

Sermon 37, To the Gentiles, Acts 10:1-11:18

Proposition: The conversion of Cornelius signals that God is sending the gospel to non-Jews too, and that we need to accept His work.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luke has shown us how the gospel went from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria. Now, a third of the way into his book, he is ready for the crucial transition: the gospel is about to go to the Gentiles. This is a tremendous breakthrough. Today, of course, we can actually ask "Will the Jews be saved?" But in the first century, the really astonishing question was "Will the Gentiles be saved?" To even ask the question was borderline absurd. The only way Gentiles could be saved by Israel's God was by becoming Israelites. That is, Gentiles as such simply could not be saved. They could only be saved as Jews. Luke was well aware of this prejudice. For centuries, tradition has held that he was a Gentile. More recent commentators actually now think that he was a Jew, meaning that the entire Bible, so far as we know, was written by Jewish men. But regardless (both sides are guessing), Luke lived in the first century and he knew that Gentiles couldn't be saved. That's why this episode is the longest narrative in Acts (unless you count the voyage at the end of the book), and the key scenes in it are told three times. The point is clear, and made in so many words by Peter: God orchestrated the coming of the gospel to the Gentiles so that they could repent and be saved as Gentiles, without becoming Jewish or submitting to the Levitical system in any way.

Peter didn't engineer this revolution. The church didn't target Gentiles as an "emerging market." No. This was God's idea and God's work. He granted repentance unto life to the

Gentiles. He inaugurated the bringing of the gospel to the ends of the earth. So let's look at what He did, and how.

I. God's Preparations

Start with God's preparations. These are around us every day, in countless ways. Every encounter is something that God planned; every crack in the sidewalk, every chance meeting, every trip taken or not taken, is a factor in the cosmic story that the Word is crafting before our very eyes. But sometimes we get a glimpse of the preparation behind the really big events, the ones that mark the start of a new era. This crops up here, for instance.

A. Caesarea & Joppa: The Right Places

The chapter begins with a mention of Caesarea. This town sounds vaguely familiar, but I would not have been able to tell you anything about it before reading the commentaries on this passage. Caesarea was actually the capital of the Roman province of Palestine. That's right: Jerusalem was not the capital. It was the capital of a lesser region, a region ruled by the client kings (the Herodians) of Judea. But the provincial capital was right here in Caesarea, a city on the Mediterranean coast, a majority Gentile city, and yet one situated in the holy land. It was here, then, that God began the work of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. There were lots of Jews, but it wasn't a Jewish city.

And of course, we left Peter in Joppa at the end of the last chapter. Joppa is about 30 miles from Caesarea. Peter is ready, then, to head to Caesarea on short notice and minister the gospel there.

B. Cornelius & Peter: The Right People

The second thing we need to notice is that God had lined up the right people. Luke abruptly introduces Cornelius. This man stands out: he might be a Gentile, but you could hardly call him a Gentile sinner. After all, he is described with four positive characteristics.

First, he's devout. That means that he was very rigorous and serious about the exercises of piety. He read the Bible. He prayed. He did his best to live up to the moral demands of the Ten Commandments. And he probably attended the synagogue on a weekly basis. Second, he's a God-fearer, and so is his whole household. That means not only the psycho-spiritual reality that God was primary in his thinking and he evaluated every decision by whether it would please God. And not only that; he taught this to his wife, his children, his servants, and his guests. The entire household was oriented around fearing God. Already, you're probably thinking "This man didn't need to be converted; he was already a Christian!" There is some truth to that, and it's led some to conclude that the real issue here is the conversion of Peter and the Jewish church, who had to learn to accept Gentiles. But clearly, if Cornelius was already saved, why on earth this big fuss about him becoming a Christian? Why does Luke tell us his story over and over? And especially, why does Peter say that the angel described an encounter with Peter this way: "Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved" (Acts 11:14)? Clearly, Cornelius needed to know Jesus and possess the Holy Spirit. A major, major point of this story is that being a good person, a religious person, a devout person, is not enough. Even being a

God-fearer is not enough. You need to know Jesus Christ and worship Him and receive His Spirit in order to truly be saved.

Back to the godliness of Cornelius. In addition to his devout, God-fearing lifestyle, he also gave alms continually to the (Jewish) people. Luke doesn't say "Jewish," but we can understand that when he says "the people" he doesn't mean "the poor people" or "the local people" but "the people who the whole book has been about," i.e., the Jewish people. Anyway, in one sense, the point is not the recipients of the charity. It's the donor. Cornelius showed in a practical way that he feared God by generously giving to those who needed it. Finally, Cornelius was a prayer warrior. He was much given to talking to God.

