

## Acts 10:1–11:18

### *To the Gentiles Also*

How did the church arrive at a turning point where insiders were willing to include outsiders? Beginning in Jerusalem the good news has been taken out into Samaria, then, with the conversion of the Ethiopian, to the very “ends of the earth” (1:8). What is more, Saul, a vile persecutor of the community, has now become Paul, God’s chosen instrument. Where will the gospel go next? A marvelously constructed seven-act drama tells the tale (Haenchen).

*Scene one (10:1–8):* Enter Cornelius: A gentile, a Roman, a gentile Roman army officer. Luke says he was “a devout man who feared God ..., gave alms ..., and prayed constantly to God” (10:2). Yet does that blunt the impact of a story about one who made his living in the military occupation of someone else’s country? Cornelius reminds us of that pious centurion in [Luke 7:2–10](#) who received Jesus’ compassion. So he is a gentile yes, and a Roman soldier yes, but also one who is devout, as Luke’s tireless reiteration of the centurion’s piety in verses [2](#), [4](#), [22](#) and [30](#) are meant to show. He is an outsider, but one who is at least on the fringe of the community. Furthermore, he is a gentile willing to be instructed and guided. Cornelius’ movement toward the faithful community now called church is not a matter of his choice or his heroic decision. A vision begins the narrative. In the story Cornelius (like Peter) is an almost passive actor in a drama being directed at every turn in the plot by someone greater than Cornelius or Peter.

*Scene two (10:9–16):* Cornelius has had a strange vision. Now it is Peter’s turn to be confused.

Peter is praying at noon on the flat roof of a home. A large sheet is lowered containing all animals (except for fish—how could fish be kept in a sheet? [cf. [Gen. 1:24](#)]). Peter is told to slaughter and eat. The voice says, in effect, “Come on, then! Eat!” Three times the voice commands, but Peter shows his loyalty to the sacred dietary laws and refuses. Only these laws stood in the way of the assimilation (and thus, destruction) of Jesus as Jews. They identified, demarcated faithfulness in the midst of incredible pressure to forsake the faith, drop one’s particularities and become a good citizen of the Empire. A little pork here, a pinch of incense to Caesar there, and it will not be long before the faith community will be politely obliterated. We must not read this story from the safe

vantage point of a majority religion where broad-mindedness and toleration cost the majority nothing, but rather, read the story as it was first heard—from the minority point of view, people for whom a bit of pork or a pinch of incense or a little intermarriage was a matter of life and death for the community. The dietary laws are not a matter of etiquette or peculiar culinary habits. They are a matter of survival and identity for Jews. And yet, can it be that these laws are being supplanted by some other basis for survival and identity? 🗨️

No wonder Peter is left baffled.

*Scene three (10:17–23a)*: Cornelius’ messengers arrive at Joppa seeking Peter. Once more Luke reiterates the story of the angel’s visit to Cornelius (as he will again in 10:30 and again in 11:13), for there must be no forgetting among the audience that the script for this drama is being written by *God* 🗨️. Peter does not know where he is going or why. Rather, he trusts the story to work its way out. Baffled he is, but still willing to be led. Like Mary at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, Peter could say, “I am the handmaid of the Lord.” *Disciples are those who at times say, “Lord, I do not know where you are leading me, but here I am.”* 🗨️

*Scene four (10:23b–33)*: The gathering of friends and relatives encountered at Cornelius’ home will form an audience when the time comes, as we suspect it will, for Peter to make one of his famous speeches. As the narrative unfolds note that it shuttles back and forth from Peter to Cornelius, back to Peter, then to Cornelius. Both men have visions, both make speeches. Thus Luke highlights the dual nature of what is happening. *Is this a story about the conversion of a gentile or the conversion of an apostle? Both Cornelius and Peter need changing if God’s mission is to go forward.* 🗨️ What the gathering first sees is the mighty Cornelius at the feet of Peter, worshipping him. Perhaps we are to read this action as typical gentile naïveté about religious matters—a gentile will worship anyone (or anything) if given half a chance to do so. Perhaps. Powerful militarist Cornelius does not look too powerful down on his knees, clutching the knees of Peter. Yet already Peter graciously instructs Cornelius’ misguided devotion, “Stand up; I too am a man” (10:26). Whatever Peter has to offer this man, it is something more than the power of his own personality. Then Peter speaks to the gathering, confessing that he has breached Jewish law only because God has rearranged his notions of clean and unclean. The bafflement of the vision (10:9–16) is resolved. Notice how frequently

houses and hospitality are mentioned in the story. Contacts between Jew and gentile create domestic, household, table-time problems. Conversion to Christ becomes a mundane matter of “Who shall eat at our table?” The great amount of space Luke expends on this scene is an indication of its importance. Through the dialogue of Peter and Cornelius Luke creates a scene in which old divisions are broken down and these who once were at odds—Jew and gentile—chat amiably within the home that had been off limits to Peter. Placed here, and treated in this fashion, the scene serves as a warm, touching hint of the joyous new possibilities for community toward which God is leading both Jew and gentile. As with Jesus, who was criticized for the company he kept at the table, so Peter could claim that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

