

Defeating the World

‘A pastor was shaking hands with people as they left the church. A couple greeted him and said, “We listened carefully to every word you said”. The pastor thanked the couple and said that he looked forward to seeing them next week. “Oh, we won’t be here next week”, the couple responded. “We’re going to another church next week to get a second opinion”.’

We laugh at that, but in a way, it’s truly indicative of a major problem with the American church. For the entire premise of the joke should not even exist. While doctors may well have different opinions about disease origins and treatment options, this should not be the case with the Church. There’s supposed to be a uniformity of the Gospel message that can be found in each and every church. Unfortunately, this is not the case. So great have the differences between different denominations and individual churches become that the general public feels, like the couple in the joke, perfectly justified in shopping around for churches until they find one they like. Do you think this is the way it should be?

Today’s Scripture lessons give us a much different picture of what the Church is supposed to be. Consider the words we read from the Gospel of John. Verse 17 of chapter 15 records a command from Lord Jesus: “Love each other”. Seems simple

enough, doesn't it? If we are members of the same church, then we are commanded to love each other. That doesn't necessarily mean that we have to like each other, just the same way that a husband and a wife do not necessarily have to like each other, but they have to love each other. For love, we know, is a choice, not a feeling, not an emotion. Sure, having those lovey-dovey emotions is nice, but they're not necessary for true love. So the members of the church are to love each other. You can imagine what that means. That means that we each sacrifice our own wellbeing for the wellbeing of our fellow members. We take care of each other. We help each other. We support each other. We are family members, one of another. For we have all been made children of God. We have all been adopted into Father God's family. We all now have one and the same Father. One and the same Lord, Christ Jesus, Who is now our Elder Brother, for all time and eternity. If we remain in His love. For love is a choice.

The Apostle Peter was the first leader of the early Church. Lord Jesus first chose him to have the primary leadership role among all the disciples. Note this was not a permanent or hereditary position! But in the early years, Holy Spirit chose Peter to be the point man in guiding the Church in its formative years. And the first huge transformation for the Church was the expansion of the "sheepfold". We know in retrospect that Lord Jesus had come to earth to reconcile, not just the Jews, but the world, all peoples back to God. This concept, however, was unthinkable, unimagin-

able to the Jews. Christ Jesus was Himself a Jew. And while He had blessed both Jews and a few Gentiles during His ministry, it was incorrectly but universally understood that He had come only for the Jews, to bring them back to God. That He had come to set up a new, restored kingdom on earth, that would reestablish the Jews as an independent nation once again. Well, that's what nearly everyone thought! But as time passed, what with His own execution at the hands of the Romans, and then His resurrection, when He didn't call down legions of angels to defeat the Romans and drive them out of the Holy Land, it became apparent that He had something entirely different in mind. But it takes time for people to wrap their minds around totally new ways of thinking.

Up till this time, all the Christians were Jews, or became Christians by converting to Judaism first. But this was never Lord Jesus' intent. How to get this concept across to simpleton human beings? Well, God used dear old Peter. He saw the vision of the sheet filled with unclean animals, reptiles and birds. A heavenly voice told him to get up, kill and eat them. Well, any self-respecting Jew only ate kosher foods. Seeing all these detestable creatures that the foolish, barbaric Gentile peoples ate turned Peter's stomach. This was truly a major reason why most Jews were so turned off by Gentiles. They were so "unclean", so ignorant of the ways of God, so uncivilized. For us, some cultures in the world even today eat dogs. And we are repulsed. Racist bigots we become, for to even associate with people who eat such things and

worse is abhorrent in the extreme. Yet it was just this kind of vision that Holy Spirit presented to Peter. When told by the voice to kill and eat such horrific things, Peter immediately recoiled and protested that he had never and would never eat things that God had declared were off limits, unclean and impure. But the voice contradicted him, saying, “Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean”. But this was too much for Peter to accept. Not the first time, not the second. But three times the vision repeated itself. There was absolutely no mistake God was telling something new to Peter. But what could it really mean?

Well, all would shortly become clear. The Bible tells us that up in Caesarea, there was stationed a Roman captain. This was no typical Roman officer. Not all Romans were evil people! What a concept! This Cornelius was a good man. And what makes for a good man? He was a “God-fearing man”, and not only him, but everyone in his household. Such a humble, God-fearing man that God treated him to a special angelic visitation. Now, this was hardly just for Cornelius’ benefit. Actually, this entire episode would change the course of world history, because it would forever enlarge the “sheepfold”, increase the Church, by forever breaking down the wall of division between Jew and Gentile. This angel, this messenger of God, dutifully conveyed the message to Cornelius. You see, Cornelius and by extension, his entire household, had been chosen by God to become the very first Gentile Christians! The angel told him to send men to Joppa to

summon Simon Peter to come. And he did so without delay.

Now being a Roman centurion, he was well within his authority as a duly authorized legal enforcer of the rule of the Romans, to just up and order Simon Peter to appear. At least one of the delegation he sent was a soldier who had the means, tools and weapons, to force compliance. But no. The entire matter was conducted in a most Godly, respectful “Christian” way. Peter, having already been told by Holy Spirit to both expect the men and to go willingly with them, because they had been sent by Holy Spirit Himself, immediately went with them, even as unusual and improper such a thing was to do willingly, and not under coercion.

Peter and company arrives at Cornelius’ house, and against all proper Jewish protocol, Peter enters the home of a Gentile, gasp!. After reaching down to pull Cornelius up from the floor in worship of him, Peter asks why he has been called. Cornelius recounts the visit of the angel, and concludes saying in verse 33: “Now we are all here, waiting before God to hear the message the Lord has given you”. Talk about no pressure on Peter! So he then ever so briefly begins to explain Who and what Lord Jesus had come to do and accomplished so recently. But, if Peter’s mind had not yet been blown by the vision of the sheet full of unclean animals, his and his Jewish Christian companions were about to be shocked out of their minds! For before Peter even had finished his short presentation of the Gospel, which even he himself did not fully understand yet, Holy Spirit just up and fell on the

entire household. All the Gentiles received the gift of Holy Spirit, being baptized in the Holy Ghost, and were speaking in tongues, in the exact same way as the 120 Jewish Christians had been on the Day of Pentecost in the Upper Room in Jerusalem not so long ago! It was amazing! Astounding! Unbelievable! Yet it was happening right before their eyes! So Peter, under Holy Spirit's anointing, said one of the sanest, appropriate things he'd ever said in his life. Verse 47: "Can anyone object to their being baptized, now that they have received the Holy Spirit just as we did?" Of course no one dared say a word against this obvious work of God. And so, from then on, Gentiles have been part of the Church for forever! According to God's plan from the beginning.

Now our Master Jesus has commanded us to love each other. This, in and of itself, is in direct contradiction to what the world provokes and incites us to do and live every day. To remain in Christ's love, that is to obey His commandments, means we will necessarily come into conflict with the world every day of our lives. In fact, these days, it's getting worse. And the "Christians-in-name-only" are falling away right and left! For us, though we are in constant battle with the sin-crazed world, if we are children of God, we will defeat the world. For as our Lord assures us, in I John 5:4-5: "For every child of God defeats this evil world, and we achieve this victory through our faith. And who can win this battle against the world? Only those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God". If you believe, then you will win! It's guaranteed!!

