

O Church Arise: Through the Book of Acts

A Church Without Walls (Acts 9:32-11:18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on May 31, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Mahatma Gandhi shares in his autobiography that in the days when he was a student in England, he read the four Gospels. He was greatly impressed by Christ and seriously considered converting to Christianity. It seems to offer a real solution to the pernicious caste system engrained in Indian society, which divided people up into different classes. Those born in a higher caste, a higher social strata, were assigned greater dignity and worth than those of a lower caste. Gandhi despised this system, and he saw hope in the gospel.
 - ▶ But he describes one Sunday when he tried to attend a church service. But upon entering the sanctuary, he was stopped by ushers who refused him a seat suggesting that he go worship with his own people. He left and never returned. He thought to himself, *“If Christians have caste differences also, then I might as well remain a Hindu.”*

- ❖ What a pity! Imagine if his initial encounter with the church had gone drastically different. **Imagine what kind of impact Gandhi would’ve made for the gospel if only he had encountered a church without walls.** A church that loved without distinction based on where you’re from or what you look like. A church that accepted all in Christ both Jew and Gentile.
 - ▶ But sadly he stumbled across a church that perpetuated its own form of a caste system. A church that put up walls to divide people. It failed to offer a hopeful alternative to his culture’s system of segregation. He saw more or less of the same.

- ❖ Of course this begs the question: *What would he encounter if he had visited our church? **Would he get a similar impression that we have our own form of a caste system? Would he be similarly confronted by walls that sinfully segregate and divide?***
 - ▶ **There’s a popular saying about how 11:00am Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America.** And I realize that some people might look at what’s going on in here and accuse a Chinese Church like ours of contributing to that problem.

- ❖ But as I’ve explained before, this criticism is too simplistic. It glosses over the diversity that’s in a church like ours by only considering ethnicity. **It would be accurate to say that we’re not multiethnic but we are multicultural. There is a lot of cultural diversity represented here** between 1st and 2nd generation Chinese or between Taiwanese, Cantonese, and Mainlanders. That we can one church in spite of our differences is a tribute to the unifying power of the Gospel. **There is gospel-produced unity among diversity even in a church like ours.**
 - ▶ We also have to remind ourselves (and others) of our church’s missional strategy to contextualize the gospel into the heart language of the immigrant Chinese in our city. So yes, there’s an overwhelming majority of Chinese here in this church, but that could be explained by the fact that we’re trying to reach an overwhelming population of immigrant Chinese who don’t know Jesus yet.
 - But having said all that, I do believe that – for those of us who have long been a part of immigrant churches – we can’t read this section of Acts and not feel a degree of discomfort.

- ❖ This passage centers on the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, a full-blooded Gentile. But in many ways, it's about Peter's conversion. **Not his conversion to Christ but his conversion from nationalism, from a strongly ethnocentric attitude to an open posture and embrace of all those who are in Christ with no distinction to where they're from or what they look like.**
 - ▶ So even though I don't think we should be discomforted by this passage simply because we have so many Chinese in this church, **I do think we should be discomforted if we are directly or (more likely) indirectly putting up walls, making wrongful distinctions, and making people feel unwelcome here.**
- ❖ So I've got a lot more to say about how this passage challenges us as an English congregation of a traditionally immigrant church, but let's get into this passage. Again we're doing a flyover as we go through the book of Acts, so we're not going to hit all the details. As we consider this passage I want us to do three things. 1) Let's inspect those pernicious walls that get put up to divide people even in the church. 2) We'll consider how the gospel tears down those very walls. 3) We'll talk about how to keep those walls down in the life of the church.

