

WEAKNESS AND POWER

We cannot tell Peter's story unless we see that there is much going on which is a lot bigger than Peter. The dynamism of the early church literally exploded onto the world scene after Jesus' death and resurrection. Can you imagine some human group of entrepreneurs designing and choreographing a movement that would start with a handful of Jewish peasants and end up converting the Roman Empire in under three hundred years? This was not just some minor adjustment to Roman views and values. The Empire went from Polytheism to Monotheism. There was a vast switch in moral and ethical norms. There was a growing realization that all human beings are valuable, and, for many, there was new awareness of the presence and grace of the Holy Spirit. What Jesus had started swept through the known world like some gigantic tidal wave.

So here is Peter, having just come through Phase Three – his second conversion, the Break Point, the rooster's cry, the Last Breakfast. He has awakened to the grace and love of Jesus in dimensions far beyond anything he had imagined during Jesus' earthly ministry. Peter is reinstated as apostle and friend – by Jesus – *after* the crucifixion and resurrection. Clearly, Jesus is the High Prince of Heaven. Never mind for the moment what any of *us* think or believe; this is what *Peter* knows. I mean, it's one thing to pal around with a guy you think the world of and even realize is a gifted Messenger of God. But it changes everything when this same man comes waltzing back after being crucified and still acts as personal and caring toward you as He did before. What do you say? What can you think? How do you wrap your mind and your life around such a thing?! The point is that Jesus will go on using Peter in dramatic and powerful ways, but Peter is not the initiator of any of it. Peter is not in charge of any of it. Peter is just trying, desperately sometimes, to respond and stay faithful to what Jesus and the Holy Spirit of Jesus keep asking of him.

So Peter is not the only actor in this drama, not by a long shot. The Movement cannot explode into the world unless Jesus can break His followers loose from a lot of old assumptions and expectations – from a lot of old ways of thinking and believing. That is what the Book of Acts is about right from the beginning. The disciples are confused, disorganized, and enthralled that Jesus has appeared to them, but nobody has the faintest notion what to do next. So of course they decide to elect officers. Then they choose a replacement for Judas. They pick a man that Jesus knew but did not pick. They pick a man we had

never heard of before and will never hear of again. Nothing. Nothing is happening. No human can make it happen. Then vroom! Pentecost – fifty days later. The Spirit strikes again.

Today we like to get sidetracked by the details of the Pentecost story. Are people speaking in tongues of ecstasy, or are they understanding the message in their native language? Are they drunk? Who is speaking? What is really happening? But let us not miss the real point. *“Parthians, Medes, Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, of Judaea and Cappadocia, of Pontus and Asia, of Phrygia and Pamphylia, of Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene; visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes.”* (Acts 2:9) They are ALL hearing the message, as if in their native language. And as the names of all the nations roundabout are tolled off, the hair on the back of your neck begins to rise. The story of the Tower of Babel is being reversed!

What were the Chosen People chosen for? *“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”* (Isaiah 49:6) And this is starting to happen right before their eyes. Only, it is not just about territory. God’s grace is often limited by nationalism, to be sure, but it is also frequently limited by type and kind. We are the good guys, and you are not included unless you agree to become more and more like us. Philip the deacon is directed by the Spirit (Acts 8:26) to go walking on the road from Jerusalem toward Gaza. On that road, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, the Queen’s steward and treasurer. He is returning to Ethiopia from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. As Philip comes up to the carriage, he hears the man reading from the Book of Isaiah: *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter; like a lamb that is dumb before the shearer, he does not open his mouth. He has been humiliated and has no redress. Who will be able to speak of his posterity? For he is cut off from the world of the living.”* (Acts 8:32-33; Isaiah 53:7-8)

If you concentrate really hard, you can probably figure out why these words would be especially poignant for this eunuch. So Philip and the Ethiopian have a heart-to-heart conversation. The man is enthralled by Philip’s account of Jesus and the Gospel Message, and at the end of the conversation he asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” So Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch in some nearby water. What the text does not mention is that this is completely scandalous. It assumes that all the readers already know this. Why do you think the story is in here? When the Ethiopian asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” – what he fully expects to hear Philip

say is “Gosh, I’m really sorry, but you know very well that Torah forbids us to allow eunuchs into our membership.” (“*He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the LORD.*” (Deuteronomy 23:1)) “Sorry, it’s in the Book, and the Book cannot be wrong.” Have we ever heard that before?

