

## When Tradition Undercuts Our Mission

Acts 10:1-23

*“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”*

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley  
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

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### Scripture Introduction:

Last week when we looked at “The Anatomy of a Conversion,” we saw that Paul’s conversion was really “A Tale of Two Disciples.” Two stories—one, a great enemy to the early Church (Paul), the other a great, but timid, disciple of the Church (Ananias). Today the scene shifts from Damascus in Syria, to Joppa, a seaside town along the Mediterranean coast of Israel. We get another “Tale of Two Disciples.” This time, one is Jesus’ handpicked leader of the Church, Simon Peter; the other is a Gentile Roman centurion, Cornelius. According to their tradition, good Jews were not supposed to have any dealings with Gentiles. They believed it made them “unclean” before God. According to their patriotism, the Jews were for sure not supposed to have any dealings with the Occupation Force, the Roman oppressors.

So the intriguing story we hear today is how an orthodox Jew, and a Roman Gentile came to consider one another “brothers.” [**Read Acts 10:1-23**]

### When Tradition Undercuts Our Mission

World History turns on brief moments. That last verse of our scripture lesson, Acts 10:23, looks innocent enough: *“Peter invited them in, and gave them lodging.”* Let me make a case today that World History stood in the balance as Simon Peter stood at the threshold, found three Gentiles at the door, and did the “unlawful” thing: he invited them in. You won’t find this “moment” noted in any textbook of world history. But if the early Christians, who were all Jews, had not found a way through much controversy, to open Christianity to the Gentiles, it would have eventually died as a small and forgotten Jewish sect of “Jesus-people.” History never would have noticed, and we would not be sitting here today.

Stephen Neill was an Anglican bishop, missionary to India, and renowned scholar. In his book *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*, he makes the point that Christianity is the only religion that is truly transcultural and global. He makes the somewhat obvious point that the Koran is written in Arabic and, by Muslim law, must remain Arabic to be authentic. The *Bhagavad Gita* is written in Sanskrit and, though our neighbors, physicians, nurses, and IT specialists may be Hindu's, it remains in the cultural package of India. Judaism is for the Jew. There is a path for converts, and I have known some, particularly by marriage. But to become a Jew, one enters a particular culture. But Christianity, from its very Source (that is, Jesus), Bishop Neill claims, was all about breaking out of the cultural bounds of Judaism, breaking down the barriers that divide, and being transformed into as many cultures and national identities as the world knows.<sup>1</sup> Same Gospel, translated into different cultures. The miracle of Pentecost was as much a vision of the future as it was a miracle of the moment where, people from many different nations and cultures heard the praises of God "*in their own native language.*" Christian missionaries would call it their "heart language." And the resurrected Christ set the agenda in His last words: "*Go and make disciples of all nations; teach them to obey all I have commanded you; and remember I am with you always...*" (Matthew 28:19-20)

So today, around the globe, one can find Jesus being worshipped in East Africa through drums and dancing and songs in Swahili; or through the aborigine peoples of Australia, the Chinese and Japanese in their own cultural and musical forms; from the hula of the South Sea Islands, to the great organs and choirs of Europe, and the hymns and praise songs of America.

This evolution we see in the early Church, beginning as a Jewish sect, to becoming a world faith that changed world History, did not happen without great controversy. Because people are people, and the Jews of Jesus' day were no exception. We hold on to the familiar, especially when we are dealing with what we hold sacred; and we often mistake the package for the gift itself. In the popular musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, you remember Tevya. His familiar world was crumbling all around him, and his cherished "Tradition" had become as shaky as a fiddler on the roof.

So the drama of the early Church unfolds, Acts 10-15: Peter obeys the heavenly vision and follows the three Gentiles up the Mediterranean coast 30 miles to Caesarea, where Cornelius and family were waiting. He tells them about Jesus the Messiah, and they immediately are given the Holy Spirit to believe, and are baptized—wife, kids, servants and all.

Meanwhile, back in Syria, the newly converted Paul and the "son of Encouragement," Barnabas,<sup>2</sup> were being sent out from the church in Antioch to share the good news of Christ with Jews and Gentiles in Asia Minor. Were it not for Paul's flash of blazing light on the road to Damascus; were it not for Peter's strange vision on that rooftop in Joppa, "*Get up and eat this non-kosher food...what I have called 'clean' you must not call 'profane,'*" it is doubtful that the disciples would ever have been

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<sup>1</sup>See John 10:16, Ephesians 2:1-20, and "the new song" of Revelation 5:9 as examples of this uniquely Christian vision.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 4:36 and Acts 13:1-3.

able to fulfill Jesus' Great Commission. But, as Jesus said of the Church, "*even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.*" Because the Holy Spirit has ways of intervening when we are stuck in a Tradition that is undercutting our Mission.

