

March 4/5, 2006

*The Unstoppable Church*

## **There Is No Stopping God**

**Acts 10:24 - 11:18**

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I think we all know for all the talk we do about tolerance in our culture, we live in a culture where there are a lot of people who just simply do not like each other. There are people who are angry, people who are bitter and people who are unwilling to forgive. There are people who are prejudiced. It pervades the culture.

I suppose that makes sense when you think about a culture apart from Jesus, but I am reminded that Jesus was not like that. Jesus in many ways was a rule-breaker. He touched the untouchables. He loved the unlovable. He spent time with those people that good people were not supposed to spend time with, and He was constantly criticized for that behavior. But it does seem to me, if we are going to claim to be followers of Jesus, that is what we should do. Over the last years, the question “What would Jesus do?” has become popular. *That* is what Jesus would do, but it is hard because it gets really messy. Ministry always gets messy; that is just the way it is.

From the time Peter was a little boy, it had been drilled into his head that good Jewish boys do not play with the Gentiles. A good Jewish man does not make contact with Gentile people. You do not talk to them. You do not enter their home and they do not enter your home. That is the way it works; those were the rules.

But God shows up in a trance and tells Peter that the rules are changing. Now these forbidden Gentiles will become a part of this newly-formed family called the Church. Three times Peter objects, “No way!” And three times God says, “Yes way!” Everything is changing.

Peter has reached a point where he is at least willing to invite these Gentile visitors into his home. That is where we left the story last week and we pick it up there. Turn to Acts 10. If you were not here last week, I suggest you pick up a transcript, a CD or a tape for the first half of the story, as we are not really going to go back through it. We pick up this story in verse 23:

**And on the next day he got up and went away with them, and some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied him. On the following day he entered Caesarea. Now Cornelius was waiting for them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him, and fell at his feet and worshiped him. But Peter raised him up, saying, “Stand up; I too am just a man.” As he talked with him, he entered and found many people assembled. And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him; and yet God has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean. That is why I came without even raising any objection when I was sent for. So I ask for what reason you have sent for me.”**

(Acts 10:23b-29, \*NASB)

Peter and the group from Joppa leave. We find out later that Peter takes with him six Jewish Christians, plus three from Cornelius—so a total of ten. They arrive in Caesarea. Cornelius is not only anxiously waiting, he has invited his friends and relatives. They are all very anxious to hear what Peter has to say. Cornelius is so excited that he actually bows and worships Peter, and this is a moment of truth for Peter. Any time God uses someone significantly there is always the opportunity to steal God’s glory. It is easy sometimes to use positions of leadership for self-

gratification, but Peter responds wonderfully. He immediately identifies that behavior is inappropriate and says, "Get up. I am nothing but a man."

It is interesting what he says in verse 28. It would go on the list of the top ten ways to offend your host. What is the reasoning for saying this comment: "By the way, you know this is against the rules. I am not supposed to eat with you unclean people"? I think what Peter was doing here was for the benefit of the six Jewish Christians who had come with him. Now remember, they were not privy to the information from God that Peter understood. So as outraged as Peter was by God's command to include the Gentiles, I am guessing these Jewish Christians were equally outraged and they are wondering what Peter is doing. He is breaking the rules. So Peter is in essence saying, "Hang in there. I know we do not normally do this, but God has said He wants me to do it." I think he is holding them there and later they will become key witnesses as to what had transpired.

I also think it is interesting in verse 29 that Peter said, "That is why I came without even raising any objection." The reason was because God told him. We are thinking, *What is he talking about? All he did in the first part of the chapter is object to this.* Three times God said, "This is what I want you to do," and three times Peter said, "No way!" It is interesting to notice the objections came in the presence of God. Peter objected and did business with God, so God could change his heart and when the Gentiles arrived he was ready to receive them. What Peter is saying is that when the Gentiles arrived, he offered no objection.

