

2. Peter is sent for by Cornelius (10:1–8)

Peter has responded boldly to the challenges of sickness and death; how will he respond to the challenge of racial and religious discrimination? Luke may be hinting at his comparative openness by ending the story of Aeneas and Tabitha with the information that ‘Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon’ (9:43). For, since tanners worked with dead animals, in order to convert their skins into leather, they were regarded as ceremonially unclean. But Peter disregarded this, which ‘seems to show that [he] was already in a state of mind which would fit him for the further revelation of the next chapter’, and for the instructions to go and baptize the Gentile Cornelius.⁷

At all events, we who now read Acts 10 remember that Jesus had given Peter ‘the keys of the kingdom’, although it is Matthew who tells us this not Luke.⁸ And we have already watched him use these keys effectively, opening the kingdom to Jews on the Day of Pentecost and then to Samaritans soon afterwards. Now he is to use them again to open the kingdom to Gentiles; by evangelizing and baptizing Cornelius, the first Gentile convert (cf. Acts 15:7).

Cornelius was stationed at Caesarea, a garrison city named after Augustus Caesar, the administrative capital of the province of Judea, boasting a splendid harbour built by Herod the Great. Luke introduces him as *a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment* (1). ‘Regiment’ translates *speira*, usually ‘cohort’, which consisted of six ‘centuries’ (100 men), each under the command of a ‘centurion’. Ten cohorts made up a legion. So a centurion corresponded approximately to a ‘captain’ or ‘company commander’ in our day.

In addition, he seems to have been an exemplary *pater familias*, for *he and all his family were devout*, their godliness being expressed both in generosity to the needy (JB, ‘to Jewish causes’) and in regular prayer to God (2). Whether ‘God-fearing’ is to be understood in a general sense that Cornelius was religious (as in verse 35) or in the more technical sense that he had become ‘a God-fearer’ (e.g. 13:16, 26), ‘a proselyte of

⁷ Knowling, p. 249. See Nu. 19:11–13; Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 2 (1924), p. 695; and Edersheim’s *Jewish Social Life*, p. 158.

⁸ Mt. 16:19.

the gate', is disputed.⁹ If the latter is correct, it means that he had accepted the monotheism and ethical standards of the Jews, and attended synagogue services, but had not become a full proselyte and been circumcised. So, although later (22) he is described as 'respected by all the Jewish people', he was still a Gentile, an outsider, excluded from God's covenant with Israel.

It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles (including even the 'God-fearers') on the other. Not that the Old Testament itself countenanced such a divide. On the contrary, alongside its oracles against the hostile nations, it affirmed that God had a purpose for them. By choosing and blessing one family, he intended to bless all the families of the earth.¹⁰ So psalmists and prophets foretold the day when God's Messiah would inherit the nations, the Lord's servant would be their light, all nations would 'flow' to the Lord's house, and God would pour out his Spirit on all humankind.¹¹ The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as 'dogs', and developed traditions which kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile, even a God-fearer, or invite such into his home (see verse 28). On the contrary, 'all familiar intercourse with Gentiles was forbidden' and 'no pious Jew would of course have sat down at the table of a Gentile'.¹²

This, then was the entrenched prejudice which had to be overcome before Gentiles could be admitted into the Christian community on equal terms with Jews, and before the church could become a truly multi-racial, multi-cultural society. We saw in [Acts 8](#) the special steps God took to prevent the perpetuation of the Jewish-Samaritan schism in the church; how would he prevent a Jewish-Gentile schism? Luke regards this episode as being so important that he narrates it twice, first in his own words ([Acts 10](#)), and then in Peter's when the latter explained to the Jerusalem church what had happened ([11:1-18](#)).

⁹ See Conrad Gempf's essay on 'The God-fearers', being Appendix 2 in Hemer, pp. 444-447.

¹⁰ [Gn. 12:1-4](#).

¹¹ [Ps. 2:7-8](#); [22:27-28](#); [Is. 2:1ff.](#); [42:6](#); [49:6](#); [Joel 2:28ff.](#)

¹² Edersheim, *Jewish Social Life*, pp. 25-29.