Inspecting those Walls that Divide

- ❖ Let's begin by looking at those walls that divide. We'll focus first on the walls that divided Jews and Gentiles even in the early years of the church. Remember, how significant this moment was in church history. Up to this point in Acts, Christianity was predominately a Jewish movement. It was perceived as an offshoot of Judaism.
- ❖ Only recently since chapter 8 do we see the gospel crossing significant cultural borders when Philip preaches in Samaria. Now the Bible makes it clear that Jews and Samaritans clearly didn't get along, but **Samaritans were not technically Gentiles.**
 - ▶ Though a large gulf of cultural and theological differences existed between them, at least there was some similarity. Samaritans were descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel after all. And though they rejected most of the OT, they still revered the Torah. So like any good Jew, a good Samaritan observed Sabbath, dietary laws, and other such things. **Samaritans were still hated, but they weren't completely foreign.**
- ❖ **Gentiles, on the other hand, were total strangers.** They were complete foreigners. They were pagans. Pantheistic. Idolatrous. Immoral. Unclean. What they ate, how they lived, how they worshiped – it was all considered unholy.
 - ▶ And if you still haven't connected the dots, if you're not a Jew, you too are a Gentile. The Greek for *Gentile* is the word *ethne*. Which is also commonly translated as *the nations*. The peoples of all the nations beyond Israel were Gentiles.
- ❖ **Some of you are thinking this idea of categorizing everyone different than you with the label *Gentile* seems pretty racist, pretty bigoted.** Why would the Bible endorse this? Why would God allow this? Some of you have a tough time believing the Bible exactly because of stuff like this.

- ❖ **Here's where we have to make that necessary distinction between what the infallible Bible teaches and how it's interpreted and applied by fallible people.** Yes, God chose one family out of all the families of the earth. He made a covenant with one people out of all peoples. He elected one nation and set them apart from all nations. From all the *ethne*, all the Gentiles.
 - ▶ **But we can confidently say that the Bible never endorses having an exclusionary stance towards the Gentiles.** Just think back to Genesis 12 where God initially chooses Abraham the father of Israel. He tells Abraham that I'm going to bless you and your family that you might be a blessing to all families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). So God's people are chosen, set apart, and blessed that they might be a blessing.

- ❖ **There's nothing inherently exclusionary about God choosing one people among all peoples if his ultimate goal is to serve the good of all peoples.** But what happens is that sin can corrupt a chosen people and lead them to misinterpret and misapply their election and turn it into grounds for boasting and withholding God's blessing from others.
 - ▶ In NT times, Gentiles were called dogs (cf. Mk. 7:27). No pious Jew would enter the house of a Gentile or open his house to one. Peter makes mention of this social norm in chapter 10:28. To Cornelius and his household, he says, "*You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with to visit anyone of another nation*".
 - Translating that word as "unlawful" (*athemitos*) might lead to confusion. It wasn't actually against the Law (*nomos*) as in the OT Law. It was against custom (*themitos*). Against tradition. It was a social taboo. Again, my point is that the OT itself does not prohibit interaction between Jew and Gentile.

- ❖ **So where did this social taboo come from?** A lot probably stemmed from the dietary laws that Jews fastidiously observed. The same laws that seemingly conflict with God's threefold command to Peter in the vision he received.
 - ▶ God's chosen people were told in Leviticus 11 which foods were unclean. Which foods, if you ingest, will make you ceremonially unclean and barred from the temple. From worshiping God and seeking atonement. And all the creatures shown to Peter in the vision were unclean, which is why he was aghast at the suggestion of eating them.

- ❖ Modern commentators have tried to identify some sort of health rationale for these dietary laws. But in the end, the Bible doesn't suggest these laws for given for health reasons but moral reasons. **The point of all these ceremonial laws declaring this or that thing clean or unclean is to get across the message that God is holy and you are not.** It instills a sense of God's holiness and your sinfulness, which is a barrier in fellowship.
 - ▶ *So why did God choose a people and set them apart with strict dietary rules and other such ceremonial laws?* To send a message to Israel and all the nations, that fellowship with God is only possible if you are clean. Internally, morally clean. **These external things and actions that make you ceremonially unclean are illustrative of a deeper problem, your moral uncleanness.**

