

# ESTABLISHING A GOD-FEARING CHURCH

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## Building a church that fears God

“The fear of God” is seen by many to be a very heavy or repetitious subject. However, it is the most important thing in the Christian life. Its importance in the Bible and the history of Mankind has been shown without doubt and is enough to warn us never to take it lightly.

Last time, we saw a very important point in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and that is, to teach Christians the fear of God. Let us look at another example:

<sup>1</sup> Now *there was* a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort,  
<sup>2</sup> a devout man, and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the *Jewish* people, and prayed to God continually. (Acts 10:1-2 NAS)

## What is true devotion?

A person named Cornelius is spoken of here (he is not a Jew). The Bible calls him a devout man. If I were to ask you: What is a devout man? How would you explain it? According to traditional thinking, a devout person is one who spends a few hours reading

the Bible and praying to God every morning. He would also have a fixed time of fasting every week, zealous in religious activities. If we wish to know if so-and-so is a devoted Christian, we must first enquire about how many hours he spends each morning in prayer and in Bible-reading; whether he fasts every week; and if he is zealous in church work. You see, we use these external standards to measure a believer's devotion. Of course, we will apply the same standards on ourselves. If every morning, we pray for one hour and read the Bible for one hour, and we participate a lot in church work, we would think that we must be devout people. However, the Bible definitely does not use such external means to see if a person is devout.

Then, what is devotion? To put it simply, "devotion" is a lifestyle that comes from fearing God. That is why it says here that Cornelius was a devout man, and that he and his family were God-fearing. I find this to be very encouraging. When parents fear God, they will lead their children to be God-fearing as well. Psalm 103 likewise says that God's blessings not only come upon those who fear Him, but also upon their descendants through this good family environment.

It goes to show that the fear of God is not a theory, but something that is practical, something that can be shown in our lives, and seen. Then we need to inquire further: How did Cornelius fear God? Here it says that he "gave many alms to the Jewish people, and prayed to God continually". Please note this important sequential order — fear God first, followed by giving alms, and prayer. Obviously, Cornelius did those good deeds because he feared God in his heart.

We must be clear on the Biblical priority lest we get the order wrong. Man's problem is that we like to imitate things on the surface but easily neglect its spirit. If we don't know God, we wouldn't care about the condition of our hearts as no one else can see what's inside us. Often, we are more focused on how we are doing in front of others, so that they can see how good we are, and we gain praise and glory — this is a spiritual problem.

### **Pursue godliness as an inner quality, forsake external form**

Cornelius was a Gentile. Before he came to know the Lord Jesus, he already believed in the God of Israel. Precisely because he feared God, God personally sought him out. This shows that God's lovingkindness is extended to those who fear Him.

At this point, you must note that Jews (including Jewish Christians at the time) looked down on Gentiles. They felt that the gospel was God's special grace to the Jewish people, and that it was not meant for Gentiles. This kind of prejudice led to Jewish Christians' refusal to share the gospel with the Gentiles. So, God had to personally seek out Cornelius, this person who feared Him. This point alone gives us great encouragement. If you are a person who fears God, He will surely remember you just as He remembered Cornelius' prayer.

We often ask: What kind of prayer will God hear? Many people tried all kinds of tricks to make prayer more effective. But the truth of the matter is that there are no tricks or shortcuts in the spiritual life. That is to say, you have to truly become a person who fears

God, and not learn all kinds of “tricks” to prayer. God does not care if you sit, you kneel, or even if you prostrate on the ground to pray. He also does not care if you pray at home or at the mountaintop. The Bible tells us that Cornelius’ prayer and good works were remembered by God because he feared God. Please continue to read on.

And they said, “Cornelius, a centurion, a righteous and God-fearing man well spoken of by the entire nation of the Jews, was *divinely* directed by a holy angel to send for you *to come* to his house and hear a message from you.”  
(Acts 10:22 NAS)

In everyone’s eyes, Cornelius the centurion was a righteous man. Why did they call him righteous? It goes on to explain that he was a God-fearing man. I would like to throw the question back at you: Is this how people who know you would introduce you? — Especially your spouse (who perhaps has not yet believed but knows that you go to church every Sunday), would he/she say, “Oh, my wife (or husband) has experienced a really great transformation since attending church. She/He fears God!” My guess is *probably not*. At most they would say that you are a Christian, or a God-believing person. But what is so special about being “God-believing”? Doesn’t the devil believe too? What God delights in is the fear of God.

