

The Prejudiced Christian

By Paris Reidhead*

We are considering today the widest aspect of Christian fellowship, the widest aspects of Christian fellowship, as we find it in the Book of Acts. Some years ago, a missionary reported an experience at Shanghai of a young soldier that went into a church, a Protestant church, went to the altar there, the mourner's' bench, if you please, and knelt to pray. It was rather dark. He had not seen anyone present as he came in. But a little later, either the light had changed, or he was better accustomed to it, He looked up and found at the other end of the altar was a Japanese soldier. And here were the two praying, enemies, and yet because of the fact that they began to share their testimony, though they were engaged in mortal conflict, seeking by every means to destroy the power to make war of the other nation, they knelt at the altar, victims in a sense of conditions they could not control, bound by the policies and obligations, and responsibilities of their national life and their citizenship, each doing what he thought he ought, he must do, and yet they were on their knees testifying by their presence that they had met the Lord Jesus Christ, testifying by their prayers that they were in utter dependence upon Him, and testifying to each other that each was depending upon the amazing, the sovereign, the supernatural grace of God in Christ for eternal life.

It is that which we see in this 10th Chapter of Acts. There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius... Cornelius was a name that had been carried by many of the senators of Rome, the outstanding families used it. It was a prominent name. It spoke of his importance. It spoke to his lineage, of his bearing, that he was of royalty in Roman life. He was the leader, Captain, a centurion, of a band called, the Italian band. Though stationed in Palestine, they had kept alive their Roman bearing and their Roman feeling to the place where they were called by all who knew them, the Italian band.

Can you imagine anything more obnoxious to a Jew than to be asked by someone to have fellowship with someone with the name of Cornelius? Can you imagine the racial antagonism, here a subjugated people, a captive people, a controlled people, occupied by Roman soldiers, having lost their national sovereignty, and paying taxes to Caesar? And the Captain of a band, called the Italian band? Well everything is opposed to any possibility of fellowship. There is cultural diversity. There is educational difference. There is social diversion. There is racial antagonism. You could not ask for an instance of greater incompatibility than this. And yet notice that whenever you categorize people, you destroy their humanity.

I am in total opposition to all kinds of categorical description. I think of the man who is the epitome of ignorance who says, "Oh, I don't like the Chinese people for I knew a man from China once;" 400 million people have now been put in his black bad book because he met one. Any type of categorical thinking is equally dishonest. I had a discussion with one of the members and friends of our church some time ago and they raised the question saying, I know what so and so is, because he is this, and named certain affiliations and interests. When I heard this, my whole heart felt sick. It was this type of thinking that gave rise to Hitler's Germany when he could say, "The Jews because they are Jews. It is this type of thinking that gave rise to every kind of brutality. I think of the experience in Russia with the pogroms when there again because one was Jewish they were subject to death. I think that through all the centuries there has been a tendency on the part of people to shirk their responsibility and deny their humanity by what I choose to call now, categorical thinking.

Peter could say, Cornelius? The Italian band? I know about that Italian band. I know about those Romans. Peter knew nothing of the kind. And you do not know, and I do not know what an individual is because of his nationality, or his political party, or his educational achievement. I do not know anyone because of these superficial affiliations. I only know a person when I know a person. Someone may be a member of the conservative party, this new political party that has been formed, and you say, "Well I know what the conservative party thinks, and therefore I know what he thinks." You may be entirely wrong. Someone else may be a member of a liberal party, and you say, "Well, I know what he thinks, because I know what the liberal party thinks. And you may be entirely wrong. Every person has the right to explain what he thinks and to testify to what he believes, and to what he, holds, and he is not to be judged on the basis of any racial, or political, educational, or business, fiscal association that he may find it necessary or wise to have.

