

## Opening The Door

By Frederick Lewis, 5/18/25

I can't say I particularly enjoy controversy. Some people seem to relish it, but most people I know try to avoid it. Some controversies, frankly, just aren't worth the effort. To those we say things like, "I don't have a dog in that fight." Other controversies are more difficult to avoid. There is something at stake. Matters of conscience. Convictions. Values that get compromised. There is some wrong that needs to be made right. Turns out, if you DON'T have a dog in that kind of fight you can lose something important. It may not be pleasant. It could even lead to some sacrifice, but you can't let it go.

The story we read this morning is controversial. Peter has opened the door of Christianity to the Gentiles, to a man named Cornelius and his family. That may not sound very controversial to you or me, but back then it was HUGE! Understand...the first Christians were Jewish. They belonged to the covenant of Abraham. They shared in the history of Israel. Jesus was the expected Messiah. A Jew becoming a Christian would be controversial enough but then add to that the possibility that Gentiles could become Christians. Gentiles did not belong to the covenant of Abraham. They did not share in the history of Israel. Their ancestors were not slaves in Egypt, nor heirs of the Promised Land. David was not their king and Jerusalem, and the temple had little or no meaning to them. Gentiles are absolutely, without a doubt, the wrong people. Surely God could not possibly be opening the doors to them.

Yet, while Peter was in Joppa, a coastal city about 35 miles from Jerusalem, he was praying and had a vision. He sees a large sheet being lowered by its four corners from heaven. In it were four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. He hears a voice say to him, "*Get up Peter; kill and eat.*" But Peter replies, "*By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.*" Peter is a devout Jew and faithful observer of the Law. He would not let forbidden foods cross his lips. But then a voice answers, "*What God has made clean you must not call profane.*" This goes on three times ...which is the scriptures way of saying PAY ATTENTION... THIS IS REALLY IMPORTANT ... and then everything is pulled back into heaven. Peter says at that very moment three men arrived at the house and the Spirit told him to go with them and to "*not make a distinction between them or us.*" Them and us. Us and them. Words that underline differences, reinforce boundaries, build walls and create fear. But Peter is told not to make such distinctions. Then, along with six others accompanying him, Peter enters the house of Cornelius. Cornelius is a Gentile. He is a Roman military officer. Yet, he is also someone open to the working of God's Spirit. He too, has had a vision and has seen an angel (a messenger of God) standing in his house and saying, "*Send to Joppa and bring Simon (that's Peter.) He will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.*" The Spirit then falls upon Peter, and he tells Cornelius all about how God has been revealed in Jesus Christ and then he remembers what Jesus had said, "*John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*" So, Peter concludes, "*If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?*" That leads to a powerful question. Could God have opened the door to the wrong people?

Peter is telling this story to the church leaders in Jerusalem. He is reporting back to them how it is that God has led him to this moment. God has opened the door to the seemingly impossible, the likely improbable. God has opened the door to Gentiles. I wonder, could the Spirit ever lead us, as the Spirit led Peter into controversy? Most people want God to be a calming influence in their lives, a comforter, a protector, a non-threatening, non-controversial God. But could God actually be behind some controversies? And if so, which ones? Could God, for instance been behind the Civil Rights movement? Could God have been behind the press for the equal rights of women? Could God be behind controversies in loving our neighbor, welcoming the stranger and serving the least who are easily pushed aside? You must hand it to Peter. It must have taken great deal of courage to go off to Joppa and enter a strange house. It was a controversial thing to do. I'm sure he could have left well enough alone. I'm sure he could have just kept his strange vision to himself.

At the National Cathedral in Washington, there are flags hanging inside that beautiful building from all states in the union, and the flags represent significant people from those states. In recent years, there have been three flags from Georgia. One was for Martin Luther King, Jr; one was for Woodrow Wilson, who began his law career in Georgia, and one was for Robert Alston. I had never heard of Robert Alston. Robert Alston was from Atlanta and after the Civil War was a member of the Georgia Legislature. Alston had a long history in the governing affairs of his home state, and he was absolutely incensed by the ugliness and corruption in that body. One item in particular offended Robert Alston. It was the custom in those days for wealthy and influential people to use state prisoners to work on their mansions, or to build commercial buildings, or to construct railroads or to farm their plantations. It was perfectly legal. Officially endorsed. You were not obligated to house these workers or pay them. No protections were required. All you had to do was to give them lunch. It was an immoral and corrupt system that degraded the God-given dignity and value of people. Robert Alston said, "*This is worse than slavery.*" He spoke to his fellow legislators, but no one seemed interested. They were making lots of money from this system and enjoying it. So Robert Alston announced, "*Tomorrow I will introduce a bill into the Georgia legislature to make this practice against the law.*" The next morning, he came in with his bill. An associate of several of the prominent legislators came over to Alston and

