want to make is this, God accepts who we would not. God accepts who we would not.

On the surface of things, there were few less likely candidates for God's acceptance than a Roman centurion called Cornelius, with whom our chapter begins. Cornelius was stationed in Caesarea, a city which headed the great, had built and gifted to Caesar Augustus.

It had become the permanent residence of the Roman procurator, and was the seat of Roman power. The Romans were the occupying power. The Pax Romana, the iron fist of Roman taxation, politics, and control.

What do these Jewish Christians have in common with the same people who had crucified the Lord Jesus?

[7 : 15] By his name Cornelius, we suspect that this man was an Italian Roman citizen, high class. What does he have in common with low class Jewish fishermen?

He was a gentile who was brought up with emperor worship, the pantheon of Roman gods, and he was the commander of what we're told is the Italian regiment, 600 regular Italian Roman soldiers.

In fact, there was no one in the whole Judea of the day who was really more different from these Christians than Cornelius. He was ethnically different. He belonged to a different social class.

He was the representative of the power of an occupying emperor. And yes, he may well have been a devout man and gave charitably and prayed, and he may well have been respected by the Jewish nation, but in the prevalent mindset of the day, he was a gentile, an unclean man, whose ethnic uncleanness meant that he could never be accepted by God as an equal.

He will never belong. And if Peter wants to be faithful to the teaching he was brought up with, rabbinic teaching, he and the early church will not accept him either.

[8 : 36] But then Peter receives a vision in verses 9 onwards of a sheet being let down with all kinds of animals, reptiles, birds. Many of these species are in the Jewish mind unclean, and a hungry Peter cannot eat them.

Even though the voice from heaven comes and says, get up, Peter, kill and eat, Peter will not disobey the laws of men. He will not eat anything unclean, no non-coacher food for Peter.

But then the voice comes, do not call anything impure. God has made clean. If God declares these meats clean, then what right do the laws of man have to treat them as unclean?

If God accepts, then so must we. To Peter, the idea of eating some of these foods was repugnant. Make him sick. He would rather die of hunger than eat non-coacher.

But God has made them clean. What's important here is that God has made them clean, and therefore they are to be treated by God's people as clean. What God calls clean and what God

accepts, then we must also.

[9 : 52] For ethnic Jews, the Gentiles are unclean. And Cornelius, the Roman centurion from Caesarea, was the uncleanest of the unclean.

But through this vision, from verse 28, God has shown Peter he should never call anything impure or unclean, that he does not.

Well, having gone to the house of Cornelius in verse 24, enjoyed his hospitality, which it was illegal for a Jew to do, listened to his man's story.

Peter comes out with the phrase in verses 34 and 35, I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism. He accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Cornelius was the last man in Palestine you might have expected that God of Israel to accept the Gentile invader, but God accepted him.

[10 : 56] Who could have expected that God would have accepted a man who had failed Jesus so dramatically and denied him three times on the night of his crucifixion, Peter himself?

But God did. Who could have expected that God would accept a man who had persecuted the Christian church to the point of extinction? Paul.

But he did. Who could have expected that God would have accepted a trader in human slavery? John Newton. But he did.

And that same John Newton went on to write the immortal, him amazing grace. What God makes clean, we dare not call unclean.

God accepts who we would not. Just think for a second in your own mind. Who or what kind of person is in your mind the least worthy or likely of God's acceptance?

[11 : 58] Who? What kind of person? Have no doubt that God can accept them. That God can make them clean. God reaches out everywhere to all nations, to every person, and offers acceptance with them.

It doesn't take centuries of belonging. It takes personal faith and divine cleansing. That's why we're determined as a Christian church to reach out beyond ethnic, social class or personality barriers, proclaiming the message of acceptance with God through Jesus Christ.

Now back in the mid-19th century, our fathers in the free church grasped this idea with enthusiasm. They planted hundreds of churches up and down our land. They spent vast amounts of money on the poor and uneducated, and they sent hundreds of missionaries to other nations bearing the news of God's love.

And we in our own day, we want to realise this afresh, to devote ourselves to the mission of the Gospel, to proclaiming God's acceptance in Christ and the oneness of Christ's people in Him. In my own church back in Glasgow City, we've got contact with some 100 or so Kenyans who have made their home as refugees in our city.

[13 : 21] They all belong to a Kenyan denomination called the Presbyterian Church of East Africa. The PCAA have 9 million members throughout Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda.

I went to visit some of their congregations a couple of years ago and I discovered that the PCAA was planted by free church missionaries back in the late 19th century.

Back then, many people here in Scotland considered Africa the dark continent and considered them subhuman, heathen. Why reach out to them?

Got enough trouble back here? But our missionaries realised what Peter did here in Acts chapter 10 that God does not show favouritism and so they went. The first batch, 10 missionaries, most of them from Glasgow, all died very soon after they arrived in Kenya.

