

## CONVERSION – CORNELIUS

### Introduction

Conversion is a subject that should concern everyone. Jesus said it was a requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven. Cornelius' experience had things in common with other conversions; there were also unique features. We should be careful to desire what is common rather than something that is not essential.

### Surprising encounter

There are many people who can identify with Cornelius. As a Roman soldier he was not Jewish but he believed in the Jews' religion and was a religious man. It was more than an intellectual belief – he was noted for his prayers, his care of the poor, and his kindness to his own household. But something was missing. That is evident from the fact that God responded to his prayers by sending an angel who directed him to the Apostle Peter.

Cornelius' response is instructive. He did not refuse; instead he sent for Peter immediately. That shows the regard he had for God's word. That is also evident in what he then did. He gathered his friends to hear whatever this messenger of God would say. When Peter arrived Cornelius said, 'We are all here in the presence of God to hear all that God has commanded you to say.'

Many conversions to Christ begin with a reverence for the Bible as God speaking to us. If we do not have that attitude it will take something major to happen in our lives to get us to listen. Conversely, if we do have a regard for God as he speaks in his word it is likely he will respond to that. God never told anyone to seek him in vain.

It is notable that God's angel did not deal with Cornelius' need straightaway. He pointed him in the direction of the gospel message. Many people have expected something to happen to them, and wondered why God did not do it. There are churches that emphasise the Spirit's work in ways that suggests it is the first thing an enquirer needs to know. No. the first thing we need to know is the message of Jesus. That is where we find the answer to our questions; experience comes after.

### God's hidden hand

Cornelius could not have known what else was happening in connection with his prayer. At the very time he received that message from God someone was being prepared to address his need – Simon Peter. As a loyal 1<sup>st</sup> century Jew Peter was accustomed to avoiding contact with non-Jews. Entering their homes was perceived as risking contamination! Yet Peter was one of the few people whom God could use to instruct Cornelius.

God changed Peter's attitude by a vision in which he was commanded to eat 'unclean' food, and when he refused God told him not to reject what God himself had cleansed. The riddle was solved when Cornelius' request arrived and he realised God was commanding him to visit the 'unclean' Gentile.

Peter had been with Jesus the entire length of his ministry and was a witness of his resurrection. Therefore he had Jesus' authority to teach, he had Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to bring everything to mind, and he had personal experience to back it up.

Another thing this reminds us is that our faith is based on the apostles' testimony. Every church should be 'apostolic' in that sense, and there can be no other apostles in the category of those

whom Jesus sent; they are in effect claiming superiority over the men Jesus chose and whom the Father gave him – they have no credibility.

It is clear from hindsight that God coordinated what was happening – the risen, exalted Saviour was actively seeking Cornelius. There was no way he could know that. And there is no way we can know it either if that is happening with us – our task is to seek the Lord, not wait until he does something.

### **The message he needed**

Peter's message brought great joy. Peter began by saying that God did not show favouritism, and accepted Gentiles just as he accepts Jews. We need to know that, for we may be tempted to think that God will not accept us. He will, and he is ready to forgive anyone.

He referred to it as 'God's message', and it is. The gospel is not a human invention. Churches should regard it as a sacred trust. We should regard it as 'a faithful saying that deserves full acceptance'

It is a 'message of peace'. That is what the angels declared at Jesus' birth. It is primarily peace with God on account of his 'goodwill towards men'. This is not something we achieve – it is something God tells us about, his message. That in turn produces inner peace and a way of life that promotes peace with other people. But the message comes first.

It is the message of Jesus of Nazareth. After his baptism God gave him the Holy Spirit without limit. Consequently he went about doing good, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead. It was obvious that God was with him, although some tried to deny it and suppress the truth. These facts are well-attested. Out of envy the religious leaders handed him over to the Roman authorities and compelled them to execute Jesus. Crucifixion (hanged on a tree) was understood as a sign of God's rejection. His enemies thought God had rejected him as an impostor, but instead his rejection was the result of his bearing the sins of many other people. God raised him from the dead, and there are many witnesses to that fact – they even ate and drank with him for it was no ghostly appearance but a literal physical coming back to life. The risen Jesus instructed his apostles to tell everyone what had happened and that God had appointed him as judge of all humanity. The Old Testament prophets predicted these things, and showed that people have their sins forgiven when they believe in him.

This is the gospel message – the historical facts and their significance for us today.

### **The results**

Cornelius and his friends received the message with joy. They believed what Peter said and rejoiced in the salvation God has given through Jesus.

Not every profession of faith is true – we see that in the case of Simon Magus. In their case it was obviously true. Their joy in the message was accompanied with a similar experience to what the apostles had at Pentecost. That combination could only have happened as a result of the Holy Spirit at work in them.

There are few examples of speaking in tongues in the New Testament (and no suggestion that Jesus ever did). The examples we have are at key points in the spread of the gospel. It authenticated the apostles' message at Pentecost (especially that the gospel is for all nations); it authenticated the acceptance of the Samaritan Christians (who would be afraid of Jewish rejection); and it authenticated what happened to Cornelius (for Peter had to be persuaded by God that the gospel is for Gentiles also). That is the unusual feature of this conversion, along with his earlier piety. The

main feature in common in all conversions is hearing the message of Jesus and believing in him, which produces lasting results.

We should note that Cornelius 'glorified God'. Whatever we do or do not experience a genuine convert to Christ will always give God the honour of their salvation. We should beware of people who major on personal experience rather than on what God has done. It can be waiting for an experience that never comes, or it can be focusing on self-fulfilment rather than giving thanks to God and acknowledging that it is all his doing.

Their baptism followed. A private Christian is normally a contradiction in terms (only exceptional circumstances lead a convert to being alone). Baptism is, among other things, entry into the visible church of Christ. Cornelius took his place and was accepted. It also demonstrated his faith in God's Christ; and we do well to think back to our own baptism and take it as an encouragement to our faith and service.

### **Conclusion**

It is worthwhile seeking God. He will respond as he did to Cornelius.

The key matter is what God did for us through Jesus. He bore our sins in his own body on the tree; our sins will be forgiven if we accept that; and he will come to judge the earth – there is our hope. So if you are seeking God ... focus on Jesus. Faith in him inevitably leads to the Holy Spirit taking up residence, never to leave.