

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 13

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 10-11

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All right, so we've got this Roman centurion named Cornelius, totally devout, sending messengers to the Apostle Peter, but here's the thing: Cornelius isn't Jewish. And at the same time, Peter's having this crazy vision about eating food that's completely off limits for a Jewish guy. It's a wild story.

It is wild. And it's right there in Acts chapters 10 and 11, but trust me, it is way more than just some Bible stories. We are diving deep into early Christianity.

And for this deep dive, we're using a lecture by Dr. Craig Keener on Acts. Great source. Oh, yeah.

He is a fantastic scholar. Really is. So we're talking 1st century AD, Roman Empire is at its peak, and Christianity is this brand new movement.

We've got Cornelius in Caesarea, a Roman centurion, and then you've got Peter in Jerusalem leading the early Christians. And what Dr. Keener really helps us see is how Christianity is rapidly evolving. It has gone from rural Galilee to Jerusalem, and soon it's going to be in Antioch, one of the biggest, most cosmopolitan cities in the whole Roman world.

Absolutely. It's like this outward expansion. It's like a mirror of how the early church is changing culturally and socially too.

Absolutely. And you're right, this story, it's full of these moments where cultures clash. Oh, yeah.

And these early Christians, they're coming from such different backgrounds, and they have to figure out how to navigate all of it. Right. They had their own prejudices to overcome.

Totally. And we're going to see the role of the Holy Spirit, how that guides them, and how something as simple as sharing a meal together becomes this radical symbol of acceptance. Right.

Like a new kind of covenant. It really is. Yeah.

Okay. So let's unpack this, starting with Cornelius. Okay.

He's called a God-fearer, right? Right. Dr. Keener explains that that wasn't uncommon back then. It meant Gentiles who were drawn to Jewish teachings, believed in God, and even practiced some Jewish customs.

They prayed, they gave alms, things like that. Right, right. But they hadn't fully converted to Judaism.

And that's the paradox here. Yeah. Cornelius, he's deeply devout, but he's still outside that traditional Jewish covenant.

Right. And Dr. Keener suggests some possible reasons for why Cornelius wouldn't fully convert. Okay.

One reason could be his military status. Okay. You know, Roman soldiers, especially those who are on active duty, weren't allowed to formally marry.

Ah, interesting. And marrying a Jewish woman would have required conversion, which could have created all these complications. So even his personal life, you're saying, might've been influencing his religious decisions.

Exactly. Yeah. And we also have to remember, Cornelius wasn't alone in this.

Right. He had a whole household to consider. So his choices, those would have impacted his servants, maybe even family members.

It makes you realize, you know, the complexities these early Christians faced, like their faith wasn't just this, you know, personal thing. Yeah. It was woven into the whole social and cultural fabric of their lives.

That's exactly right. And then you have this whole drama with the visions. Right.

Both Cornelius and Peter have these experiences that just really shake them. Oh yeah. Especially Peter.

Yeah. I mean, imagine being told by God to eat food that your whole culture considers totally forbidden. Ah, no.

It's not just about taste. Yeah. It's about ritual purity.

Right? Right. A way of life for Jewish people. Absolutely.

Dr. Keener even mentions the Maccabees. Yeah. You know, these Jewish rebels who would rather die than eat pork? Shows you how central food laws were to Jewish identity.

Exactly. And that's why Peter's vision is so shocking. Yeah.

He sees a sheet filled with all sorts of creatures, clean and unclean, and God says, eat. Eat. And Peter's like, whoa, hold on.

You know, I've never eaten anything unclean in my life. Right. He's going against everything.

Yeah. He's like, this goes against everything I believe in. Everything he knows.

But Dr. Keener points out, God's declaration here, it's not just about food. Right. It's about people too.

Yeah. He's foreshadowing the inclusion of the Gentiles. Oh, wow.

It's like God is saying, I can redefine what's clean. Even people you might see as outside your circle. Right.

You know. It reminds me of that story in Ezekiel. Yes.

Where God tells him to cook over human dung. Yeah. Ezekiel's horrified.

Oh, I bet. Just like Peter. God eventually lets him use cow dung instead.

Right. But the point is made. Right.

God can redefine purity. Absolutely. So while Peter is grappling with this vision, Cornelius' messengers are knocking at the door.

Right. They've traveled over 30 miles. That's a long way.

From Caesarea to Joppa. Yeah. Dr. Keener says that suggests a sense of urgency.

