

Title: “Open to God. Open to People.” January 28, 2018 Pastor Dave Sattler Series: “Missions Month — Understanding Our Neighbourhoods”

Text: Acts 10, Peter, The Evangelist Sources: NIV Life Application Bible.

Commentaries: Ajith Fernando, I. Howard Marshall, & Grant Osborne. Books: “The Comfortable Pew” by Pierre Berton, “What Happened to Christian Canada?” by Mark Noll, & “Is Jesus Your Personal Saviour? In Search of Canadian Evangelicalism in the 1990s” by G.A. Rawlyk. Song: “The Cause of Christ” by Kari Jobe. Articles: Faith Today — “The Rise & Fall (& Rise?) of Evangelicalism,” John Stackhouse, July/Aug 2017; “Trading Places: Is Canada More Religious Than the U.S.?” Kevin Flatt, Jan/Feb 2018. Lectures: Dr Ray Bakke (NSAC, 1/21/2018) & John A. Beck (Caesarea, 10/28/2013).

I. Review & Introduction :

- Good morning, everyone. I’m Dave Sattler, one of the pastors here at NSAC today continuing with Missions Month — “Understanding our Neighbourhoods.”
- <Slide> Here’s a vision. In Acts 8:8, Luke writes, “So there was great joy in that city.” The Good News of Jesus had come — salvation, healing, transformation.
- This too is what Vancouver needs. Right?!
- These weeks we’ve been focusing on listening our way into the culture. Like Philip, boldly approaching family, friends, & neighbours, our ‘passing chariots,’ to “express the love and hope of Jesus.” And, may “joy” resound in our city!
- Still, as Christ-followers, how do we ‘navigate’ these times in Vancouver? How do we live, how do we love ... people whose world-views are so different from ours?
- Resistant to any hint of the Christian Story, most Vancouver-ites are not waking up on a Sunday wanting to, or even thinking about, going to church.
- <Slide> So, what’s happened to the Christian Church in Canada in 150 years?
- Quick recap. In 1867, about 4 million people called Canada ‘home.’
- 40% were Roman Catholic and just over 50%, practicing Protestants.
- Yet, by the late 1800s, many Canadians abandoned faith and sought salvation in ‘scientific inquiry.’ Others succumbed to a growing gospel of consumerism ... often secretly, while still attending church to maintain outward ‘appearances.’
- To combat these cultural impulses, many church leaders in that time began to stress a “religion of the head” over “religion of the heart.” — French in Rawlyk, p.11/12.
- Beneath the surface, the pulse of the Christian Church in Canada began to wane.
- Today, we’ll briefly look at Canada’s second fifty years.
- ILL - In 1925, two large Protestant denominations, Methodists and Presbyterians, merged to form the United Church of Canada. With a noble vision ...
 - Q: To “... provide [what] Canada needed to continue as a moral, God-honouring, and socially compassionate country.” — Noll, p.43
- With the Anglican Church, the United Church made up Canada’s “mainline Protestants” who formed the bulk of Canadian worshipers. And, by the early 1930s, virtually all these mainline Protestant churches were “in liberal hands.”
 - Rawlyk, p.32
- There’s another loaded term — “liberal.” Theologically, this means ‘softening’ tradition church positions on things like ... the authority of the Bible, the identity of Jesus, and salvation alone through faith in Christ and His work.