*Scene five (10:34–43)*: Now for the sermon, a sermon which opens with a stunning confession by Peter: “I now know that God shows no partiality.” The speech then follows the outline to which we have become accustomed in Acts—proclamation, scriptural proof, summons to repentance. God is not a looker upon the face, does not play favorites, shows no partiality. Can we hear what an upsetting, exciting, world-reversing word this must have been to those whose faith was based upon assumptions of partiality, who had suffered in spite of and because of this partiality, and yet still believed? It was not an easy word to hear. Throughout Acts, step by step, laying scriptural proof on proof, gradually edging us out of Jerusalem and into Samaria, now into Joppa, past the converted Samaritans and then the Ethiopian, Luke has brought us face to face with this Roman soldier so that we may feel the full blast of the gospel, may know the reluctance of the disciples to be here, may know how long and painful was their journey to realize the full and frightening implications of the gospel—God shows no partiality! The subject matter of the vision was somewhat ambiguous—does the “common” and “unclean” refer to food or to people? That has now been made clear. The issue, as it turns out, is not simply about “unclean” food but also about “unclean” people, about who shall sit at our table. More specifically, the vision is about our own inability to know what or who is clean and unclean.

Now it remains for Peter to justify his position by Scripture—no easy task. First he asserts that “in every nation any one who fears him [God] and does what is right is

acceptable to him [God]" (10:35). A good thought, but one not supported by reference to any biblical text. Certainly, God sent Jesus Christ to Israel (10:36), but that statement will not help him with Cornelius. The aside, "he is Lord of all," becomes the basis for a consideration of gentiles within the scheme of salvation. Peter is not reading some new idea into the story; rather, he is further penetrating the meaning of the affirmation that Jesus Christ is Lord. Because Jesus has ascended to reign with the Creator of all people, in the resurrection-ascension both redemption and creation are linked in Jesus Christ. A vision of the Lordship of Christ, ruling with the Creator of heaven and of earth, is the basis for Christian efforts at inclusiveness. One cannot have a Lord who is Lord of only part of creation. So in any nation any one who fears him and does what is right "is acceptable to him."

Peter then recounts, citing the same events and material of previous speeches in Acts, the Christian proclamation. But a careful look at the sermon indicates that Peter has not simply found some good Hebrew text to justify why he is here with Cornelius and his kin. His speech is more than "proof texting." The affirmation of Christ's Lordship is a theological statement gleaned from the experience and faith of the apostles, not something to be proved from the Torah or prophets. Peter's sermon is an attempt to struggle with his recently received new perception of the movement of the gospel. He has no proof text to justify himself. He is out on risky terrain without tradition or Scripture to back him up.

This is the way it sometimes is in the church. If Jesus Christ is Lord, then the church has the adventurous task of penetrating new areas of his Lordship, expecting surprises and new implications of the gospel which cannot be explained on any basis other than our Lord has shown us something we could not have seen on our own, even if we were looking only at Scripture. This does not mean an undisciplined flight of fancy into our own bold new ideas or the pitiful effort to catch the wind of the latest trend in the culture under the guise of seeking new revelation. Rather, it means that we are continuing to penetrate the significance of the scriptural witness that Jesus Christ is Lord and to be faithful to divine prodding. Faith, when it comes down to it, is our often breathless attempt to keep up with the redemptive activity of God, to keep asking ourselves, "What is God doing, where on earth is God going now?"

*Scene six* (10:44-48): Any doubts about the validity of Peter's new insight into the

impartiality of the gospel are assuaged by the irruption of the Spirit, which descends on Cornelius and his kin as confirmation of Peter's claims that the author of this plot is God. Any potential dilemma concerning the baptism of gentiles is thereby settled, for who could forbid baptism after the Holy Spirit is already with these people (10:47)? The wind has again blown where it wills (John 3:8), and now the church must account for its movements.

*Scene seven (11:1–18)*: The gospel is not about the solo efforts of one enlightened and progressive leader who takes it upon himself to baptize gentiles. When Peter returns to Jerusalem, he has some explaining to do to the church. The story of the vision is retold for emphasis. Luke softens the resistance of the church by saying that it was table fellowship with gentiles which angered the saints at Jerusalem, when actually baptism (or the problem of circumcision—see Acts 15) was the probable root of their anger, although the two go together since baptism would initiate someone into the table fellowship of the church. Is the “table fellowship” issue a matter of who shall eat at the Lord's Supper? Luke leaves it ambiguous, probably because Luke's church would know no distinction between “religious” meals and “nonreligious meals.” Who shall be admitted to the church's table is a thoroughly religious question. Peter now says that “the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction” (11:12). The church's silence and then response shows that it realizes a bold (and perhaps frightening) chapter has opened in the saga of the People of God. To gentiles also has God granted the ability to turn toward life. The real “hero” of the story, the “star” of the drama is not Peter nor Cornelius but the gracious and prodding One who makes bold promises and keeps them, who finds a way even in the midst of human distinctions and partiality between persons.

