

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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Cornelius, Peter, and the Conversion of Gentiles

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Cornelius ([10:1-8](#))

Caesarea: A predominately Roman city on the shores of the Mediterranean in Judea, Caesarea was the headquarters of the Roman governor of the Judea province. Archaeological digs have discovered a stone from a building here inscribed with the name Pontus Pilate.

A centurion: Cornelius was an officer in the Roman Army. As such, Jews of that day in the region would quite naturally hate him and his ilk. According to Lenski, "Thirty-two such Italian cohorts were stationed in the different provinces of the empire. They were made up of Italian volunteers and were considered the most loyal Roman troops."

A devout man: Typically, we would expect that Roman soldiers would have been raised in or at least greatly influenced by the system of the Roman gods – Jupiter, Mars, Venus, etc. But prolonged occupation also means being exposed to the religion(s) and philosophies of the region, in this case Judaism. Somehow that exposure had resulted in Cornelius becoming a believer. The Jews called such people "God-fearers", as they adopted many tenets of the Jewish faith, yet stopped short of becoming full Jews in lifestyle -- and in circumcision! Jews respected and appreciated these God-fearing Gentiles, but they could not really share their life and homes and food with them, because they were still in fact Gentiles and not full Jewish converts.

The ninth hour of the day was a customary time of prayer for Jews, and a bit later in the chapter Cornelius says he was indeed praying when God spoke to him via a messenger (angel) in a vision.

Cornelius! It is significant that God spoke to Cornelius directly, calling him by name. It is also worth noting how Cornelius responded, namely as one who had a real relationship with God. Apparently, Cornelius' faith was shared by others in his household and under his command.

Simon whose surname is Peter: Cornelius probably didn't even know who Peter was. But he knew that he should do what God told him to do, and he could trust that God was speaking to this Peter fellow also.

Up on the Roof ([10:10-23](#))

Peter went up on the housetop to pray: In that culture, the "housetop" was normally used as a sort of patio. There was nothing strange about Peter going up on the housetop to pray. (Even so, the James Taylor song is still great!)

A voice came to him: We don't know exactly what this experience was like for Peter. It is rare, though not *unheard of*, for God to speak in an audible voice (ha!) More often, God speaks to our inner self.

Rise, Peter, kill and eat: Obviously this would go against Peter's upbringing as a Jew, which was to never eat anything except kosher foods. Certainly, among the all kinds of four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air there were non-kosher animals included.

Not so, Lord!: Peter's response was absurd – and typical of us! He said "no" to his Lord, when we all know that the only legitimate answer to a request from our Lord is "yes." But God comes to us where we are, and uses His good devices to break through our shells, barriers, and defenses for His good purposes.

Peter had a habit of telling Jesus "no" (Matthew 16:22, John 13:8). Peter had a lot of practice trying to put God in a box, and now God was going to shake Peter up and change his thinking.

"Shake yourself up a little, my brother. If you are too precise may the Lord set you on fire, and consume your bonds of red tape! If you have become so improperly proper that you cannot commit a proper impropriety, then pray God to help you be less proper, for there are many who will never be saved by your instrumentality while you study propriety." (Spurgeon)

The point is, Peter had faith, Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Peter had been used *greatly* by God. At the same time, Peter was still Peter! God didn't use him because he was perfect; He never does that. He makes us "perfect" in the sense of using us where and when He chooses. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you must be perfect for God to really use you!

And a voice spoke to him again the second time: God responded clearly to Peter. What God has cleansed (declared clean) you must not call common (impure, unholy, unacceptable to God). In Old Testament thinking, there was the holy and the common. The holy was made common when it came into contact with something common, and could only be made holy again through a ritual cleansing. When something was made holy it was called consecration; when it was made common it was called desecration.

Three times: For deep emphasis, God repeated this vision three times. Peter was not going to get the opportunity to blow this off!

...Peter wondered within himself: Even after all that, Peter didn't have it all figured out. That came in time, as God spoke to Peter through the visitors arriving at his door just about then.

The Spirit said to him: Previously it was simply said that "a voice" spoke to Peter. Now, we are told that the Spirit spoke to Peter. This was God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, speaking to Peter.

At this point, God has not told Peter that his visitors were Gentiles. Normally, a godly Jew like Peter would not associate in this manner with Gentiles. Knowing this, and knowing Peter's previous resistance ("Not so, Lord!"), God simply surprised Peter with the knowledge that these men were Gentiles. All Peter needed to know was that the Spirit said, "I have sent them."

Peter must have been a bit shocked when he opened the door and saw two servants and a soldier at his door. He would have known immediately that they were not Jews, and he would have wondered why God told him to go with them and why God had sent them.

The whole idea that God would send and use Gentiles was entirely new to Peter. God was expanding Peter's mind and heart.

A Gentile – worse yet, an officer in the Roman army – wanted to hear the gospel from Peter. Peter never did anything like this before!

Then he invited them in and lodged them: Here we see the change in Peter’s heart by the way he invited them in and showed them hospitality. “Lodged them” is literally “to entertain as a guest.” Peter didn’t just coldly give these Gentiles visitors a room; he entertained them as welcomed guests, and he did this against every custom of the Jews of his day.

