

Cornelius: A Man Saved by Words

by Walton Weaver

The story of the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10 and 11) is one of the most interesting recorded in the book of Acts. This is true for several reasons.

In the first place, he was a remarkable man. Luke tells us that Cornelius was a man of authority in the Roman army (Acts 10:1), but more importantly, he was "a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always" (Acts 10:2). From this description of the man we would conclude that he was a person of good moral character and very religious.

Second, Cornelius was a Gentile. This is significant only because he was the first Gentile convert and his conversion marked a turning point in the history of the early church. Shortly after his conversion an all-out effort began to be made to get the gospel to the entire Gentile world.

Third, there were several miracles involved in the story of this man's conversion. Many people have had a great deal of difficulty in trying to understand these miracles in relation to the conversion of Cornelius.

Fourth, the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out on Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:45). There is much speculation and a lot of misunderstanding about why Cornelius was baptized in the Holy Spirit. It served a very definite purpose, but was that purpose directly related to his conversion?

Why Peter Was Summoned

Peter later told his Jewish brethren in Jerusalem that an angel told Cornelius, "Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:13-14). What was it that Cornelius needed to be saved? Peter says he needed WORDS. What words? Would just any words do? Of course not! He needed words from Peter, but these would be divine words from God. Cornelius understood this, for he said to Peter upon his arrival, "Now, therefore, we are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God" (Acts 10:33). The words spoken by Peter were given to him of God; he was summoned so Cornelius and his household could hear the words of the gospel, God's power to save (Rom. 1:16), for the first time. If Cornelius was to be saved at all he would be saved by the WORDS of salvation brought to him by Peter.

It is not our purpose in this brief article to make a detailed study of this man's conversion. We simply wish to call attention to the fact that since he was saved by

WORDS, then he was NOT saved by the other things we mentioned in the introductory statements of this article. Let us now make a few brief comments about each of these things.

Not Saved By His Morality

We saw how Cornelius was a good moral man. He had a good reputation even among the Jews. And there is value in a good name. "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, Loving favor rather than silver and gold" (Prov. 22:1). We all admire the man who pays his debts, treats his family well, lives a good moral life, and helps the poor. Cornelius was all of this and more, as the statement, "feared God with all his household," demonstrates. Why then was he not saved? Simply because he had not heard WORDS whereby he might be saved. There are things a person must do to become a Christian and Cornelius had not done these things. "What will be the end of those who obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17), Peter asks. Earlier he had said that his readers had "purified [their] souls in obeying the truth" (1 Pet. 1:22). The gospel which has been revealed in WORDS must be heard (Rom. 10:14-17 [esp. v. 17]), believed (Mk. 16:16), and obeyed (2 Thess. 1:7-9; 1 Pet. 4:17; Acts 2:38). Cornelius had not heard, believed or obeyed the gospel. All of his good works would not save him (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 10:1-3; Tit. 3:5).

Not Saved By Miracles

There are several miracles recorded as being involved in this story of conversion. Peter had a vision, there were visits made by an angel, and messages were communicated by both the angel and the Holy Spirit. But Cornelius was not saved by any of these things. The angel and the Spirit were instrumental in getting Peter, a human agent, and Cornelius, a man in need of salvation, together, and in convincing Peter that the Gentiles were proper subjects for salvation (the purpose of the sheet let down from heaven (Acts 10:9-16). But according to God's way of doing things, Cornelius needed to hear WORDS of salvation from a human agent like Peter (not directly from an angel or the Spirit) because this is God's way of communicating His word of salvation to sinners.

Not Saved by the Baptism of the Holy Spirit

"While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word" (Acts 10:44). The six Jewish brethren who had accompanied Peter to the house of Cornelius (Acts 11:12) were astonished when they saw "the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also" (Acts 10:45). Peter called this outpouring of the Spirit upon the Gentiles a baptism of the Spirit (Acts 11:16). Was Cornelius saved by Holy Spirit baptism? No, this baptism of the Spirit served an entirely different purpose. As a matter of fact, there are only two examples of Holy Spirit baptism recorded in all the New Testament. Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost to find another

example of it---"as upon us at the beginning," according to Peter in Acts 11:15. Acts 11:18 shows why Cornelius and his household were baptized in the Holy Spirit: "When they heard these things [Peter's explanation in vv. 15-17 of what had occurred, ww] they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life'" (Acts 11:18). The purpose of this baptism in the Holy Spirit is found in this conviction produced in these six Jewish brethren. It was this conclusion that God had intended to produce by this baptism. So they were not saved by Holy Spirit baptism; they were saved by the WORDS of salvation preached by Peter. This is the way all men are saved, and Cornelius is no exception.

He Was Saved by Words, But What Words?

What were the WORDS by which Cornelius was saved? According to Peter it was "the word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ--He is Lord of all---that word you know, which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee after the baptism which John preached" (Acts 10:36-37). It was that word that was first spoken by the Lord, and confirmed by miracles (Heb. 2:3-4; Mk. 16:15-20), the gospel of our salvation.

The words preached by Peter produced faith (Acts 15:7) and repentance (Acts 11:18), and they included the command to be baptized (Acts 10:47-48). Cornelius and others in his household were saved as they heard, believed and obeyed these words. Can people be saved today by anything less?