- ❖ But unfortunately Israel misinterpreted and misapplied this in three ways. **First, they confused external and internal holiness.** They thought it was the same thing. So by merely eating the right foods and avoiding the wrong ones, by maintaining an external holiness, they assumed an internal holiness (cf. Mk. 7:15-23).
- ❖ Now because they failed to see this, it contributed to their second mistake. **The Jews saw their fellowship with God as guaranteed irrespective of their obedience.** Their confidence rested in their birthright. They were God's people no matter how bad they were. And no matter how good a Gentile was, he was still a dog. So even a God-fearer like Cornelius – who was likely more pious than many Jews – he was still treated as an outsider simply because he was born of the wrong lineage, in the wrong culture.
- ❖ **And ultimately the problem is that Israel assumed they were chosen and set apart because they were better than other nations.** They figured it was because they were morally superior. They failed to understand the grace of God by which he sets his electing love on a people not because they're lovely or lovable. But because he's free to show mercy to whom he wills to show mercy (Rom. 9:15; see Deut. 7:7-8). It's all grace.
 - ▶ The doctrine of divine election is never intended to compliment the chosen but rather to humble them in realizing that the choice was all God's grace. It was *not* a validation of your worthiness. When you truly get that, it compels you on a mission to graciously extend and share the undeserved blessings you received. **God's sovereign choosing of a people is never a ground for boasting but a call to mission, a call to serve.**
- ❖ But God's chosen people in the OT twisted the doctrine of election to compliment themselves and to justify an exclusionary stance towards others not like them. To justify the walls they constructed. And sadly God's chosen people in the NT (the Church) can be guilty of the same.
 - ▶ The walls we put up may have nothing to do with dietary restrictions. **But they might have something to do with your level of education or economic status.** Would believers among us without a college degree, with only a high school diploma, feel fully at home among a highly educated congregation like ours? Would a disciple of Jesus who makes an hourly wage instead of an annual salary feel fully included in a church made up largely of professionals?
 - **Or what about walls put up related to one's political ideology or affiliation?** In some churches you'd be hard pressed to discern a difference between their message and the Republican party's platform. While other churches and their pulpits are just another soapbox for the Democrat's platform. Do you have to vote like us to truly be a part of us?
- ❖ And come to think of it, maybe our walls do relate to food. **When we put up walls connected to one's ethnicity or culture, then food is totally relevant.** If a non-Asian brings a dish to your small group potluck that's not familiar to an Asian palate, that's unique to their culture, if no one really touches it, what message does that send? **Do you have to be Chinese or Asian American to experience true gospel community in our congregation?**

- ❖ Before you too quickly answer, put yourself in the shoes of someone *not* of the majority among us. Try to imagine a small group evening or a Sunday morning from their perspective.
 - ▶ **Church, until these kinds of walls are repented of and torn down, the church – our church! – will remain segregated by human prejudice and preference.** That is *not* the kind of people, the kind of church, Jesus came to redeem and rule as King.

Tearing Down Those Walls with the Gospel

- ❖ This leads to our second point. **Let's continue in our story to see how the gospel of Jesus has the power to tear down these walls.** Let's go back to the end of chapter 9. Most of the chapter focused on Saul's conversion and appointment as an apostle to the Gentiles. In v32, the attention shifts back to Peter who really is the one who inaugurates the mission to the Gentiles.
 - ▶ In vv32-43, Peter travels beyond Jerusalem to various coastal cities in Judea. He ends up in Lydda where he meet Aeneas, a paralytic whose been bedridden for eight years. In Jesus' name, Peter declares Aeneas healed and tells him to make his bed. Fold up the mat you've been laying on for eight years. You won't be needing it anymore.
- ❖ And then he's called to a nearby town called Joppa where he's brought before a disciple, a dearly-loved sister named Tabitha. She recently died and yet her friends believe somehow, in some way, Peter can help. And help he does! He puts everyone out of the room, prays before Tabitha's dead corpse, and then says, "Tabitha, arise." And she's resurrected.
 - ▶ We won't spend much time on these verses. All I want to say how struck by the similarities between Peter's two miracles and Jesus'. Remember when Jesus healed the paralytic lowered through the roof by four friends? Remember what he said to him? "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home." (Mk. 2:11) Sound familiar?
- ❖ And remember when Jesus raised up Jairus' daughter who died? Remember what he said to her? After putting everyone out, except Peter, John, and James, he said to her, "*Talitha cumi.*" (Mk. 5:41) Which means, "Little girl, arise."
 - ▶ If Peter was speaking in Aramaic (like Jesus), he would've said in v40, "*Tabitha cumi.*" That's more than a coincidence. **Peter needs the assurance (we need the assurance) that he's on the right path. That his ministry is truly an extension Jesus'.** Especially since it's going in a brand new direction. He's breaking new ground.
- ❖ **If you recall, Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom (Mt. 16:19), and now he's being sent to Caesarea to use those keys to open up the kingdom to the Gentiles.** Caesarea was the seat of Roman government in Judea. So full-on Gentile territory. Now we're told Cornelius is a centurion, a commander of a hundred men. He company was part of the Italian Cohort, which consisted of 600 soldiers under the command of six centurions.
 - ▶ It says in v2 that he and his household were God-fearers. Gentiles who worshipped Yahweh, who practiced Jewish piety, and attended synagogue. But God-fearers aren't Jews. They're still Gentile dogs. God-fearing dogs but dogs nonetheless.

