

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Eight – Acts 9:32-11:18
The Conversion of Cornelius

Racism. Tribalism. Sexism. Cultural snobbery. Various types of discrimination have a great hold on the church and great power to destroy the unity of the body of Christ. This was as true of the early church as it is today.

Through the conversion of Cornelius, God demonstrated irrevocably that he does not make distinctions in his kingdom. Therefore we have no right to make distinctions either. The fact that we do not practice complete equality as members of the church of Christ is a blasphemy against God. Unfortunately, the early church did not hear clearly and live forever by God's message that he does not show favoritism.

OPEN

- When have you felt separated from people because of cultural or racial differences?

STUDY

1. *Read Acts 9:32-43.* How was the power of God demonstrated in this passage?

Aeneas is healed of being paralyzed for eight years (34). Dorcas was restored to life after dying from sickness (40).

2. What were the results of the demonstration of this power?

Many people believed in the Lord (35, 42).

The miracles portrayed Peter as an authentic apostle of Jesus Christ, who performed “the signs of a true apostle.” Similar miracles had endorsed the prophetic ministry of Elijah and Elisha. Four factors support this suggestion. First, both miracles followed the example of Jesus. Second, both miracles were performed by the power of Jesus. Third, both miracles were signs of the salvation of Jesus. Fourth, both miracles caused everyone to turn to the Lord.

3. *Read Acts 10:1-9.* What evidence was there in the character of Cornelius that the Holy Spirit was working in him (v. 2)?

He was “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (v. 2).

4. What do you learn about the character of God from his response to Cornelius through the angel (vv. 3-6)?

God hears the prayers of those who seek Him. He does not turn away humility.

Read Acts 10:9-23. 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 supported such a divide. 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. The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, and developed traditions which kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would even enter the home of a Gentile, even a God-fearer, or invite such into his home (see v. 28).

5. How did God prepare Peter for Cornelius?

First, Peter was staying at the house of a tanner, someone who would have been considered “ceremonially unclean.” Second, God gave Peter a vision that demonstrated how Gentiles were to receive the Gospel as well as Jews.

6. What would the command in verse 15 have meant to Peter?

Based on the vision, it would have meant that he could eat the animals considered “unclean” by the Jews. The image, though, is that Gentiles were not to be considered “unclean,” but rather were to be evangelized. The Gospel was for Jews AND Gentiles.

It is interesting that Luke ended 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. This may have been the first sign of Peter’s openness to Gentiles.

7. *Read Acts 10:24-48.* What evidence is there that Cornelius expected God to work (vv. 24-26)?

Cornelius had called together his relatives and close friends. He worshipped Peter, perhaps overjoyed that Peter had arrived.

8. What would have been the consequence if Peter or Cornelius had not obeyed God?

Presumably, the relations between Jews and Gentiles would have deteriorated and the Gospel would not have been proclaimed to Gentiles. Also, Cornelius and his family would not have heard the Gospel.

9. What is the message that God has for Cornelius (vv. 33-43)?

The message that God has for Cornelius is the same message He has for all of us: the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ.

Summary: Luke has now recounted the conversions of Saul and Cornelius. The differences between these two men were considerable. In race Saul was a Jew, Cornelius a Gentile; in culture Saul was a scholar, Cornelius a soldier; in religion Saul was a bigot, Cornelius a seeker. Yet both were converted by the gracious initiative of God; both received forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Spirit; and both were baptized and welcomed into the Christian family on equal terms. This fact is a signal testimony to the power and impartiality of the gospel of Christ, which is still “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile” (Romans 1:16).

10. *Read Acts 11:1-18.* Throughout this passage we see Peter learning about God’s desire for him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Trace the process of Peter’s understanding.

Peter was praying, then received a vision, observed the vision, heard the voice of the Lord, met the three men sent from Cornelius, travelled to Cornelius’ house, begins to speak to the Gentiles, the Holy Spirit falls on them, he remembers the words of the Lord Jesus, realized that he could not stand in the way of God.

11. Look at this passage carefully. In what ways do you see unity growing within the church?

Jews and Gentiles are receiving the same Gospel, the same Holy Spirit, and are rejoicing together.

APPLY

- How are you affected as you see the timing and plan of God in people's lives?

How have you experienced this in your own life?

How do you see unity between people from different cultures and races lived out in your church?

PRAY

- Ask God to reveal to you bigotry in your own life and ways that you separate yourself from others because of cultural or racial differences. Ask him to change you and forgive you.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.