

“More Than Conquerers— The First of Many”

Genesis 12:1–3; Acts 10:34–48

It is easy to forget that the Gospel is meant for everyone. Cornelius was the first of many Gentiles called to the body of Christ by God.

A promise made for all?

Here’s the question the apostles had to face in the years after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: Was Jesus the savior of the Jews only or would the Gentiles¹ be saved also? To put a finer point to it: Would Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus have to first become Jewish, seeking to keep all of the Jewish Law?

It can seem easy to open the pages of Scripture and answer this question. Isn’t the promise made to Abraham a promise that encompasses “all the families of the earth?” Yes (Genesis 12:3). Weren’t the Jews given by God to be “light to the nations?” Yes (Isaiah 49:6). Didn’t God promise a day when nation no longer lifted up sword against nation but they all sat under fig trees unafraid? Yes (Micah 4:4). And on...and on...

Yet, piles of Scripture can still leave the human heart untouched. Who could blame the Jews for losing their sense of mission to the world? The Assyrians had scattered ten tribes to the winds. The Babylonians had burned their temple and sent tens of thousands into exile. And for most of the last five hundred years, the Jews had traded one pagan, Gentile oppression for another, the latest edition being written in Latin.

We need to have some sympathy for Peter and the other apostles as they struggled to hear and to live out God’s incorporation of the Gentiles into the promises made to Abraham, i.e., into God’s plan to rescue Israel and the whole world. Even the gift of God’s Holy Spirit on Pentecost did not obliterate the apostles’ confusion and concerns.

All this said, we aren’t then surprised that the story of the first conversion of a genuine, completely-outside-the-family, Gentile, is no simple matter. We get angels, visions, and the Spirit’s direct intervention. The whole story, from Acts 10:1-11:18, including Peter’s defense of his actions, is by far the longest story in the book of Acts.

Even the Gentiles

Cornelius is an important man, an officer in the Roman Army. He and his family live in Caesarea, a large city built by the Romans on the Mediterranean coast northwest of Jerusalem. Cornelius is one of the God-fearers, Gentiles who are drawn to the God of Israel and even read the Hebrew Scriptures (in Greek!) and pray to God – but are NOT Jewish, which, for Cornelius, would mean circumcision.² Though not Jewish, he is a devout and generous man.

One day an angel comes to Cornelius to let him know that God has heard his prayer and seen his generosity. The angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to fetch a man named Peter.

The next day, before Cornelius’s men arrive in Joppa, Peter is on the roof of his house praying. He grows hungry and falls into a trance. He then has a vision in which, basically, despite being a Jew, he is commanded to eat pork. Peter, of course, protests, for the food laws, like circumcision, set the Jews apart. If you ate pork, you weren’t Jewish. If you ate pork, you were not part of the people of God.

When Peter wakes up he is puzzled by what the vision meant but then the Spirit of God speaks to him, telling him that ‘the front doorbell is about to ring’ and he should go with the men he will meet at the door...and he does.

Peter learns that Cornelius has gathered both family and friends. Cornelius falls on his knees to worship Peter, who gently corrects him. It seems that the purpose of all this is dawning on Peter, for he tells the gathering of Gentiles that



¹ “Gentile” simply means “not Jewish.”

² Circumcision was one of what Paul calls “the works of the Law” that distinguished between Jews and non –Jews. It was a boundary marker. The food laws, which were the focus of Peter’s vision, were also boundary markers.

God has shown him no one is “unclean” just as no food, such as pork, is “unclean.” People are people and food is food. Old boundaries no longer have any use.

Cornelius tells Peter that a “man in dazzling clothes,” came to him and had him send for Peter. Now, Cornelius, along with his family and friends, are ready to hear Peter’s message. And Peter proceeds to tell them the story of Jesus, who is the “Lord of all.” Even before Peter finishes, the Holy Spirit dwells within these Gentiles, enabling them to speak in tongues.³ Then Peter, seeing what was happening, baptized them all with water in the name of Jesus Christ.

There are a couple of important things to notice about the story.

- First, this is all God’s doing – in the person of the Holy Spirit. Peter and Cornelius seem almost passive, along for the ride. God uses angels and visions to move events along.
- Peter, a Jew, is taken aback by God’s insistence that, in essence, it is acceptable to eat pork. The much-protected and cherished food laws of the Jews had been set aside. They would no longer mark out the people of God. Your reading of the New Testament will be helped tremendously if you understand that this question became a long-running dispute. Acts 15 tells the story of major meeting of the Christian leaders in Jerusalem in 49AD to address this question.

It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of the controversy surrounding Peter’s baptism of Cornelius. In the minds of many fellow Jewish believers, Peter shouldn’t have eaten with the Gentiles much less have baptized them into the body of Christ. Yet, Peter rightly realized that he could not stand in God’s way on this. He went to Jerusalem to explain himself to the leaders of the Christian community. Later, there would be a conference in Jerusalem on this very question – must Gentile men seeking entrance into the community of believers first be circumcised...and avoid pork...and keep the Sabbath...and so on. The decision made by the conference was a firm “no,” though those who wished certainly could keep the Law in good conscience.

Yet even after the conference, there remained Jewish-Christians who taught that keeping such “works of the Law” (as Paul put it) made one a superior Christian. But they too slowly faded away. Led by Paul, a Pharisee himself, the Christians came to understand that there could be only one mark which distinguished believers from nonbelievers: faith in Jesus Christ. It is this faith that bound Cornelius to Peter . . . and to us. It is the Spirit who is given to all who share in this faith. Will Willimon reflects on the conversions in the book of Acts:

Conversions in Luke-Acts are *stories about beginnings*—the beginning of a new chapter in the life of the church, the initiation of a new mission, as well as the beginning of a new life for the individual person. Conversion is the beginning of the Christian journey, not its final destination. Moreover, conversions in Acts are *stories about vocation*—someone is being called for some godly work. Conversion is not for the smug individual possession of the convert, but rather for the ongoing thrust of the gospel. Finally, conversions in Acts are *stories about the gifts of God*— God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip’s work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of “free will” and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. “*By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope ...*” (1 Peter 1:3b; author’s italics.)⁴

As Paul would write to Christians in western Asia Minor (Turkey): “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

³ We can’t really know from the text whether this experience of the power of the Spirit is the same as Pentecost, when the disciples were enabled to speak in other languages. It could be or it could be another manifestation of the Spirit. But, like Acts 2, we know it was audible. Personally, I think it was a Pentecost 2 experience, signifying again the undoing of the tower of Babel.

⁴ William H. Willimon, *Acts*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 103–104.