It is first made clear that Peter is to be God's instrument in this development, for Cornelius was instructed to send for him. *One day at about three in the afternoon*, which Luke has already identified as a time of prayer among Jews (3:1), *he had a vision* in which *he distinctly saw* an angel who called him by name (3). In response to his terrified question, the angel told him that his *prayers and gifts to the poor had come up as a memorial offering before God* (4), so that he had taken note of them, and that he must *send men to Joppa*, about thirty-two miles along the coast to the south, to fetch Simon Peter who was staying *by the sea* with his namesake, Simon the tanner (5–6). It was at Joppa, centuries previously, that the disobedient prophet Jonah had boarded a ship in his foolish attempt to run away from God.¹³ But Cornelius the centurion, who was himself used to giving commands, immediately obeyed this one, sending two servants and one soldier to Joppa (7–8). The angel did not preach the gospel to the centurion; that privilege was to be entrusted to the apostle Peter. ✎

This initial incident set the stage for what followed. For the primary question was how God would deal with Peter. How would he succeed in breaking down Peter's deep-seated racial intolerance? The principal subject of this chapter is not so much the conversion of Cornelius of the conversion of Peter. ✎

3. Peter receives a vision (10:9–23)

On the *following day* after Cornelius' vision, at *about noon* (i.e. twenty-one hours later), even as Cornelius' men *were approaching the city* of Joppa, Peter *went up on the flat roof* of the tanner's house to *pray* (9). *He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance* (10) and had an extraordinary vision. *He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners* (11). Some commentators have speculated that in his hunger-induced trance on the sea-side rooftop what Peter really saw was not a sheet but the sail of a boat passing by. And certainly *othonē* could be translated 'sail-cloth' (11, NEB). The main point of his vision, however, was what the sheet *contained*, namely *all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air* (12, NEB, 'whatever walks or crawls or flies'), evidently a mixture of clean and unclean creatures calculated to disgust any orthodox Jew.

¹³ Jon. 1:3.

Yet, having seen the vision, he now heard a voice which issued the shocking order: 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat' (13). 'Surely not, Lord! Peter replied, as he had done twice during Jesus' public ministry,¹⁴ adding 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean' (14). So the voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean' (15). After this it seems that the whole vision of the sheet was repeated three times, immediately after which the sheet was taken back to heaven (16).

The vision itself left Peter confused. But while he was wondering (RSV, 'inwardly perplexed') about the meaning of the vision, the delegation sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate (17). They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there (18). Then, while Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him (in some direct, unmistakable way), 'Simon, three men are looking for you (19). So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I [the Spirit] have sent them' (20). The key expression *mēden diakrinomenos* in 10:20 and *mēden diakrinanta* in 11:12 is usually translated 'without hesitation' (RSV) or 'without misgiving' (JBP, NEB), but it could mean 'making no distinction' (11:12, RSV), that is, 'making no gratuitous, invidious distinction between Jew and Gentile'.¹⁵ Thus, although the vision challenged the basic distinction between clean and unclean foods, which Peter had been brought up to make, the Spirit related this to the distinction between clean and unclean people, and told him to stop making it. That Peter grasped this is clear from his later statement: 'God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean' (28).

So Peter went down and said to the men who had come from Cornelius: 'I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?' (21). The men replied, 'We have come from Cornelius, the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say (22). At this Peter invited the three men into the house to be his guests (23a). This seems to mean that he 'gave them a night's lodging' (NEB), even though they were uncircumcised Gentiles.

We note how perfectly God dovetailed his working in Cornelius and in Peter. For while Peter was praying and seeing his vision, the men from Cornelius were approaching the city (9–16); while Peter was perplexed about the meaning of what he had seen,

¹⁴ Mt. 16:22; Jn. 13:8.

¹⁵ Alexander, I, p. 398.

they arrived at his house (17–18); while Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit told him that the men were looking for him and he must not hesitate to go with them (19–20); and when Peter went down and introduced himself to them, they explained to him the purpose of their visit (21–23).

4. Peter preaches to Cornelius' household (10:23b–48)

The next day, Peter and his entourage set out north along the coastal road to Caesarea. They were a party of ten, the three Gentiles from Cornelius, Peter himself and *some of the brothers from Joppa* (23b), who numbered six (11:12). If they went on foot, it must have taken them a good nine or ten hours, apart from stops. So it was the following day that they reached their destination. They found a considerable company awaiting them, for *Cornelius was expecting them* and had assembled not only his personal household but also *his relatives and close friends* (24). His spiritual humility and receptivity may be judged from the fact that, *as Peter entered the house*, he ‘threw himself at his feet—as if he were a heavenly visitant’.¹⁶ It was an inappropriate gesture, however. Peter *made him get up*, affirming that he was himself only a man.¹⁷

If Cornelius' act of falling down before Peter was unbecoming, so too according to Jewish tradition was Peter's act of entering a Gentile home. *It is against our law*, Peter said (28). This is not the best translation of *athemitos*, however, which ‘denotes what is contrary to ancient custom or prescription (*themis*), rather than to positive enactment (*nomos*)’.¹⁸ In fact, the word describes what is taboo’.¹⁹ But now Peter felt at liberty to break this traditional taboo and to enter Cornelius' house, because God had shown him that no human being was unclean in his sight.

