

## CHRISTIANITY BECOMES A WORLD RELIGION

**Introduction:** The most controversial matter that faced the very first Christians was how to get them to break out of their Jewish isolationism and take the good news of Jesus to the gentiles.

The first person to do this was Philip the Evangelist who preached to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8, but even that aroused suspicion requiring a delegation of apostles to check it out.

Actually, something very dramatic was required to convince the early Christians that it was alright to preach to outsiders and that is what Acts Chapter 10 is all about.

The Apostle Peter was in the seaside town of Joppa and he had a dream telling him to eat food that was not permitted for Jews to eat, according to their rules. At the same time a Roman centurion who lived up the coast at Caesarea had a dream telling him to send some people to find Peter and bring him up to tell him some news he should hear about. He sent some soldiers to find Peter and bring him back.

Cornelius had come to believe in the one true God and had developed good relations with the local Jewish community. But of course, he was a gentile and there was always that barrier between him and them.

In obedience to the vision Peter had seen he went with the soldiers and was welcomed by Cornelius and his friends, eager to hear what Peter would have to say; Acts 10: 33, 'Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.'

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Listen to Peter's reaction; Acts 10: 34, 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'

At last the penny had dropped. It was alright to tell non-Jews about Jesus and that is what he did; Acts 10: 44, 'While Peter was still speaking ... the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The [Jewish] believers who were with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.'

A little before this, the murderous opponent of the early church, Saul of Tarsus, was wonderfully converted on the road to Damascus and he was given the specific task of taking the gospel to the gentiles; Acts 9: 15, ' ... this man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the gentiles ...'

So, with the conversion of Saul, who became Paul the Apostle, and Peter's mission to Cornelius, the way was open for the fledgling Christian movement to break out of their narrow ethnic boundaries to take the good news about Jesus across the Roman Empire and down the centuries to reach even us.

Let's look a little closer at this Roman centurion.

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He was somebody like most people we know. He was a respectable, decent, honourable, God-fearing man. Good, but not good enough for God. These qualities are never enough because when it comes to our holy and righteous God, none of these qualities can take away the stain of sin that is on our hearts and in our deeds.

As our Prayer Book says, ‘... We have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep, we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts, we have offended against thy holy laws, we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done and there is no health in us.’

Cornelius, his family and friends needed to be saved and that is exactly what happened to them when they heard and received the message about Jesus from Peter.

Notice another thing about Cornelius; everything that had happened to him up until the moment he heard Peter’s message was part of God’s work in his heart. Cornelius recognized the emptiness of life lived without God. All the privileges of Roman citizenship, high military rank and personal wealth couldn’t hide the shallowness of his life. Defective as his Jewish friends may have been, he saw in those who believed in the one true God something better.

But even that was not enough. So when he had the vision telling him to send for Peter, something told him he had to do it. Of course all this was God working in his heart. As Jesus said, ‘No one can come to me except the Father draw him.’

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It was only when he heard about Jesus, his life, his death and his resurrection that it all fell into place for him. That is how it is for everyone who needs to find God for themselves.

Beyond this personal side, the most significant thing to come out of this event is beginning of the worldwide mission of the Christian church.

After Peter returned to Jerusalem to explain what had happened the apostles and believers, Acts 11:18 says, ‘they had no further objections, and praised God, saying, “So then, God has granted *even* to the gentiles repentance unto life”

The rest, as they say, is history. Christianity had become a world religion, offering to people of every race the free gift of eternal life, won for us by the death of Jesus on the cross.

Two important points of application flow from this. First; it remains now for us to search our hearts to see if what happened to Cornelius and his friends has happened to us. If we are in doubt, be assured it can, if we respond to God’s great love the same way they did. Then we too will praise God and be added to the number of those whose names are written in the Book of Life.

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Second; it is for us to live out in our lives the truth made plain in the story of Cornelius, namely that as Christians we must not hold any prejudice towards anyone who is of a different nationality or race from us. As St Paul said in Galatians 3:28, 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.'