- ❖ Now after Peter experiences his roof top vision, and the voice from heaven telling him, “*What God has made clean, do not call common.*” (10:15) After hearing that message three times over, Peter is told by the Holy Spirit that three men sent from Cornelius are downstairs, “*Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them.*” (10:20)
 - ▶ Now in my ESV it says to go “without hesitation” but my footnotes say that phrase could also mean “without distinction”. In fact, in chapter 11:12, a very similar expression is found and there it’s translated as “making no distinction”. **So the point is that Peter is no longer to make distinctions between clean and unclean, whether regarding food or people** (cf. 10:28).
 - Apparently Peter’s a fast learner. Because we see him in v23 putting this to practice. He invites these three Gentiles into Simon’s home to be their guest. That’s no small thing. That’s a big step.

- ❖ Now when Peter arrives at Cornelius’ house the next day, we read in v25, “²⁵*When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshiped him. ²⁶But Peter lifted him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am a man.”*”
 - ▶ Here we see a repudiation of two extreme views about mankind. **Here Peter rejects the tendency to either deify man or denigrate him.** Listen to John Stott, “*Peter refused both to be treated by Cornelius as if he were a god, and to treat Cornelius as if he were a dog.*”¹
 - Cornelius explains the vision he received. And in v34, Peter sees what’s happening and says, “*Truly I understand that God shows no partiality*”.

- ❖ The point there is that God’s not partial. **He doesn't make the kind of distinctions where you treat people differently by eternal criteria like gender, ethnicity, nationality, or class.** But here's where we have to be very careful with our language. In saying that God doesn't show partiality or doesn't make distinctions, we're not making an absolute claim.
 - ▶ **God’s impartiality does *not* mean he makes no distinctions between those who do right versus those who do wrong.** Just look at v35. “*but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*”
 - So God *is* partial to those who fear him and do what is right. But Peter’s point is that God’s favor is not limited to Israelites but open to anyone in every nation. **In other words, God's not against making moral distinctions. But he is against making ethnic and cultural distinctions.**

- ❖ It's important to clarify that Peter is not suggesting, by simply doing what's right, Cornelius was accepted by God in the sense of being justified (declared righteous) even before hearing the gospel and putting conscious faith in Christ. If that were so, then there would've been no need for Peter to come.

¹ John Stott, *Acts (The Bible Speaks Today)*, 189.

- ❖ **The fact is Cornelius is lost without hearing and believing the gospel.** So Peter preaches in vv36-43 a gospel summary of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and second coming to judge the living and dead. He concludes in v43, "*To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*"
 - ▶ So notice right there. When it comes to receiving forgiveness of sins and entrance into the kingdom, the true Church, God still makes a distinction. **There's still a distinction between those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus versus those who remain in their sins and reject Jesus.**

- ❖ The Bible teaches that there's only one race, the human race. **So all mankind can trace their lineage back to one man named Adam.** So we're all equal in that sense, and we're all equally sinners sharing in Adam's Sin. Jews and Gentiles are equally condemned under the Law. **But that's why God sent another man, a second Adam, to succeed where the first failed.** This man Christ Jesus lived the life we should've lived, died the death we deserved to die, and now the only hope for all mankind is to cling to this new Adam by faith and live our lives in him.
 - ▶ **This is why Christianity is at the same time both strictly exclusive and radically inclusive.** To be a member of the redeemed people of God, you have to go to the one and only Savior Christ Jesus. That's what makes Christianity strictly exclusive. But it's radically inclusive in that the whole world is welcomed to come to Jesus. And you don't have to reject your own nationality or ethnicity or culture to join his Church.

