

# Followers of the Way

## Peter and Cornelius: The Necessity of Obedience

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### Acts 10:1-33

Acts is a significant book in the New Testament, without it we would not have known how the birth and growth of the Church came about. It is the link between Christ's Great Commission and the wonderful epistles that the apostles wrote, outlining the first thirty years from Jesus' ascension to Paul's imprisonment in Rome.

Although known as 'the Acts of the Apostles' some have referred to this book as 'the Acts of the Holy Spirit' since the third Person of the Trinity is mentioned by name 57 times. But it may just as well be called 'the Continuing Acts of Jesus Christ', because Luke begins this second volume of his work like this,

In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven. (Acts 1:1-2)

So Acts is the story of what Jesus continues to do by His Spirit through the Church. Before His ascension Jesus told the apostles, 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8) In the first nine chapters we see the progression of this: How the Church was first planted in Jerusalem; then through the persecution following Stephen's martyrdom they are thrust out into Judea and Samaria. Now in Ch.10 we see something new happening. Up to now the Gospel has been shared only among Jews, but there is about to be a breakthrough to the Gentiles, and the beginning of the trajectory towards the ends of the earth.

### 1. A Prepared Heart

The chapter opens with these words, 'At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment.' v.1 Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea, was situated on the Mediterranean coast thirty miles north of Joppa where Peter was staying. Cornelius, the Roman centurion, was a very important person in the city, having command of the Italian Regiment known as the most loyal of the Roman troops. As such, he should have been the object of hatred for every patriotic Jew living in Caesarea. Yet we are told this man, brought up in the pagan mythology of his day, was devout and God-fearing, along with his whole family.

God-fearers were Gentiles who accepted the God of Israel, who were monotheistic rather than polytheistic, yet did not become proselytes to Judaism. Cornelius' devotion was evidenced by his regular prayers to the living God and alms-giving to the needy, and this, as we see, did not go unnoticed. While he was praying at three in the afternoon, one of the set hours of Jewish prayers, he saw a vision of an angel, a messenger from God.

The angel addressed him by name, 'Cornelius!' The centurion was struck with fear, who wouldn't be at the sight of an angel, and blurted out, 'What is it Lord?' The angel's answer must have brought him both re-assurance and intrigue,

Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea. (vv.4-6)

He must have been encouraged to know his devotion by prayer and almsgiving was acceptable to God, but also wondered why he had to send for Simon Peter. However, he didn't question and simply obeyed what the angel had said, as a true soldier would do.

Isn't it interesting that the angel said nothing about salvation? Would it not have been much more impressive to receive the gospel from this shining messenger from God? But this was not God's purpose; the keys of the kingdom of heaven had been entrusted to Peter and it was to the apostles that Christ said, 'You will be my witnesses.' So the gospel message comes via faithful men, not heavenly beings.

Cornelius' heart had been prepared for what he was about to hear.

I became a Christian at 19, but it didn't happen in a vacuum – I had attended Church and Sunday School most of my life, I was a member of the Boys' Brigade where we were taught the Christian faith, I was also challenged several times about giving my life to the Lord, and even tasted something of what the world had to offer, all before that night in November when I surrendered my life to Christ. I had prayed and tried to read the Bible before this, but it only really made sense afterwards.

I remember hearing a minister preach on this passage about Cornelius and he said, 'Never despise the prayers of those who are not yet Christian.' We never know what stage they are at on the journey of faith. We knew a lady in one of our Churches who was brought up Roman Catholic. As such she did not have the privilege of learning how to have a personal quiet time or even how to pray. When she built up her confidence to pray openly for the first time, she concluded her prayer by saying, 'Yours sincerely, Ann!'

The Lord was preparing Cornelius' heart; through his interest in the God of the Jews, in his prayer life and in his ethical stance, giving generously to all in need without asking about their religious or ethnic background. He was ready to receive the message from Peter.

But God also had to prepare Peter's heart before he could have...

## **2. An Obedient Heart**

Peter was the leading apostle, and although he was a follower of Jesus, he remained a faithful Jew, with all that this entailed. However, the Lord had already been working in his heart – he had gone to see a dead woman, Tabitha, which would cause him ceremonial defilement, and he raised her to life, as his Master had done to Jairus' daughter; and he was staying in the home Simon the Tanner, a worker in dead animal skins, which again was an unclean occupation.

But it was just before Cornelius' men arrived that the Lord really prepared Peter's heart Acts 10:9-15. The Lord used Peter's hunger and the aroma of the food to reveal this vision. For him to see these unclean animals and be instructed to kill and eat them, is the equivalent of us being told to kill another human being and consume their flesh! That's how strong this vision was.