Gentiles like Cornelius are included, not as those who are basically nice people after all but as those who, like Israel, are able to repent (11:18). Repentance, contrary to popular misconception, is not a heroic first step I make toward Christ nor is it a feeling-sorry-for my sins. It is the divine gift of being able to be turned toward truth. Turning toward the truth about myself and my situation is quite beyond my power to accomplish. Like Cornelius, I cannot repent—turn around—on my own. So God does it for me. In Christ, God has turned toward us and “granted,” given, us repentance (5:31; 11:18). ✎ Cornelius is surprisingly passive in this story, as if he is someone who is being swept along, carried by events and reacting to actions quite beyond his power to initiate or to control. This is

the way it is with repentance. It is more than a decision we make (“since *I* gave *my* life to Christ”; “since *I* took Jesus as *my* personal Savior”) or some good deed we offer to God; repentance is the joyful human response to God’s offer of himself to us, the necessary, quite appropriate turn of a life which is the recipient of God’s gracious turning toward us. Repentance is an act of God’s grace . Everyone, says Peter (10:43), Jew or gentile, virtuous pagans like Cornelius or zealous persecutors like Saul, may now turn, return, to God.

Later, Ephesians would remind gentile Christians like Cornelius that they were “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, ...” (Eph. 2:12–14).

## REFLECTION: *Conversion in Acts*

Thus far in Acts we have observed a crowd transformed from scoffers into repentant believers (2:14–41), a person from the exotic ends of the earth enlightened and baptized (8:26–40), a raging enemy made into a courageous brother (9:1–31), and a gentile soldier adopted by the church (10:1–11:18). Luke-Acts is rich in these dramatic accounts of change worked by the power of the Spirit. Whatever the Gospel is about, it is about change of mind and life. It is well for us to pause and attempt to draw together some of Luke’s images of conversion.

A logical place to begin might be with Peter’s statement that the crowd is to “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).” Is this Acts’ scheme for conversion?

As we noted in our more extended interpretation of this passage, we should not lift out this passage and make it the one model for conversion. Nowhere else in Acts is this pattern mentioned. The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian shows the dramatic

way in which the Spirit directs the community out beyond the boundaries to all sorts of people (8:26–40). This account sets the stage for perhaps the most dramatic conversion of all, the conversion of Saul the enemy into Saul the brother (9:1–19a), which in turn moves into the conversion of Cornelius (and Peter!) as the community is converted into welcoming even gentiles into table fellowship (10:1–11:18). This survey suggests that Luke’s accounts of conversion are far too rich to be reduced to one factor or one scheme.

By placing the stories of conversion in succession, a circumstance that knowing Luke’s way of organizing material could not have been by chance, Luke portrays the dramatic fulfillment of Acts 1:8: “See, in these persons, the gospel has indeed gone to the end of the earth.” The crowd in the street in Acts 2, the Ethiopian, and Cornelius were all willing, inquiring converts. Saul, on the other hand, was a fierce enemy. But Acts 9 shows that the gospel has power even over its enemies. Even healing can become an occasion for turning, as the stories of the healing of Aeneas (9:32–35) and the raising of Dorcas (9:36–43) conclude with comment that many “believed in the Lord” or “turned to the Lord” after these acts of compassion.

Taken within the context of the unfolding narrative, we can surmise what these stories of conversion meant to the community. After Acts 7 the church is left devastated by the murder of Stephen. Will the mob and the principalities and powers have the final say over the future of the gospel? Does the scattering of the believers in the ensuing persecution signal the end of the Way? No! The story is beginning rather than ending—as the conversion accounts in Acts 8–10 clearly demonstrate (Gaventa, pp. 124–125). Accounts of conversion are lovingly retold by the church as confirmation of the continuing power of God to create the Christian community *ex nihilo*, fresh in each generation by the power of the Spirit. The church, even in its most trying times, may take heart, knowing that all is not left up to us nor is the community of faith of our sole creation.

