

**“Belong, Believe, Bless”: A Framework of Flourishing**  
**Acts 11:1-18**  
**1.14.18**



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**Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context...** (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

*Perhaps you might want to share a bit of your own faith journey with the group.*

*“Were there other faiths that you investigated/considered before trusting the message of Christianity? If you already have, what made you decide for Jesus? If you haven’t, can you identify what makes you hesitant?”*

*“Did you find a people with whom you belonged before you were able to believe? How did they assist your journey? Did you believe before you chose to belong? What have been some of the challenges of belonging?”*

*“Do you know of people who have left the Christian faith? What have they identified as the reason(s) for their departure?”*

*“Are there places in your theology where you sense that the Spirit is breaking some boundary in order to make space for you to love someone for him? What have been some of the challenges associated with this particular crisis?”*

*“In what ways might you pursue a healthier sense of belonging? In what area of belief would you like to see some development? Where in your world are you finding places of blessing... where you are good for another?”*

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**Teaching Notes...**

**Our initiation into relationship with Christ meant being incorporated into a community of people who share a common Story, a common passion (new heart), a common vision of what life in the Kingdom would look like if it happened right here and right now, and a common mission of reconciling love.**

**“Belong, Believe, Bless”: Christianity at a “macro-level”.**

**Belonging influences what we believe and how we respond.**

**Believing alters our behavior (blessing) and deepens our sense of belonging.**

**Our conduct (blessing) enhances our identity with the community and solidifies our beliefs.**

**The church began as a marginal, mission movement.**

**The church, temporarily, enjoyed public favor and wide-spread acceptance** [see the chapter on 4<sup>th</sup> century history and Constantine in your church history book]. In that time, ‘mustard seed’ and ‘yeast-in-the-dough’ faith gave way to ‘top-down religion’ and the culture considered itself officially Christian.

**The church is, once again, a marginal, mission movement.**

Call it ‘post-Christian’, call it ‘unchristian’, if you’d like, but whatever you label it, you will have to admit that we live in a culture that is drifting further away from a biblical worldview and its insistence that what we believe to be good for us is good for you, too.

I’m not going to pull out the arsenal of stats and anti-Christian sentiments, because we all feel the tension. Most of us, here, adhere to a way of life that a vast majority of the culture would label as ‘irrelevant’. It’s not even that they are actively ‘hostile’ toward Christianity, but that they are indifferent. It’s cute.

Leonard Sweet describes our present mission to the world as, *“playing away”*. We no longer have ‘home-field advantage’.

**We have, in our culture, people who...**

... neither belong nor believe.

... belong and believe, and who are finding their behavior, with some measure of consistency, resembling that of Jesus.

... believe, but have never belonged.

... belonged, but didn’t really believe (continued to attend for social reasons, family connection, etc.)

... formerly belonged, but still believe.

... belong, but have yet to believe. They actually desire to belong to a faith community while they are deciding what it is that they believe.

Luke is the only one of the biographers who was a non-Jew. He is writing to people living outside of the geography of Palestine who were living in a world of competing religious loyalties. There are no more living eye-witnesses to the accounts of Jesus and the events which took place in Acts. No one to whom Luke was writing 'grew up in an Christian home'. They don't know who Timothy Keller is.

They were small communities of faith who were wrestling with their social context and attempting to make sense of their faith.

**The Bible proposes a world to us. We all come to that world from somewhere else.**

We discover that our understanding of what it means to be human and how the world works is constantly being challenged by the God-Story.

**Paradigm:** the mental framework which determines how we perceive, understand, and interpret our world.

They are often more implicit than explicit and are so deeply held that it often requires some type of 'crisis' to awaken us to our need for repentance: a change of thinking. Literally, "going beyond the mind you have"

Luke offers this episode as a 'watershed' moment in the Jesus movement. For Peter (and those who shared his heritage), the entirety of their history had been informed and formed by a decidedly Jewish paradigm. Their identity as a "unique/chosen" people, at times, resulted in beautiful expressions which distinguished both them and God. At times, it resulted in arrogance, and discrimination, and ugly patriotism.