- ❖ **Cornelius didn't have to reject his Gentile culture and adopt Jewish culture before he could receive Christ and be received by the church.** And God reinforces that point in v44 when the Holy Spirit falls down on all who heard and believed. And when they begin to speak in tongues, it proves that their gift of the Spirit is the same Spirit given at Pentecost in Acts 2.
 - ▶ Peter draws the obvious conclusion. Look at v47. "*Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?*" Or as Stott puts it, "**How could the sign be denied to those who had already received the reality signified?**"² Baptism is more than a private ceremony that signifies your cleansing of sin. It's a corporate ceremony that communicates your full inclusion into the Church as a full-fledged member. That's why baptism and church membership are connected.

- ❖ Later on in chapter 11:17, Peter defends his decision to baptize Cornelius and his household because to do otherwise would be to "*stand in God's way*". God is tearing down all the walls that once kept Gentiles out of the covenant community of God. And if this is his doing then no one should stand in his way or try to put up walls to impede the progress of his mission.

Keeping Those Walls Down in the Life of the Church

- ❖ That leads to our final point about keeping those walls down in the life of the church. **We have to be vigilant not to allow any walls to creep up even if unintentionally.** Let me ask you a question. Be honest with yourself.

² Ibid., 192.

- ❖ ***Are there any walls in your own heart that impede you from enjoying fellowship with those who don't share your language, culture, ideology, or background?*** We mustn't assume we have no prejudices in our hearts. They might just be unspoken or even unconscious. But if they're there, they're walls. Whether it's feelings of superiority OR fear of the unknown OR it's just straight-up racism, repent of these attitudes. Pray for forgiveness and ask God to soften your heart and grant you a compassion for all peoples made in his image.
 - ▶ We love God. We want to follow God. We want to do his will. But then how is it possible for us to “stand in God's way” and not bat an eye? God is on a mission to make disciples of all nations! He has redeemed for himself a church full of diversity. Are we on the same page?

- ❖ **People have asked if I want this to be a multi-ethnic church. *Is that my vision?*** I usually tell them that I just want this church to be faithful to the Gospel and the Great Commission. Multi-ethnicity is not an absolute for me. **I think a church or a congregation could justify being mono-ethnic.** Our Mandarin and Cantonese congregations are obviously mono-ethnic.
 - ▶ I think that's fine as long as the congregation is 100% committed to reaching an unchurched people group with a genuine language barrier. Think of them more as “missional congregations” trying to reach the ever-growing, immigrant Chinese community in Houston.
 - And the reality is that every immigrant church will eventually start up an English ministry. Why? Because their 2nd-generation kids eventually need what their 1st-generation parents needed – ministry conducted in their heart language. And since the English side is made up predominately of the Chinese side's children, they too will start off very mono-ethnic.

- ❖ But now 40 years have gone by for HCC. Our English congregation has grown and morphed over the years. Very few have parents on the Chinese side. There's no language barrier (or much of a cultural barrier) with most people in our neighborhoods, campuses, and workplaces. **So our justification for remaining mono-ethnic as a congregation is wearing pretty thin.**
 - ▶ Our brothers and sisters in the Chinese congregations are well-suited and uniquely called to serve the immigrant Chinese community. And as long as they're faithful to that mission, let's not hinder their mission by pressuring them to be more multiethnic.

- ❖ But we're in a different context on the English side. I believe we're well-suited and uniquely called to serve our neighbors, the diverse community around us. I think you'd be hard-pressed to come up with a biblical or theological reason for us to remain comfortably mono-ethnic.
 - ▶ I know there's much more to be said. We'll definitely come back to this. I'm just getting the conversation started. But let me leave you to chew on this question: ***What's the main thing that identifies us and unifies us as a congregation?*** I'll tell you what the answer should be. What identifies us and unifies us should be our common Lord, our common faith, our common baptism (Eph. 4:5). Discuss this week in your small groups how that commonality can take precedence in the life of your group and of our congregation.