

## **The Conversion of Cornelius**

**By David Pyles**

The conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 was one of the most revolutionary events in religious history, serving to radically reshape many cultures of man. With this conversion, the Christian church ceased to be a strictly Jewish entity and became open to Gentiles also. This was the beginning of a movement that would make Christianity the world's largest religion. The event was also revolutionary in that it put an end to dietary rules that had been specified by Moses in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, and observed by the Jews for 1500 years.

The seeds of this great Gentile movement were sown by Jesus Himself when He showed unusual kindness to them, especially in the cases of the centurion (Mt 8:5-13), the Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-30) and the woman of Samaria (Jn 4:1-42). Jesus also prophesied this movement in several places (e.g. Mt 8:11, 22:1-14, Lk 12:28-30, Acts 1:7-8). Gospel outreach to the Gentiles started with a deacon named Philip, who preached to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). However, the case of Cornelius was of greater significance because it officially made Gentiles a part of the church and as equals to the Jews. The great impact of this conversion was owing to the fact that it was done under Peter, who was a notable apostle, and who acted under heavenly commandment. Peter's actions were also endorsed by the fact that Christ had previously given him surprising degree of authority in such matters. In particular, Jesus said:

*And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. – Mt 16:19*

The meaning of this became clear with the conversion of Cornelius. It meant that Christ would use Peter to officially open the doors of church fellowship to people who had formerly been omitted. Peter's authority in this respect was to be honored by others as having the backing of heavenly decree. This authority would also be great enough to terminate the long-held customs of the Jews with respect to the dietary rules.

As with almost all things under the law, the dietary rules were symbolic, and were done away when their symbolic intent was served. The fact that these rules had only symbolic significance was implied by the words of Jesus, who famously taught:

*Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. – Mk 7:14-15*

Notwithstanding the sensibility of this statement, it was so contrary to the thinking of the Jews that they were offended by it, and even the disciples of Jesus struggled to grasp the principle (Mt 15:12-20). Many Christians theorize that the dietary rules were given for practical reasons of health. While there may be some truth to this, it cannot be the primary motivation for the rules.

It is a dubious claim that God cares less for the physical health of His church than for the health of Israel. Also, Paul said, “*For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer,*” (1Tim 4:4-5). These facts imply that the dietary rules had mostly symbolic significance. Their meaning would be clearly revealed with the conversion of Cornelius.

The story of Cornelius began with an angel appearing to him in the ninth hour of the day and commanding him to seek out Peter for instructions in things that Cornelius ought to do. Cornelius was described as a devout and prayerful man with a devout household. He was evidently a proselyte (i.e. a Gentile convert to the Jewish religion). The likely reason that the angel appeared to him at the ninth hour (3pm) was that Christ died on the cross at that very time, thereby rendering Cornelius righteous, and all other elect of God with him. The remainder of the story will be about the issue of cleanness before God, and this is why the dietary rules of the law are a central part of it. Those rules had designated certain animals as being clean and others as being unclean for purposes of consumption. Upon receiving the angelic commandment, Cornelius promptly sent three Gentiles under his command to fetch Peter.

On the next day at the sixth hour (i.e. noon), and as the three Gentiles were approaching his gate, Peter was on his rooftop praying. He was overcome with great hunger and fell into a trance wherein he saw a sheet attached at its four corners and being lowered from heaven as a net, and captured within the net were unclean animals of all sorts. Peter was commanded by a voice from heaven to slay and eat, but Peter resisted, claiming that he had never eaten anything common or unclean. The voice then replied, “*What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common,*” (Acts 10:15). The net was lowered thrice, in obvious connection with the three Gentiles at the gate, and then the net and its contents were taken into heaven.

The imagery in all this was powerful, and also pertinent in every detail. These events happened at noon because this is a time when all cultures of men gather to eat. Mealtime is also a favorite forum of fellowship. For as long as men have existed, they have gathered around tables, around campfires, beneath shade trees, etc. for food and fellowship. This is also why cooks are dear to men. Cooks not only supply food but also unite men in this favorite forum. Because of these human traits, eating and drinking are used in the Bible as metaphors for fellowship (Mt 24:48-49, Mk 2:16, Lk 22:29-30, Jn 4:31-32, 1Cor 5:11, Heb 13:10), and indeed, the Jews took such actions as being outright declarations of it (Mk 2:16, Acts 11:2-3, 1Cor 10:18, Gal 2:11-13). A prime instance of this symbolism is in the Christian communion service. It entails eating and drinking, but the Greek word for “*communion*” actually means “*fellowship*.” It is the highest form of fellowship, and this is why Paul prohibits it where the communicants are in a state of dissent (1Cor 11:20).

The communion service also shows that to eat or drink can mean the highest form of fellowship for the things being consumed or for what they represent. Hence, the communicant symbolizes that his eternal life is owing to his oneness with Christ. The same

idea was conveyed in the eating of the Passover and also of the heavenly manna (Jn 6:49-50). Further, when John was commanded to eat a book in the hand of an angel, the meaning was to thoroughly assimilate and accept what the book revealed (Rev 10:9).

Peter was put in a state of hunger because hungry men are not apt to find fault, either with the food they eat or those with whom they eat it. A full man will loathe a steak, but a hungry man will love a hamburger. Peter's God-given hunger was symbolic of the fact that his heart was being trained by God to desire peace and brotherhood with people he had formerly loathed. As Paul would later say, "*But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another,*" (1Thes 4:9). When men are united in peace and fellowship, it is because God has given them hunger for such.

