

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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**Broadcast Date:** 4 November 2001

**No.** T0187

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## **Acts 10 - The first introduction to the Gentiles**

As I was thinking about my next talk for *Truth for Today*, the news was coming through of the withdrawal by the IRA of a recent concession regarding their weapons. At the same time, there seemed to be an increase in the violence between the Jews and the Arabs in the disputed territory in the Middle East. Both of these problems have deep seated roots which, despite the efforts of men of goodwill, do not seem to yield to any long term peace settlement. Historians can trace the genesis of the conflict whilst commentators can describe the steps in its escalation along with its horrific results, but no one seems able to remove the distrust and antagonism which is present on both sides. As we study the reasons for the conflict, we can perhaps, remain dispassionate because we are not directly involved. We must, however, breathe a sigh of relief that we do not have the responsibility to have to try to resolve the issues. Yet for those who live in the region the conflict remains a constant threat to the security and well being of themselves, their relatives and friends.

All through the ages, man has found it difficult to live with those he cannot accept and who are in some ways different. It might be race, culture, religion or politics but, time and again in the modern world as well as the ancient, we can easily find examples of this intransigence which quickly leads to boycott and eventually bloodshed.

We have, for the last two weeks, been considering the first pages of Christian history. Today we have arrived at the Acts 10. This has to do with representatives of groups of people who detested each other. It concerns what, to my mind, was the most difficult issue the early church had to resolve. Our chapter brings before us the admission of the Gentiles into the church without their first going through the Jewish gate as it were. Today, when the majority of Christians are non-Jews, we could read the story of Cornelius and easily miss the tremendous implications of the passage. The antagonism which the Jews had for the Gentiles in Bible times is hinted at in Scripture, but we would have to turn to contemporary writings before we began to grasp the great gulf that existed between a Jew and the rest of mankind. The Jewish Law had been promulgated with the deliberate aim of keeping the Israelites separate from pagan influence for the worship of the one, sovereign God. Jews looked with horror upon the Gentile world with its idol worship and multiplicity of gods; its infidelity and immorality and eating habits which relished eating meats which, to the Jew, were filthy and obnoxious. The incident, therefore, which is recorded in Acts 10 is of supreme importance in the account of the missionary activity of the early church. Some measure of its importance in Luke's estimation can be gauged by the large number of verses that the story covers. In mentioning Luke, I ought to say I believe that he was the author of the Acts of the Apostles.

The admission of Gentiles into the church centres around a man called Cornelius, who was a centurion in the Roman army. He is described in verse 2 as a devout man and one who feared God. There is more than a hint here that Cornelius was loosely attached to the Jewish synagogue and would suggest to us that he had seen the emptiness of pagan religions and practised regular prayers to a monotheistic God. In addition, he sought to reflect this piety with a moral life. It was possible that he was showing a deep interest in Judaism though, as yet, he had not been circumcised. This would have been necessary if he had wished to become a proselyte of the Jewish faith. Please note also that Scripture says that he feared God with all his house. Obviously, Cornelius could not make the rest of his household actual believers in God, but he did see that the general atmosphere of his home reflected his beliefs.

He was stationed at Caesarea, which had been evangelised by Philip as we can read in Acts 8:40. Perhaps he heard Christ being proclaimed then, or perhaps it was during Paul's brief visit on his way back to his native Tarsus. What is certain is that God honoured the faith and prayers of Cornelius as we can read in 10:4 where it says, "...Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." I feel that that statement is an encouragement to us to continue to pray. We never know in what way, or when, our prayers will be answered. Cornelius received a blessing from the Lord which far exceeded anything he had expected. In this vision, God commanded him to send for Peter, one of the leaders of the apostles, who was at Joppa after visiting the churches of the coastal plain of Palestine on a mission of encouragement and ministry. Peter had been sent for by the Christians at Joppa because a well respected woman in the church there had died. On arrival, Peter prayed and restored the woman, named Dorcas, to life. This most unusual and powerful miracle had a tremendous effect upon the district and many of the Jews there became followers of Jesus. Instead of a brief visit, Peter stayed on for quite some time.

It was during this visit that Peter received the summons from Cornelius. Probably the last thing on Peter's mind as he rested in Simon's house was that he would be faced with a most momentous decision. To have to visit a Gentile's home, much less preach the message of Christianity, was earth shattering in its implications. We must notice however that Peter's mind was prepared by the Lord before he was actually faced with the problem of visiting and preaching to a Gentile.