What we tend to do is to pretend with God. At least Peter was honest with God. We come to God and we pretend that there is nobody that we dislike. We pretend there is nobody that we are irritated with because good Christians do not act that way. "Oh, God, we love everyone." And then when we meet those people we take it out on them. Peter dealt with the problem with God, so he was ready to receive them.

Let me make a suggestion to you. Think of the person in your life that most irritates you, the person that you most dislike or you have the most tendency to avoid. Every day this week in prayer before God, be honest with God and say, "God, I cannot stand this person. God, this person irritates me and I want to avoid him. I hate him or I am angry with him." Whatever it is, every day be completely honest before God. I would suggest to you that by the time you get here next week, your heart will be changed as to how you feel about that person. That is exactly what Peter did. He did business with God and God changed his heart. He was ready to receive them without objection.

The last part of verse 29 is interesting: "So I ask for what reason you have sent for me." I think Peter is still clueless. I think even though Peter has come this far, he still does not get it. He does not realize that there is this revival about to break out among the Gentiles and they are about to become part of the family.

**Cornelius said, "Four days ago to this hour, I was praying in my house during the ninth hour; and behold, a man stood before me in shining garments, and he said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Therefore send to Joppa and invite Simon, who is also called Peter, to come to you; he is staying at the house of Simon the tanner by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. Now then, we are all here present before God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord." (vs. 30-33)**

Cornelius relays his encounter with the angel that we studied last week. One thing that we need to make a note of is that this would be the first time Peter was aware of this. Even though we as the readers know this, this is the first time that Peter heard this information. So Peter is putting together, *This is what God said to him*, along with, *This is what God is doing with Cornelius*. He is realizing that God is pulling this thing together. This is a God moment.

**Opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)—you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”**

(vs. 34-43)

Peter is putting together that this is a God thing. God is doing something in Peter. God is doing something in Cornelius. He is bringing it together.

Now if you look at verse 35, take it out of its context and make it stand alone, it could appear to be supporting a view known as pluralism. Pluralism is the idea that it really does not matter how one comes to God and that as long as you are a good person and you fear God, God welcomes you in. But that is clearly *not* what is being said—because as you go further into the text, it is not until they understand what Jesus did and they embrace that, that they are saved. As a matter of fact, check chapter 11. Peter will even say that it wasn't until Peter arrived and the message of Jesus was delivered that they experienced salvation. What it *is* saying is that for those who fear God, those who are seeking after God, God welcomes them whether they are Jew or Gentile, male or female. They are welcome to pursue Him and will ultimately come to Him through Jesus.

One of the interesting features of the Book of Acts is how differently the message of Jesus is presented depending upon who the audience is. It is not a one-size-fits-all presentation. So far in the Book of Acts, it has been a message that has been highly oriented around the Old Testament law and the Old Testament prophets because it has been a Jewish audience and they revered the Old Testament. That was very effective for them.

But now, when we move to a Gentile audience, there is none of that. It shifts to what they would have understood and what they could identify with. So Peter says, “You have heard about Jesus. You have heard about Him in Nazareth. You have heard about Him in Galilee, in Jerusalem and Judea. You have heard about His miracles. You have heard about Him casting out demons. You have heard ultimately that He was crucified on a cross, buried and supposedly rose from the dead.” The movement of Jesus would have been so powerful that people all around the region would have heard these stories. So Peter is saying, “You have heard all of this. You are aware

of this.” But now Peter goes another step and says, “We are eyewitnesses. We have seen the miracles. We saw Jesus crucified and we have seen the risen Jesus. We are here to say that He is alive.”

We are coming upon Easter, and those people in the Jesus Seminar claimed that Jesus rose from the dead but it was not a physical resurrection; it was a spirit thing. They claim that nobody saw Him and He just disappeared into heaven. Peter could not disagree with that more. Peter said, “You know, the resurrection was so real that we ate with Him. We drank with Him. We saw Him. We talked with Him.” Paul says in Corinth that there were over 500 witnesses who saw the resurrected Jesus. Peter is saying, “We are among them. He is the Old Testament Messiah that the prophets talked about and God has appointed Him as the judge and the Savior.”

