

Aug 23, 2020

## Acts 10:1-23

### Outward Church: Cultural Preferences

*Jonathan M. Romig*  
[CornerstoneWestford.com](http://CornerstoneWestford.com)

Today I want to start with a Scripture passage that **promises** how things are going to be **one day**. This promise comes from the book of **Revelation**, the last book in the Bible. It shows us what the **final day** will look like when Jesus returns. It shows us a **great multitude** of **different kinds of people** from all over the **earth singing and praising God**.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Revelation 7:9-10** (ESV)

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

Have you ever **imagined** what this will be like? Like, will there be different pockets and sections of people singing together. Like, in one section the **baptists** will be singing hymns wearing suits and ties, their hands in their pockets but smiles on their faces? Right next to them I imagine a **church from Africa**, the women dressed in **colorful African dresses**. They’re dancing and singing and the kids are jumping up and down. Maybe there’s a section of **monks** from the **middle ages** who will be chanting, and a **Portland section** where everyone is wearing **skinny jeans, brimmed hats**, and are **swaying in the wind**. I’ll be in the **pastor** section in the **far back** with my **tambourine missing the beat**.

We’ll probably be all **mixed together, arms around each other’s shoulders, all dressed in white, singing songs** from different **countries** from different **times** and **places**. You’ll finally get to try that ancient **Gregorian chant** you’ve always wanted to sing. **John paints a picture** of a beautiful **multi-ethnic mega-church**. We are all **gathered around the bloody Lamb** who **laid down his life for us, Christ Jesus**, at the **center accepting** all our **praise** from **all these people** from **all around the world**.

**Why** does **John** give us this picture? Why did **God** show it to him and to us? So we could say, “That’s nice! Can’t wait **to get there!**” or to **inspire** us? I think John gives us a glimpse of what the **church will look like then** to **influence** what it **looks like now**. It’s meant to **inspire** us to **work towards it**, to **help create it**, to **experience a little bit of heaven’s diversity** in the **here and now**.

We’re going to spend **this week** and the **next couple weeks** going through **Peter’s vision** of **eating the unclean animals** and I hope and pray that it will **inspire us** to **work towards becoming** a more **diverse multi-ethnic church** that looks just a little bit more like that **final church** in **Revelation chapter 7**.

I’ve been working through a class called ***Race, Class, and the Kingdom of God*** to see if it’s something I’d like to lead us through this fall in our **Christian Education hour**. In the third session the speaker, **Elena Aronson**, puts up a picture of **her church**. It’s a beautiful picture of white and black families, young and old, all together. In this picture, she says, there are both **homeless** and **millionaire**, people from all social and economic places. But she also says the **diversity** of **their church body** didn’t happen without **hard work**.

At their church they have something called the **75% rule**—“If you’re **comfortable more than 75% of the time**, then we’re doing something wrong.” In other words, “If you’re comfortable more than 75% of the time, that means **your cultural preferences are winning** over everybody else’s.” So if the kind of **prayers**

that are prayed, worship songs that are sung, and sermons that are preached make you feel comfortable more than 75% of the time, then your likes are setting the agenda. That's convicting. That tells me **my cultural preferences** almost always win out—starting with the **preaching**.

If the goal is a **multi-ethnic culturally diverse church**, which we see in **Revelation** and in **Acts**, then we need to **re-consider** some of our **cultural preferences**. I believe God wants to **begin to peel back** our **cultural preferences** so that we can experience **his kingdom** and **his promises**. To do this we need **three things: openness, humility, and the Holy Spirit**.