This preparation can be seen in Acts 10:11-16. Here Peter receives a direct message from the Lord whilst he is in a trance. In this vision, Peter sees all kinds of four footed beasts, wild animals, creeping creatures and various types of birds. Verse 13 states, "And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat." This was a most awful command for a Jew to be faced with. Something of its intensity for Peter's moral scruples is seen by his answer which we can read in 10:14: "But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean." I repeat again that it was a most appalling and offensive action that Peter was being led into at this moment. All his life he had sought to follow the strict dietary code which was a fundamental cornerstone of his Jewish faith. To a western man of the twenty first century, diet has to do with healthy eating. For Peter and his fellow Jews, the correct food eaten in the correct way was a major constituent of the life that would bring honour to God. The next verse is the commission which altered the direction of the evangelising mission for ever: "And the voice spake into him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven."

For a little while, Peter and his companions at Joppa must have puzzled over the meaning of this vision but when the party of three arrived from Caesarea with the request from Cornelius, Peter knew immediately where his duty to the Lord lay. I am sure that it didn't make the decision easier and that his mind would be in torment. It was enough however that the Lord had commanded him to go.

The comment has often been made regarding verse 14 where Peter said, "Not so, Lord," that this was an anomaly. How could someone call Jesus "Lord" and yet refuse to obey His command? The fact is that so many of us reflect Peter's attitude in our lives. We accept the blessings and privileges of Christianity but fail to carry out the obligations which the call of Christ brings. It is not that being a member of the church of Christ is a matter of keeping laws for, just as we are saved by grace, so is the life unto which we are called.

The apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:18 wrote, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ". How can we grow in grace yet remain hard and unforgiving? As the Spirit of God leads and guides, and the Word is ministered in the power of the Holy Spirit, there will come many challenges to the ingrained habits and attitudes of our natural life. Take one simple example. When the collection is taken in our local church or assembly, do we give according to the great example of the God who gave His only begotten Son, in other words, by grace, or is our giving governed by our innate selfishness? If it is, we are guilty of saying, "Not so, Lord".

Again I wish to point out the tremendous implications involved in Peter's visit to Cornelius at Caesarea. To visit Cornelius in his home and to preach Christ was far more than accepting an invitation to a tea party! It might seem to us that the trip to the centurion's home was nothing compared with the display of power involved when Peter worked the miracle of raising Dorcas from the dead, which we noticed in Acts 9. Philip Yancey in his book, "*What's So Amazing about Grace*", quotes Karl Barth's comment that Jesus' gift of forgiveness, was to him more astonishing than Jesus' miracles. I believe the same comment could be made when we compare Peter's actions. It needed the same application of the divine power of grace to alter Peter's lifelong attitude towards the Gentiles as it did to restore life to the lady at Joppa.

To return to the narrative in Acts 10, we notice from verse 23 that when Peter went to Cornelius, he took certain of the Christians from Joppa with him. I would judge that though he was willing to take full responsibility for any decisions, he wanted witnesses of everything that happened. He knew there would be many who would be highly critical of his actions if it meant Gentiles were admitted to the church without being in relationship to Judaism first. In view of the controversy that surfaced at Jerusalem caused by the Gentile question. This was a prudent action.

When he reached Caesarea, Peter found Cornelius, accompanied by friends and relatives, waiting for him. Immediately Peter states his position as a Jew. This is recorded in verse 28, "And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean". Following this statement, Peter went on to ask why Cornelius had sent for him. Perhaps he wanted further confirmation that this mission was from the Lord? If that was so, then I am sure that as Cornelius outlined the details of his vision, Peter was confirmed in his original surmise that this was the Lord's doing especially when he heard Cornelius say, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

Before we consider the details of Peter's response to Cornelius, I want us to notice that Luke has recounted for the second time the details of the centurion's vision. I am persuaded that this is an indication of the importance of this

vision for Luke as he wrote the account of the early church which has become known as the Acts. Luke does the same with Peter's vision, though that is not repeated until Peter returns to Jerusalem to give an account before the apostles and Christians of Judea. The burden of Peter's explanation to the assembled company is that his preaching to the Gentiles was ordered of the Lord. This is unfolded in chapter 11 and, as that chapter is the subject of next week's talk, I will not say anything further.