Yet Philip baptizes this man without a qualm. Scandalous! The Ethiopian is a foreigner, he is doubtless black, he is definitely a eunuch. Yet he is also definitely included in the Christian Movement: he is IN – all the way, in one play. Hey wait a minute! Who is changing all the rules?! It is rocking the world – at least the world of all the early Christians. The New Testament takes a dramatic new stance about God’s grace and acceptance made known in Jesus Christ.

Some of you realize that we have enormous controversy in our own time with people quoting Old Testament texts to prove that certain types of people cannot have full membership or rights within the church – almost as if they have never heard of the Christian Gospel. It is a huge and terrible problem. (More on that later.) The underlying dilemma: How do we let people into our faith family if we think they will dilute or destroy everything we believe in and care about? On the other hand, if what we believe includes the notion that God loves *all* the children and that our very purpose is to be a light to the nations which draws *all people* to God, then what?

Well, Peter is an apostle at the very beginning of this explosion and controversy. He does not design it or ask for it, but he is quickly caught up in it. The hottest battles of the early church were not between the church and the world. They were between the church and the church. How very familiar. As many of us said in Omaha when confronted with the Tri-Faith Initiative: “Our problem is not loving the Jews or Muslims; our problem is loving some of the other Christians.” The hottest battles in the early church were between that portion of the church which believed it must keep all of the precepts, laws, and customs of former days, and that portion of the church which believed that Jesus came for everyone and that Jesus’ grace and love superseded all old precepts, laws, and customs. By the way, heresies go off the deep end in both directions, but we cannot say it all. So let’s get to Peter’s third conversion – Phase Four.

Like most of us, Peter does not get past his old attitudes and convictions easily. Remember that he had long since given his life to Jesus – way back in the first conversion. That was *not* enough.

Contrary to many popular, simplistic views on the subject, that was not enough! Then, as we saw, Peter hit the end of his own tether – the end of human pride and confidence. He died with Christ and was born anew, turning will and life and plans and purposes over to his Lord. Only, this second conversion was not enough either. Now he is to become a major leader and evangelist and witness in this new Movement we call Christianity – only, not by his own wisdom or insight. And that means the Holy Spirit has to break Peter out of some prejudices and narrow ways of thinking, or Peter cannot be helpful to a lot of the people that Jesus wants to reach.

Third conversion. This is no theoretical exercise; there is a Roman Centurion in this story – a real, live person. His name is Cornelius. We still know his name, clear down to the present day. Cornelius lives in Caesarea, the Roman headquarters for all Judea and Samaria. A Centurion is a man of considerable wealth and prominence, and if he is converted, it will have a huge influence. We are not allowed to think in crass or pragmatic ways like this, but the Holy Spirit can. Cornelius is a devout man – a man of good deeds and a man of prayer. But he needs some human contact if he is to get in on the purpose and mission of Christ. So Cornelius has a vision. And obedient to this vision, he sends messengers to Joppa to invite Peter to come talk to him about the faith. That’s the easy part. Now the Holy Spirit has to find some way to get Peter to accept the invitation. That’s the hard part. Jews can have business transactions with pagans, but they do not go into their homes; they do not eat with them; they do not socialize with them or act like close friends on an equal basis.

So Peter has a vision. I know you get it, but let’s say it straight out: The purpose of the vision is to instruct Peter to break the kosher laws of Torah; people are more important than the dietary laws. The purpose of the vision is to tell Peter to break from some of the traditions and truths he has been taught from the time of his birth until now. The purpose of the vision is to instruct Peter to defy what he thinks of as the Law of Moses and the authority of Torah, and to go act like a friend and a brother to this pagan enemy officer of his people.