The third scene of the Holy Spirit's intervention took place in Jerusalem and is described in Acts 15, what is known as "The Jerusalem Council." Now that Gentiles were becoming believers, through the miracle of the Holy Spirit's illumination, what are we to do with all of them? Do we require that they be circumcised, according to the Abrahamic covenant? Do we require that they obey all the "kosher" dietary laws, and honor the Sabbath? In short, do these new believers in Jesus need to become Jews before they become Christians?

There are two unmistakable questions that beg to be asked from the Word of God today. The first is: **HOW ARE YOU GOING TO REACH THE UNCHURCHED?** This is an awkward term; I'm not even sure it appears in any contemporary dictionary. But it is the best we have. The "unchurched" are the "Gentiles" of our day—those who have no active relationship with any church family that can help them along their "journey of discipleship"<sup>3</sup> They are your neighbors, your friends, work associates, clients, those who provide services you need, from the bagger at the grocery store to the dry cleaner who takes care of your clothes. The second question from this text that begs to be asked is this: **WHAT "TRADITIONS" DOES YOUR CHURCH HOLD THAT MAY GET IN THE WAY OF ACCOMPLISHING THAT MISSION?"**

In the early church, those "traditions" were things like circumcision (or the "berith" as Jews call it today; it is as important to the Jew as Baptism is to Christians); dietary laws called "kosher"; Sabbath practices of what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. For Christians today, "kosher" takes the form of dress codes for worship, hand clapping (or not), the kinds of songs we sing and the instrumentation to accompany them; whether or not to use projection screens in the sanctuary; the practice of children's messages in the middle of Sunday worship.

At first blush, these things may sound as petty as what meat to eat and how to prepare it ("kosher"). But digging a little deeper, we begin to realize that these concerns arose out of a genuine concern about how we are to handle the Sacred, the Holy.

In preparing this sermon, I want you to know that I did not have a personal agenda to address these kinds of questions. But as we have moved through the Book of Acts to see how the Holy Spirit first shaped that early Church, the text for today begged the questions: How can we reach the unchurched?; and What "traditions" does your church hold that may get in the way of accomplishing that mission?

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<sup>3</sup> First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville mission statement: *With Christ as our Savior and Guide, we seek to know God's love and share it, with each other, our community and the world. We invite you to join us in this journey of discipleship!*

Let me digress long enough tell you something about three candidates for your next pastor that the Pastor Nominating Committee has now interviewed twice, and wishes to continue a relationship with. There is a list of 2<sup>nd</sup> Interview Questions that were asked all three, one of which was on Preaching. It was notable to me that all three began with this same point, in so many words. “The first thing that should be said about my preaching is that the message needs to arise out of the Bible and from the life of Christ, not from my own latest interest or opinion.”

I have no vote in this process, I am supposed to be an advisor to the committee and not overlay my influence. I am serious about wanting to honor that. So, when I heard this from all three, I kept a poker face. But I’ll tell you, it was all I could do not to stand up and say, “Hallelujah!” Because that perspective on the Word of God in preaching and worship presumes that neither the people nor the pastor know what the church needs. Members of a congregation have their opinions, preferences, hopes, and dreams, and so does the pastor. But at the end of the day, they are subjective, and they are just ours. Only God knows what the church needs. And if this church is to carry its greatness into the future, it will do so only when a listening, praying pastor teams up with a listening, praying Session to lead the congregation into what God is calling you to be and do. They must march to the beat of a different drummer,<sup>4</sup> and not be blown off course by the changing winds of “what makes a successful church.” The choir’s anthem from Psalm 119:105 was right on target, “*Thy word, O God, is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*”

Now the question is: when you ask your unchurched neighbors or friends or work associates to come with you to church...what will they find? I have been with you for only eight months, but already I know they will find a beautiful sanctuary; a wonderful choir, director, and organist; they will find friendly people to welcome them, and maybe even to invite them to lunch, or to one of our fellowship luncheons after church. They will get a call from the pastor, and hear about our children’s programs, our youth programs, and our service to the poor. If they have had a positive church experience in the past, all of these assets may very well draw them to re-engage their spiritual journey through our church, because the sub-culture of Church is familiar to them.

But due to the increasing secularization of culture, even in the Bible belt, and due to changing ways information is communicated in this digital age, most of your unchurched friends will be mystified by certain things that you take for granted and love. For example, your unchurched friends may come to worship the first time to hear their children sing in the children’s choir. They are so proud when their children stand up there and bravely sing praises to God at the top of their lungs. They finish, and mom and dad are about to clap, because that is what everyone does in a school assembly, when children need to be affirmed. But they stop themselves because they witness the oddest thing. The people don’t clap for their kids! “Oh, is that offensive to God?” To use Simon Peter’s language, is it “unclean” to clap in church when children have brought us joy and given the best offering to God that they could?