## 1) Openness.

### **Acts 10:1-8** (ESV)

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, 2 a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. 3 About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, "Cornelius." 4 And he stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" And he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. 5 And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. 6 He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." 7 When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, 8 and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

The first thing we need to **peel back** our cultural preferences for the sake of **Christ's diverse kingdom** is... **openness**. If the **type of person** God chooses Peter to meet **doesn't surprise us**, then we're **missing something**. I know there are **several Centurions** in the **Bible**, and so we kind of think of them as quality guys, but first and foremost they were **Roman soldiers**. They were **trained killers** whose job it was to use their **100 men** to do whatever the emperor wanted, including **crush foreign invasions** and **eradicate rebellions**, even **Jewish rebellions**. Herod likely sent a **Centurion** and his men to **Bethlehem** after **the birth of Jesus** to kill all the boys who were **two-years old** and under (Matt 2:16). To be a **Roman** was also to **worship the emperor**. Leaders in the **military** often **functioned like "pagan priests"**, leading their soldiers in worship (*Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence*).<sup>2</sup>

The Bible does tell us Cornelius was **devout** (religious), **feared God**, **gave to the poor**, and **prayed**. This tells us that he **may have been something known** as a "**God-fearer**," which is someone who worshipped and prayed to the **one true God of Israel** but **refused** to become Jewish through **circumcision**. So at the end of the day, it's **hard to know** exactly what was in Cornelius' **heart**. But we can trust that God sees what's on the inside and chooses him to be the **first of many Gentiles coming to Jesus**.

I want you to **imagine** someone who is **completely different than you**. They're the **opposite gender**. They're a **different age** than you. They don't have the **same money** as you. They're from a **different country** than you. Their **skin color**, and **hair style**, and the **way they talk**, even the **language they speak**, are **all different** from you. Maybe they're from Africa or India or Mongolia or Arabia or Canada... Maybe they're just from Lowell. I just got Covid tested at the **Cambodian** center in Lowell. Maybe they're a **recent immigrant** from **Cambodia**. Wouldn't it be **amazing to worship Jesus** next to them? Wouldn't it be amazing to share a **pot-luck meal** with them? It would be really cool to try some Cambodian food. How amazing would it be to have **international musicians** and **instruments** on our **worship team**? I loved the time **Thierry preached in French**. It would be great to have someone preach in **Haitian** or another language. When I worked as an **intern** at a [Church in Lynn](#) it was definitely the most diverse multi-ethnic church I'd attended. I remember a **white** population, a **black** population, and a **Vietnamese** population. At the time I didn't appreciate how **special** that is. In the race class the teacher says, "**Intentionality** is not the

same thing as **good intentions**.” We can create a **cross-cultural church family**, but we have to take **intentional steps** to make it happen. Living in **Westford** it’s going to be **harder** for us than someplace like Lynn, but with **Lowell** right **around the corner**, and Westford itself having a lot of different people from different ethnicities, there’s **plenty of opportunity**. *A good first step is openness*. A second is...

## 2) Humility

### Acts 10:9-16 (ESV)

9 The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. 10 And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance 11 and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. 12 In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” 14 But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” 15 And the voice came to him again a second time, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” 16 This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

**God** takes what Peter thought he knew and **flips it upside-down**. Peter **thought he understood** the law and how he wasn’t supposed to eat **unclean animals**. Maybe you’ve heard the phrase, “**You are what you eat**.” Well, for much of Jewish history the people of Israel practiced **strict dietary laws**. Even today, **kosher food** is a huge industry. Kosher food meets Old Testament and **traditional Jewish dietary restrictions**. I learned this week that dairy and meat can’t touch so no cheeseburgers. There are also one set of **drawers** and **cooking utensils** for dairy and a second set for meat. Just like kosher food **signifies people as Jewish today**, it signified them as Jewish in the **past**. God gave the Israelites specific dietary laws of what was clean (edible) and unclean (inedible) to **set them apart** as **his special people**.

Monica and I are doing the **Whole30** right now. It’s kind of like the **paleo diet**. When you do something like this, or any type of diet, it kind of sets you apart. It changes what you eat, and if you go over to someone’s home, they try and make adjustments for you. Last week I ate a burger at a friend’s home, but I wrapped my **burger** in **lettuce**. Weird, right! If you’re apart of a gym that does the Whole30 together, you have a community that does it too. Together, you kind of embrace the **weird** of the diet, the **differentness**. God gave the Israelites differentness in their diet to set them apart as **his** own. Check out what it was like.