Conversion means “to change.” This is a mighty change indeed! This is Peter’s third conversion. It shakes Peter’s world even more than the unusual catch of fish. That was exciting and interesting and fun, despite the changes it ended up making in Peter’s life. But this third conversion is a direct challenge to everything Peter has believed

and assumed about what God wants, what God requires, how faithful people are supposed to live. And of course this belief is not just a private or personal opinion. This has the weight of two thousand years of Judaism backing it up and claiming it as the revealed truth of God. By the time we read about it in the Book of Acts, Peter seems to be telling the story pretty calmly. But he must have been in complete agony and turmoil at the time. Have you ever come to the conclusion that you have been dead wrong about something you have fervently believed all of your life? (More on this later.)

In passing, we get a hint about Peter's devoutness. Never in his life has he broken the kosher laws. He is certain there is some mistake. Surely God could not be asking him to go against God's word and law. "Dear Deity, surely you jest! Didn't your parents send you to Sunday School?" But the voice insists: "*It is not for you to call profane what God counts clean.*" A little mini-summation of the stormy side of the Gospel of grace and mercy.

This scenario is enacted three times. Peter has already had some experience with threes. It is the code, the earmark – he knows it is coming from Jesus. What can he do? Does Peter want to hear the rooster's cry again? So he shrugs off a lifetime of training and conviction, welcomes the messengers, and goes off with them the next morning to be the guest of Cornelius. Meanwhile, Cornelius has gathered his friends and relatives together to hear what Peter has to say. It ends, of course, with all of them believing, receiving the Holy Spirit, and getting baptized. Another very early, very dramatic incidence of the Gospel breaking beyond the borders to bring in people none of the early followers would have thought to bring in by themselves. It is the beginning of the explosion. With a couple of hard swallows – and a temporary moment of weakness (Galatians 2:11-14) – Peter will side with that wing of Christendom which includes and accepts the Gentiles. His conclusion is very informative: "*If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?*"

To be sure, lots of faithful people have learned how to withstand God. They go on thinking, believing, and acting in ways that God has tried to break them out of. It is not always entirely clear which of us are withstanding God and which of us are being faithful to New Light being revealed. What we do know for certain is that God sends new Messengers with New Light all through human history. All the pioneers of our faith were bringing New Light when they first came.

Abraham stopped child sacrifice. Moses made a covenant with a God beyond all nature, beyond all human images – unheard of. Jeremiah proclaimed that a New Covenant was coming, not like the covenant made under Moses. And Jesus? Well, Jesus called so much of our assumed truth into question that we have not recovered even still.

So Peter is changed once again. Peter goes against everything he had formerly considered sacred, and he comes down on the side of those who are determined to let people like us – the pagans, the non-Jews – into the church. Peter gets into enormous trouble for it, loses a lot of friends and relatives over it – and helps to change the history of the world because of it. It is Peter’s third major conversion, and I hope none of us are willing to let it go for nothing.

Meanwhile, be it noted: In Phase Four (third conversion), Peter is still being dealt with, taught, changed, and transformed by his Lord. Peter is drawn into terrain that is about more than Peter specifically or personally. Christianity starts out as a private affair, but it never ends there. Peter’s efforts are for the benefit of others, and about issues he would have been happy to leave alone forever. In Phase Four, he is in the midst of things exceedingly important to Christ Jesus his Lord. Incidentally, he makes some wonderful friends he would never have known otherwise. And those friends make other friends for Jesus that number first into the hundreds, then into the thousands, then into the millions. I think that some of you are among them.

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Sometimes we change our minds. Evidence mounts up, new information comes along. We begin to realize that our former opinions and conclusions about some things are simply inadequate. How nice and peaceful and wonderful that sounds.

At other times, the process is not so peaceful. We do not just change our minds – we *get* changed, from somewhere deeper and more compelling than we understand. Our minds scramble to readjust. But it is more than a mental process going on. Genuine conversions are not self-induced; they are not in our control. They come to us “like a revelation” – that is the word we usually use. They change our perspective beyond all logic, though afterwards we may invent some logic to help us explain the new perspective. And the problem, or at least one of the problems, is that when we try to explain a conversion to another person, we are stuck with a logic and a language that convey very little of what is really going on.