Theologically this is very important. Not only is Jesus the Savior, but Jesus is appointed by God as the Judge. It is not possible that one day we will stand before the Judge and the Judge will say, “I know what Jesus did but I have decided that is not adequate.” Because the Judge is the Savior, there is no chance of that. They are one and the same. Therefore, our salvation is guaranteed. Our salvation is assured. He says in verse 43 that it is through Jesus and those who believe in Him that they experience forgiveness of sins.

**While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. All the circumcised believers who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then Peter answered, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days. (vs. 44-48)**

Peter is declaring the message of Jesus, and I think at the exact moment when they understood it and they believed, the Holy Spirit came upon them and it was evidenced by speaking in tongues. This absolutely amazed these Jewish Christians that the Gentiles would be included in the family just as much as they were.

This raises an interesting question: Is speaking in tongues meant to be a normal evidence for the receiving of the Spirit? Well, the answer would be clearly no—because we have seen salvation all through the Book of Acts that was not evidenced by speaking in tongues. It is critical to remember that the Book of Acts is not laying out what should be normal for the church. It is laying out a transition of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, from what was to what will be. There is this period of transition.

Think about how much in the Book of Acts is not really normal in the church today. It is not normal that God speaks to us in trances, in visions and through angels. It is not normal that fishermen raise people from the dead. It is not normal that people are struck dead because they lied about their giving. It is not normal that everybody pools their money together in order to live in a commune. It is not normal that there are tongues of fire and rushing wind in a spectacular event like Pentecost. It is not normal necessarily that we meet in houses or the temple courtyard. None of these things are meant to be the normal. It is a transition. It is a spectacular time for the church.

In order to understand this subject more completely, it is good to have a sense of geography—because what is happening is that we are moving from Jerusalem and out from there. At key

points along the way, God is wanting people to know that the Church is very much alive and active and the Holy Spirit has come upon these different groups of people. He started in Acts 2 with what happened at Pentecost and Jerusalem. These people were already believers. The Holy Spirit came upon them subsequent to their salvation but that is how it would have to be in a period of transition. It was evidenced by the speaking in tongues, which is the word *glossa*, which means glossary languages. In Acts 2 the languages were actually listed. It was a miracle. It was a spectacular event to say this was a New Covenant. The Spirit is coming in a way that He has never come upon believers before.

The next time we see anything is in Acts 8 in Samaria. This is the passage that Mark taught us a few weeks ago. In Samaria, again you have people who are already believers. The Spirit comes subsequent to their salvation, but again it is a period of transition. If the Holy Spirit had come upon all believers when He came at Pentecost, it would have created mass confusion. Think about the confusion that it created just in Jerusalem, and Peter had to explain what was happening there. Because God is a God of order and not a God of chaos, He waits until Peter and John get to Samaria and then they explain the Holy Spirit. At that moment, the Holy Spirit comes upon them and they are included in the body of Christ. In Acts 8 in Samaria, there is no evidence of speaking in tongues.

The next is in Caesarea, which is out yet farther and for the first time out to the Gentiles. There is this moment of salvation when they trust Christ. The Spirit comes upon them, which I think is the norm according to the New Testament. The evidence of that is the speaking in tongues. The purpose of tongues there was to convince these circumcised Christians, the Jewish Christians, that the Spirit of God had come upon the Gentiles just as He had come upon the Jews. They were just as much a part of the family of God. They were not second-class citizens of the church. They were equal, and that is exactly how these Jewish Christians understood it. “It is just like what happened to us”—that is their conclusion.

There is only one other time in the Book of Acts, then, where there is this gift of tongues, and that is in Ephesus in Acts 19, and we will explain that when we get there. It is in Acts 2 in Jerusalem, Acts 10 in Caesarea and in Acts 19 in Ephesus. As the church spread out farther and farther, there are significant points along the way where God wants everyone to know that this is His Church. This idea that tongues was all over the Book of Acts and happening all over in the Church just simply cannot be supported. It happened three times in very specific locations for very specific purposes.