The second batch took coffins made of Scottish pine from the borders with them on the ship out to Kenya knowing that they too would die of malaria, tribal hostility and wild animal attacks and they did.

[14 : 35] But they went and they went and a church was born, now 9 million strong, over a hundred times stronger than ours.

Babel had to be reversed. The program of a risen Saviour had to be obeyed. The Gentiles had to be reached and told of God's love in Christ. And so we say again on the basis of Acts 10, let's redouble our efforts to reach out beyond ethnic, social, class, personality boundaries proclaiming the message of acceptance with God through Jesus Christ.

God accepts who we could not. Secondly, I want us to notice from this passage that God accepts how we could not.

Why, what process does Peter come to the conclusion that he's been wrong all along and that God has made clean, he must not treat as unclean, that Gentiles must be reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and made equals of a common salvation in him.

It wasn't at this stage you'll notice in Acts 10 through deep theological reflection in the Academy or by a plenary parliament where opinions could be aired.

[15:54] It was as God's people opened themselves out to God's heart and they listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit as he spoke to them. I wanted to notice something very interesting about our passage.

The vision Cornelius had of an angel from God came about as we learned from verse 30 as he was praying. And Peter had this vision of the large sheet being let down from heaven as we learned from verses 9 and 10 as he was praying.

While both these men, one a Gentile, one a Jew had opened their hearts to the heart of God and were listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, God spoke to them and showed them something new. It was while both men were aligning themselves with God's will through prayer, God changed their minds and brought them into alignment with his loving purposes for the world.

It was in the place of prayer that change took place, that the light was turned on. They prayed and God spoke. Now what happened in the days of Acts before the conclusion of the Canon of Scripture is unrepeatable.

[17:08] To make important decisions today we need to come together in general assemblies reflecting upon the teaching of the Bible. God speaks to us through every page of the Bible, every word of the Bible and brings us to the realization that we need to change to get into line with his will.

However, the shudder does not take away from the present priority of prayer. When God's people pray, God does amazing things in the Book of Acts.

Their prayers cause earthquakes in Philippi, their prayers break open prison bars in Jerusalem, their prayers bring back the dead to life. Prayer is the strength of the Christian life.

It unleashes the power of heaven into our experience and into our world. But more even than that, prayer changes us. It brings us into alignment with the will of God and gives us the strength to overcome the barriers that we naturally erect.

It was while praying, Peter came to realize he'd been wrong and begun to accept Gentile mission. I wonder, speaking here mainly to Christians, are you struggling with acceptance, accepting others?

[18:21] Yes, even accepting yourself. By all means, spend time in God's word. But spend it on your knees in prayer.

The burden wall was broken down by the collective will of the people. But the greatest barrier in the world of the day between Jew and Gentile was broken down in prayer.

In what ways today are you devoting yourself to seeking God's heart and will in prayer? What new revelations of the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ await us when we as individual Christians, and as a church, listen to the heart of God and pray.

God accepts how we would not. Third, God accepts what we will not. God accepts what we will not. So what is the basis upon which there is acceptance with God for Cornelius, for Peter, for you and for me? Does God accept everyone, regardless of who they are or what they've done?

[19:30] Well, clearly not. In verse 43, Peter talks of our need for forgiveness of sins. These sins we commit, they're the only barrier which stand in the way of our acceptance with God.

Our ethnic barrier, clearly, is no background. Our personality type is no background. Our social class is no background. Our transgressions are. Now, every human has this intuitive sense that there's a gulf between them and God, a gulf that needs to be bridged, sins that need to be forgiven. That's why in every society in our world today, there is a sense of the religious. There has never been nor will there ever be a human society with no God consciousness.

And even in our so-called secular societies, it is only that the true God has been replaced with other gods of our own making.

Gods with the names, money, comfort, happiness, pleasure, football, whatever. All human beings know that there is a problem between themselves and God, but go about fixing the problem in all the wrong ways.

[20:41] Humans think they can earn the forgiveness of their own sins. We do it through religious ceremonies, by acts of self-denial, by adopting a religious lifestyle where forgiveness becomes not a gift of grace from God, but a reward for our religious effort.

Or human beings adopt the belief system that, well, as long as my good works outweigh my bad works, well, I'll be okay. Whatever form it takes, forgiveness is earned, doesn't come from God. But in so doing, all that happens is that people sink deeper into alienation, loneliness and guilt. How can we do anything to appease the God of infinite holiness?

What we need isn't to turn over a new leaf and become better people. What we need is complete transformation and forgiveness, and that can only come from God.

The only basis upon which we can be accepted by God is through the Gospel of His Son, Jesus Christ, that Gospel which is called in verse 36, the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

[21 : 55] Peter goes on after that verse to recount historical narrative of the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and explains its significance, the perfect life of Jesus, the sacrificial death of Jesus, as He takes upon Himself our sin and guilt, the resurrection of Jesus as He defeats death and reigns in power.