The unclean animals had been captured as in a heavenly net. Men oftentimes represent their evangelical zeal by wearing a hook. This is prompted by Christ's commandment to Peter and Andrew, "*Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men*" (Mt 4:19). However, the next verse says, "*And they straightway left their **nets**, and followed him.*" Hence, the type of fishing that was intended was by means of a *net*, not a hook. Accordingly, Christ compared His kingdom to a net in one of His great parables (Mt 13:47-50). A hook is a humanly contrived symbol that is well-calculated to lend credibility to errant human theories. A fish cannot be caught on a hook without its cooperation, but a net overpowers all fish, even the unwilling. A hook therefore conveys the false idea of decisional salvation, but a net communicates the true principle of salvation by irresistible grace. It is also true that a hook will succeed only if the fish is deceived, but Jesus Christ is the very opposite of deception.

The heavenly net also resolved the mystery of the symbolic intent of the dietary restrictions. They symbolized the strict separation that was to exist between the Jews and all other peoples of the world. The restrictions were also an effective way of enforcing this separation. If one cannot eat what other people eat, then one cannot sit at the same table with them, thus severing fellowship. Therefore, God's commandment that Peter eat the things in the net implied revolutionary change from long-held, Bible-based customs. Ratification of this change would require authority in Peter far surpassing what God ordinarily gives to men, and this explains the surprising strength of the statement wherein Christ committed to Peter the keys of the kingdom (Mt 16:19). Some have misconstrued this statement as generally conferring to Peter headship over the other apostles. This is clearly contradicted by scripture (Mt 23:8-11, Mk 9:33-37, Lk 22:24-32), and refuted by Peter himself (1Pet 5:1-4). The exceptional authority given to Peter pertained only to this particular matter of admission to fellowship of the kingdom.

The animals in the net were truly unclean under the specifications of the Law, but they had been cleansed in a sovereign and gracious act of God. The animals were therefore perfect symbols of all Gentiles embraced in the covenant of grace. However, the Jews were in exactly the same situation, and this is why God prohibited their segregation in the church.

Accordingly, given the symbolic meaning of the dietary restrictions, they became highly inappropriate for the church. Men of all nations, races, etc. are saved in like manner by God's grace and are to be united in Christ and His church. All this was beautifully explained by Paul to the Gentile Ephesians:

*But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit. – Eph 2:11-22*

When Peter insinuated that the animals in the heavenly sheet were common and unclean, he was corrected with the words, “*What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common,*” (Acts 10:15). Peter was not told that he would be the cause or means of their cleansing; rather, God alone was the cleanser. Nor was Peter told that the Gentiles at his gate would shortly be cleansed; rather, they were *already* cleansed by God. These claims correct the beliefs of many Christians, who think that cleansing before God happens at the point of gospel conversion. The Bible implies that Cornelius and company were cleansed *before* the gospel ever reached them. This conflict derives from a misunderstanding of the principle of justification by faith. To be “justified” means to be *declared* righteous, not to be rendered righteous. When a court justifies a man, it is declaring a preexisting state of innocence. God's elect were legally cleansed the moment Jesus died on the cross (Rom 5:10, 2Cor 5:18-20, Eph 2:14-17, Col 2:13-15, Heb 10:10-14). This is why Cornelius and company were *already* clean, but their gospel conversion *declared* and *certified* this cleansing, thereby bringing glory to the gracious God who cleansed them. Accordingly, when the Bible speaks of the righteousness of faith, it means the righteousness that is *denoted* by it.

A second error that is discredited by the case of Cornelius is the practice of infant baptism. There is neither precept nor precedent for infant baptism anywhere in the New Testament; however, many have tried to justify the practice using an ingenious interpretation of certain household baptisms that are recorded in the book of Acts (10:2-48, 16:15, 31-34, 18:8). Their claim is that the actual policy was to baptize all non-dissenting members of a household, which would include even infants or small children. All this is sheer conjecture and is a flailing attempt to stand guard over preconceived notions. The Bible does not contain any provable instance of a baptism being administered to anyone other than a professing believer.

Now the account of Cornelius provides the first of these household baptisms, and it is reasonable to suppose that it set precedents by which all others are to be understood. From the outset of the story, the reader is told that Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man “*with all his house,*” (Acts 10:2). The clear meaning is that all members of his house, or all being considered by the story, were devout, God-fearing people. Next, the reader is told that, as Peter preached to this group, “*the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word,*” (Acts 10:44). Finally, Peter asked the Jewish church members who accompanied him, “*Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?*” (Acts 10:47). Hence, the baptisms were administered to those who had received the Holy Ghost, who were the same as those who had heard the word, and these had been devout, God-fearing people from the outset. Such descriptions clearly cannot apply to infants. Nor will the other household baptisms of Acts support infant baptism. In all of them except one (16:15), the baptized individuals were described as *believers* somewhere in context.

When the angel appeared to Cornelius, the angel might have simply told him to believe on Christ, repent, be baptized, etc. This was not done. Rather, the angel told Cornelius to receive his instructions from Peter. The reason is that the honor and duty of telling the gospel of Jesus Christ has been given to men. All believers should be inspired by this fact to a higher degree of evangelical service. We are surely indebted, not only by the death of Christ, but also by the benefits we have received through the evangelization and conversion of Cornelius.

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