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<sup>4</sup> Thank you Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

Then it comes time for the scripture readings, and your unchurched friends pick up the fact that Christians come to know God better from the Bible. The pastor might say, “Let’s all turn to the Book of Acts, chapter 10, verses one through twenty-three. All of a sudden, your friend is embarrassed; he hasn’t a clue where the Book of Acts is. Besides the print is so small, it makes it hard to read, not to mention how one tells between the big chapter numbers and the little verse numbers.

Then we sing a hymn. There it is, as big as life, Hymn # 426 “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak.” You help your friend find his place; you point out the first verse, and sing a little louder so he might catch the tune. He’s doing pretty well, but then you come to verse two, and he can’t quite figure out how that works, or there are a couple of musical dots, and he doesn’t know you’re going back to sing the same verse again. And so it goes. They’re glad to have been with you and experienced your reality, but they may not choose to come back. It’s a foreign sub-culture.

Now, I think we all know that they are not rejecting Christ or the Gospel or the truth that they might find in the Bible. Do you see what I’m saying? The unchurched are not uninterested in Christ and making a personal connection with God; I think most of the unchurched truly want that and know they need a “Power greater than themselves.”<sup>5</sup> But it is the subculture of the Church that is uninteresting. So the same question comes up, in a little different language than it did at the Jerusalem Council long ago (Acts 15): “Do I have to become part of the traditional church subculture to be a Christian?”

Now, let me close with a the story of the agony my former church went through as we tried to make our worship service more user-friendly by putting projection screens up in the beautiful and traditional sanctuary. I’m sure there are many here, as there are in other congregations, who have a proud tradition of worship in a beautiful holy space like this, who may be muttering under their breath, “Over my dead body.” Well, at least this is what some of my people back then were saying.

But finally the decision was made, the Session voted to make the investment. Let me say right away, it only passed because they were “invisible” screens that did not mar the beauty of the sanctuary. They were projected on a blank white wall, so they disappeared when not being used. (There are cosmetic ways to do the same in most sanctuaries.) Also, the people we had working on what would go on those screens were given guidelines, so that the words to scripture and the verses of hymns were in graphics and backgrounds that were simple and tasteful, not something that looked like an advertising billboard.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Big Book* of Alcoholics Anonymous, Step Two.

When opening day came, we had three surprises. The first was how loud the hymn singing sounded. It filled the sanctuary. Why? Well, because most of the congregation got their noses out of the hymnals, and were looking up at the easy-to-follow words on the screen above. There were some, especially choir members, who liked to sing the parts, and so they could still use the hymnals help the rest of us along with our singing. And the sound was so different; it was a delightful surprise.

The second surprise came over the course of several weeks, when the delight with the screens came not from the young people, but from the older people. Why? Because the older members did not have to pick up those heavy hymnals with arthritic hands and hold them for all four verses. Plus, we were able to bring back some of the old favorite hymns that never made it into “Big Blue,” but now could be easily typed into the projection capability when the sermon theme called for it. And newer praise songs, not in Big Blue, but very simple and singable could also be incorporated into worship. It was a “win” for everyone.

The third surprise was that people actually began remembering the main points of the sermon, and the scriptures they were connected to. As in every other area of information sharing in our culture today, the auditory was reinforced by the visual.

Well, end of case study. But this does not even mention the user friendliness for unchurched people being able to have a church experience where they could participate fully without a long learning curve. Can we, in this or in different ways, draw a circle to bring the unchurched *in*, instead of letting Tradition draw a circle that shuts them *out*?

There has been a great spirit of unity and confidence here in recent months. Some may well ask, why inject into this good spirit something so de-stabilizing and alienating as talking about something about which many will be rolling their eyes? The answer is pretty simple: When your next pastor comes, he or she will have one primary challenge to address. How can this church reach the *unchurched*? Another way it may be asked, “How can this church grow?” or “How is the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville going to create an open and attractive door to a new generation of believers and seekers?”

In working with the Session to address this question honestly, your new pastor will undoubtedly explore certain creative ways that will sound hair-brained or threatening; some may simply make you sad that the church you once knew will need to be transformed in certain ways to reach that new generation for Christ. When that day comes, I want you to remember that it is the pastor’s sacred calling to do exactly this, so that your church may thrive and grow into the future.

*“Go and make disciples of all people, teaching them to obey all I have commanded you. And then, remember this: I will be with always; even to the close of the age!”* Alleluia! Amen.