

DEFTLY DISMANTLING ECCLESIASTICAL BOMBS ACTS 11:1-18

The primary role of spiritual leaders in the church—a role the New Testament calls *elders*—is to discern the will of the Lord Jesus and lead the church to walk in it. Most often Jesus' will is discerned by carefully studying and accurately interpreting the Scriptures. But the Bible does not address every issue or decision that needs to be made in a church, in which case the elders must seek the Lord until they are convinced He has revealed His will to them, which usually requires many long, late-night meetings. However, one of the greatest joys of leadership is the gratification that results from being convinced that they have, indeed, discerned His will and are now able to lead the congregation to walk in it.

On the other hand, one of the greatest difficulties of leadership in the church is announcing to the congregation what they are convinced is God's will, only to have that announcement criticized, marginalized, misinterpreted, or even rejected.

Yet you don't have to be a leader for very long to know that this is normal. This is to be expected. Even the best spiritual leaders have taken heat for decisions and directions they announce to the people they lead. Especially decisions and directions that involve change. Because many people don't like change. Some people resist change. And when such people discover that they are being led to change it can produce in them a negative reaction.

But another role of spiritual leaders in the church is to, as much as they are able, preserve the unity of the church when there is misunderstanding, disagreement, or conflict. Division is the mortal enemy of the church, and spiritual leaders must do everything in their power to prevent it from happening. But therein lies another challenge. The church is comprised of people with diverse personalities, backgrounds, and convictions, some of which mitigate against unity. The church consists of people who have varying degrees of spiritual maturity, and people who have brought some of the baggage of their former life with them into the church. The result is that some people in the church are rigid, reactive, resistant, and rebellious.

It is not always easy dealing with such people. It requires patience, humility, sensitivity, and, most of all, love, qualities which are absolutely necessary to be an effective spiritual leader in the church. It is also a skill that requires extraordinary wisdom; thus, my title: "Deftly Dismantling Ecclesiastical Bombs."

We just finished studying Acts 10 in which Peter received a private revelation from God telling him that God was drastically, dramatically, and immediately changing the rules with regard to who and what were "clean" and, therefore, acceptable to Him. God told Peter that the door to salvation was now open to Gentiles, who were formerly outsiders. What is more, He told Peter to open that door, and when Peter did, he saw confirmation of God's revelation when the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his family and friends in the same way He had come upon them on the Day of Pentecost.

This was big news! Wonderful news! Well... wonderful news for *some*. Look at **verses 1-3**. *Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ³ "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."*

As I said, God changing the rules about Gentiles becoming heirs of the kingdom and eternal life was big news, and it wasn't long before that news got around. By the time Peter got back to Jerusalem from Caesarea, people were buzzing. Many people, like the Apostles and those who were mature in the faith, rejoiced at the news. After all, this was foretold in

the Old Testament and Jesus, and it corresponded with what they knew about God's amazing grace.

But there were some for whom that news was scandalous. They were skeptical that God would suddenly invite "unclean" Gentiles into His family, and suspicious that Peter had overstepped his authority by unilaterally making this decision and issuing this decree. They thought his decree was the result of his subjective interpretation of his private vision, and they considered it rash and cavalier. "How could you go into the home of uncircumcised Gentiles and eat with them, Peter? Don't you know what God says about that in the Law of Moses? Don't you know how God feels about that?"

Peter's response to them is both interesting and instructive, and it reveals some things about spiritual leadership in the church that, I believe, are very practical for us today.

For one thing, Peter did not react defensively to their accusation. He could have said, "Hey...wait a minute. Were you guys *there* in Joppa when I received that vision? Were you there in Caesarea to witness what the Holy Spirit did? Why don't you do a little more inquiry before jumping to conclusions!"

Or, he could have said, "Hey, do you know who I am? I'm one of the Twelve, an Apostle, the one who has preached countless sermons and performed dozens of miracles, and the one of whom Jesus said, 'I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church...and I will give you the keys to the kingdom.' Who are you people to question me? The Lord Jesus picked me to do this very thing when He was on earth!"

