

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Acts 10:1–8, ESV.

***10** At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ² a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³ About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴ And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵ And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶ He is lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.” ⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him, ⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.*

It's Still a Gift: *The Christian as Reprobate.*

The Book of Acts, also known as the Acts of the Apostles, is divided roughly into two parts, the first showing the establishment of the church in and around Jerusalem, mostly among Jews, and the second showing the spread of the church outward into the Roman Empire to Gentiles. Approximately halfway through the book is a story that has gotten a lot of attention because it is considered the first documented case of a named Gentile being converted to “the Way”, as it is called throughout Acts. “The Way” is what became Christianity, but none of the first-generation players, like Jesus, Peter, and Paul, saw themselves as starting a new

religion. They were simply Jews who accepted Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, the culmination of the hopes of the Israelite people. The symbolism behind the conversion of Cornelius, the first documented Gentile convert, is that the Jewish Messiah is the Messiah of all people and that the God of the Jews is the God of all people. But before we dive into that story, I'd like to talk about a young man I met when I was a faculty member at CU Boulder.

We will call him Harry. He was a computer science student. He noticed that I was wearing a cross around my neck and approached me after class. He said that he had recently become a Christian, having been baptized at a friend's church over the Christmas break. His parents had gone off on an international trip over the break and so he had gone to stay with his roommate. The two had been assigned together as roommates in the fall, and they had become buddies. The roommate was a Christian and spent a certain amount of time reading the Bible and watching Christian material on the Internet. Harry ended up talking to him about Christianity. It wasn't until they were at the roommate's house over the Christmas break that Harry first attended a church. Near the end of the break, he was baptized. What Harry wanted to talk about wasn't his new-found faith, it was the way that his family reacted to him when he told them he had been baptized. I'll get back to this.

Simply because the writing style and vocabulary are so similar, it is widely believed that the Book of Acts was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Further, both books are dedicated to the same unknown person, Theophilus, who might have been a donor to the cause, and Acts seems to refer to a Gospel that the author also wrote. So, we know that a single person did write both books. The only question is if it was really Luke. Luke was an evangelical companion of Paul and is mentioned in at least one letter that we know Paul did personally write, Philemon. There are also multiple “We passages” in Acts, suggesting that the author was with Paul during some of his travels. Given that a well-known second century theologian, Irenaeus, associated Luke with the Gospel, it is reasonable to assume that the author of both books is indeed Luke, the young companion of Paul.

The Book of Acts begins with the resurrected Jesus appearing to the Apostles and then ascending into the sky. Then the Apostles gather in Jerusalem. Peter becomes the focus of the effort to spread “the Way”. Mostly, he preaches to Jews. It will be Paul who will become famous as the evangelist to the Gentiles, but Peter does preach to Gentiles, to non-Jews. In fact, the very first person who is identified in the Bible as a non-Jew and who becomes a follower of Christ, is evangelized by Peter, not Paul. This happens in the southern part of Israel, near Jerusalem.

Here is something crucial to the story that is easy to miss while reading Acts. It was a huge step for Peter to bring the faith to a Gentile. Remember that Gentiles were considered pagans, idolaters, people whom the Chosen People kept mimicking. This is why the Jews kept getting punished by God. Jesus and all his Apostles were Jews, and until this moment Jesus was almost a fully Jewish phenomenon. Two themes that we see in Acts are 1) the God of the Jews is now recognized as the God of all people, and 2) through the Holy Spirit, and with the assistance of angels and miracles, God frequently steps in to help spread “the Way”. Jews like Peter would have been unlikely to approach Gentiles otherwise.

Cornelius is a centurion in the Roman army. It’s most likely true that no actual Roman legions were stationed in Judea at this time, and so he is probably one of many local recruits. Cornelius is part of a force whose job it is to maintain order in this Roman province. At the beginning of this story, Cornelius is not yet a follower of Jesus. There is a beautiful, poetic story that precedes Corenelius’ conversion. Here is what Luke tells us happens to Cornelius:

10 *At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of what was known as the Italian Cohort, ²a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God. ³About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God come in and say to him, “Cornelius.” ⁴And he stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” And he said to him, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. ⁵And now send men to Joppa and bring one Simon who is called Peter. ⁶He is*

lodging with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁷ When the angel who spoke to him had departed, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from among those who attended him,⁸ and having related everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Luke tells us that before he becomes a follower of “the Way” he is “*a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.*” Remember that in the Bible, to fear God means to follow and respect God. We see that although he is a Gentile, he believes in the Jewish God. It’s not clear at what level he believes. He certainly has not become a Jew. Most likely, he has lived near Jews all his life, has grown comfortable with their notion of God, and has an intuitive feeling that he wants to be one of the faithful. He is struggling with how to do this as a Gentile. Then God steps in.