Right now, I want to just take a moment. It's obvious to us why this was the right man to be the first Gentile convert. His piety and godliness put us to shame. If someone was writing a one-sentence profile of you, would they conclude that your most notable characteristics were how devout, God-fearing, generous, and prayerful you were?

This man is a soldier in the occupying imperial army. In God's eyes, that doesn't make him ineligible for salvation.

Notice, then, on the other side, how Peter is the right one to bring the gospel to him. Though Peter is not necessarily a "Hebrew of the Hebrews," educated by the most prestigious rabbi in the world and possessed of an encyclopedic knowledge and a prodigious intellect, he is the apostle to the circumcision. Only Nixon could go to China because he was known to be tough on communism. Only Peter could go to Caesarea and evangelize the Gentiles, because he was known to be a stickler for the Levitical law. There is no sense, as there was in the previous chapter, of someone who's an outsider to the movement. The acknowledged leader of the apostles brought in the Gentiles. In other words, this came from the very highest circles within the nascent church. If Peter approves of it, there is really nothing else to say — as the Jerusalem church acknowledges at the end of this section, in 11:18.

So Peter and Cornelius are the right men. We're establishing the principle. Later on, renegade Jews like Baruch Spinoza and reprobate Gentiles like Ted Bundy could embrace the gospel (not that those two in particular ever did). But this change is already big enough, and so, rather than try the nerves of His people too hard, God took the very best, most upright Gentile and introduced him to the most senior, gifted, outspoken one of the original 12 apostles. The results made history.

C. After Judea, Samaria, and Joppa: The Right Time

But of course, we're still on the preparations. The third thing I want you to see about them is that the preparations took place at the right time. God did not send the gospel to the Gentiles on the day of Pentecost. That would have been too soon. He did not evangelize Gentiles before Samaritans, thereby seemingly neglecting the reunification of divided Israel and Judah. He did not go to the Gentiles before reaching an Ethiopian and doing a healing in Joppa. He worked methodically closer and closer to the edge of Judaism, and then He reached over the boundary and converted a Gentile who was the closest possible thing to a Jew without actually being one. First God softened up His bigoted Jewish people by the conversion of people outside Jerusalem.

Then He had them recognize Samaritans as full members of the body of Christ. Then they welcomed in the Ethiopian eunuch. They were getting a taste of the Father's love for diversity within His family. And now that circle of inclusion is being expanded just a bit.

The Jewish Christians had grown up singing Psalms about all nations coming and worshipping before God's throne. But it was still hard for them to move from that to actually welcoming in the black eunuch and uncircumcised Roman and all the other blood-eating Gentiles who were about to flood through the door. So God brought them up to it gradually.

II. God's Initiative

God's preparation of the main characters, the setting, and the timing is all over this passage. But with that preliminary stuff cleared up, I also want you to see how this whole account of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles and thus the Gentiles to the church has God's fingerprints all over it. In fact, Luke makes it clear that including Gentiles was not Peter's idea. It was not Cornelius' idea. It was not any human being's idea. It was God's idea. The Almighty took every last particle of initiative on this.

A. Visions

The first way that God brought this about was through visions. These visions are incredibly important. Luke leads with them, and then Cornelius and Peter tell them over and over again. Why? Because they are making it clear that they did not decide to take the church to the Gentiles. They did not come up with this idea on their own. God came to them and told them to do it.

1. Telling Cornelius to Seek Peter, 10:1-6

The chapter begins by introducing Cornelius, a centurion in the occupying Roman Army. Remember, Judea and Samaria are colonized lands. They do not govern themselves; they are ruled from Rome. And one of the agents on the ground of that colonial rule was Cornelius. Luke doesn't hush this up or skate over it. What is he telling us? That however ethically murky colonialism is, it is not wrong to serve in a colonizing army. Cornelius is not sinning by virtue of being a military man. Indeed, he is portrayed as a very good guy, as we just talked about.

Well, God sends an angel to Cornelius and tells him to send messengers and get Simon Peter and bring him over to give further instructions. God set this all up.

2. Telling Peter that Purity Laws No Longer Apply, 10:9b-16

Meanwhile, the next day God introduces the idea to Peter. The vision of unclean animals at lunchtime, and God commanding to eat them effectively says "The old purity codes are dead, Peter." God repeats it twice — just as Peter is going to do in the rest of this story. Notice, of course, that neither of these visions says "God is going to save the Gentiles and they won't have to become Jews." It isn't that straightforward. But that is the overall message.