Many years ago, I attended a church camp, which was held in a quiet countryside. One day, I was quieting on the campgrounds at about eleven o’clock at night when a twelve-year-old child came to sit beside me. He said, “I can’t sleep. I’d like to have a chat with you.” He then proceeded to tell me that he was very sad because

his dad would go to church every Sunday, like a very devout man, but when his dad comes home, he would often argue with his mum, even physically hitting her. He said, “At least Mum is more honest. But Dad looks so devout at church, and he comes home and becomes a totally different person.” I also became very sad when I heard this.

I don’t know how your family looks at you. Would they see you like the way this boy saw his dad, that he became more selfish and impatient after going to church? Perhaps your family, friends, and colleagues are not believers, and do not agree with your Faith, but I hope that they can see from your behavior that you are a person who fears God.

## **God manifests His righteousness and goodness through Cornelius**

Let us continue to look further:

<sup>34</sup> And opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand *now* that God is not one to show partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.” (Acts 10:34-35 NAS)

Note the sequence of the words: “fears Him (that is, God)” and “does what is right”. That is to say that we do what is right not as a means to show off, but because we know and fear God. At the same time, we observe that even though Peter was an apostle of the Lord, the fear he had for God did not seem to match up to this Gentile’s. So, what did God wish to teach Peter through Cornelius?

The preceding verses speak of Peter seeing a vision in which a large sheet comes down from heaven with all kinds of four-footed animals, crawling creatures of the earth, and birds of the air. And a voice commanded him to “kill and eat”. However, Peter, with much fear and trembling said to God, “By no means, Lord!” Do you see how strange people are? Religious tradition and customs are often more important than the word of God. Peter is a classic example of this. So, when a voice from heaven commanded Peter to eat the creatures in the large sheet, he actually had the gall to refuse God saying, “By no means!”

A person who fears God will definitely listen to God’s word carefully and will be serious about putting it in practice. It is obvious that Peter did not quite know how to fear God then, so God purposely chose to teach him and to help him understand its importance through Cornelius. What God values is not the observance of law or religious rules, but that we know how to fear and keep every command of His.

It is at this time that Peter is astonished to find that God delights and welcomes all who fear Him in every nation (not just Israel). Why was Peter so astonished? — It is because in the hearts of the Jews, God is partial only towards them. Even when they became the Lord Jesus’ disciples (Jewish Christians), they still held onto this traditional point of view, being unwilling to share the gospel with the Gentiles, wrongly thinking that they had no part in God.

This was precisely Peter’s blind spot. This kind of terrible religious tradition coupled with wrong concepts gets in the way of God’s work and takes the place of God’s will. Through the experience of

the Gentile, Cornelius, God helps Peter understand that He cares for Gentiles just like He cares for the Jews. In the eyes of the Jews, Cornelius was unclean — someone God was not pleased with. But now, Peter witnesses for himself that God manifested Himself to Cornelius, and commanded Peter to share the gospel with him, his family, and friends. This experience was certainly a great shock to Peter.

At this point of time, Peter finally realizes that in God's eyes, every nation and every ethnicity is just as precious. Anyone who fears God is welcomed by Him. This is totally in line with what it says in Psalm 103. Yet it took Peter all this time to understand this (up to Acts 10).

Here, I would like you to remember that God really cares for those who fear Him. I do not know how long you have been in the church, or how long you have believed in the Lord — all these are not important. Perhaps you have done exorcism work, you have the gift of healing, the gift of tongues or whichever other spiritual gift — these are also not important. What is most important is: *Do you fear God?* Because what matters to God is not how gifted you are, or whether you believe in Jesus, or how long you have been a Christian, but that you fear Him.