asked, "Mr. Alston are you going to introduce your bill today? Alston replied, "Yes, I am." At that, the man reached inside his coat, pulled out a derringer pistol, and shot Robert Alston dead. There are a lot of ministers who speak from pulpits or get on television or write books who do a tremendous disservice when they tell you, "If you just believe in God everything will be alright. Everything will be peaceful and happy." In fact, the opposite may be true. Believing in God actually pulls you into people lives and throws you into controversy. God so loved the world that this controversy OPENING THE DOOR...had to be put on the table. And because the door was opened to the Gentiles, it was opened to Augustine, and to Martin Luther, and to John Calvin, and to Karl Barth. You and I would not be sitting here today as Christians if God had not led the church to open its doors. So how huge is that? How important is that to you?

Peter came back to Jerusalem and stood before the apostles and believers. He hears their criticism and objections. And notice how he responds. He tells them a story. This story we heard this morning. A story we have already heard in some detail. He doesn't pull out a power point. He doesn't quote anyone. He simply tells his story. He speaks of the scriptures and his own experience. He weighs everything in the light of the Christ he knows. Then Peter tells them about going into a living, breathing Gentiles' home and coming to understand. If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" The scriptures say, "...they were silenced." Actually, their criticism were silenced. Because the next verse states, "And they praised God" as they recognized the wideness of God's grace and mercy.

When addressing the challenges contemporary leaders face, Ron Heifetz, Director of Harvard University's Center of Public Leadership offers a seminal distinction between what he calls "technical problems" and "adaptive challenges." Technical problems, Heifetz says, are relatively easy to address. Keeping up with technology. Learning new techniques. Getting the advice of reliable experts and consultants. Adaptive challenges, however, are different. Adaptive challenges require dramatic change and risk and often come at first with the sense of great loss. Adaptive challenges require a new way of being. They require a change of heart and mind.

In my last congregation, we were doing fine by all measurable standards. We had a large facility and a lot of programs going on. Over the years several church members had served in prominent roles in our denomination which was known for its strong commitment to international ministries across the globe. Efforts in education and economic development and health ministries. Missionaries who had spent years in training studying and learning various languages so they could effectively communicate in counties that were diverse in culture and religious background and practices. One Sunday, a young couple showed up at the church door. They were dressed in brightly colored clothing and carried hand woven handbags. They knew very little English, as they had only recently arrived in this country from Thailand. Their home was in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) and they had been re-settled in Thailand because their tribal lands had become valuable resources to their government who had been conducting a campaign of genocide against them displacing them to refugee camps in Thailand. They told us their story. We welcomed them to worship. The next Sunday, two more friends showed up. We welcomed them. The next Sunday, five new friends showed up. The next Sunday, ten more. And over the next two years we welcomed over 200 Burmese refugees. It was controversial. We did not share the same language. The same foods. The same understandings. Sunday School classes had to adapt. Youth groups had to be adjusted. Worship services had to be augmented. New hymns introduced. It will not surprise you, if I tell you, we made some hard and challenging decisions. It was difficult. Not everyone was happy. However, in our early conversations, with these friends from halfway around the world, now on our doorstep, we asked them why they came to our church to begin with. They told us their story. How a hundred and fifty years ago, missionaries from our country had come to their land, but not just any missionaries; missionaries from our own denomination. Those missionaries spent years learning their language, conducting worship, translating the Bible, helping to build schools and clinics and generally telling them the story of Jesus. Now fast forward, when these new friends arrived in our city many of them were placed in a large apartment complex next to the church. They felt terribly out of place. Alone. Then these friends looked across the street and saw the high steeple of our church and saw the name of our denomination on the church sign out front. And they knew they had found a home. Because after all, they told us, they were our great, great, great spiritual grandchildren. So, we did what we had to do. We welcomed them. Suddenly, it was no longer a story about them and us. It was story about something greater.

God has a broader vision of our future and a greater hope for our humanity that we could ever imagine on our own. That's what Peter was confronting. And Cornelious. And the church leaders in Jerusalem. They were not opening the door to something destructive. But they were opening the door to something controversial and weighing everything against what they knew to be true in Christ Jesus.

May it be so for us.