As already mentioned, Peter experienced the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven with all kinds of animals on it. In the end, he broke lifelong convictions and conclusions about what God wanted from faithful people. He had gone off to the home of a pagan Roman Centurion in Caesarea, and there he had eaten nonkosher food. But even more startling to him, Cornelius and his whole household received the Holy Spirit almost as soon as Peter started speaking, when they began to get glimmers about Jesus and His Message and His mission.

Clearly Jesus wanted this Roman “family” to be welcomed fully into the *ecclesia* – the faith family of the Holy Spirit – and it rocked Peter’s world. It opened up a whole new dimension to what the early Christians were believing about “the Christian church.” As such, Peter’s third conversion was also a revelation and a conversion for the early church itself. Torah did not mean what they had always supposed it meant. Soon they would worship on a different day of the week; they would eat all kinds of formerly forbidden food; they would have a completely different concept of what it meant to be circumcised. But most of all they would realize that baptism and the presence of the Holy Spirit were available to far more of earth’s children than they had at first imagined: people from every tribe and race and culture and gender and circumstance – as the Book of Acts keeps making clear.

The simple summation is: “Any friend of yours is a friend of mine.” That is, if the Spirit is welcoming anybody, faithful followers have no choice but to welcome them too.

Of course, many are still trying to claim that all this newness – this new awareness – must stop. That it must all be frozen back in A.D. 40 or 50. That if the Holy Spirit wants to welcome anybody after that, sorry – too late.

But the truth is, this third conversion of Peter paves the way for a whole string of awakenings that have been “coming over the Christian church” ever since. Who do we know who has “received the Holy Spirit”? Not just Greeks and Romans, and eventually a whole Gentile world that includes most of us. But also women and blacks and Chinese and American Indians and South Sea islanders. And some people, of course, are still bitching and moaning about it. But slowly the attitudes change, and the majority begins to realize that none of us are strong enough or wise enough to fight the Holy Spirit forever.

More recently, there has been a growing awareness that some gay people are very much in faithful love-bonds with Jesus. They have received the Holy Spirit. They know their own relationships with their partners to be consecrated and guided by the Holy Spirit. And so this same text in the Book of Acts leaves the faithful with no choice about accepting gay people into full membership in the Christian church. As with all the other struggles – from the acceptance of Cornelius down through all the resistance to various groups, races, cultures, slaves, genders – it takes some of us a while to catch on. It often seems like it takes us far longer than it should. But the Holy Spirit keeps winning us over in the end because the truth of God’s love and grace for all of us is more powerful than the forces that want to keep us divided and without respect for one another.

This acceptance, by the way, is not an “anything goes” kind of philosophy, which often tries to piggyback on the Gospel for as long as it can get away with it. Christians are not free to be liars or con artists or freeloaders or predators. It is not a LAW thing; it is a LOVE thing. To be specific, “promiscuity” is not okay with the Holy Spirit, whether it is gay or heterosexual. Promiscuity leads to broken relationships and people getting rejected and devalued. Promiscuity leads to heartbreak and betrayal. Wherever there is promiscuity, people are wounded, trust is smashed, and it takes a long time for such wounds to heal. These are Satan’s tools and Satan’s goals.

Long-term covenant love-bonds between partners, gay or heterosexual, are difficult and full of challenge, and they require prayer, forgiveness, continual maintenance, and dedication. But they lead toward true and faithful relationships that support and sustain love, children, trust, purpose, the Kingdom – things that God loves and Satan hates.

Do any of us imagine that we want solid, faithful, loving relationships more than gay people do? Have all of us found such relationships easy to come by? Do any of us know heterosexuals who exemplify sexual behavior that we believe the Holy Spirit abhors? Is it true that some of you have never had any gay friends who seriously and consistently tried to live their lives in obedience to the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

Life is challenging and sometimes difficult for every one of us. Are we not supposed to be caring, supportive and, when possible, on each other’s side? Sometimes, as with Peter, this requires a third conversion. Love is never easy or automatic in this world. Often love

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has to blast its way through all sorts of barriers, assumptions, and false convictions in order to get us back on the side of God's Kingdom. That can be disconcerting for a while, but it is also beautiful and wonderful.