

Cornelius

Acts 10

Introduction

The conversion of Cornelius is one of the great landmarks in the history of the early church. So far, Jews had a place in the Church of Christ (Acts 2) and also the half-breed Samaritans (Acts 8). But up to this point, there were no Gentiles in the Church. We do not realize nowadays the awful hostility and hatred that existed between Jews and Gentiles in the first century. Jews had such pride in their race, and despised the Gentiles as dogs, merely fuel for the fires of hell. They kept themselves apart from Gentiles as much as possible. No orthodox Jew ever entered the home of a Gentile, nor invited a Gentile into his home, even less sit down and have a meal together. When a devout Jew returned from market, he washed his hands very carefully because of defilement from Gentiles.

In this situation, how could a Gentile enter the Church? How could Jews mix with them at Church? As a result of the vision to Peter and subsequent report of the incident to the leaders at Jerusalem, the enormous obstacle was removed. The Church henceforth was for all races and cultures. **Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus** (Ephesians 3:6).

This is not of any immediate problem to us. We are Gentiles and are in the Church, and the Church has been like that for over 1900 years. We would be glad to see Jews in the Church to prove among other reasons that we are all one in Christ Jesus. Though the story is still relevant in places where churches consist of people of one colour by deliberate policy, one race, one class, one culture, or one age group. The story underlines the importance of oneness in Christ, and there is no place for prejudices and unwarranted suspicions against people who are not our type.

The Lord of the Church has no favourites. In Christ, all are welcome and all in Christ should be welcomed by His people. There is no place for segregated congregations; else we will not fit into heaven very well. **A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne** (Revelation 7:9).

Our main concern now is to study Cornelius. He was a religious man, a good family man, a generous man and a God-fearing man, even to the extent of praying. Yet he was not a Christian. We have all met people like this. Sometimes they are nicer people and more attractive than many sound orthodox Christians. We meet them on the street, we live next door to them, we have been helped by them. Often, such people have had good training, a good parental example, Christian upbringing, a desire for good reputation, respectability, and the appearance of being good and generous. They are good people at least on the outside. But they do not belong to Christ. What is their situation before God? What do they need?

A good man's life

Cornelius lived in Caesarea, a coastal garrison town named after the Augustus Caesar of Luke 2:1. Caesarea had a splendid harbour, and was the administrative capital of Judea. Cornelius was a centurion of an Italian Cohort. In the Roman army, a legion of 6000 men was made up of 10 cohorts (battalions), and each cohort had 6 centuries (companies) of 100 men each. Each company was commanded by a centurion, with responsibilities like a captain. Centurions were the backbone of the army, men of great courage and loyalty (N.B. All references to centurions in the New Testament show them in favourable light).

Cornelius and all his family were devout and God-fearing (Acts 10:2). This word for God-fearing is a technical term, mentioned several times in Acts, used for Gentiles who were weary of polytheism and the immoralities of pagan religions. They attended the Synagogue, and believed and used the Old Testament in Greek. They accepted there was one God, and His high moral precepts. They kept the Sabbath and laws concerning food. But they were not a full Jew, i.e. not a Proselyte, because that required baptism, sacrifice and circumcision. (The latter was rejected by many as degrading.) From the ranks of these God-fearers, the Christian church drew many converts in the first century.

Cornelius was decent in every sense. **He gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly** (Acts 10:2). Some of his troops had the same character (Acts 10:7). **He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people** (Acts 10:22). Therefore according to the light he had, he lived close to God. We meet others of the same character in the New Testament – the rich young ruler, Nicodemus, the Ethiopian Eunuch. And we meet many more around us. Aren't they good enough? What more can we expect from them?

A good man's incompleteness

The record indicates that Cornelius's life was not only noticed by men, but also by God. God knew all about him, his prayers had been heard and his almsgiving observed. Peter summarized the situation: **I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right** (Acts 10:34,35).

Here is the problem verse. It is so important to interpret it in the light of the rest of the story and of the New Testament as a whole. We do not say we are saved by religion and morality. Cornelius needed to hear about Jesus, and needed to be told that **everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name** (Acts 10:43). He needed Christ and salvation and life. He needed the Holy Spirit (10:47). He needed peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all (10:36). He had yet to believe and repent.

So how do we interpret this verse that whoever fears God, and whose works are righteous, is accepted by Him? "Accepted" does not mean saved. But God prefers righteousness to unrighteousness, and sincerity to insincerity among Gentiles as well as Jew, because God has no favourites.