- **<Slide>** The ‘liberal’ notion? — A ‘little bit of religion’ and being a ‘good citizen,’ but certainly not ‘laying down one’s life’ to follow Jesus.
- ILL - Reminds me of complaints last January ...
 - Regarding the worship song chosen as our theme for Missions Month ...
 - “The Cause of Christ” by Kari Jobe. Some lyrics, Q: “The only thing I want in life is to be known for loving Christ, To build His church, To love His bride, And make His name known far and wide. For this cause I live, For this cause I’d die, I surrender all, For the cause of Christ.”
 - One note I received declared, Q: ‘God would never ask anyone to do this.’
- **<Slide>** Post-World War II, hundreds of new churches were constructed across Canada. As George Rawlyk put it, Q: “Canadian Protestants seemed ... on the verge of ... another Golden Age.” And, the Roman Catholic Church was flourishing too — especially in Canada’s french-speaking regions. In a 1946 Gallup Poll, almost seven in ten Canadians said they’d worshiped [in a church] ‘in the past seven days.’ More than one-third higher than church attendance in the U.S. in the same period. — Gallup in G.A. Rawlyk, p.36/54; Noll in Flatt, FT, p.21
- **<Slide>** This era was characterized, however, by what Canadian writer, Pierre Berton disparagingly called, ‘the Comfortable Pew’, title of a book he authored.
 - Berton’s 1963 Canadian church commentary, Q: “Ritual, alas, cannot long remain exotic when it becomes a weekly commonplace. It may become as comfortable and as reassuring as an old slipper; or it may become a drag. For myself, and for most of my contemporaries, it became a drag.” — Berton, p.19
- Consequently, within decades, the newly-constructed pews of Canadian mainline churches were “largely empty” ... while those of so-called conservative Protestant evangelical churches — Baptist, Pentecostal, even Alliance, “filled to overflowing.” — Rawlyk; Berton in Rawlyk, p.36 We’ll pick up the next fifty years in the weeks to come.
- **<Slide>** Now, let’s turn to: Acts 10, pg. 891-93 in the blue Bibles.
- Luke’s longest narrative: 66 verses committed to the conversion of Cornelius.
- Converts to Christianity were “pouring in from surprising backgrounds.” By the end of the 1st Century, non-Jewish converts came from thirty-nine cities in thirty countries — places like Samaria, Ethiopia, and now Rome — the menacing, occupying enemy. — NIV Life App, p.1971; Osborne, p. xix
- For devout Jews, even ones with newfound faith in Jesus, the idea of associating with Gentiles, let alone worshiping the same God in the same church together, would have made their skin crawl.
- Today, we look at Peter. Messy fisherman. Impetuous disciple. Often-vacillating apostle. Accessible, Peter’s no ‘superhero.’ Just like us.
- A pertinent question this text raises: Is there anything in us God wants to change — a blindspot, an arrogance, a prejudice? [Let’s READ Acts 10:1-15; 19-29a; 34-48]
- PRAY: ‘Lord, move me out of the way. Come, speak to us by Your Spirit. Shape us as people of Your mission in our city. We’re hungry to hear from You. Amen.’

II. Narrative & Teaching Outline:

1. <Slide> A Roman Centurion (Acts 10:1-2)

- Its amphitheatres, temples, and arenas made it a ...
 - Q: “showpiece for Roman culture.” – Fernando, p.316.
- West of Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean, Caesarea was an important ancient-world seaport. The first landing point from Rome and the last launching point to Rome. On a 2013 visit, our teacher called it, Q: ‘Rome away from Rome.’ – Beck.
- Filled with Gentiles, many Jews greatly disliked Caesarea – even fear going near it.
- Cornelius, “a centurion” (1), is a high-ranking official in the Roman army and commands a band of soldiers charged with peace-keeping here amidst frequent violent outbreaks. Somewhat surprising, Cornelius appears sympathetic to Jewish theology and ethics. He’s described as “devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (2).
- <Slide> APP - Makes one wonder, ‘Isn’t that good enough?’
 - Prayer and caring for the poor surely counts for something, doesn’t it?!
 - But, ‘goodness’ can be a barrier. Many ‘good’ Vancouver-ites self-identify as “spiritually open.” But, they’re clearly not open to Jesus.
 - Some non-Christians lead ‘purer’ lives than most Christians. Believing, ‘I’m a good person. I do good things. Why would I ever need your God?’
 - But, we see in the Christian Story, that ... spiritual sincerity, doing good works, even ‘saying your prayers’ is not enough.
 - Truth is: we can never do enough to please God or win God’s favour or earn our salvation. Salvation comes through faith in Christ alone. For many ‘good’ people, this simple yet profound truth is a “stumbling block.” – 1 Corinthians 1:23

2. <Slide> Open to God (Acts 10:3-20)

- The narrative is framed by two visions. God directing, enabling people to see with ‘fresh eyes.’ And today, still, God often speaks, through dreams and visions – especially in the non-Western cultures of our world, like the Middle East.
- God had Cornelius on His radar (4) and spoke to him in a vision. And, responding in obedience, “Cornelius ... sent [three of his people] to Joppa” (7-8).
- Notice Cornelius’ openness to God.
- ILL - Again, some people aren’t as far from God as they might appear.
 - I recently reconnected with a man I met 13 years ago when his daughter was attending youth group here when I was Youth Pastor.
 - He was anti-God, anti-church, anti-me ...
 - We even got into a minor verbal altercation in the parking lot once when I went out to meet parents after youth group.
 - Then, just in September, going through a rough time and not knowing where to turn, he called me. Out of the blue! We’ve been meeting and he is searching – now, beautifully open to God. And God’s showing him things! He’s just signed up for Alpha starting next month!
- Prayer plays a big role in this story.