What exactly is happening here in Caesarea? There are those who would say that this was not the same gift of tongues. Even though it is the same word *glossa*, from which we get the word glossary, in this case it was not languages because you did not have different nations represented. It is more of a prayer language. It is an ecstatic language here. The reason people want to conclude that is because it justifies what often is referred to as “tongues” in churches today, and they need some sort of biblical support for that. But clearly that is not what this is. Paul does talk about that type of ecstatic prayer language, sometimes called ecstatic babble, in 1 Corinthians 12, 13 and 14. That prayer language was very common in the various Greek pagan religions. For those Gentile believers who have brought that pagan practice into the church and tried to pass that off as the gift of tongues, it would have had the opposite effect of what God intended. Rather than these Jewish Christians saying, “Look, they received the exact same gift,” they would have said, “That is not the same thing. That is clearly inferior. Clearly they are second rate compared to us.”

The only way for the desired effect to have happened was that the Gentile believers experience the exact same miraculous gift that they experienced at Pentecost. They would have immediately said, “That is exactly what happened to us. Therefore, they must be just as much a part of the church as we are.” That is exactly the way they responded.

The other thing to note is that the word “tongues” is in the plural. Any time in the New Testament that the writers are talking about the legitimate miraculous gift of languages known as tongues, it is always in the plural because languages are plural. You have multiple kinds of languages and they are listed in Acts 2. But whenever the gift of tongues is referred to in the singular, it is referring to this ecstatic language that came out of the pagan religions that actually is still practiced among many world religions today. The reason it is singular is because there are not multiple kinds of this ecstatic babble. Babble in itself is one kind, so it is singular. When you go to Corinthians and you read through that discussion, if you have a King James Bible, it refers to those as an unknown language or unknown tongue. Where it gives the word “unknown,” it is simply because it is singular. It is referring to this ecstatic prayer language that was taken out of the pagan religions and brought into the church. There is that which is artificial and there is that which is miraculous. Clearly the point of this text is saying that what happened at Pentecost, which was miraculous, is now what happened at Caesarea. This is miraculous; therefore these people must be part of the family. That is why Peter concludes:

**“Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days. Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.** (vs. 47 – 11:1)

In chapter 11:1, the Christians back at the home base in Jerusalem hear that the Gentiles have responded to the gospel and have been converted. There is this miraculous revival going on. It is time to have a party and it is time to celebrate. You think when Peter and company got back, they would have had a big celebration praising God for what He was doing among the Gentiles. But that is not what happened.

**And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”** (vs. 2-3)

Rather than Peter and company coming back to a celebration, they come back to a confrontation. They are confronted because they broke the rules, because they crossed the boundaries. They are confronted because they went into the homes of Gentile people and that was against the rules. Anytime that you are faithfully doing what God has called you to do, there is going to be somebody to criticize you because there are always those people who are more passionate about the rules than they are compassionate about lost souls. That is where these people were at. They were far more interested in who broke the rules than they were in these lost people who had come to faith in Jesus. So Peter responds to them.

When I was growing up, one of the words I heard all the time was this word *separation*: “We have to be separate people.” What I understood that meant by what was modeled and by what was taught is that we need to separate ourselves from the people of the world. You know, you have the people who don’t believe in Jesus; they are bad and they are over here. You have the people who do believe in Jesus; they are good and they need to clump together over here. And never the twain shall meet. That is what our understanding of separation was.

Somewhere along the way, it dawned on me that is not very much like Jesus at all. As a matter of fact, yes, we are a set-apart people. That is what the word “saint” or “holy ones” actually means. We are set apart from the value system of this world. We are set apart from the immorality of this world. But we are not set apart from the people of this world. Those are the very people Jesus has called us to love and to reach. The calling is to socialize without compromise. That is the challenge: to socialize without compromise.