### Leviticus 11:2-3 (NIV)

2 “Say to the Israelites: ‘Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: 3 You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud.’”

The rest of Leviticus 11 goes through various **scenarios** spelling out what kind of animals the Israelites can and cannot eat.<sup>3</sup> For example, **camels** are unclean because even though **they chew the cud** they don’t have a **divided hoof**—they’re more like “two large toes” (Lev 11:4). When I was in **Minneapolis** several years ago at a CCCC church-planting conference, I tried a **camel burger** in an **international food court**. It was **tough** and **gamey** and not kosher. There’s also rules for **seafood**.

### Leviticus 11:9 (NIV)

“‘Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams you may eat any that have fins and scales.’”

So sorry, if you were Jewish, you weren’t supposed to eat **shell-food**. No **New England clam chowder** for you! I’ve created a picture sampling the different kinds of clean and unclean animals.

- **Clean** = Cows, chickens, sheep, salmon, locust, and deer.

- **Unclean** = Pigs, horses, camels, eels, lobster, vultures, bats, moths, and puppies.

Sorry, if you're kosher, you **can't eat puppies!** But, you can eat certain kinds of **bugs** with **jointed legs**, like grasshoppers and locusts (Lev 11:20-23). Now while not eating some of these animals **may** have had **health benefits**, the Bible **doesn't explicitly say that** but that God gave these rules to **show their holiness**.

**Leviticus 11:44** (NIV)

44 I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground.

The Jews had followed these dietary restrictions for over a **thousand years**. But now **Peter** is seeing this vision where Jesus tells him to take and eat a **puppy!** That's so **confusing**. Verse 17 says Peter was "**perplexed**" by what he saw. He was "**at a loss**."<sup>4</sup>

Speaking of **animals in sheets**. I once saw an episode of that TV show *Chris Angel Mindfreak*. You remember that show where he did magic for people on the street? Like he'd levitate and people would freak out! Well, in **one episode** he made an **entire elephant disappear behind a giant sheet** in a **circle of people**. I was like, "**How did he do that?**" I've come to the **conclusion** that they must have **all been in on it... even the elephant**. I was **perplexed**.

Peter was perplexed, but I don't think that was a bad thing. I think that's another way of saying Peter was **humbled**, because he **didn't get it**, and that's okay. If we start to have conversations about **becoming a more cultural diverse community**, even if we don't get it **right right away**, that's still a **start**. In *Race, Class, and the Kingdom of God* (I know today is starting to sound like a **promo** for them—and maybe it is...), they lay out "**Rules of Engagement**"—how to discuss race in the church.

1. No experts in here. — We are all learning together. That takes humility.
2. Expect someone to say something stupid or racist. — Been there, done that.
3. We have a Mercy Umbrella in here. — We can have humility, without fear, because of grace.

Yesterday at our Elder's retreat we decided to offer this class this **fall** as part of our adult Christian Education program via Zoom. I hope you'll be a part of this. It's an opportunity for *openness, humility*, and...

### 3) The Holy Spirit

Acts 10:17-23

17 Now while Peter was inwardly perplexed as to what the vision that he had seen might mean, behold, the men who were sent by Cornelius, having made inquiry for Simon's house, stood at the gate 18 and called out to ask whether Simon who was called Peter was lodging there. 19 And while Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you. 20 Rise and go down and accompany them without hesitation, for I have sent them." 21 And Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your coming?" 22 And they said, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say." 23 So he invited them in to be his guests.