- Not ritual or rote, but prayer as vital link to/dialogue with the living God.
- V.9 - “Peter went up on the roof to pray.” Perhaps he’d skipped his figs & oats for breakfast or the hot Mediterranean sun got to him, but “he fell into a trance” (10).
- And, while Peter was in prayer, God worked powerfully on his heart.
- **<Slide> APP** - It’s hard to be open to God if we’re not in regular prayer.
 - Not tied to our performance; sure, God can and does use us however, whenever. But, we are not just ‘pawns in His game.’
 - Here’s the point: **Mission flows from having been with Jesus.**
 - Are we searching for, hungering after, open to, divine promptings?
 - There, in our prayer-closet or on our prayer-roof, heart open ... blindspots are revealed, attitudes confronted, hesitations challenged.
 - This is how God loves to work in concert with us, shaping us, and moving us out into His people-mission.

3. **<Slide> Open to People (Acts 10:21-35)**

- Without going deep into Jewish Dietary Law, it’s clear God’s ushering in a new day.
- Before the vision, Peter would have deemed Cornelius, ‘unclean,’ ‘outside God’s plan’ — incapable of accepting Christ’s salvation.
- After, Peter now sees Cornelius’ salvation as his personal responsibility.
- This was a massive shift — perhaps the ‘TSN Turning Point’ in church history.
- One could argue none of us would be here today in a Christian church had it not been for the vision God gave Peter that day that made him open to people. Other people. Even Gentiles. Even us.
- **<Slide> ILL** - At his evening session, last week’s guest speaker, Ray Bakke ...
 - Urged us to identify people from the 4 spheres of our lives:
 - ☐ Biological - family, Geographical - neighbours, Vocational - colleagues, Recreational - friends/teammates.
 - How is God challenging you to be more open to people?
 - People like ... that annoying family member who often says inappropriate things? That grumpy neighbour with her perfectly-quauffed lawn? That hardened CEO, manager, shift boss, your superior at work? Or that ‘hot-shot’ person at your gym?
 - It’s easy to find excuses to steer clear of people like that, but what if God is calling us to see reaching out to those people as our responsibility?
- Peter begins his Gospel presentation to Cornelius with a confession, “Uh, now I realize ... God does not show favouritism but accepts [people] from every nation who fear him.” Difficult words for a ‘died-in-the-wool’ Jewish boy.
- But great place to start! With humility, not talking down to people; without pretence, putting oneself into God’s great grace story.
- This is the right tack. And it ‘builds bridges’ to people.
- APP - For 2000 years the Christian Church has had 2 basic approaches to mission:

- **<Slide>** Separation from the world: walls, protecting us from contamination, and sometimes looking ‘down our noses’ at ‘outsiders.’ This was Peter.
- Or, Syncretism with the world: blending into the culture to look like, act the same, even think ... just like everyone else.
- How about you: Separatist? OR, Syncretist?
- Seems, in our day, syncretism is more of a challenge.
- Wanting to blend in, most Christ-followers ‘bury’ their faith or go ‘private’ with it — rarely talking about it, not bringing it up, for fear of rejection or being deemed, a ‘Jesus-freak.’
- Problems with the extreme of both. Separatists have no audience — they alienate them all. No one wants to listen. Syncretists have no message — it gets lost in the blending. Nothing eternal to offer.