Oh, yeah. Definitely. And even the way they approach Peter, calling from the outer gate.

Right. Shows a respect for Jewish customs, right? Oh, it does. They know they're Gentiles.

Yeah. You can't just barge into a Jewish home. Right.

It's fascinating how Dr. Keener picks up on these little details that reveal so much about the culture back then. Totally. Yeah.

So Peter, he's still processing this crazy vision. Yeah. And he hears the Holy Spirit prompting him to go with these messengers.

It's like God's nudging him, step out of your comfort zone. Right. Cross this huge cultural boundary.

Yeah. It's a big step. And he takes six Jewish Christian companions with him.

He does. And Dr. Keener suggests they're there as witnesses. Okay.

Probably because what Peter's about to do is enter the home of a Gentile and share a meal. That was considered super taboo for a devout Jew. Yeah.

So they needed to see it. See it for themselves. Exactly.

They get to Cornelius' house, and Cornelius is so blown away, he tries to bow down to Peter. Yeah. Like he's some kind of God.

It's interesting because Dr. Keener points out that in Roman culture, showing that kind of reverence to deities, to emperors. Like authority figures. Yeah.

Authority figures was totally normal. Right. But Peter refuses, which is significant.

He's like, nope, I'm just a regular guy following Jesus. Exactly. Not some divine being.

Yeah. It reinforces this idea that there's only one God, which is this core Jewish belief. And it really sets Peter apart from all those Roman gods and goddesses.

Yeah. Sets him apart. And then, Peter, he gives this sermon, and he connects the dots between Jesus and the Jewish prophecies about a coming Messiah.

Okay. He talks about Jesus' good deeds, his anointing by God, how forgiveness of sins comes through him. So he's speaking, and all of a sudden something totally mind-blowing happens.

Yeah. The Holy Spirit comes down on everyone listening, even the Gentiles. Just like at Pentecost.

It's like a Gentile Pentecost. That's what it is. It's a Gentile Pentecost.

And I bet that was shocking. Oh, you can imagine how shocking this must have been for Peter. Yeah.

And those six Jewish Christians that came with him? Up until this point, you know, the Holy Spirit was seen as something specifically for the Jewish people. Right. It was a sign of God's covenant with them.

Yeah. But now, God is pouring out his Spirit on Gentiles, people who were considered outside that covenant. It's like, yeah, those old boundaries, we're breaking those down.

That's it. Breaking them down. Yeah.

And to make it even more dramatic, the Gentiles start speaking in tongues. Oh, wow. Just like the disciples did at Pentecost.

So it's the same gift. Same gift, the same power to communicate across these cultural barriers and spread the gospel. It's proof.

Proof positive. They are now part of God's mission. Absolutely.

Peter's like, okay, God has clearly accepted these folks. Let's baptize them. But back in Jerusalem, not everyone is happy.

You can understand why. For centuries, circumcision was the sign of belonging to God's people. And now, Peter's saying the Holy Spirit, considered a far greater gift, has been given to uncircumcised Gentiles.

Wow. Throws everything they thought they knew into question. Really does.

Yeah. But Peter defends his actions? He does. Is he bold? Oh, yeah.

He's bold. He tells everyone about the vision. The vision he had.

How God told him to go to Cornelius. And how the Holy Spirit's presence is undeniable evidence that God's on board with this whole Gentile inclusion thing. But what's fascinating to me is that even Peter struggled with this later on.

Dr. Keener points out that in Galatians, Peter actually avoids eating with uncircumcised Gentiles when some more conservative Jewish Christians are around. Oh, interesting. So even the leader of the early church.

Yeah. He's wrestling with these issues, you know? So it wasn't all smooth sailing. No.

It shows how complex this question of Gentile inclusion was. Yeah. They're figuring things out as they went.

Yeah. Totally new territory. And this is why the story of Cornelius is so important.

It is. It's a turning point. And the focus starts to shift away from Jerusalem toward Antioch, which becomes this major center for Gentile Christianity.

And that's where Barnabas comes in. Yeah, Barnabas. Dr. Keener describes him as this person who really saw the good in people.

And he welcomed those who were often marginalized. He had already shown this kind of support for Paul. Right.

Who was a former persecutor. Exactly. Former persecutor of Christians.

And now he sees this incredible potential in this growing Gentile movement in Antioch. But he knows he needs help. So he goes and finds Paul in Tarsus.

