

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS

Marc Gibson

“Conversion” means a turning around from one direction to another. The book of Acts records cases of conversion and non-conversion as the gospel of Christ spread into all the world. The conversion of Cornelius is significant because he is the first Gentile to obey the gospel. His conversion demonstrated to the Jews that “God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life” (Acts 11:18).

The Sinner – Cornelius

Cornelius is no insignificant individual, being a centurion of the Italian Regiment (Acts 10:1). He is also “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (10:2).

Though he is a sincere, religious man, Cornelius is lost in sin. He does not know about the Savior of mankind, Christ Jesus. Therefore, he is told to send for Peter who will tell him “words” concerning what he must do to be saved (10:6, 22, 32; 11:14). Cornelius and his invited guests gather to hear from Peter the inspired message revealed and commanded by God (10:33).

The Preacher – Peter

While Peter is staying in Joppa, God shows him a vision of a great sheet containing all kinds of animals (10:9-12). He is told to kill and eat, but he refuses to eat what he considers unclean (10:13-14). He is then informed that he must not call unclean what God has cleansed. This vision happens three times, leaving Peter to wonder about its meaning (10:15-17a).

After he arrives at the house of Cornelius, Peter wonders no more. He begins by saying, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (10:34-35). This “whoever” includes the Gentiles, who will now be “fellow heirs of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

The Message – Jesus

Peter proceeds to preach Jesus to Cornelius and his invited guests. He preaches Jesus as “Lord of all,” whose life, death, and resurrection were according to the will of God who ordained Him “to be Judge of the living and the dead” (10:36-42). He further proclaims that “through [Jesus’] name whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins” (10:43). With these words, remission of sins has now been “preached in His name to all nations [Jew and Gentile]” (Lk. 24:47; cf. Isa. 2:2-3).

The Response – Belief and Baptism

As Peter is speaking, the Holy Spirit falls upon all who hear the word and they speak in tongues (10:44, 46). This is not what saves Cornelius, for, as we noted earlier, it would be “words” by which he would be saved, not the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (11:14). These “words” are the gospel of Christ which is God’s power unto salvation for both Jew

and Gentile (Rom. 1:16). The outpouring of the “gift of the Holy Spirit” is a sign to the Jews of God’s inclusion of the Gentiles into His kingdom (10:45; 11:15-18).

Peter knows that no one can forbid water (or withstand God) by refusing to baptize a believing Cornelius into Christ and His body; therefore, he commands them to be “baptized in the name of the Lord” (10:47-48; 11:17). Water baptism is a command, not a suggestion. Believers of the gospel must be baptized to be saved (Mk. 16:16; Acts 2:38; 1 Pet. 3:21). You, too, can be converted like Cornelius if you believe and are baptized into the body of Christ!