Peter goes on in the text, and I am not going to read it because we have already been through this part of the story twice. This is the third time it has been stated. He tells them what his trance was, what God said to him, what happened to Cornelius and what God said to him. Peter is making the case that this is a God thing.

There is a question that we might ask: Why does Luke repeat the details three times? For an author who is known for his brevity and his lack of detail, he tells the exact same story three times in two chapters. By the end of the third time, we are saying, “You know, we get it.”

I think there are a couple of reasons for that. First, you cannot underestimate how radical it was that these Jewish people, who had it drilled into their heads from the time they were children that they were not to spend any time with Gentiles, to realize that had all changed and they were now part of the family. That was so radical that three times was necessary to make a very important point. Even the first readers of the Book of Acts would have still struggled with the reality of that teaching, so three times he is saying it. It took Peter three times and maybe it will take us three times.

The second thing is there is this picture of the sovereignty of God and that God was doing something with Peter, God was doing something with Cornelius, and he brought them together. This was not something that just happened and now they are discussing if it was good or bad. This was a God thing and Peter is going to go and say, “If this was a God thing, then how can we stop it? How can we get in the way of it? How can we disagree with it?”

There are two verses that I want to highlight and one is verse 14.

**“...and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.”**

This is Peter talking about Cornelius’ vision. What Cornelius understood is that when Peter comes, Peter will speak words to you by which you will be saved. You take that back to Acts 10:35 and clearly when God welcomed them in, it was not salvation—because what Cornelius was told was that it isn’t until Peter arrives and Peter tells the story of Jesus that you will be saved. It helps us again to see that Acts 10:35 is not plural. It is just saying those who seek God are welcome, but they come through Jesus.

The other verse that I want to highlight is Acts 11:15:

**“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning.”**

There are two things here to notice. One is that Peter identifies that what happened to the Gentiles was exactly what happened to them at Pentecost. It was not a different gift. It was not a different manifestation. The whole point of the text is that it was exactly the same. It was a miraculous gift of languages.

The other thing that is worth noting is that Peter goes all the way back to what happened at the beginning, meaning Pentecost. At this point, we are probably about seven or eight years past Pentecost. What Peter says would lead us to conclude that the gift of tongues was not common within the church. Peter had to go all the way to the one time it happened in Jerusalem as a point of reference. In other words, he is saying, “What happened in this very unique place in Caesarea is what happened to us eight years ago back at Pentecost.” This again would affirm this idea that it was very rare and very specific for a very specific purpose. It was not the norm, even in the first century church.

**“And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ”** (v. 16)

He is remembering Jesus’ statement to that effect. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the act that God does the moment we trust Jesus as Savior. We receive the Holy Spirit and we are identified with the body of Christ—that is what it means. It is not something we seek. It is not something we do. The rest of the New Testament would say it is automatic with every believer and it is at that moment that you are part of the family: Jew or Gentile, male or female. Paul talked about it in Ephesians when he said, “There is one Spirit, there is one Lord, there is one salvation, there is one body. We are all connected together through the person of Jesus Christ.”

When I enter into spiritual discussions with individuals, I try to avoid the labels, because a label really does not matter. All I want to know is who or what are you trusting in for your salvation. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, the moment you trusted Jesus you received His Spirit and you were identified as part of the body of Christ. At that moment we are family, regardless of what label is on our forehead. What Peter goes on to say is if God views it that way, then who are we to say otherwise?

**Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?” When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”** (vs. 17-18)

In other words, they hear that it is a God thing. How can they argue with that? So they accept it. We might say that they accept it for the time being. This is going to be an ongoing problem in the Book of Acts, this realization that the Gentiles could fully be accepted as part of the family of God. Even Peter himself is going to revert back to some old beliefs, and Paul is going to have to confront him and get him back on track. It is a very difficult thing.