Paul, who used to be called Saul, had this total transformation. Total transformation. From hunting down Christians to preaching the gospel.

Right. Amazing. Barnabas sees Paul's calling to reach the Gentiles and brings him to Antioch.

What a pair. Power couple. I know.

Right? And you know what else is cool about Antioch? What? That's where the term Christian first pops up. Oh, really? Yeah. Probably as a nickname first.

But then it becomes this badge of honor, showing that the followers of Jesus are becoming their own distinct group. Something that goes beyond those cultural and ethnic divides. It's like a whole new movement.

Yeah. Exactly. So they're doing their thing in Antioch.

And then some prophets show up from Jerusalem. Right. Bad news.

A worldwide famine is coming. Yeah. And remember, this famine is going to affect Antioch too.

Right. But even though they're facing hardship themselves, the church in Antioch sends aid to the poorer believers in Judea. Wow.

That's incredible. It really is. It's an amazing act of generosity.

It is. It shows the unity of the early church. They were committed to taking care of each other.

Yeah. Regardless of where they lived or their cultural background. Yeah.

And Dr. Keener points out that this theme of generosity isn't new. In the Old Testament, Joseph prepared Egypt for a famine by storing grain during years of plenty. Yeah.

It's like a foreshadowing of how these early Christians proactively respond to this prophecy. So we're seeing this theme of generosity. Yeah.

And this pushes the church to cross those cultural boundaries. Absolutely. But it wasn't always easy, right? No.

There were still so many differences to navigate. Yeah. Especially when it came to Jewish believers and this whole Gentile inclusion thing.

It wasn't a perfect transition. No. Absolutely not.

And this tension was something they were constantly working through. Even Peter. Even Peter, after his experience with Cornelius, still had moments where he struggled.

Right. Yeah. It just shows they were human.

They were. They were grappling with these deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. Trying to figure out what it meant for them.

As believers. Yeah. And it's a reminder that the early church wasn't this perfect unified entity.

Right. They were constantly evolving, having these tough conversations, and trying to understand God's will in this changing world. It's amazing to think about all this.

These huge shifts in the early church happened in just a few chapters of Acts. I know. Dr. Keener really brings it all to life.

It does. Showing just how dynamic, and let's face it, how messy things were back then. It wasn't a neat and tidy transition.

Not at all. You see those tensions, those struggles with prejudice and tradition. Right.

But it's also inspiring to see how God worked through it all. It really is. And what really strikes me is God using ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

Peter, even with his hesitation about the food, allows the Holy Spirit to lead him. He does. And Barnabas, with his welcoming spirit, brings Paul to Antioch.

Right. And helps to build this incredible multicultural community. It's amazing.

It is. And it reminds us that God can use anyone who's willing to listen and obey. To listen.

It's not about your background. Right. It's not about your personality.

It's about being open. It's about being open. To how God might be working.

To how God might be working, even if it pushes us outside of our comfort zones. Right. And it makes me think about the Holy Spirit's role in all of this.

We often think about the big dramatic events, but Dr. Kiener also shares these kinds of funny stories about how the Spirit can kind of nudge us in these unexpected ways. It's not always a lightning bolt. Not at all.

Sometimes it's a whisper. Yeah. Sometimes it's something that makes you laugh.

Right. But what's important is that we pay attention. Pay attention to those nudges.

Right. Those moments where we feel called. Called to do something different.

Something different, yeah. Something that might even seem a little radical. Which brings us to Dr. Kiener's big question at the end of his lecture.

Yeah. Big question. He asks, how would we respond to the unexpected promptings of the Holy Spirit today? Good question.

Would we be as willing as Peter to cross those cultural barriers? Yeah. Challenge our own preconceived notions. Challenge those notions, even if it ruffled some feathers.

Right. Even if it went against what everyone else was doing. That's the question, isn't it? It is.

It is. It's something to really think about. It is, yeah.

Because, just like in the early church, the Holy Spirit is still speaking. Right. Still calling us to reach out.

Reach out, build understanding, show compassion. And the world needs that message now more than ever. It really does.

And you know what we've been talking about with Cornelius, Peter, and this whole turning point in early Christianity? It's not just ancient history. Right. It's a living, breathing example of what happens when we let the Holy Spirit guide us, challenge us, and empower us to live out this message of love and inclusion.

A message that was radical back then. And honestly, it's still pretty radical today. It is.