One could argue that Luke is uninterested in individual conversion stories per se. The individuals who are converted are, except perhaps for Paul, left with their personality and individual background undeveloped. They are not so much individuals or typical examples of conversion as they are symbols for groups of converts, pieces in the larger narrative of the miraculous expansion of the church. No conversion, not even of the crowd at Pentecost, not even that of Paul, established a repeated pattern which is

appealed to in the preaching of Acts. Unlike some evangelical interpretations, never is a conversion story an end in itself. Conversions are a part of the larger story of some issue within the life of the community. The gospel, at least in Luke-Acts, is not simply about getting people converted for the sake of conversion. Although we have focused upon individual accounts of change and turning, these conversions, even the mass conversion of [Acts 2](#), result in adoption into the community, baptism, and the breaking of bread and prayers ([2:42-47](#)). The community must confirm and interpret Paul's Damascus road experience through Ananias and Barnabas. The community must ratify Peter's actions and Cornelius' conversion.

In our radically individualized milieu and our attendant radically subjectivized approach to conversion, we do well to note the communal, corporate quality of conversion in Acts. Conversion is adoption into a family, immigration into a new kingdom: a social, corporate, political phenomenon.

Luke's rich collection of conversion accounts warns the church against making any one pattern or scheme *the* standard steps for conversion. The turning wrought by the Spirit takes a variety of forms, leads to a variety of responses, and is context-specific. Each person is called by his or her own name, so to speak, and dealt with as the Spirit sees fit. When was Peter converted? When Jesus called him to follow or when Peter confessed that Jesus was "The Christ of God" ([Luke 9:20](#)) or when Peter discovered that he did not, after all, know who was clean and unclean ([Acts 10:1-11:18](#))? Luke will not let us settle down with one account or one moment. Peter was literally "on the way" as a member of "the Way." He resolved to follow Jesus, wherever that might take him. Surprises greeted him at each significant turn in the road.

David Steinmetz notes that the Protestant Reformers were so convinced that sin is so deep-rooted in human thinking and willing, that the gospel is so demanding and different, that only a lifetime of conversion can change us into the new creations God has in mind for us. The modern evangelical notion that conversion is an instantaneous, momentary phenomenon is not rooted in the thought of the Reformers nor, we might add, in the thought of Luke. Even Paul's dramatic encounter upon the Damascus road (reported three times in Acts—with significant differences in each account), required interpretation, reflection, and the confirmation of the community. Presumably, we never become too old, too adept at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need



for more conversion, additional turning. The Christian life is akin to the way in which Luke organizes the life of Paul—a series of journeys, pilgrimages, excursions out into some unexplored territory where all that is known is the faithfulness of God. Conversion is a process more than a moment.

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 ital.)

Today, many associate conversion with the excesses of revivalism or razzle-dazzle electronic evangelism, where any means becomes legitimate and conversion is the beginning and end of Christianity. Even the use of the term is rejected by some “liberal” Christians. As we have seen in Luke-Acts, conversion is not a peripheral event. Acts was written, we believe, not to convert unbelievers but to confirm converted believers. Working on a number of levels, dealing with a number of issues, Acts seeks to help the church identify itself to itself, to confirm it in its struggles, and to help adjudicate its internal disputes. Conversion as evidence of the miraculous power of God to make the church the church and to overcome every enemy and boundary is at the very center of the church’s life. We ignore the phenomenon of conversion at the peril of losing the

church. Here is a God who takes me, “Just as I am without one plea,” as we are fond of singing in the old hymn, but encounters with this God do not leave us just as we are. Too much of mainline Protestantism is focused not upon conversion but upon accommodation, adjustment, and the gospel reduced to the status quo. Acts reminds us that change, turning are part of the Christian lifestyle.

A church which has no quarrel with Caesar’s definitions of peace and justice, a church enabled by its culturally accommodated preachers to lessen the gap between the gospel and the status quo has no need to preach conversion. In such a church Theophilus will be told stories of people who overcame personal anxiety, who found security in conventional truth, who kept with their own kind and stayed safely home. No one needs religious conversion or cultural detoxification to bed down in this church. But if the church hopes for more, for a new heaven and a new earth, for people who know the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay, then, as Hans Kung says.

We are to preach *metanoia*. We must entice people from the world to God. We are not to shut ourselves off from the world in a spirit of asceticism, but to live in the everyday world inspired by the radical obedience that is demanded by the love of God. The church must be reformed again and again, converted again and again each day, in order that it may fulfill its task (p.438).

In a time when there is much talk of the need for more organized and scientifically managed methods of church growth, our study of the conversions in Acts raises some tough questions for proponents of many of these methods. If the church is only about the wholesale “winning of souls” by whatever method is deemed most effective, then conversion has become the end of faith rather than its beginning. In Luke-Acts conversion is a by-product of the gospel, the result of one’s encounter with the power of the Spirit, not the gospel. Luke has no interest in the utilitarian question of *how* people become converted or *how* the church ought to evangelize, what technique is most effective or what method yields the most certain results (Gaventa, pp. 150–151). These are stories about *God’s* actions, not the church’s programs.