There are several things that come to my mind out of this story as we begin to wrap this up. One is just the reality that if I am going to be faithfully doing what God has called me to do—to have unbelieving friends and to spend time with them—I need to know I will be criticized for that. There will always be those people who are more passionate about their rules than they are compassionate about lost people. You just need to know that. I wish that was not true but it is. We also need to remember it must be socialize without compromise. It is not an excuse to live like the rest of the world. Hanging around unbelievers and living like them accomplishes nothing and it is nothing like Jesus at all. It must be socialize without compromise.

I want to close with two stories. Both of them come from India. With our church planting initiatives in India, this seemed appropriate. One is a very negative story and one is a very positive story. The first one comes out of Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography, talking about a time when he was a student in England.

...in his student days in England he was deeply touched by reading the Gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity, which seemed to offer a real solution to the caste system that divided the people of India. One Sunday he attended church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines. But when Gandhi entered the sanctuary, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said to himself, "I might as well remain a Hindu!"

- *Acts*, by R. Kent Hughes (Crossway, 1996) p. 149.

Just imagine how India could be different today if that one church at that one moment would have understood what we just learned from the Book of Acts.

The second is a story told by Paul Brand, who is a medical doctor. He was a missionary in India and spent most of his adult life with leprosy patients. He says:

John Karmegan came to me in Vellore, India, as a leprosy patient in an advanced state of the disease. We could do little for him surgically since both his feet and hands had already been damaged irreparably. We could, however, offer him a place to stay and employment in the New Life Center.

Because of one-sided facial paralysis, John could not smile normally. When he tried, the uneven distortion of his features would draw attention to his paralysis. People often responded with a gasp or a gesture of fear, so he learned not to smile. Margaret, my wife, had stitched his eyelids partly closed to protect his sight. John grew more and more paranoid about what others thought of him.

He caused terrible problems socially, perhaps in reaction to his marred appearance. He expressed his anger at the world by acting the part of a troublemaker, and I remember many tense scenes in which we had to confront John with some evidence of stealing or dishonesty. He treated fellow patients cruelly, and resisted all authority, going so far as to organize hunger strikes against us. By almost anyone's reckoning, he was beyond rehabilitation.

Perhaps John's very irredeemability attracted my mother to him, for she often latched onto the least desirable specimens of humanity. She took John, spent time with him, and eventually led him into the Christian faith. He was baptized in a cement tank on the grounds of the leprosarium.

Conversion, however, did not temper John's high dudgeon against the world. He gained some friends among fellow patients, but a lifetime of rejection and mistreatment had permanently embittered him against all nonpatients. One day, almost defiantly, he asked me what would happen if he visited the local Tamil church in Vellore.

I went to the leaders of the church, described John, and assured them that despite obvious deformities, he had entered a safe phase of the arrested disease and would not endanger the congregation. They agreed he could visit. "Can he take communion?" I asked, knowing that the church used a common cup. They looked at each other, thought for a moment, and agreed that he could also take communion.

Shortly thereafter I took John to the church, which met in a plain, whitewashed brick building with a corrugated iron roof. It was a tense moment for him. Those of us on the outside can hardly imagine the trauma and paranoia inside a leprosy patient who attempts for the first time to enter that kind of setting. I stood with him at the back of the church. His paralyzed face showed no reaction, but a trembling gave away his inner turmoil. I prayed silently that no church member would show the slightest hint of rejection.

As we entered during the singing of the first hymn, an Indian man toward the back half-turned and saw us. We must have made an odd couple: a white person standing next to a leprosy patient with patches of his skin in garish disarray. I held my breath.

And then it happened. The man put down his hymnal, smiled broadly, and patted the chair next to him, inviting John to join him. John could not have been more startled. Haltingly, he made shuffling half-steps to the row and took his seat. I breathed a prayer of thanks.