And this is the principle that is here that is applicable to all of us. How frequently someone is going to be heard saying, "Oh, this man could not be interested in the Gospel because he is rich, because he is wealthy." Nothing could be further from the truth. Wealthy people become inwardly hungry, wealthy people become disturbed, and distressed, and perplexed, and confused. And no one is to be rejected because of some superficial affiliation. We must not allow ourselves this intellectual deceit that enables us to say, I know what he is because he is Jewish, or I know what he thinks because he is a Republican, or I know what she does because she is a college graduate. All of these things are basically dishonest when they become labels by which we identify an individual. What could have been done? I know what this man is because his name is Cornelius, I know what he thinks because he is a Roman, I know the kind of a life he lives because all of the Romans are profligates, and are all libertines, and all immoral, and all dishonest. Do you see how easy it might have been for this to have prevailed; actually, I think it did prevail. I think this was what was in Peter's heart. I think this is what was in my heart, and what was in your heart, about people that we do not know and do not understand. And I think it is something that God must deal with if we are to ever know fellowship on the basis that He intends us to have it. All superficial delineations that would enable us to attest a person's character and attitude, because of that delineation, because of that label, must be rejected by us. And you must seek to know the individual. The church is not so large. The number of people that name the name of Christ are not so many that what there is the possibility of your getting acquainted with at least a few from each of the various groups that might comprise it.

And it ought to be an adamant rule with you, one that is inflexible, one that you do not allow to be changed, that you are not going to judge anybody at all on the basis of some superficial label that they may carry. You are going to look for the individual, and you are going to strive to know that individual, and you are not going to allow any type of bigotry, and any type of intellectual dishonesty; but you are going to take the attitude that is expressed here and clearly taught when God has gone to such lengths and pains once and for all to destroy all of the usual basis of fellowship.

Out in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is Bethany Fellowship, from which Fred Johnson came, and to which Claire Smith has gone, and it has been blessed and used of God, and it has been my joy to minister there on occasions, and I praise God for what He has demonstrated there: five families in about 1941 or 2, all Lutheran in background, and all Norwegian in background, met together. And I asked Ted about it. I said, "Mr. Hegre, Ted, if you were to do this in New York City, and you were to have five families, and they were to have been of different religious backgrounds, and different racial backgrounds, would it have been as easy as it was with 5 Lutheran Norwegian families." He said, "O no. It would be much more difficult, far more difficult to establish in New York City, shall we say, what was established in Bethany Fellowship.

You may recall the story of Bethany, how that the five families, all junior executives, desired to answer the question, "How can we more perfectly give our lives to the Lord," and so, voluntarily, without any Scripture, but just because they thought it was wise and proper, sold their homes, pooled all of their assets, and from that time on took no salary or no income of any kind, but they lived just together, established a Bible School. Now they have a Print Shop and a factory, making hunting trailers, and electrical appliances. Students that go there pay \$150 and that is all they pay for four years of education. But they all work and they all share in the life, and there is no one that has a salary. Mr. Lovstrand one of the five men is the traffic manager for one of the large Canning Companies, and his salary is about \$15,000 a year. He just brings the paycheck in and gives it to the treasurer, and they give him back his lunch money. And this is the basis on which Bethany Fellowship has been established. Now, I said, "if you were to do this, in any other place, would it be possible?" He said, "It would be possible but it would be extremely difficult." I said, "Why?" He said, "We understood each other. We understood our national traits, we understood our national reactions, we understood our tendencies, and we were able to adjust to one another, and we understood our religious background. And so it has not been done anywhere else. Perhaps it is because God has not been able to find five Norwegian Lutheran families, I do not know, that love the Lord sufficiently to do it."

But here in the New Testament we find that God has completely broken over from all nationality distinctions, all economic distinctions, all educational distinctions, and He has said, "This fellowship is to be upon a supernatural relationship to the Lord Jesus and not on national, or natural relationship to each other." And I say this is fellowship on the widest possible basis, for it has cut right across all these antagonisms, all these antipathies, all these misunderstandings and it has brought them right to that one place of proper meeting which is at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice now before we leave it. That whereas Peter, and the other of the apostles had they views this Italian band, and its Centurion Cornelius, would have said, "We know about these people because there is a stereotype of our minds and whenever we hear Cornelius we know it is Roman, whenever we hear Italian band we know the kinds of lives they live, we are aware of these people because... Look how wrong he would have been had he had such, because Cornelius was a devout man. Perhaps they would have said, "It is impossible for a Roman, perhaps impossible for a Captain of a band of a hundred soldiers, Roman soldiers, to be devout. But you see, God says, Cornelius was a devout man. Look at how unfair Peter would have been. Then when he said, "He feared God with all his house." If he had, he would not have known that. God knew that. Peter could not have known it, because as he said it was unlawful for you to go to the house of a Gentile. So he would have had no way of knowing this. But Cornelius the while being castigated in the minds at least of the Jewish Christians would have feared God none the less with all his house. And he gave much alms to the people, that is to the Jewish people who the while would have been mistreating him, at least with words, and he prayed to God always.