Up until now, Peter has seen himself as the evangelist to Jews. It wasn’t yet in his heart to try to bring Christ to Gentiles, and in fact, he would have been quite uncomfortable doing so. Before he meets Cornelius, Luke tells us this:

⁹ The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. ¹⁰ And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance ¹¹ and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. ¹³ And there came a voice to him: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” ¹⁵ And the voice came to him again a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Meanwhile, Peter is on a rooftop, and in a vision, he is presented with a variety of foods that Jews would consider unclean. Peter's reaction, as a devout Jew, is to reject this food. But a voice tells him that he should eat the food. Peter tries to refuse, saying he has always followed the Jewish food laws. But then the voice – which is obviously God – says: *“Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”* Peter is still processing this statement from God when there is a knock on his door and messengers from Cornelius tell him that Cornelius wants a visit from Peter. Working from both ends, Cornelius and Peter, God is preparing something huge. Cornelius is being told to find the man who is in charge of the evangelistic efforts initiated by Jesus. Peter has been told that he had better not judge people as impure just because they are not Jews.

Two days later, Peter meets Cornelius, along with friends and relatives of his. Luke then tells us this:

Then Peter declared, ⁴⁷“Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” ⁴⁸And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Cornelius and his household all embrace the faith; they receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized with water. This becomes a critical milestone in the spread of faith: it has now jumped the boundary from Judaism to the Gentiles – that is, to all people.

What happens next is that Peter tells the other Apostles, as well as other believers, what has happened. Here is what Luke writes:

¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

The centurion Cornelius is *us*. Just like Cornelius, when we were born, we had the Holy Spirit within us, letting in the light. Then God intervenes and brings us to faith.

There is another subtlety to the spread of the mission to non-Jews. While it is true that Paul felt individually called by God to evangelize Gentiles, he returned to Jerusalem after he had begun his work. He did this in part to convince the leaders of the Jerusalem church to back this effort. A formal conference ensues. Paul argues that salvation comes through faith and by following the teachings of Jesus, not by being a Jew or by following Mosaic law. Paul is then given a supportive send off to continue these efforts. Luke is pointing out that Jerusalem, in other words, the Jewish section of "the Way", is the center of the new movement. This reinforces the theological lesson that they are not starting a new religion. Rather, they are revealing the God of the Jews to be the God of all people and showing that this is happening because Jesus is the true Messiah. Peter, who has himself learned this lesson and has brought Cornelius and his household to Christ, acts with the other Jerusalem evangelists to put a formal stamp of approval on this radical new

direction the effort is taking. We see the incredibly symbolic – and very pragmatic – significance of the conversion of Cornelius, something arranged by God.

I'd like to get back to Harry. I gave him this name for a deep theological reason: when I was trying to figure out what to call him, my eyes landed on a desk near where I was sitting and there was a Harry Potter novel sitting there. So, Harry told me that when he told his father that he had been baptized as a Christian, his father got angry and said that “those people” were all “reprobates”. Now, I knew more or less what this word means, but I looked it up. A reprobate is an unprincipled person, a deviant, a sinner. Here is what Paul says about such people in the first chapter of his highly influential letter to the Romans:

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

The point is that the tables have been turned by society. Christians are now looked upon suspiciously, and enough time has passed since faith has become unacceptable to some, that many older people now do not want their children attending church. One of the letters in the New Testament that is traditionally

attributed to Paul is Ephesians. In fact, the author identifies himself as Paul. But the writing is extremely different than what we find in the letters that we know that Paul wrote, like Romans. Ephesians is filled with ponderous sentences that do not sound at all like Paul. It also has content that doesn't reflect Paul's normal theological concerns. Interestingly, the first verse in most versions of the letter dedicates the letter to the believers at Ephesus (which was in modern Turkey), but the oldest versions of the letter do not mention Ephesus. We think that a follower of Paul wrote the letter, and that it was originally a circular letter meant for wide readership. But it does contain solid first century Christian content. It's a great letter.

One of my favorite passages is this:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

This makes it clear that having faith isn't our doing. It is a "*gift of God*", not a result of pious behavior on our part. God filled us with grace when we were born, and that is why we were drawn to God. We have no business boasting about our faith. It is indeed an incredible blessing, an astonishing gift. A crucial aspect of this gift is forgiveness. We can come to God without having to worry about what we have

done in the past or even about our failures in the future. Faith brings forgiveness. This echoes a major point of the Book of Acts. We do not live under a legal system like the Israelites. Salvation is based on what we believe, not what we do. The last verse, ¹⁰ *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*, has some wordplay in it that does translate well from the Greek. We are God's workmanship, and we were made for good works. So, yes, it is understood that we are saved by faith, but true faith always brings the kind of behavior God expects from followers of "the Way".

So, what did I tell Harry? I told him to give it a few years. He should let his family, especially his father, see how he lives. Let him see Harry's values in action. Let his father also see the joy with which he lives. I told him that you typically cannot convert someone with words alone, and that I imagine he, Harry, saw something in the way his roommate lived and thought, and that was what led Harry to be baptized. He should let his father have the same experience, but he should keep in mind that the older we are, the slower we tend to change. His father would learn that he, Harry, is no reprobate, that he is a decent, kind, forgiving, generous man of faith - who is a true follower of "the Way". And above all else, Harry should remember that just as it was in the days of the early evangelists like Peter and Paul, it is still very much a gift to have faith.