That one incident proved to be the turning point of John's life. Years later I visited Vellore and made a side trip to a factory that had been set up to employ disabled people. The manager wanted to show me a machine that produced tiny screws for typewriter parts. As we walked through the noisy plant, he shouted at me that he would introduce me to his prize employee, a man who had just won the parent corporation's all-India prize for the highest quality work with fewest rejects. As we arrived at his work station, the employee turned to greet us, and I saw the unmistakable crooked face of John Karmegan. He wiped the grease off his stumpy hand and grinned with the ugliest, the loveliest, most radiant smile I had ever seen. He held out for my inspection a palmful of the small precision screws that had won him the prize.

A simple gesture of acceptance may not seem like much, but for John Karmegan it proved decisive. After a lifetime of being judged on his own physical image, he had finally been welcomed on the basis of another Image. I had seen a replay of Christ's own reconciliation. His Spirit had prompted the Body on earth to adopt a new member, and at last John knew he belonged.

"Belonging" from p. 23-25 of *Stories for the Heart, I Forget* compiled by Alice Gray (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 1996).

The reality is that you have people just like John in your office, in your neighborhood or in your school. Oh, they might not be physically scarred but they are scarred; they are wounded and they are angry. They are bitter and despairing. They hate life and they hate everything around them. They are not real lovable people. They wonder in their heart, *Is there anyone who could possibly love me?* Jesus loves them, and as followers of Jesus, He is calling us to love them. He calls us to touch those who are untouchable, to love those who seem unlovable. He calls us to sit down and eat with those that everybody else says are out of bounds.

Every weekend there are people like John who walk through these doors. The scarring and disfigurement lies beneath the surface. They are angry and despairing. They are ready to give it up. They wonder, *Is there anyone who could possibly love me and accept me?* My prayer is that we will be the kind of congregation that would be like Jesus—that would reach out and love those people—because that is what Jesus would do.

\*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE  
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March 4/5, 2006

**Study Questions**  
*The Unstoppable Church*  
**There Is No Stopping God**  
**Acts 10:24 - 11:18**  
Pastor Bryan Clark

**Opening Discussion**

1. Who are the people you avoid? Why?
2. How do you respond to people who clearly don't want much to do with you?
3. How do you balance the need to influence unbelievers for Jesus while remaining uncontaminated by the world? In other words, how do you spend time with unbelievers without becoming like them?

**Bible Study**

1. Review the first part of the story from Acts 10:1-23a. Why did God need to prepare Peter's heart for his visitors?

Wouldn't you think the leader of the New Testament church would be more accepting of anyone who wanted to know about Jesus?

Are we ever like Peter? Explain.

2. Read Acts 10:23b-48. What transpired in Cornelius' home?

What was the evidence that these Gentiles had truly become part of the body of Christ?

How were the circumcised Jews affected by this event?

3. What was the purpose of the gift of tongues in this text?

What was the impact of this miraculous gift? (See also Acts 11:15).

Is Acts a book about what we should expect as the norm in the church or about transitions from the old covenant to the new?

4. Read Acts 11:1-18. What was the response of the circumcised Christians back in Jerusalem regarding Peter's ministry?

Have you ever had people criticize you for spending time with unbelievers? How did you respond?

5. Read Galatians 2:11-14. Did the pressure put on Peter from the party of the circumcised affect Peter's behavior?

What about Barnabas?

How can peer pressure prevent us from reaching lost people?

6. What was Peter's answer to the circumcised Christians in Acts 11?

What would Jesus do to reach the lost people around you?

## **Application**

1. Is anyone beyond God's power to save? List one person you think is the least likely person to come to Jesus. Would you begin to pray for that person's salvation and be willing to be an instrument to reach that person if God so chooses?
2. Are you ever guilty of criticizing other believers because of who they spend time with, like the circumcised Christians did with Peter? What can you do to prevent being critical of those whom God is calling and blessing?
3. How do you prevent yourself from falling back into an attitude of partiality towards people like Peter did in Antioch (see the Galatians text)?

How do you keep from dividing the world up into "us" and "them?"