

CONVERSION STUDIES

CONVERSION OF A CENTURION

Example seven of thirteen

The tenth chapter of Acts is the account of the conversion of Cornelius. So important is this beginning of the gospel among the Gentiles that the pertinent facts are recorded a second time in Acts 11. Cornelius was an Italian by nationality and a soldier by profession. "Centurion" indicates he was in command of one hundred soldiers.

Cornelius was a very religious person. He was devout, prayed, and feared God. The word translated "fear" means to reverence. The fact that Cornelius feared God is evidence of some knowledge of God (Acts 10:1,2). This knowledge he gained from the Jews. He had become dissatisfied with the emptiness of paganism. Cornelius was benevolent. This was wide spread for he was well thought of (Acts 10:22). What was his spiritual status?

He was lost. He was told that Peter "shall speak unto thee words, whereby thou shalt be saved, thou and all thy house" (Acts 11:14). It may startle some to learn that a man of this nature was lost. Your spiritual status is not the same as your religious condition. Too many sentimental people believe that any religion is fine. Such an idea opposes the way of Christ. If any religion will do, why send Christ into the world since people were religious before Christ came? All religious people are not saved people. Jesus said, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

Cornelius had a vision in which an angel told him to seek Simon Peter. Cornelius obeys the angel's message and sends three messengers to bring Peter. The angel did not tell him what to do to be saved. Why not? God ordained that the gospel be preached to men by men (I Cor. 1:21). Later Peter has a vision in which he sees all manner of beasts, creeping things, and birds. Then he is told to rise and kill and eat. He refuses for this would be contrary to his upbringing. The message from Cornelius arrived to help Peter understand what God wants of him. The next

day he leaves to preach to Cornelius, the first Gentile to hear the gospel. After the reception, Cornelius rehearsed his vision, and requests Peter to speak. Cornelius had made preparation for this meeting by inviting others (Acts 10:27).

"And Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34,35). Now the Gentiles know they can follow God. There is no social or national restrictions on the gospel. After this introduction, the sermon will be the same story as preached on Pentecost, to the eunuch, and the Samaritans. There is no other (Gal. 1:8). The story of Jesus of Nazareth is reviewed. He was the Anointed (Acts 10:38). He was the long awaited Messiah. He had ministered on earth (Acts 10:38). What better summary could be given of His healing, teaching, comforting, and rebuking sin? Still He died a violent death (Acts 10:39). He was slain by the very ones He sought to save. "He came unto his own, and they that were his own received him not" (John 1:11). Death was not permanent. "Him God raised up the third day, and gave him to be made manifest" (Acts 10:40). He came forth from the tomb by God's power (Rom. 1:4). After His resurrection He gave a commission (Acts 10:42). He is someday to be the Judge of all. Judgment was a prominent part of apostolic preaching (Acts 24:25; Heb. 9:27). Peter concluded with a gracious promise of remission of sins (Acts 10:43). The gospel story causes us to love Christ. We must be careful lest we lose sight of Christ in the systems of things about us.

There were three special or miraculous happenings involved in this conversion. These are not necessary today and are not to be expected. An Angel appeared to Cornelius to inform him where to find the truth. This was necessary because he did not have a written New Testament to tell him about Jesus. There is nothing an angel can tell you about salvation that is not revealed in the N.T. If he did tell you something else, he would have to be

rejected (Gal. 1:8). A vision appeared to Peter. Its purpose was to convince Peter he should go to a Gentile and preach to him. He would not have gone without the miracle that convinced him that God had called him to go to the Gentiles.

The baptism of Cornelius' household in the Holy Spirit was the third miracle. Many people today claim one must receive such to be saved. Such an idea is false. Why did the Holy Spirit come upon Cornelius? The use made of a thing by Spirit guided men shows the purpose of that thing. What Peter said it meant must be its purpose. Peter used this miracle to prove to his Jewish brethren that God wanted the Gentiles to hear the gospel (Acts 11:15-17). The purpose of the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit was to prove to all Jews that Gentiles were acceptable to God as gospel subjects. That was the purpose or else Peter used it wrongly. If preachers who today claim this is an example of conversion for all are right, Peter was wrong. The outpouring of the Spirit on Cornelius was more for the Jewish observers than for Cornelius' household.

The Holy Spirit's coming on Cornelius was not a general happening and hence is no part of conversion. This is obvious there had been nothing like it since Pentecost some years before. Peter classifies the event as one that had not occurred since Pentecost. "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at

the beginning" (Acts 11:15). Its purpose, therefore was not conversion. If conversion were the purpose, Peter could have cited any other conversion since Pentecost. Instead he had to go all the way back to Pentecost because nothing like it had ever happened. After the miracle, Cornelius was still commanded to be baptized in water. "And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 10:48). This is the same baptism commanded of the Jews (Acts 2:38). Water baptism is connected with salvation; Holy Spirit baptism is not (Eph. 4:5). No one need be baptized in the Spirit to be convinced you are an acceptable subject. This was proved at Cornelius' house. Thus the third miracle will not happen again any more than an angel coming.

The general features of Cornelius' conversion proceed on perfectly natural lines as all other conversions in Acts. He first had to hear (Acts 11:14; 10:22). His conversion was brought about according to the great commission. He was told what to do, not what to receive. Having heard the message, he believed (Acts 10:43; Rom. 10:17). Cornelius repented because Peter was preaching under a commission that required it (Luke 24:47). Finally, in order to be in Christ, he was baptized (Acts 10:48). Taking away the three miraculous elements which had specific purposes to be fulfilled, the conversion of the first Gentile was like all others then and now.

(B. G. Echols)

CHURCH OF CHRIST

412 East King Street
Shippensburg, Pa. 17257