We see from Acts 10 that Peter still despised the Gentiles in his heart, thinking that God is partial towards the Jews. Hence, I constantly remind brothers and sisters not to use the word “Gentile” to refer to non-Christians. It is as if non-Christians are second-class citizens, people that are not pleasing to God. Even though they have yet to believe in the Lord, it doesn't mean that God doesn't care for them. God's desire is for you to care for them.

Of course, we have reason to think that God could have sent angels to share the gospel with Cornelius, but He commanded Peter to visit Cornelius instead. And in so doing, God bridged the relationship between the Jewish believers and the non-Jews. Such lengths our God went to!

Peter finally realized that God does not show partiality. This left an indelible impression in his life. In the epistles he wrote to the church in his later years, he reminded them saying:

And if you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each man's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay *upon earth*;  
(1Peter 1:17 NAS)

The matter of Cornelius left such a deep imprint upon Peter's heart that, many years later, he still bore on his mind this lesson that God taught him. He reminded the church saying that if you address God as Father, then you ought to know that the Heavenly Father does not show partiality to man and will surely judge you according to your deeds. This is why we ought to be devoted to fearing Him during the time of our stay on earth.

### **Correction of errors in our beliefs brings positive effects**

We can't help but ask: Why does Peter emphasize that God is impartial towards Man? In comparison, many Christians constantly believe that they are "once saved always saved" after believing in the Lord — God's judgment would only fall upon the non-Christians, not them. Even if Christians sin, they would not be

judged because Christ's precious blood would spare us this calamity. This erroneous teaching and the resulting fallacies have caused many Christians not to be afraid of committing sin. Hence all kinds of sins like sexual immorality, slander, greed, strife, envy, arrogance, flourish and become commonplace in the church. At the root of it all is because Christians do not fear God.

However, Peter reminds us saying that God "impartially judges according to each man's work". Therefore, we have to fear Him and constantly remember this important teaching, lest we fall under God's judgment. God does not look at what you believe in, but whether you fear Him in your actions, because our God is just and holy.

This meeting with Cornelius left such an indelible impression in Peter's heart that he wrote in 1 Peter in his later years, emphatically reminding Christians that God impartially judges according to each man's work, and that they ought to conduct themselves in fear during the time of their stay upon earth. We should constantly bear in mind Peter's admonishment.

Let us continue to look at the positive impact of the fear of God on the church.

<sup>12</sup> And at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. <sup>13</sup> But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. <sup>14</sup> And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to *their number*; (Acts 5:12-14 NAS)

Note that these three verses follow on from verses 1-11. Many preachers do not talk about the topic of “the fear of God” in verses 1-11, because they are worried that non-Christians would be scared away from the church when they hear this message. But what happened in reality? After the incident of Ananias and Sapphira, verse 14 tells us that there was an even greater increase in the number of believers instead!

There is a general belief in the church that if we broach the subject of “fear of God” too early, non-Christians will be scared away, and that it is by far wiser to speak more of “God’s love” to draw people into the church. However, this is Man’s wisdom, by no means what the book of the Acts of Apostles says. The fact of the matter is that with the sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira, the number of believers increased. These were still willing to come to church, proving that they really wanted to seek to know God. Don’t think that we should first draw people with “the love of God” and then talk about the “cost of the cross” — this is purely Man’s wisdom in sharing the gospel. Doing so will eventually lead to holiness being totally wiped out from the church. Needless to say, what will happen to a church that has lost her holiness.

### **When Man is faithful, God works, and there will be revival in the church**

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase. (Acts 9:31 NAS)

Here, it says that when the gospel spread throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria, the number of believers continued to increase. At the same time, five things are mentioned: enjoyed peace; being built up; going on in the fear of the Lord; in the comfort of the Holy Spirit; and the increase in numbers.

Yet, among the five things, four are things that Man cannot do. For example, “enjoyed peace”. Peace is not something you can have simply because you desire it. Only God can grant it. “Being built up” is in the passive form, implying that only God can build the church. “In the comfort of the Holy Spirit” puts it plainly that it is the Holy Spirit comforting the church. And having more people in the church is also something that God does, as Acts 2:47 tells us. It is God who saves and increases the numbers in the church. The only thing that the believer must hold fast to is “going on in the fear of the Lord”.

