

Reaching Christians for Christ

Just as this book flows out of the story of a conversation, the New Testament also flows out of a series of conversations and the stories behind them. One of the most fascinating of those stories, as we saw in the last chapter, involves the apostle Peter and a Roman military leader named Cornelius. When Peter, a Jew, arrives and enters the home of this Gentile man, he does not speak to Cornelius and his friends from a position of superior privilege and power, but rather he comes to them somewhat off-balance, almost dazed by what is happening. Peter says, in essence, “Look, I’m outside my comfort zone just by being here. I’m taking a risk just to enter your home, just to be your friend. Being here violates my long-held religious standards...so I’m learning right along with you.” And then, before he proclaims anything to them, he pays them the added respect of listening: “May I ask why you sent for me?”

Even after hearing about Cornelius’s vision, he still does not teach, but rather repeats again that he himself is learning through this experience: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts those from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” And then, finally, he begins to teach, but even so, he emphasizes not their ignorance but how much they already know: “You know...You know...” he repeats. Finally, he gets to the core of his message: “We are witnesses of everything [Jesus] did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross,

but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen—by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:39–43).

And Peter can get no further. That is all Cornelius and the other people need to hear. They believe and God’s Spirit fills them. Peter baptizes them—a radical act, since they are the first Gentiles to be so marked as disciples. But the story does not end there.

Before long, the Christians back in Judea hear what Peter has done, and they are critical—critical exactly as Jesus’ critics, the Pharisees, had been critical of Jesus a few months earlier: “You went into the house of the uncircumcised and ate with them,” they say. In other words, “You extended friendship to the ‘wrong’ people, to outsiders.” (Do you feel the sad irony here, that Jesus’ so-called followers have so quickly switched sides, playing the role of Pharisees—in just a matter of a few years? The irony is stunning, depressing, jolting—a stinging warning to all of us today.) In response, Peter tells the story of his spiritual friendship with Cornelius and company, concluding with this powerful statement and question: “The Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” (Acts 11:15–17).

His statement (actually a question—in light of what we have said earlier about questions, do you see why phrasing it as a question was such a good idea?) leads to one of the happier endings in the whole Bible: “When they heard this, they had no

further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.' "

Peter learns, the Christians back in Judea learn, just as Cornelius and his entourage have learned: Everybody is transformed through the process of spiritual friendship.

Just as Peter remembered some of Jesus' words when explaining the baptism of the Gentiles, right now I remember how Jesus said he would be with his followers and how his Spirit would teach them as they went into the world to make disciples. *Making disciples* is the more biblical term for *evangelism* and the original way of saying "engaging in spiritual friendship." I remember how Jesus said there were lessons he wanted to teach them but they could not yet bear to learn, and I wonder if this lesson was one of them: that the door of God's acceptance would be opened to all people, whatever their background, with no favoritism.

I also wonder if there are lessons that we can only learn as we, like Peter, leave our comfort zones, as our old categories are stretched beyond the breaking point, as we engage in spiritual friendship with the Corneliuses around us, as we become learners as we teach, as we refuse to place ourselves on a higher plane than anyone else, and as we show respect to those to whom we have been sent.

And I wonder if it conversely might be true that if we are not engaged in spiritual friendship in this radical way, there are things we can never learn as disciples—no matter how many Bible studies we join, classes and courses we complete, sermons we take notes on, verses we memorize, doctrines we affirm. Might spiritual friendship be an essential dimension of our own training as disciples, an experience we need as much as others do?

And further, might it be fair to say that we cannot really call ourselves disciples if we are not following Jesus' and Peter's example of being "friends of sinners"—spiritual friends who

love, accept, learn with, and teach those who are missed by God, precious to God?

That is why I say that when spiritual friendship happens, when real evangelism happens, it is the Christians who are converted first.

A friend of mine, Skip Smith, describes his ministry in a rather unusual way. He says his goal is "reaching Christians for Christ," and that is how I feel as I write this chapter. I feel that some Christian readers may be ready to be converted into a new kind of Christian—not Christians who judge, remain aloof, feel superior, disrespect those who do not believe—but rather Christians who join Jesus and Peter in befriending others, and believing that as they do, *everyone involved* will become closer to God, closer to Christ.

That is how it has been with April and me. She is not the only one growing through our friendship. I am learning and growing too. My conversion is ongoing, as is hers.