Whether consciously or unconsciously, Peter had just now repudiated both extreme and opposite attitudes which human beings have sometimes adopted towards one another. He had come to see that it was entirely inappropriate either to worship somebody as if divine (which Cornelius had tried to do to him) or to reject somebody as if unclean (which he would previously have done to Cornelius). Peter refused both to be

¹⁶ Haenchen, p. 350.

¹⁷ Cf. Acts 14:11ff.; Rev. 19:10; 22:8–9.

¹⁸ Alexander, I, p. 403.

¹⁹ Bruce, *English*, p. 222.

treated by Cornelius as if he were a god, and to treat Cornelius as if he were a dog.

Peter went on to say that, having been sent for, he had come, *without raising any objection* (29), or ‘without demur’ (NEB). Why, then, had Cornelius sent for him?

In reply, Cornelius told the story of his vision of the angel (30–33) which had taken place four days previously. His account is identical with Luke’s (3–6), except that he now calls the angel *a man in shining clothes* and omits any reference to the terror he had experienced at the time (4). He then thanked Peter for coming and added: *Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us* (33). It was a remarkable acknowledgement that they were in God’s presence, that the apostle Peter was to be the bearer of God’s word to them, and that they were all ready and open to listen to it. No preacher today could ask for a more attentive audience.

Peter began his sermon with a solemn personal statement of what he had learned through his experiences of the previous few days. He stated it both negatively and positively. First, *‘I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism’* (34). *Prosōpolēmpsia* means ‘partiality’. It was forbidden to judges in LXX, who were not to pervert justice by discriminating in favour of either the rich or the poor.²⁰ For with the divine judge ‘there is no injustice or partiality or bribery’.²¹ Peter’s statement, however, has a wider connotation. He means that God’s attitude to people is not determined by any external criteria, such as their appearance, race, nationality or class. Instead, and positively, God *accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right* (35). Better, and more literally, ‘in every nation whoever fears God and works righteousness is acceptable (*dektos*) to him’. I will leave for the time being a full examination of this statement. It is enough now to draw attention both to its context in Acts 10 and to its contrast with ‘no favouritism’. The emphasis is that Cornelius’ Gentile nationality was acceptable so that he had no need to become a Jew, not that his own righteousness was adequate so that he had no need to become a Christian. For God is ‘not indifferent of religions but indifferent of nations’.²² As Lenski asks: ‘If his honest pagan convictions had been sufficient, why did he seek the synagogue? If the synagogue had been enough, why was Peter here?’²³ Peter will soon teach him the necessity of faith for salvation (43).

²⁰ E.g. Lv. 19:15.

²¹ 2 Ch. 19:7.

²² Bengel, p. 605.

After this introduction, affirming that ‘there is no racial barrier to Christian salvation’,²⁴ Luke summarizes Peter’s sermon (36–43). Although it was addressed to a Gentile audience, its content was substantially the same as what he had been preaching to Jews. Indeed Peter said so, calling it both *the message God sent to the people of Israel* and *the good news of peace* (reconciliation with God and neighbour) *through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all*, not just of Israel (36). It related to certain recent events, which Peter’s audience knew about, because they had been public, and whose place and time Peter was able to pin-point: ‘*You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached*’ (37; cf. 1:22). These events centred on the historical Jesus, on the successive stages of his saving career, and on the salvation he offers in consequence.

First, Peter alluded to Jesus’ life and ministry, *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth* for his work as the Messiah, not with oil like the kings of Israel and Judah but *with the Holy Spirit and power*, that is, with the power of the Spirit.²⁵ Thus anointed, *he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil*, or ‘tyrannized’ by him,²⁶ so that his power was seen to be greater than the devil’s, *because God was with him* (38; cf. 2:22). Moreover, Peter continued, ‘*we are witnesses [eyewitnesses in fact] of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem*’ (39a), and are therefore able to give first-hand evidence or testimony. It is clear from this that ‘some kind of an account of the life and character of Jesus formed an integral part of the early church’s preaching, especially its initial evangelism’.²⁷

Next came Jesus’ death. The authorities *killed him* by crucifixion. But Peter hints, as he had done in his earlier sermons (2:23; 5:30), that behind the historical event lay a

²³ Lenski, p. 419.

²⁴ Haenchen, p. 351.

²⁵ Lk. 4:18.