We need to ask: Why was the church blessed? The reason was they went on in the fear of God, staying faithful to Him. The preceding text already tells us that the church at the time met with great persecution and quite a number of believers were thrown into jail, with some even killed. However, despite such severe persecution, they maintained their faithfulness towards God. Hence, the Spirit of God was with them, comforting, encouraging, and building them up.

Even though the church faced such terrible persecution and severe testing, the number of believers continued to grow. Obviously, this is the work of God, not something that Man can do. Actually, it is not hard for the church to grow in numbers. We can try human

ways like organizing more activities to share the gospel, making the worship program more entertaining, and people will naturally want to come. However, you need to be very careful, for if the church does not know how to fear God, however many human methods you use to share the gospel, you will end up attracting even more people who do not fear God. Hence, you need to be clear that the increase in numbers in the early church was purely because God Himself was at work, and not because of Man's intelligence. This also tells us that the only thing that believers must hold fast to is the fear of God in all things. In this way, God can use the church to accomplish His work. Let us look at the following passage:

<sup>41</sup> Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added *to them*. <sup>42</sup> And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. <sup>43</sup> Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. (Acts 2:41-43 NKJ)

Note that verse 43 says, "fear came upon every soul". What were they fearful of? It is emphasized here that the believers in the early church feared God, and precisely because they feared God, they feared the servants of God.

**Strive with one heart to fear God and He will be with us and bless us**

Generally, Christians think that to fear God is to be afraid of Him, and this being the case, they wonder how one could possibly establish a relationship with Him. But the fear of God that the Bible speaks of is out of respect, love, and obedience — not the sort that comes with committing sin, of being afraid and wanting to avoid Him. The right kind of fear of God is rather like the Father-child relationship. In a healthy and lively relationship, the child has fear as well as love towards his father. We should never take our relationship with God to be like that of a grandchild to his grandparents, trying all possible means to get what he wants, and flying into a tantrum if his demands are not met. This kind of attitude is a lack of fear of God.

The mark of the early church was that *fear came upon every soul*, and everyone feared God in their hearts. Yet, come chapter five, the incident of Ananias and Sapphira happened. The practice of having outward fear of God without any inner substance was beginning to emerge. It was under such circumstances that God judged Ananias and Sapphira, in defense of the church's holiness. This incident caused fear to come upon all who heard of it. God once again brought the church back on track, teaching them to fear the eternal God through this incident.

We see from Acts 2:42 that those who fear God would certainly be serious in listening to and obeying the teaching of the servants of God. In this lively and healthy spiritual environment, naturally the relationship between brothers and sisters would be harmonious. Precisely because of this, they often broke bread, fellowshiping, and praying together. We can refer to verses 44-47.

<sup>44</sup> And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> and they *began* selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. <sup>46</sup> And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, <sup>47</sup> praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:44-47 NAS)

Verse 41 tells us that three thousand were added to the number of disciples. And in verse 47, it mentions that “the Lord was adding to their number day by day”. This shows us once again, that God is happy to increase the number of those who were being saved if the church fears God. It is obvious then, that whether the number of believers increases depends on the fear of God. If the church fears God, brothers and sisters will definitely be serious in keeping God’s word. When God’s word is in the believers’ hearts, their relationship with one another will then be harmonious. Conversely, if the church is lacking in love and harmony, it implies that brothers and sisters have already lost the fear of God. If the church is lacking in the fear of God, it would not be good even if the numbers increase. What’s most pressing now, then, is to deal with the matter of fearing God.

Verse 46 tells us that the people also loved the church because she had a good witness. Hence, in these last days, we ought to encourage and admonish one another to become a person who fears God. Not only are we to pursue the fear of God on the individual level, but we are also to evermore learn to fear God as a church —

on the corporate level. If brothers and sisters fear God, the words in the book of Acts will be realized because God would be just as happy to work among us.

May God add to the church day by day those who are being saved!

— End —