Now let me ask you. Would this not be quite good expression of our faith in the Lord Jesus, for the manifestation of it in our lives, a devout person who feared God with all his house, gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always. And yet all of this, known to God, was hidden from Peter. And therefore it seems to me that we have got to recognize that the fellowship to which we have been called is a fellowship wherein we meet, not on the basis of our backgrounds. I am so troubled when people use this after they have been converted. After you have been born of God, after you have come as a sinner and stood at the threshold of grace, and pled for mercy, and asked God for pardon, and as a poor, hopeless helpless, hell deserving sinner, for this is the description of us all, how thereafter can there be any attention paid to that which could not have met our need, and satisfied our longing, and lifted our burden, we meet on one basis. I think it is often much easier for the Cornelius of this life to be sympathetic with the poor and understanding of the poor, understanding of those that have not had the advantage and opportunity that they have had. I think they can adjust, if you wish, socially downward far easier than is possible for someone that has been in poverty and denied the privileges of education to have fellowship with a person that has known wealth, and affluence, and all of these things that have been denied the one. I think it is much easier to leave them, than it is to understand how anyone could be willing to leave them. The person that has not known this may have deep resentment, deep antagonism. I am sure it was not hard for Cornelius, obviously noble, wealthy, educated, influential, to say, "Peter, tell me." It was not hard for him to fall on his face in front of a fisherman, whose gnarled hands had not yet lost their callouses from the ropes with which he had drawn the catch into his boat. I am sure it was not hard for Cornelius to do it. But you see, it was much harder for Peter to receive Cornelius. God had to do something for Peter. Peter had never had influence, he had never had position, he had never had wealth, he had never had the power that these things bring, and for him to go to a house of the Gentiles was to cross racial lines, to go to the house of a wealthy man was to cross social lines. It was far harder for Peter to go to Cornelius than it was for Cornelius to call for Peter. It was far easier for Cornelius to fall on his face before Peter than it was for Peter to look Cornelius in the eye.

And this is difficult. This is hard. It is very hard. And consequently it seems as the Spirit of God has through the years in American Christianity especially, had this social delineation in church life. And I believe that it is one of the things that has kept God from working in the manner in which He wishes to work. I think that it is a lack of recognizing that there is a true culture in Christ, and probably the only true culture is in Christ.

We are hearing these days a great deal about culture. Beloved, that culture which is to be the foundation upon which any society rests, any nation rests permanently, and any community of believers or church rests, is a culture when you recognize the sovereignty and the centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we only can find fellowship when we take our eyes off of these incidentals that God held to be of such unimportance that He completely rebuked Peter of all his prejudices by this vision of the sheet let down from Heaven, and forced him to go to the house of Cornelius. We can only have true fellowship when we turn our back on our prejudice, misconceptions, and our stereotypes about one another, and we meet at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. There the rich man and the poor man are on the same basis, there the wise man and the unlettered man are on the same basis, and everyone meets on identically the same grounds when we meet at the nail pierced feet of the Son of God. And it is this that is to be the foundation of our fellowship. If we gather to our cultural interests, and compatibilities, if we gather to our educational achievements, if we gather to our financial standards, then we have done violence to the whole

concept of fellowship. It must be on the basis of our gathering to the Lord Jesus Christ. The poor not taking pride in their poverty, or the rich taking pleasure nor pride in their wealth, but each leaving this, and finding it as unimportant as he meets at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ, and there he finds a compatibility, he finds a joyous oneness, a sympathy and understanding that knows no racial, national, nor social distinction. We come as one in Christ.