So God had the idea, and God is the one who starts to show Peter and Cornelius how this is going to work. Notice that Peter does not understand his vision immediately. He meditates on it. We are almost never told in Scripture what the characters are thinking — but here we are told that Peter is thinking that he has no idea what the sheet is supposed to mean. It's anyone's guess, he seems to be thinking.

B. Visits

The major purpose of the visions was to bring about contact between Cornelius (not a believer) and Peter (a believer). Even today, as more of our Muslim friends than ever before are being converted to Christ, they might see a vision but the upshot of that vision is virtually always the need to get together in person with real believers and learn from them how to follow Jesus. Folks, our faith is a social faith! The church is for introverts too. But even introverts need to be in church and confess that they believe in the communion of saints.

1. Cornelius' Three Messengers to Peter, 10:7-8

The first visit is of Cornelius' three messengers to Peter. They show up at his door — two servants and a soldier. And they just say “We want to see Peter.” The Spirit then handles the rest, telling Peter “Go with them and stop making distinctions.” And he does, taking half a dozen Jewish brothers with him as witnesses of what's going to happen next.

2. Peter and Six Jewish Christians to Cornelius, 11:12

They visit, and there they encounter a Gentile, enter his home, and end up staying with him. But Cornelius knows that they are coming and has assembled everyone he can think of to be there to receive them. Have you ever walked into a house and realized that they are all sitting expectantly in the living room, waiting for you to come in and talk to them and be the main event? That was the case here. Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends. They are ready to hear, and Peter is ready to speak.

III. God's Gifts

And the upshot of that speech is that God makes it abundantly clear that the Gentiles are full members of the church now.

A. The Spirit Falls Upon Cornelius & his Household, 10:44-46

Peter preaches, telling about Jesus. He emphasizes that God shows no partiality. That is, God is not so stuck on His original people, the Jews, that He has nothing for the rest of the human race. God does not save based on looks, intellect, race, origin, or any other human characteristic. Nor does He save based on goodness. What Peter means by saying that “anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him” is that those who have already received God's grace and fear Him are the ones that He delights in. The point is not that if you do enough good works, God will eventually notice and save you. But Cornelius feared God and did what was right, and Peter was talking to him and his friends. “People like you can be saved.” That was the core of the apostle's message to Cornelius, his family, and his friends.

We know that they received Jesus because they received the Holy Spirit, and Christ and His Spirit are a package deal. If you have one, you have the other. There is no Christ without the Spirit, if only because “Christ” literally means “Anointed with the Spirit.” That is who Jesus is. He is one in being with the Holy Spirit; He is Anointed by the Spirit. And thus, when the Spirit fell on the Gentiles, it was clear that they had become Christians.

Now, was Cornelius somehow a non-Christian? Of course. One of Luke's points in telling this story is that the best, most devout, most God-fearing person you can ever hope to meet still

needs Jesus. Being very religious is not enough. Reading and studying the OT is not enough. Only Jesus can save, and Cornelius needed to be saved. The same goes for your devout friends. If they are devout, that's probably good. But it is not enough to save them. Only Jesus can do that.

B. God's Agents Baptize Gentiles, 10:47-48

So God's agents baptize Gentiles, the official sign of their welcome into and membership in the church. The result is that Peter stays with them.

Just two weeks before, the thought of baptizing a Gentile who had never been circumcised would have been anathema to Peter and to pretty much the whole rest of the church. And now, suddenly, here he is doing it. Why? Because it was God's idea.

C. God's Church Accepts Gentiles, 11:18

Folks, the payoff of this whole passage, the point that all the repetition is driving at, is right here in 11:17: It was God's idea. God wanted it to happen. Peter was just His servant in the whole thing. And the church bought it. The church agreed. They recognized ultimately that salvation is God's gift, and He had given it to the Gentiles.

Notice what they call it: Not salvation, but repentance unto life — that is, the kind of genuine turning from sin that leads to life. That kind of turning is God's gift. No one else, no one less, can grant it. Only the Almighty can. And He did. The gospel went to the Gentiles on that day in Caesarea, and it has never stopped since. Here we Gentiles are, believing it and practicing it.

So brothers and sisters, believe that God brought the gospel to us and never looked back. Believe that gospel. And keep sharing it. Next week we'll talk about how sharing table fellowship is a major side note in this chapter, and one that our church needs to engage in. But Luke's biggest point is that God sent the gospel to the Gentiles, and the biggest application of that truth is simply gratitude. God thought it worthwhile to evangelize *you*. Can you thank and praise Him for that? Can you live like someone He's saved? Amen.