The Lord did not tell Peter the meaning of the vision, but left him to work it out for himself. Just then, the men sent from Cornelius arrived and Peter invited them in as guests. This was a first step of faith. The next day Peter, along with six believers, followed the men to Caesarea. When they arrived, Peter entered the home of a Gentile for the first time. This may not seem like a big deal today, but to paraphrase Neil Armstrong, 'It was one small step for Peter, a giant leap for the Church.'

If Peter did not have an obedient heart by going to this Gentile centurion's home and offering him and his household the message of salvation, Christianity would simply have remained a sect within Judaism. But he was obedient and took that step of faith, which led to the gospel spreading further towards the ends of the earth.

It's interesting to see Cornelius' reaction when he first met Peter – Acts 10:25. The ESV rendering is much more powerful and accurate, 'When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and fell down at his feet and worshipped him.' That is what the Greek word means and that's why Peter is so emphatic about getting him to stand up, as he himself is only a man.

As Peter entered Cornelius' house, where the centurion had gathered all his family and friends, the apostle re-stated the belief that he had grown up with and to which he ascribed only two days before: 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean.' (v.28)

Peter had an obedient heart, he stepped out in faith, out of his comfort zone, and the gospel was launched into the Gentile world.

It's easy for us to remain in our comfort zones, our holy huddles where we feel safe, rather than obey the word of the Lord and reach out to those who are different from us. Every nation has its groups they believe to be beyond the pale, like the Jews with the Gentiles: be it the blacks and whites in America; the untouchables in India; the gypsies in Romania; or in my own Province, the Protestants and Catholics.

The summer before I started training for ordination, I joined an organisation called Project Evangelism, where, by the way, I met my beautiful wife! We did children's and youth outreach along the Antrim Coast, including a place called Waterfoot. What was significant is that families from West Belfast holidayed there, all from a Roman Catholic background, many with republican and paramilitary links.

We built up a relationship with these kids and shared the gospel message. One evening a boy asked us, 'Are yous Protestant or Catholic?'

Before we could answer another boy, around 11 yrs old spoke up, 'Nah, they're neither. They're Christians! They could go up the Shankill Road (Protestant) or down the Falls Road (Catholic), and it wouldn't make any difference!'

Talk about out of the mouths of babes and infants!

After a prepared heart and an obedient heart comes...

### **3. A Transformed Heart**

Peter proclaimed the message to Cornelius and his family, all God-fearers, so they were not ignorant of the Jewish Scriptures. He began in v.36 'You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, announcing the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.' He did not have to start from scratch, they had an under-standing of God's dealing with Israel and of Jesus Christ. Peter preached a message similar to what he did on the Day of Pentecost, and the result was no less astonishing.

When Peter declared in v.43 'All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name', the Holy Spirit came upon those gathered and they all began to speak in tongues. It was like another Pentecost, in fact this was the third time the Spirit was manifest in this way: the first was on the Day of Pentecost itself, when He came upon the Jews in Acts 2; the second time was in Samaria in Acts 8, when the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit; and now, here He is coming upon the Gentiles.

Peter and the believers with him recognised this as a work of God, as the Gentiles received the Spirit, just as they had done, but without having to become Jews. Peter then ordered that they be baptised to show they were truly accepted into the kingdom and the Church. The transformation in their hearts was obvious for all to see. This was a gargantuan shift in theology and one which Peter had to defend before the criticisms of the Jewish leadership of the Mother Church in Jerusalem. They accepted his defence and so this paved the way for the Gentile mission, spearheaded by Barnabas and Saul.

We have all heard amazing testimonies of transformed hearts similar to that of Paul on the road to Damascus: drug addicts; alcoholics; prostitutes; those on the edge of society – they encounter the living Christ and their life goes from one extreme to the other.

We rejoice with those testimonies, but, in reality, most Christians in the West did not live a particularly wicked life before meeting Christ. Their testimony is much more subtle or 'normal', yet the transformation of heart is no less spectacular.

Story of one family.

Teenage daughter... rebellious... rude... argued with parents, started drinking and smoking. Parents despaired.

Friend invited her to Church and she was saved! The transformation was noticeable straight away. Instead of arguing and disobeying parents, she couldn't do enough for them. Friends said she should pray for, and witness to, her parents. So for the next five years she prayed, told them all she was doing at Church and about the sermon every Sunday. Eventually they accepted her invitation to come to Church with her, and both were saved at the service. The minister visited them that week and asked, 'What in the sermon convinced you Christianity was true?'

'It wasn't you, it was my daughter,' said the father. 'I was convinced Christianity was true five years ago, the first time she came home from Church and made me a cup of tea!'

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A prepared heart, followed by an obedient heart, leading to a transformed heart. May we follow Peter's example and seek for the Corneliuses in our lives.