Now I submit to you that it is very much easier to have fellowship that is on the basis of a national life. Here in New York City, for instance, the strongest church life we will find is where the national groups have retained their loyalty to the church and are meeting in their traditions, and in their interests. But I believe that this is passing and will rapidly go, and there will have to be something vital and vigorous put in its place.

If I understand what the Spirit of God is trying to say to the Gospel Tabernacle Church in New York it is this: We do not fellowship on the basis of the fact that we are members of the Christian and Missionary Alliance. We are grateful for its ministry and its world-wide testimony, but this is not our grounds of fellowship. We do not fellowship on the basis of the fact that we are members of the Gospel Tabernacle Church. We are grateful for its continuance through these decades, for its ministry, for what God has done with it. We do not meet on the basis of the fact that we have come together around a doctrinal statement, the Fourfold Gospel. We are grateful for this, an expression of what we hold. We do not meet on the basis of the fact that we have either achieved, or have not achieved on some educational level, or some financial standard, or some social standard. We meet on one basis, one place only, and that is, The Lord Jesus Christ. We are gathered to the Son of God. We meet with Him. We meet as before Him. We come unto Him. Anything less than that is far below the Biblical standard, and anything more than that is going to be the cause of ultimate division and grief, and heartache. He is asking us to gather to His Son. It is thus that when Peter and some of the brethren from Joppa come to the house of Cornelius, they were amazed at the fact that Cornelius knows the Gospel, that he is a devout man, that he fears God, that he has given alms to the people, that he has prayed to God always, and that the Spirit of God can fall upon Cornelius, upon these hated Italians, upon these that are the oppressing people, and the same way that He fell upon the devout, earnest Jews that had followed three years with Him in His earthly ministry. And now they have met at the feet of the Lord Jesus, and there is the place of fellowship.

We have sung so often, "There is a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea," and this is true. But there is a narrowness in fellowship. You know how narrow is true Christian fellowship. It is just as narrow as the outstretched arms of the Lord Jesus Christ, for when you go beyond the reach of those nail pierced hands and establish fellowship on any other basis, whether it be financial, or educational, or racial, or any other basis, you have passed the limits of fellowship. When you meet inside the circumference of those nail pierced hands, and the only grounds of your gathering is the fact that you have been washed in His Blood, and born of His Spirit, and filled with His Presence, and you love Him, and He loves you, then there is a wideness in His fellowship that will reach out to every nation, every kindred, every language, every tongue, every social strata, every educational level of achievement, and we can meet together now, because having come within the circumference of His nail pierced hands we have had to leave all of these other delineating marks outside. You carry none of it with you. When you come into this circle, you come on the basis of one grounds of fellowship, you have gathered to others who are in Christ; you meet Him, and you meet those that have met Him, and you meet in Him. You say, "Well what about our going to our homes, what about taking people that don't understand to our homes?"

Our Lord had an answer for that. He said, "If you will make a feast, do not bring those that can pay you back in kind but you go out and bring the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind." What is He saying? You meet with those that in their need have met with Me. And this is true fellowship. Only fellowship that deserves the use of this noble word that we are coming to appreciate is the fellowship that is on the basis of the finished work of Christ. If you meet on the fellowship of the kind of possessions you have, or education you have secured, or the kind of talent you have, personality that you have developed, then it is going to be a fragment. You are going to have to go outside; you are going to have to go here or there. You are going to have to gather in little groups, apart from Him. But if you will let your fellowship be just as wide and no wider than the nails in His hands, then there is room enough for everyone, and narrow enough to exclude anyone that is not prepared to meet on that ground.