²⁶ Lenski, p. 422.

²⁷ Stanton, p. 13. Against the insistence of Bultmann and others that the early church was concerned only about the risen Lord and not the historical Jesus, Professor Stanton takes what he calls the ‘unfashionable’ view that ‘the early church was interested in the past Jesus’ (p. 186), that his life and character were part and parcel of its initial evangelistic preaching (p. 30), and that ‘the resurrection faith of the church did not obscure’ these things (p. 191).

theological significance, behind the human execution a divine plan. For they had killed him *by hanging him on a tree* (39b). Peter was under no necessity to call the cross ‘a tree’; he did it by design, in order to indicate that Jesus was bearing in our place the ‘curse’ or judgment of God on our sins.²⁸

The third event was the resurrection (40–41). Peter emphasized that it was both a divine act (*they killed him ... but God raised him from the dead*, the same dramatic contrast as in 2:23–24 and 5:30–31), and datable (*on the third day*). It was also physically verified, because God deliberately *caused him to be seen, not indeed by all the people, but by special witnesses whom God had already chosen*, especially by us apostles. Moreover, the resurrection body the apostles saw, although wonderfully transfigured and glorified, could nevertheless materialize, so that they *ate and drank with him*, and he with them, *after he rose from the dead*.²⁹

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus were more than significant events; they also constituted the gospel, which *he commanded us* (the apostles again) *to preach*, in the first instance *to the people, i.e. the Jews*. But the scope of the gospel was universal. So the apostles were also to proclaim him as ‘Lord of all’ (36), as judge of all and as Saviour of all who believe. They were *to testify that he would return on the judgment day, since he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead* (42; cf. 17:31). All will be included; none can escape. Yet we need not fear the judgment of Christ, since he is also the one who bestows salvation. Long before the apostles began to testify to him as Saviour, *all the prophets* did so in the Old Testament, and still do through their written words: they *testify about him*, the unique, historical, incarnate, crucified and resurrected Jesus, *that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name* (43), that is, through the efficacy of who he is and what he has done. This ‘everyone’ includes Gentiles as well as Jews: the phrase ‘crashes through the barrier’ of race and nationality.³⁰

It was a marvellously comprehensive message, a précis of the good news according to Peter which Mark would later record more fully in his gospel, and which Luke incorporated in his. Focusing on Jesus, Peter presented him as a historical person, in and

²⁸ Dt. 21:22–23; cf. Gal. 3:10–13; 1 Pet. 2:24.

²⁹ Cf. Lk. 24:30, 41ff; Jn. 21:13; Acts 1:4.

³⁰ Haenchen, p. 353.

through whom God was savingly at work, who now offered to believers salvation and escape from judgment. Thus history, theology and gospel were again combined, as in other apostolic sermons. As Cornelius, his family, relatives, friends and servants listened, their hearts were opened to grasp and believe Peter's message, and so to repent and believe in Jesus.

Then, *while Peter was still speaking these words, and before he had finished (11:15), the Holy Spirit came on all those Gentiles who heard the message and believed (44), which was the condition Peter had just mentioned (43). The small group of Jewish Christians (circumcised believers) who had come with Peter was astonished ('absolutely amazed', JBP) that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles (45), whom they had regarded as uncircumcised outsiders. But they could not deny the evidence of their eyes and ears, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God (46), as had happened on the Day of Pentecost. It was 'a type of the reconciliation between Jew and Gentile, whose alienation had for ages been secured and symbolized by differences of language'.³¹*

Peter was quick to draw the inevitable deduction. Since God had accepted these Gentile believers, which indeed he had (15:8), the church must accept them too. Since God had baptized them with his Spirit (11:16), '*Can anyone keep [them] from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have*' (47). How could the sign be denied to those who had already received the reality signified? Chrysostom expatiated on this logic. By giving the Spirit to Cornelius and his household before their baptism, God gave Peter an *apologia megalē* (a mighty reason or justification) for giving them water-baptism.³² Yet in a sense their baptism 'was completed already',³³ for God had done it. Peter was clear that 'in no one point was he the author, but in every point God'. It was as if Peter said: 'God baptized them, not I.'³⁴

So Peter *ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then, having been welcomed into God's household, they asked Peter to slay with them in their household for a few days (48), no doubt in order to nurture them in their new faith and life. The gift of*

³¹ Alexander, I, p. 417.

³² Chrysostom, Homily XXIV, p. 155.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

the Spirit was insufficient; they needed human teachers too. And Peter's acceptance of their hospitality demonstrated the new Jewish-Gentile solidarity which Christ had established.