“Normally a Jew would have said, ‘Well, it is nice to meet you, but we need to stay out here in the street. You can’t come inside.’ Or he might have said, ‘If you go down the street a little way, I think you’ll find an inn where you can stay.’ No orthodox Jew would have invited Gentiles into his house. He would not have sat down at the same table with them. He would not have had fellowship with them. It was forbidden.” (Boice)

Cornelius and Peter ([10:24-42](#))

Cornelius waited for Peter to come, knowing that since God motivated him to call Peter in the first place, God would bring the plan to completion. Cornelius sent servants to get a man he had never met, so that he could meet this unknown man. He only knew that the man was a pious Jew, who by tradition would have nothing to do with a Gentile such as Cornelius. Despite all that, Cornelius was waiting for them -- in faith.

Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him: Cornelius didn’t know Peter, but must have thought him to be a special man of God, so he fell down at his feet and worshipped him. This reaction was understandable, though wrong.&*()JKL:7890jkl;

In the Bible, whenever worship is offered to men or to angels (e.g., Revelation 19:10), it is refused. But Jesus received such worship freely (Matthew 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 28:9). This is yet another mark and proof of the divinity of Jesus.

Peter honored Cornelius by coming all the way from Joppa to see him. Cornelius honored Peter by bowing low before him. They did just as Paul would later write, in honor giving preference to one another (Romans 12:10).

He went in: This is one of the shortest, yet most important passages of this section. Peter actually entered the house of a Gentile, something that Jewish customs and traditions strictly prohibited. By entering a Gentile’s home, Peter

showed that his heart and mind had changed, and that he had learned the lesson of the vision of the great sheet. This lesson would be profoundly important in Peter's remaining ministry, and therefore is the most important message of this chapter.

In saying "I should not call any man common or unclean," Peter understood that the vision was about people, not food, though the principle still relates to food. Believers are not under any obligation to keep a kosher diet. How we eat may be better or worse from a health perspective, but it doesn't make us any more right with God. Jesus spoke of this principle: "Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart, but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" (Mark 7:19). Paul reiterates this principle in Romans 14:14 and Colossians 2:16-17.

I prayed in my house... I was fasting: Undoubtedly, Cornelius prayed either generally to draw closer to God, or specifically that God would send the Messiah. God would answer this prayer through the gospel Peter brought to Cornelius. Either way, the intensity of his prayer was evident.

Your prayer has been heard...: It is interesting to note that though Cornelius was not a Christian in the sense that he was not yet baptized or born again, yet in this case God heard his prayers and remembered his generosity to others.

Peter's Sermon to the Gentiles ([10:43-48](#))

In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality: This is the foundation for Peter's understanding that the gospel should now go forth to Gentiles. This statement goes completely against the prevailing Jewish thought at that time that God certainly did show partiality, towards the Jews and against the Gentiles. Many Jews of Peter's day thought that God loved the Jews, and hated the Gentiles.

According to Barclay, it was common for a Jewish man to begin the day with a prayer thanking God that he was not a slave, a Gentile, or a woman! If a Jew married a Gentile, the Jewish community would have a funeral for the Jew and consider them dead. It was thought that to even enter the house of a Gentile made a Jew unclean before God.

And that street ran both ways. In many areas, Gentiles despised Jews as weird traditionalists, and believed that they were evil plotters who worshipped pigs. After all, they thought, Jews refused to eat pork, so they must worship pigs!

All of this changed with the spread of the gospel. Christianity was the first religion to disregard racial, cultural and national limitations.

Peter's sermon was a wonderful, if brief, explanation of the person and work of Jesus.

Whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins: The brief sermon concluded with an understanding of the broadness of God's promise of salvation. Note carefully: Whoever believes -- Jew or Gentile; slave or free; white or black; good or wicked; rich or poor -- whoever believes.

While Peter was still speaking these words: "Faith comes by hearing." Salvation came when each one of these Gentiles responded to Peter's message with believing faith in their hearts -- the gift of God -- so that they were actually born again as they listened and believed!

The Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word...: Once again we see this filling with the Holy Spirit accompanied by the demonstration of spiritual gifts. This was a filling with the Holy Spirit in two senses: First, in the sense that He indwells and abides in every believer; second, in the sense of a special empowering with gifts and graces from the Holy Spirit.

Those of the circumcision who believed were astonished: The Jewish Christians present were amazed. They may have understood that God loved the Gentiles, but who would have thought God would fill Gentiles with the Holy Spirit in the same manner -- and degree -- as the Jews?!

He commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord: This entrance of Gentiles into the church was not a new plan, but something promised long ago. The Old Testament looked forward to the day when a light would shine in the darkness of the Gentile world (Isaiah 60). God promised Abraham and his descendants that the blessing that came through him would extend to all nations (Genesis 12). And remember Jesus' promise regarding "other sheep, not of this fold" (John 10:16). Jesus also promised, "I... will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32).