And here in this passage, Peter is reflecting upon the historical reality of these events. These things happened verse 37.

Jesus went about doing good, verse 38. We are witnesses, verse 39. God caused the risen Jesus to be seen by certain witnesses, verse 41, who were called to testify, verse 42.

The word testify here has a legal connotation. This is Peter's legal deep deposition. The apostles were witnesses of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

One wonders as to the skepticism of our own age when we are unwilling to accept the testimony of so many witnesses, not just the apostles back then, but the hundreds to whom the risen Christ appeared after His resurrection.

[23 : 10] Well, so what, I hear you say, as you look away in this interest, so what? Peter makes the point in verse 43, Forgiveness of sin does not come through our own efforts to make ourselves right with God, it comes through believing in Christ.

Believing in Christ is the vehicle through which God forgives our sins, not pilgrimages, but faith, not religion, but trust. We believe that having lived the perfect life, Jesus bore our sins upon the cross and as our substitute, and His rising from the dead is the declaration of His universal lordship.

It is simple faith in Christ through which we are forgiven and accepted by God. That faith is otherwise described in our passage as being devoted to God, to fearing God, but at its root it's faith. Cornelius had faith in this Christ, Peter had faith in this Christ, and so both found acceptance with God. God did not accept them on the basis of their good works, but on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ.

Now some people in our society today think we're really naive to believe in Christ. What Neal and Dayspring are doing today, and professing today in their faith in Jesus, has all the epistemological value of Harry Potter or the Lord of the Rings.

[24 : 35] But their faith, as that of the Christian church, is based upon the solid witness of history and upon the love and the glory of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There can be no more reasonable basis for faith than this. That's what they pray, that's what they wish for Sory and Flory, that both would grow up believing in this Christ.

God accepts us on the basis of faith in Christ, not ethnic background, not class, not social background, or personality type.

I'm not asking today whether you have faith, because everyone in Scotland today has faith, even if they deny it violently. I'm asking whether your faith is in Jesus Christ, because it's only here that there's true acceptance with God.

It's only here, through faith in Christ, God accepts us. And it's only here, through faith in Christ, we can accept others, and we can learn to accept ourselves for who God has made us to be.

[25 : 43] God accepts what we will not, but it's through faith, not by our efforts that we're saved. And then lastly, God accepts when we do not.

God accepts when we do not. As we close, I want us to focus upon what the net result of Peter's new realisation was. How Peter and the Gentile Church reconciled their new understanding of gospel mission with what they had always believed prior to this.

While we read in verse 48 that having witnessed the Holy Spirit filling these Gentile believers in Christ, Peter commands that they be baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Who God has baptised with his Holy Spirit, the church must now recognise with its baptism in water. That baptism symbolises incorporation into the family of the church, where all share equally in the outpouring of Christ's grace and blessing.

This Gentile Centurion Cornelius, together with his household, they now become equal sharers in salvation with Peter and the Jewish believers of his day.

[27 : 00] The Gentiles and the Jews become one through the gospel of Christ's peace. Babel, Genesis 11, is reversed through Christ.

Equality, fraternity, oneness become the life of the church, as through Christ and by his Spirit, God breaks down the barriers which had for millennia divided humanity into the haves and the have-nots, the clean and the unclean, the acceptable and the unacceptable.

One church, one church, one people, the true united nations of God's grace and love.

In my own church back in Glasgow City, that oneness is demonstrated every time we sit round the Lord's table as we'll be doing tonight at Communion. There will be Christians in our church tonight from every inhabited continent on the planet.

And we'll sit there together as equals, refugees and doctors, asylum seekers and accountants.

[28 : 13] We'll be eating the bread of Christ's body and drinking the wine of Christ's blood together as equals with no one person more equal than any other.

Because in Christ all the barriers which once existed between us are torn down. So much so that the Apostle Paul can later on go on to say, in Christ there's no Jew or Greek, there's no slave or free, there's no male or female, because you're all one in Christ Jesus.

That's the church into which Sory is being baptized today. A church, a family of faith that's reaching across the whole world and holding us together as one.

A wonderful family in which Christ fills us with joy, grace, love and acceptance. God accepts Cornelius on the basis of faith.

The church accepts Cornelius on the basis of faith. It doesn't take sanctuaries for Cornelius to belong. It just takes one moment of revelation and realization.

[29 : 25] My village up north in Galsby, most people will always be thought of as encumbers, especially if they're English. Not the church, not the church, because the church of Jesus Christ accepts all encumbers who will come through faith in a risen and crucified Saviour, yes, even guys from Glasgow like me.

Will you come to Jesus today in faith, believing that though we're sinners, what Christ did on the cross He did for us? You won't find real acceptance anywhere else, but here you can, in Christ and in this church, will you come?

Even as New and Day Spring are coming today, will you come? With a billion other Christians, will you put your faith in Jesus and find acceptance there?