But Peter did *not* respond by leveraging his privileged position or his past experience to put these people down or put them in their place. Instead, **verses 4-15**. *⁴ But Peter began and explained it to them in order: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. ⁶ Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸ But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' ¹⁰ This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. ¹¹ And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; ¹⁴ he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵ As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning.*

I would like you to notice two things about Peter's response to his critics. First, he *objectively* tells them precisely what happened. If you compare Peter's recounting of the event here in chapter 11 with the actual event in Acts 10, you will find that the language is almost identical. He doesn't embellish or exaggerate the details in order to make it sound more interesting or more compelling. He doesn't editorialize or insert his own personal commentary in order to reinforce the story's veracity or defend his decision. He simply states the facts, exactly as they occurred.

Secondly, Peter *thoroughly* tells the story. He doesn't leave out anything that would be important for his critics to know, including God's exact words to him, "What God has made clean, do not call common," including that God revealed this to him *three* times, including that the vision occurred at precisely the moment Cornelius' servants showed up in Joppa, and including that the Holy Spirit dramatically fell upon Cornelius and his household.

In responding to his critics, Peter told the story objectively and thoroughly, and I would

suggest to you that this is extremely important when dealing with misunderstanding or conflict. Many times, sometimes inadvertently, we insert our emotions into such conversations to try and convince our critics how “right” we are (or how “wrong” they are), or to stress just how important the matter is. But rarely do emotionally laden conversations have a positive effect upon the outcome. They are often perceived as manipulative or combative or defensive.

I’m not sure if Peter felt emotion when he was confronted by his critics, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. And *if* he did, he was able to exercise self-control by keeping his emotions in check by objectively and thoroughly relating the facts, which can facilitate understanding and diffuse the emotion that is aroused by disagreement and misunderstanding. That’s wisdom. That’s the result of being filled with the Spirit.

It was only after Peter told the story that then he told his critics how they, too, could have confidence that this was totally a God thing. **Verses 16-17**, *¹⁶ And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ 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 stand in God’s way?”*

As Peter explains the rationale for his decision, he provides two pieces of evidence. First, he quotes Jesus himself. Not the passage in which Jesus prophesied that Peter would be given the keys to the kingdom, but a passage dealing with baptism. Peter’s audience was intimately acquainted with the ministry of John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus. He famously baptized people in water, preparing them for the coming Messiah. But the Messiah, Jesus prophesied, would baptize with the Holy Spirit, a much greater and more consequential baptism. Peter remembered these words and quoted them to his audience.

Secondly, Peter saw God impart the same gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household. He saw the Holy Spirit “fall” on them, compelling them to speak in tongues (languages they had not learned) and to extol the Lord (10:46). The vision Peter had received and his interpretation of the vision might have been *subjective*, but Peter’s personal observations of what the Holy Spirit did at Cornelius’ home, witnessed by many other Jews, was objective proof that his vision and interpretation were true.

And Peter says to his critics, “When I saw all that God was doing, who was I that I could stand in God’s way? God is the Author and Orchestrator of all this, not me.”

And **verse 18**, *¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”*

Questions answered...criticism abated...minds changed...division averted...unity preserved... resulting in worship. You cannot have a more successful outcome.

I realize that some of you may read this story in Acts 11 and think, “Okay, that’s a nice story...but what’s the big deal? It’s just a historical narrative about how a potential conflict was resolved. I don’t see what relevance it has for us today.”

As I have reflected on this passage over the last couple of weeks, I have personally been impressed by how relevant it is, especially for leaders in the church... and especially in a day when disagreements and misunderstandings in the church are so common. Let’s be honest: We, in the American church, have a disturbing propensity for disunity and division. So, allow me to suggest three principles that come out of this passage which have very practical implications.

First, unity in the church is extremely important to Jesus, and ought to be extremely important to members of His church. Just before He died Jesus was praying for all who would believe in Him, which includes us, and He asked His Father, “May all of them be one...” (Jn. 17:21). Our unity is precious to Jesus. It brings Him enormous pleasure when we live in

harmony and peace, and, conversely, it grieves Him when we do not.