Do you see then why I say this is fellowship on the widest possible grounds. Because it is just as wide and no wider than the two spikes that bound Him to the Cross. So wide that anyone at any corner of the globe can look to Calvary and hear Him say, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden," regardless of nationality, regardless of religious background, regardless of the degree and kind of sin. All of this is inconsequential and meaningless, for whoever you are, and from whatever land you may come, the invitation is, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor," and those arms just face a world of dying men. And anyone that will look toward Calvary will find they are included in embrace. But when you come, come as a sinner, come perhaps from Hindu religion, when you come from Islam, when you come from pagan protestant Christianity in America, or from just having been agnostic or atheist, whatever it might be, whatever quarter of the religious compass you have left to come to Christ, from then on your fellowship is to be found with those that have come within the embrace of the Son of God. Make room in your heart for anyone who has found place in the heart of our Lord. Endeavor to understand. Do not let any of the prejudices, or stereotypes of your youth hinder and limit, and restrict your fellowship now in Christ. But open your heart, open your heart. Do not close it to the poor because you are rich. Do not close it to the rich because you are poor. Do not close it to the wise because you are unlettered. Do not close it to the unwise because you are educated. Do not close it to those that are talented because you have none, or to those that have no talent because you have some. But recognize that the grounds of our fellowship is that we are accepted in the Beloved. If we can be accepted by Him, we can accept each other in Him, and meet in Him once and for all, forever, could it be that God should strike a blow at any lingering prejudice, any lingering attitude that could be inimitable to what He is trying to establish in our hearts, a pure and perfect love for the Lord Jesus that reaches out to encircle and embrace all who know and love our Lord Jesus, and overflows out to those who know Him not, but through us will come to know Him.

Thus Cornelius and Peter represent the poles of antagonism, cultural, racial, financial, and social antagonisms, and they have been drawn together, right under the open heaven, and he said that same Holy Spirit that fell upon us has fallen upon them. God has obliterated once and for all all of these superficial delineations that have broken, and crushed, and hurt.

I think in closing of the fact that this church exists because there was a 13th Street Presbyterian Church that found no place in its embrace for the poor of the streets of New York, and so Dr. Simpson¹ felt that to achieve this goal of spiritual fellowship on Bible terms, he would have to start all over again. O dear heart, it has to be started over with you, it has to be started over with me, not with a new church, but a new attitude. And a ruthlessness with any lingering prejudice or bigotry that should in any wise come in to mar the warm fellowship with the risen Son of God. We meet in Him, accepted in the Beloved, we accept one another in Him, and we understand each other because we have been understood by Him.

May God press upon our hearts that the grounds of this fellowship is not theological, it is not doctrinal, it is not organizational, it is not occupational; the grounds of our fellowship is in His glorious Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. We meet in Him, we come to Him, and if you know Him and you love Him then you are of the aristocracy for there is no one higher in the whole family of God than the one that can sing, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears released. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed." There is no higher status in the family of God than, Saved by His wonderful grace. And if you are in Him, you are of us.

Let us bow in prayer. Our Heavenly Father, we thank and praise Thee that Thou hast taken such pains, one whole chapter in your Book, to strike at this deadly, terrifying thing, racial prejudice, social animosity, pride that separates and divides, and hurts, cruelly bruises. Oh, that it should not once be named among us. We do not speak to any problem that exists, Lord. We speak to our own hearts where that problem lies dormant and latent in us all. Grant, our God, that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ shall so cleanse us, and purge us, and that the power of Thy Holy Spirit shall so fill us and possess us that we shall be without any kind of bigotry or prejudice, we shall not attach labels to people, and judge them on the basis of the accidents of birth and occupation and achievement, but we shall realize that if we are in Christ we are of one another, and that the warmest possible fellowship shall be developed not because of similarity of tastes from our old life or background, but because

¹ Albert Benjamin Simpson (1843-1919) founder of The Christian and Missionary Alliance

we love Him who loved us and gave Himself for us. Show us, Lord, that the aristocracy of Thy household puts us all as children of the King, born into the Father's family, and joint heirs with Christ, once and for all lifting us out of the past, with all the burdens and fears, and heartaches, and grief that that unchosen past might have brought upon us, lifted in the glorious liberty of the children of God, and the freedom of the household of faith. So to that end, bind our hearts in love, one for another, Let there be a new affection, a new feeling, a new sense of joy that we are in Christ, a new warmth in greeting as we leave the church, a new sense that we belong to one another because we belong to Him. And we will give Thee all the praise, because we ask it in the worthy name and for the honor and glory of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen. Let us stand for the Benediction.

Now unto Him who loved us, and gave Himself for us, has washed us in His Blood, and made us to be kings and priests unto God for ever, unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

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