

Clean Sheet
2020 Vision #3
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[Acts 10](#)

Like many people in America, I love to drink coffee. It is invigorating, it makes sweet things taste better, and I associate the many flavors of coffee with specific memories – places I've lived, people I've known, and so on. Maybe you do the same! But, because I don't add milk or sugar to my coffee, the first sip often tastes bitter. At home, there's no problem here – though I like grinding and using beans from my favorite coffee shops, I water the coffee a lot more than they do, both stretching my supply and reducing the bitterness. When getting coffee directly from the café, however, that bitterness shows on my face from the very first sip. You know the face – and have probably made it yourself a time or two. Weirdly, the bitterness, the disgust at the first sip no longer turns me away from the coffee. I know it gets better, that as long as I keep drinking, and don't let that first sip dissuade me, I won't experience the shock of disgust again. But if I set it down for too long, if I let it cool too much – then, the next sip is bitter again.

On the one hand, it's really strange that we drink this bitter beverage as much as we do. Why keep drinking something that causes us to curl our lips in disgust? Why do we even start to crave the taste after not drinking it for a while? On the other hand, we know that coffee wakes us up. Our minds spin with possibilities. We can focus on tasks, working with alacrity, with dexterity, with attention we wouldn't have otherwise had. Y'know, when coffee was first introduced in Europe in the 17th Century, the coffee salons – cafés – that popped up all over were known for being the hotbeds of revolution. Café dwellers mixed across society – they were one place that nobles and commoners might mix, since there was no tradition limiting access. Scholars of the enlightenment extolled the virtues of coffee, while merchants bought and sold so much of the stuff that even humble

fisherfolk could afford to drink it, at least on occasion. Cafés provided the vision, the fuel, and the proof of societal change, that people from all walks of life could live and work together in “Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.”

But a millennium and a half before, another vision of revolution led to similar understanding. The story of the Apostle Peter and Cornelius the Centurion is not read very often in worship anymore – it’s a bit longer than we tend to like to read – but it offers us a vision of how God led the early church to be more inclusive. Peter, you’ll recall, was tasked with being the “rock on which Christ will build the church.”¹ At first, the church consisted of mostly Jewish people, with occasional gentiles who converted to Judaism before being baptized into the church. But there was a growing desire from gentiles – that is, from non-Jews – to join the Jesus movement without becoming Jewish first. One of those was Cornelius the Centurion, an officer of the Roman Army with charge of around 100 people. This man was about as gentile as you could get – not only non-Jewish, but also a Roman, one of the oppressors of the Jewish people. And yet, this Centurion’s entire household was known as a worshipper of the God of the Jews. “He gave generously to those in need among the Jewish people and prayed to God constantly,”² the Bible tells us. And God heard his prayers, before he had converted, before anything had changed – God heard Cornelius, and sent a vision to him, naming Peter and setting up a meeting between them.

Meanwhile, Peter was feeling a twinge of hunger. He knelt on a rooftop to pray, when he had a vision. In it, a great sheet of linen is lowered to the earth, carrying “all kinds” of animals, reptiles, and birds. A voice tells the hungry Peter, “Get up, kill and eat!” Peter replies, with a sense of disgust, “Absolutely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” You can picture Peter’s mouth curling with the same shape as when you first take a sip of coffee. The voice calls back to Peter, “Never consider unclean what God has made pure.” And, like drinking coffee gets you used to drinking more coffee, the same conversation repeats

¹ Matthew 16:18

² Acts 10:2

three times. Clearly, God is trying to tell Peter something important, something that is difficult for Peter to swallow – and just as clearly, it is important that Peter listen. As the story continues, we see Peter called to visit the Centurion, preach a sermon about Jesus’ death and resurrection being salvation for all, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius, his household, and on all gathered there to hear what this guy Peter had to say.

The connection between the vision of clean and unclean food and the inclusion of gentiles into the church is a weird one for us today. After all, the church today is not just primarily Gentile – it’s overwhelmingly so. Likewise, clean and unclean foods isn’t something we’re terribly bothered by as a whole, though there are those who must keep track of ingredients in food for their health, there’s no religious distinction made. But for the early Jewish followers of Jesus, this was an incredibly important moment. After all, the book of Leviticus says, “I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from all other peoples. So you must separate between clean and unclean animals, and between clean and unclean birds... I have separated you from all other peoples to be my own.”³ The separation of clean and unclean food animals was specifically linked with the separation of the Jewish people from the gentiles. (Chance 2007, 170) Now, there’s a lot of complications around how this separation was put into practice by the Jewish people – some tried as best they could to physically separate themselves from any Gentiles, while others interpreted it as being about marriage – so long as they didn’t marry a Gentile, they were fine. Peter seems to have interpreted this as meaning that he was forbidden from “associating or visiting” with Gentiles.⁴

When Peter gets a chance to connect the dots of the visions to Cornelius and to himself, he takes another great leap. He says, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships [God] and does what is right is acceptable to [God.] This is the message of peace [God] sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the Good News through

³ Leviticus 20:24b-25a, 26b

⁴ Acts 10:28

Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all!”⁵ In the book of Acts, this is the beginning of the acceptance of Gentiles into the church without first requiring conversion to Judaism. It’s a time of a clean sheet – a fresh start, without division, without distinction between “clean and unclean”.

I know it is important to note something else here: this important change doesn’t initially last for Peter. Paul writes, in his letter to the Galatians, that Peter, “had been eating with the Gentiles [in Antioch] before certain people came from James. But when they came, he began to back out and separate himself, because he was afraid of the people who promoted [separation].”⁶ Paul confronts Peter directly in that letter, and when Acts picks up the story again, Peter has turned back again to the view of inclusion. “[God] made no distinction between us and them, but purified their deepest thoughts and desires through faith...We believe that we and they are saved in the same way, by the grace of the Lord Jesus.”⁷ After a great deal of deliberation – and hearing from Paul and Barnabas – the leaders of the early church wrote a letter to the church proclaiming that Gentiles and Jews would have no restrictions placed on them, except needing to refuse “food offered to idols, blood, the meat of strangled animals, and sexual immorality.”⁸ This set up the church to continue to expand, including people from all over the known world.

But, just like Peter did, the church has again and again forgotten this lesson, and needed to relearn it. When Christians fought in the Crusades, they drew separation between themselves and those they labeled as “infidel” in the Holy Land. But when St. Francis of Assisi crossed the battle lines of the 5th Crusade and met with Sultan Malek al-Kamil, the two of them established that the other was faithful to God in their own way, creating the opportunity for at least a temporary peace. When Europeans separated themselves from non-Europeans, whether through slavery and segregation in the US, or Apartheid in South Africa, or in many of the other ways that racism has taken hold in the church, it is taking decades to

⁵ Acts 10:34-36

⁶ Galatians 2:12

⁷ Acts 15:9, 11

⁸ Acts 15:29

acknowledge where the church was at fault and finding ways that we can once again be together in worshipping God.

The vision of the clean sheet provided for the mixing of peoples who had once been separated. Just like the cafés in Europe centuries later, this mixing led to revolutionary change. People who had once held each other at a distance now could listen to each other, learn from each other, and be included together in equality. We find ourselves today in need of another clean sheet, a chance to connect with each other across our differences. Though we may forget, and some may recoil with a taste of bitterness, like the first sip of coffee after a long time away, we know that God calls us to continue on sweetening the church through loving each other, caring for each other, and joining together for the benefit of all. Amen.

Works Cited

Chance, J. Bradley. *Acts*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007.