It stands to reason, then, that those who love Jesus and want to please Jesus will be passionate about unity, committed to unity, and, in the words of Paul, *“eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Eph. 4:3). And especially elders, the spiritual overseers of the church, whom Jesus has entrusted to care for the church, and watch over the church. As I said earlier, division is the mortal enemy of the church because it tears at the fabric of who we are—a diverse group of people who have been made one in Christ.

Here is the second principle: A church’s maturity is not measured by whether or not it has conflicts, but by how it resolves its conflicts. Disagreements and misunderstandings are inevitable for every church, and sometimes those conflicts are over matters that are truly consequential (the matter that Peter was dealing with in Acts 11 was truly consequential). Spiritual leaders cannot prevent conflict, but, when it does happen, they can manage it in an objective, constructive manner so that it can be resolved as quickly as possible. As you know, conflict can escalate quickly.

Peter was wise to address this potential conflict as quickly as he did, and by so doing it was resolved before it caused division.

The third principle is: When there are concerns about decisions or declarations spiritual leaders have made, it is best to reserve judgment until you have heard the whole story. There are reasons for this. First, God reveals things to your leaders that He does not reveal to you. If He has revealed something to them that you do not like or you do not agree with, it’s not their problem, it’s yours. So instead of immediately assuming that they are wrong or that they need to change their minds, seek an audience with them. Let them tell you the story of how they arrived at the decision.

Second, chances are you don’t know the process your leaders went through to try and discern God’s will. You don’t know if they, like Peter, initially protested what God had revealed to them, or how hard and how long they may have wrestled with God’s will. Again, it is best to reserve judgment until after one has heard the whole story.

It was Peter, in His first epistle, who admonished us to *“be self-controlled and alert, for our enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour”* (1 Pet. 5:8). In my 41 years of pastoral ministry, I have learned a few things about the schemes and tactics of the devil with regard to the way he attacks local churches, which are a huge threat to him and his territory. It seems to me that his favorite and most effective tactic is to attack the unity of the church in order to cause division. Because he knows that when there is division the church is debilitated. Jesus becomes obscured, the church gets distracted and diverted from its true mission, and its testimony is severely tarnished.

So, the enemy looks for every opportunity to introduce conflict with the hope that those conflicts will not be resolved. And I would suggest to you that conflict is more like a bomb than a fiery dart. Dismantling those bombs, what I would call constructive conflict resolution, requires attentiveness, carefulness, and deftness.

It seems to me that every spiritual leader in the church needs these qualities, because conflict is inevitable, and often there are multiple conflicts going on simultaneously in the church (the enemy uses cluster bombs). But I certainly don’t believe that constructive conflict resolution is only to be done by spiritual leaders. All of us should learn how to do this. Indeed, as we increasingly become conformed to the image of Jesus and aligned with the will of Jesus, we will be passionately committed to constructive conflict resolution, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Deftly Dismantling Ecclesiastical Bombs

Acts 11:1-18

Main Idea: Responding to criticism that he had overstepped his authority by introducing a very consequential change in the church, Peter objectively and thoroughly explained exactly what God had revealed to him and how he became convinced it was true.

Peter is criticized by a “constituency” in the church (1-3)

The conservative “circumcision” party

The assumption that Peter was wrong

Peter’s response (4-17)

He tells the complete story of what happened (4-14)

Objectively and thoroughly

Emphasizing the work of the Holy Spirit

He reinforces the story’s veracity by quoting Jesus (16)

He uses irrefutable logic (17)

The Constituency is satisfied (18)

They fell silent

They worshiped

Three relevant principles

1. Unity in the church is extremely important to Jesus, and ought to be extremely important to members of his church
2. A church’s maturity is not measured by whether or not it has conflicts, but by how it resolves its conflicts
3. When there are concerns about decisions or declarations spiritual leaders have made, it is best to reserve judgment until one has heard the whole story

Application Questions

Acts 11:1-18

The circumcision group in the Jerusalem church made some assumptions about Peter's behavior before they had a chance to talk to him, which is the default reaction of many people. Why are people so quick to do this? Are you prone to make assumptions or jump to conclusions? What would be a more constructive way to respond. How can (better way) this become your default mode?

Most of us have seen or experienced the heartache of church division. What can you learn from Peter about how to dismantle ecclesiastical bombs in the church?