

Handout

Peter's Circle – 1st Century Jewish-Christians

Social/economic context: We do not know much about Peter's social/economic context in the early days of the Church. We do know that at this time he viewed himself primarily as Jew – (hence conflict between Peter and Paul over need for Gentiles to become Jewish (i.e. circumcised) to become Christian.) It is therefore safe to conclude that most of his social groups would have been also Jewish-Christians. As we have no evidence of Peter returning to his role as fisherman, he was probably also dependent on the financial support of such people.

Political context: At this time, as they had been for most of their history, the Jewish people were an occupied people. Their lives were governed by their Roman occupiers. Although they were allowed to practice their faith and customs without interference the occupation of their Promised Land still rankled. They still longed for an earthly Messiah who would restore the dignity and glory of David's Israel.

Religious context: Until this moment a faithful follower of the 613 Laws of Moses found in Pentateuch (First 5 books of the Bible). Among those laws were general prohibitions against contact between Jews and Gentiles – see Peter's own comments in verse 28 – because it was assumed that Gentiles would not know the dietary and cleanliness laws and would thus inadvertently transfer their 'uncleanness' to the Jews. Because, as result of this unidentifiable 'uncleanness' the Jews would not know which purification rituals were required. Jews who were known to fellowship (especially eat) with Gentiles were ostracized by other Jews who would not want to risk inadvertent 'contamination'. Without the proper purification ritual one could be excluded from the Temple and unwelcome in Synagogue. To be excluded from Temple would mean to be excluded from Worship. To be unwelcome in Synagogue means to be

ostracized by community – excluded from social and economic opportunities. Excluded from group discussion (note Jesus and the Apostles taught/preached in the synagogues)

Handout

Cornelius' Circle – 1st Century Roman Centurion

Social/economic context: Centurions would have been a commander of 100 men in a Roman Legion. Such men were members of a relatively small class and received substantial pensions upon retirement and would easily count among the notables of a town. This appointment was dependant on the good-will of the Roman leaders 'further up the ladder'.

Political Context: Cornelius was a stranger in a strange land. The Romans were an occupying force. Their empire spread from Western Europe to India and North Africa. This empire was maintained by a strict code of discipline and control. Great freedoms were allowed to the occupied peoples as long as they behaved, but there was never any doubt who was in charge. In fact, the Romans often used 'Puppet' Kings from the local population like the Herods. Disobedience could be punished by banishment to the far reaches of the Empire but loyalty was also rewarded with plenty of opportunity for upward mobility. Caesarea Philippi the city where Cornelius lived was the Roman Capital of the province of Judea.

Religious context: He, as all Romans, was a Gentile – strictly translated 'non-Jew'. Romans were rather religiously tolerant as long as it did not threaten the stability of the Roman Empire. However, refusal to honour the Emperor Cult could bring down the wrath of the 'Empire'. Refusal to honour the patron god's of a city could bring down the wrath of one's neighbours. Caesarea Philippi was built by Herod the Great's son Philip who named it after himself and the Emperor Caesar Augustus. It contained a Temple at which the long-dead Caesar Augustus was worshiped and, during Cornelius' time, where the current Emperor Tiberius was also worshiped as divine.

Emperor Cult – a mechanism by which order was maintained in the Provinces of Rome (only the most 'degenerate' Emperors ever claimed divinity themselves). The Emperor was revered as divine and was frequently referred to as Son of God, Lord, and Saviour. Temples and priests would be established in support of this cult. The Romans believed that god's were to be kept happy by appropriate worship so that that god would protect his or her people and they would know prosperity. City Cults – city's often

had their own patron 'god' and lack of appropriate worship by individuals could have dire consequences for the entire city. (It was this belief that Nero used to his advantage when Rome experienced a huge, devastating fire in 64 A.D. He deflected blame from himself to the Christians pointing to their refusal to participate in Emperor worship).

Acts 10:9-23 - Peter's vision (NRSV)

⁹ About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. ¹² In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." ¹⁴ But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven. ¹⁷ Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. ¹⁸ They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. ¹⁹ While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. ²⁰ Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." ²¹ So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" ²² They answered, "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 Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

Questions for Discussion in Small Group
“Peter”

- 1) What was Peter asked to do?
- 2) Where did this request originate?
- 3) How did the vision prepare Peter to act?
- 4) Did Peter hesitate?
- 5) What were the risks (religious, social, financial) of this encounter? (Write on individual yellow Post-its)
- 6) Which risks do you think would be the most daunting?
- 7) What emotions do you think Peter had to overcome when entering Cornelius' home? (Write on individual pink Post-Its)
- 8) What was his motivation for going? (Write on Individual green Post-Its)

Acts 10: 1-8 - Cornelius' vision (NRSV)

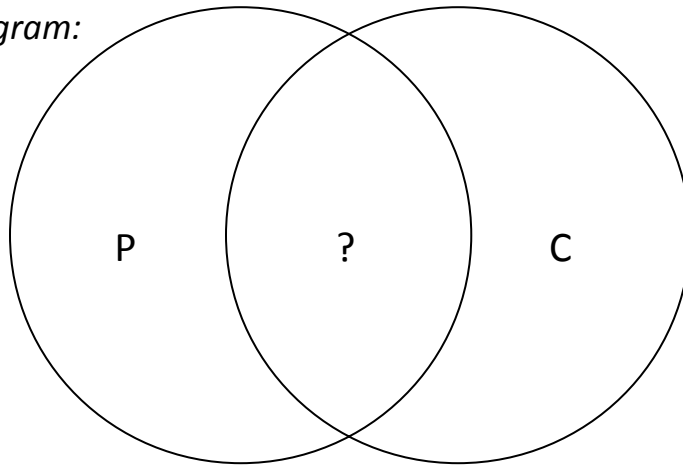
In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called. ² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God. ³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius." ⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; ⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, ⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

Questions for Discussion in Small Group ***"Cornelius"***

- 1) What was Cornelius asked to do?
- 2) Where did this request originate?
- 3) Did Cornelius hesitate?
- 4) What were the risks (religious, social, financial) of this encounter? (Write on individual yellow Post-Its)
- 5) Which risks do you think would be the most daunting?
- 6) What did emotions do you think Cornelius had to 'leave behind' when inviting Peter into his home? (Write on individual pink Post-Its)
- 7) What was his motivation? (Write on Individual green Post-Its)

Large Group Discussion

Draw Diagram:



Invite each group to put their yellow Post-its in the appropriate P (Peter) or C (Cornelius) space, their pink underneath the appropriate P or C space and their green Post-its in the overlapping area.

1. What are some of the patterns we see?
2. Which of the two parties took the bigger risk? i.e. who had the most to lose? Who had the most to gain?

Read the entire passage Acts 10:1-35

3. How were Peter and Cornelius transformed?
4. How were their circles transformed?
5. What are lessons we are to learn from this story?

Acts 10: 1- 35 (NRSV)

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.² He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.³ One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius."⁴ He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God."⁵ Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter;⁶ he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside."⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him,⁸ and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

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send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say.”²³ So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging.

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.²⁴ The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.²⁵ On Peter’s arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him.²⁶ But Peter made him get up, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal.”²⁷ And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled;²⁸ and he said to them, “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.²⁹ So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?”

³⁰ Cornelius replied, “Four days ago at this very hour, at three o’clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.³¹ He said, ‘Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.³² Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.’³³ Therefore I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.”

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.