Between verses 34 and 43, Peter preaches the Christian gospel to all in Cornelius' house. As usual, it centres on the Person of Christ and His death on the cross. He prefaces his sermon with a comment that God is no respecter of persons. This is still an important truth to acknowledge for we are all apt to think that there is something within us that would make God prefer us to another.

Regardless of race or social standing, we are all in need of grace. It is only the grace of God that brings our salvation. Verse 3 traces the divine origin of the message. It was the word which God sent. Again I feel I must emphasise this for the Gospel preached by servants of the Lord today must have that same revealed truth concerning Christ being Lord. Notice also that it was to the Jew first, but as the title given to the Lord Jesus is that He is Lord of all, this must also include the Gentiles.

Peter also includes more details of the Lord's earthly ministry than he has done previously in his sermons. I would like to focus on verse 38 which says, "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him."

In these verses we see something of the actions of the Messiah as promised in many passages of the Old Testament. He opened the eyes of the blind, made the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak, the hungry were fed and those that had lost loved ones were comforted. He was very aware of the lot of the poor and friendless. I would like to comment further on the phrase "He went about doing good." The appellation "do-gooder" has the connotation in our world of someone who is misguided. Their intention might be good but they usually receive a blanket condemnation. This is a pity for someone who really tries to do good is following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. Certainly we, who are followers of the Lord, should be seeking to do good in this world and not be afraid of the name "do-gooder".

The message moves on in verse 39 to the events which Peter and the other apostles had witnessed in Jerusalem when Jesus was arrested, and crucified but raised from among the dead. The climax of the address is brought to the attention of the listeners in verses 42 and 43 with the words, "And he commanded us to preach unto the people, and to testify that it is he which was ordained of God to be the Judge of quick and dead. To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins".

When Peter talks about preaching to the people, to all intents he had the Jews in mind as up until then they had only evangelised their own countrymen. Later in these sentences he uses the phrase, "whosoever believeth in him." This must have reassured Cornelius and the other Gentiles that they could share in the blessings of Christianity. The resulting signs demonstrate that Cornelius and other Gentiles who were listening seized upon the invitation to respond by faith and to become believers in Jesus.

If Peter had been the only witness to the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the Gentiles and to see them praising and speaking in tongues, he would have been in a weaker position when he had to make a report to the church in Jerusalem. Also present, however, as we have previously noted, were some of the circumcision as Luke describes them. When the Acts was being written, the problem of Gentile believers being admitted to the church without first being circumcised was still exercising the minds of many Jewish Christians.

It is worth repeating that Peter showed great wisdom in taking six Jewish believers with him to Caesarea. They could vouch for the sight that God did not withhold His approval. Indeed, the whole of chapter 10 demonstrates that the admission of the Gentiles into the church was divinely engineered. From the signs displayed, it was obvious that Cornelius and his friends could not be dismissed to a second rate status or an inferior position when compared with Jewish Christians.

The final act to confirm their place within the Christian body was baptism. Peter asks his fellow Jewish believers the question which we can read in 10:47, "Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptised, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" Again he takes nothing upon himself, leading apostle though he was. He asks for the approval of the six Christians who travelled with him from Joppa. In these baptisms, Peter and his friends were acknowledging the acts of a sovereign God who could call whomsoever He will, even the despised Gentiles. The last verse of the chapter records that Peter stayed for a few days as a guest of Cornelius, no doubt to instruct him in the faith and of the implications of his belief in Jesus.

I come back to the thought with which I started: the admission of the Gentiles to the church without first becoming part of the Jewish faith was the most difficult problem that the infant church had to face. That was why it had to be one of

the main apostles who took the lead in opening up the way. Even then, there is no way that Peter would have taken such action unless he was convinced he was being led of the Lord so to do. The issue was not settled at Caesarea for the circumcision question rumbled on. It surfaces on many occasions, even to the point where Peter would not eat with Gentile Christians when he was at Antioch because he was afraid of what the Jews of Jerusalem would say. At that time, the apostle Paul had to rebuke Peter for betraying the whole basis of justification as is recorded for us in Galatians 2:16, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law."

May we who, by the grace of God, have come to believe in Jesus rejoice in so great salvation which is offered freely to all people, regardless of wealth, station, gender or race.

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