For Peter, the boundary-lines were very clear. It was "Jew" and "Gentile". It was "us" and "them". You were either "in" or "out". There were very clear markers. Cornelius messed with their tidy theology. He was a card-carrying, pork-eating, uncircumcised Gentile, who had now encountered God in a similar fashion as those who were nurtured under the incubator of Judaism.

The early Christians were facing an "identity crisis". *"What does it mean to be the people of God? What does it mean to be the people of God in this time and place? How might God be at work in the unsettling movement of the Spirit? What boundaries might he be attempting to break through?"*

Peter, who finds himself at the very center of this Jesus-movement, must also come to terms with many of his deeply held convictions and not necessarily abandon them, but hear them re-told in light of the Jesus-event.

This is not simply Peter's decision to 'diversify' the gospel, but the Spirit of God breaking the boundaries and, in the process, challenging deeply held assumptions

about who God is, whom he loves, and how he works in the world. Peter must feel the disorientation. He must re-orient himself.

**I suggest that as we continue to wrestle with our sense of identity and mission (who we are and why we are), it will require:**

**A people with whom we might belong.**

**A faith in which we might believe.** [Not simply a set God-proposals upon which we all agree, but a way of belief which is trustworthy.]

**A divine initiative to bless, in which we might participate.** [It is not simply about increasing our mission's effort/activity, but becoming better attuned to the missionary heart of God.]

**Some statements that lend direction to our pursuit..**

**We seek to be Christ-centered and others-oriented.**

Our life with Jesus makes us increasingly relevant and propels us toward others.

**We seek to develop an 'earthy-spirituality'.**

An environment in which people routinely encounter God and the resulting ethic it engenders. The Kingdom "come on earth".

**We desire to function biblically and live currently.**

Christianity, done right, is good for humanity. The life well-lived--- in keeping with the values of the Kingdom--- allows humans to flourish.

**We seek to cultivate a culture of authentic relationships, not casual acquaintances.**

Christianity is both intensely personal and decidedly communal. Everywhere you look in the Story, God's desire is not simply to rescue people, but to form for himself a "people".

**We are compelled by the vision and voice of God which challenges our paradigms and invites us to receive those we would tend to exclude.**

We ask God not for a vision of what life will be like once the church's fortunes are restored and we are, once again, in a place of cultural-prominence, but for a vision of what is possible only in "exile" (Jeremiah 29:1-9).

**We are convinced that the Spirit of God is at work in a turbulent world where the strategies and maps, once utilized by the church, have lost their usefulness.**

We need not jettison 'tradition' (for tradition's sake), but only traditions which have proven to be un-transferable and fail to help us live out an ancient-future faith (Mark 7).

**We re-commit ourselves to becoming 'strangers'; "journeying people" who are in constant need of direction and who are willing to enter the vulnerable and ambiguous places of mission.**

Honestly, much of our faith is 'unscripted' and takes us into uncharted territory. We are not just offered our "motivation" and "handed our lines". We are called upon to improvise and implement, "*Everything that Jesus began to do and teach...*" (Acts 1:1)

We are becoming a people who are so immersed in the Story that we are increasingly familiar with the Author. We are able to think his thoughts, able to move in rhythm with his heart. We are able to choose a course of action that is faithful to the story-line.

**We discover what God is up to in the world through revelation. We implement his goodness and good intentions through incarnation.**

The best place to discover what God is up to in the world is not within the confines of the church, but through observation and conversation around tables, in check-out lines, in our workspaces, over a venti drip, or on the sideline of a soccer field. It is there that we are able to "*hear the groanings*" of creation and find the Spirit "*groaning with us*" (Romans 8).

**We must be the people of God who are creating space for those who want to believe, who provide the context and content for making belief in Jesus probable, and who are offering a 'replica of faith' for others to follow.**