Others see Cornelius as being in the same position as Old Testament believers. People who repented, brought sacrifices, threw themselves on God's mercy to be saved – as God worked in their hearts. So Cornelius was not saved by his faith and righteousness, but he knew his needs as a sinner, depended on grace of God which then led to a life of righteousness. He had the same attitude to God as a man has when he becomes a Christian – repentance and faith – as in Old Testament times, living up to the light he had. No question of earning salvation. But still needing to learn of the way God's mercy seen in the Old Testament partially was fully revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Needing to enjoy and understand the fullness of God's grace revealed in Christ, with all its blessing.

However we interpret this verse, it is evident that Cornelius was not in a satisfactory condition. He needed the full light of Christ and all the blessing which He brings, including knowledge of forgiveness of sins through His Cross. But the story in total context tells us that however commendable his spiritual progress and his response to the light given, his light was incomplete. What faith and obedience he had was defective, urgently needed to be brought into the full light of the Gospel, and receive the assurance of forgiveness of sins in Christ.

This story is saying very definite things to our own situation. Religion is not enough. Morality is not enough. We need Christ. We need to be saved by Him, know His forgiveness, and place our faith in Him. Other religions are not ways to God. There is salvation in none other than Christ. Even less is it suggesting that all men are going to heaven, religion or no religion. The whole story contains the urgency in pointing men to Christ, for they urgently and desperately need Christ and nothing else.

A good man's spirit and attitude

It was clearly the Lord's purpose to lead this seeker to further light and into the full knowledge of salvation in Christ. He sent His angel to tell Cornelius to make contact with Peter in Joppa, lodging with Simon the tanner. Peter would give him further instructions. Immediately Cornelius sent his two servants and a devout God-fearing soldier to Joppa.

Meanwhile God had prepared Peter not to be prejudiced against Cornelius, with a vision of unclean and clean creatures, given three times. The Spirit then told Peter to go with the three men when they arrive from Cornelius. The whole episode was perfectly arranged and timed by the Lord.

The next day a party of 10 (Cornelius's three servants, with Peter and six friends) journeyed to Caesarea. Cornelius was waiting for them, prepared. He had assembled a good company – servants, soldiers, relatives and close friends. Cornelius fell down in worship, to be told by Peter not to treat him like a god. And at the same time Peter did not treat Cornelius like a dog, because he did the unthinkable by going into a Gentile's home. Cornelius recounted how God had directed him to seek out Peter. Notice instant obedience had followed the command, just like a Roman centurion would have expected of his men.

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us (Acts 10:33). What a good way to start every church

service – recognizing we are all assembled in the presence of God to listen to His commands. All are present. God is present. We wait to hear God’s Word. United, humble and expectant. A God-conscious congregation – how much more blessing we would receive if that was always our spirit.

When we are in the frame of mind of Cornelius, we have the assurance we will be blessed. Cornelius was seeking salvation, guidance, help, deliverance and the Lord’s will. Scripture gives very clear and definite promises to people with that attitude. **If anyone chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own** (John 7:17). **You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart** (Jeremiah 29:13).

When eager to do God’s will, anxious to find His way, prepared to do anything He says, when we really are in earnest – we will find. Cornelius was living proof of that.

A good man’s search rewarded

We are not going to go into the full details of Peter’s sermon here, except to say it was God-centred preaching – Christ’s ministry, death, resurrection, return as judge. **Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name** (Acts 10:43). The response to his message was clear. The Gentiles repented, believed in Christ and received the Holy Spirit. And in receiving the Holy Spirit, they received assurance, fuller revelation of God’s love, larger understanding of God’s truth, and the secret of holy living and effective service.

Cornelius was a fine man, but there was one gaping hole in his life. He was without Christ. His basic need was Christ. He had sins which needed forgiven. They may not have been crude vulgar sins of the man of the gutter, they may have been sins of respectable pride, self-sufficiency of a man who could boast he needed nothing, self-will and directing his own life, self-righteousness of a man who thought he had a claim on God, and the basic failure of every godless man or woman - unwillingness to receive salvation as a free gift, refusal to bow the knee to Christ, obstinacy which will not allow God to reign in the life.

Can you see something of yourself in that description? Are you aware of the gaping whole in your life? Christ is the only way. Believe in Him, and receive forgiveness of sins. Your search will be rewarded, as Cornelius’s was. Seek, and you will find.