4. **<Slide> The Good News of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36-43)**

- We mustn’t shy away from ... “announcing the good news of Jesus Christ” (36).
- Peter does it here in three do-able ways that still fit today.
- First, he speaks about his personal experience.
- Now Peter’s story was extraordinary. For three years, he’d walked with Jesus. But, every Christ-follower has a story — you do, of your own unique experience with Jesus. May it become natural for you to speak with others about it.
- Second, Peter briefly describes Jesus’ life, death, & resurrection (37-40).
- ‘Game-changers,’ these events changed our world forever. It’s important we are comfortable talking about them with people.
- Third, Peter speaks of the necessity of faith, “... everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins” (43).
- ILL - To most today, our message is counterintuitive.
 - Talking about Jesus often elicits negative or at best, blank responses ... but this mustn’t deter us. As pastor, you might think, ‘Easy for you to say. People want to listen to you.’ I wish!
 - As mentioned, three months ago I officiated a wedding for a former neighbour. Full of non-Christians. The moment I talked about Jesus and His saving work on the cross, nearly every face looked down. And, my heart sunk. Sweat formed on my forehead. I think I turned red.
 - But, I also sensed, in that moment, the Spirit moving as I pressed on and shared the Good News of Jesus with wedding guests.
 - We’ve all gotten them. Glazed-over expressions or flat rejection, ‘Don’t preach to me.’ From a friend, a family member, a workmate.
 - And it hurts.
- As much as we need to talk about Him, more we must ‘embody’ Jesus.
- I love how Peter “invited [Cornelius’] men into the house to be his guests” (23).
- Later, at risk of breaking Jewish Law, Peter “[stayed] with [Cornelius’ family in Caesarea] for a few days” (48). An extension of friendship, acceptance, belonging.
- **<Slide>** APP - The power of simple hospitality. A hallmark of the early church.

- Having people in our homes. A lost art in our city. Many have nice houses but never open them up. Perhaps it's fear of people 'getting into our kitchen.'
- Hospitality is foreign. But so needed in a city like ours. Where, in our climate, we can go for months without speaking to or even seeing people in our neighbourhoods. At night we roll into our 'bat-cave,' straight into the house!
- When there is such fellowship, intimacy, joy in sharing a meal together at someone's table. Let us be courageous in hospitality!

5. <Slide> The Ministry of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48)

- It surprised Peter when his sermon got interrupted by a 'Gentile Pentecost' ...
- "The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (44).
- This wooing of the Holy Spirit is vital in reaching family, friends, & neighbours.
- ILL - I confess, a big life-frustration of mine is that I am not the Holy Spirit.
 - I know, it's probably a good thing. But oh, how I wish I could reach in and 'light a fire' in people's hearts! Turn them on to Jesus. But I can't!
 - God alone, by His Spirit, can transform people. Not us.
 - We can't argue anybody 'in,' or 'whip up' an emotional encounter to make Jesus tangible. Ultimately, it's up to the Spirit to convince people of the absolute real-ness of Jesus and His message!
- Then, Cornelius, his relatives, and close friends believed in Jesus and were "baptized" (48). And I have to say, if you're a believer but have not yet been water baptized, then what's "[standing] in the way?!" (47) We're doing baptisms next Sunday right here. Baptism Class, this Wednesday night, 7pm. Come talk to me!
- <Slide> ILL - Some of you know, we prayed for my Australian Uncle Noel's ...
 - Salvation for thirty-five years. And nothing seemed to happen.
 - Until, years back, my father felt led to invite him on a missions trip.
 - My retired uncle was a wealthy, successful, good man.
 - And, on that trip, the Lord began to melt his heart. As he interacted with team members, gave his time and money to build houses for needy-yet-joy-filled Mexican Christians, he realized something was missing in the orientation of his life. The Holy Spirit was touching Him.
 - And eventually, he gave his life to Jesus!
- I want to encourage those who have been praying for and reaching out to loved ones for so long. Don't give up. God hears your prayers. And, the Spirit's on it!
- <Slide> APP - To wrap, I've heard it lots ...
 - Q: 'I'm not a mature Christian, I don't know enough to share my faith.'
 - Do you know that Peter's mission to Cornelius may have actually impacted Peter most? And God wants to do the same with us. Don't worry, God is very patient. Peter, like us, vacillates back and forth between his old sinful self and the new person God is making him into. Yet God still encourages Peter out into mission and moves mightily through him to reach many people.
 - Here's the beauty of it: sharing our faith also helps us grow in our faith.
 - People of NSAC, let's do it! Amen.