I don't want you to miss it, but did you **catch what the Holy Spirit did? He spoke!** He had a **conversation with Peter**. He told him **what to do** and **how to do it!** "Go with these men, immediately!" This should be **really encouraging** guys. Remember, **Peter** is the one who **rejected Jesus three times**. And then it just **happened again**. He told God **no three time** in his vision. He's probably thinking, "**Not again!**" But God's

**not done with him yet.** God is shaping him and leading him and at **just the right time** the Holy Spirit tells him what to do and he does it. He takes **one small step of obedience.** He, an **observant Jew** who isn't supposed to eat with Gentiles, invites Cornelius's men in for dinner (**one soldier** and **two servants**, all probably Gentiles). He shows **hospitality** to those who are **different than him.**

What **one small step of obedience** is Jesus calling **you to personally?** Maybe it's an **act of hospitality**, sharing an **outdoors socially distant meal** with people who are **ethnically different** than you and just **asking them questions** about their **experience** right now. Maybe it's speaking up for a **coworker** at work who sometimes gets **overlooked** because they come from such a **different cultural perspective.** Maybe it's making sure your kids **know** they can **date** and **marry** someone with a **different ethnic heritage.**

What's **one small step of obedience** Jesus is calling us to as a **church?** I believe the **Bible** leads us to **work towards having** a more **diverse multi-ethnic church.** But in order to **make this happen,** we have to be willing to **give up** some of our **cultural preferences.** This means intentionally **elevating** into **leadership** people from **other cultural ethnicities, community-group** leaders, **worship team** members, **Elders, Deacons, staff.** *Laying down our cultural preferences takes openness, humility, and the Holy Spirit.*

Jesus, laid down the **glories of heaven,** all of **his cultural preferences,** being **surrounded by angels in worship,** and was **born** in a **stable,** laid in a **manger,** the **humblest way** to begin (Phil 2:5-11). But that wasn't far enough. Day by day, every day, he put his **Heavenly Father's will above his own,** laying down his cultural preferences for **thirty-three years** till the cross, where he **laid down it all.** **Jesus gave up** his life to **win salvation** for every tribe, tongue, and nation, even **you** and **me.** To know him means **laying down ours too,** laying down our **pride** and **ego** and **clinging to him.** It means **repenting** of the way we **idolize ourselves** and **intentionally** seeking those who are **different than us** so we can **elevate them.** *Building a diverse multi-ethnic church body takes openness, humility, and the Holy Spirit.*

The **gospel** tells us that **we're forgiven** for the ways **we haven't prioritized** others of **other ethnicities.** As we **make changes,** the gospel guards us **from pride,** thinking **we've achieved it.** **Jesus died** to save us from the ways we **alienate others.** There's **no room for pride** here. And when we **stumble** and **fall,** when we say something **stupid** or **racist,** we have a **Mercy Umbrella** in here. Jesus forgives. *It's because of the gospel that we can practice openness, humility, and follow the Holy Spirit.*

### **Ephesians 3:20-21 (NIV)**

20 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

*Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).*

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What are some of your cultural preferences?
2. What are some examples of cultural preferences that make you uncomfortable?
3. What type of church do you see when you read Revelation 7:9-10?
4. Why was it so difficult for Peter to understand the vision in Acts 10?
5. What does it mean to approach cultural differences with openness and humility?

6. How might we apply the 75% rule to the way we do things as a church?
7. What one step might the Holy Spirit be leading you to take to love someone of a different ethnicity?
8. What's one small step we can take as a church body to become more diverse and multi-cultural?
9. How does Jesus' model of humility in Philippians 2:5-11 help us humble ourselves?
10. How does the gospel give us the courage to make changes without fearing failure or risking pride?

<sup>1</sup> Compare to God's promise in Genesis 12:2-3.

<sup>2</sup> “And as a centurion, Cornelius would not only be pressured to worship foreign gods, but also be responsible for leading various ceremonies on behalf of his cohort. As a centurion, Cornelius would essentially function as a pagan priest!” Sprinkle, Preston. *Fight: A Christian Case for Non-Violence*. David C. Cook. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> See infographic: <https://www.ucg.org/bible-study-tools/booklets/what-does-the-bible-teach-about-clean-and-unclean-meats/infographic-which> Accessed August 15th, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Mounce Greek Dictionary.