# A Fulfilment of the Great Commission

I think it’s easy to look at the story of Cornelius’ conversion in Acts 10 and think of it as simply another nice story about a person coming to faith in a book that is full of nice stories about people coming to faith.

But Cornelius' conversion is one of the most important events recorded in the book. It’s the longest single narrative in Acts, and partly because of the fact that the story is immediately retold from Peter’s perspective in chapter 11, which alone screams its importance.

On top of that, the event includes multiple visions, angels, a trance, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. That’s a lot of supernatural activity surrounding the conversion of just a single household.

The reason the passage garnered such focus, both in terms of the supernatural and in its recording by Luke, the author of the book, is because Cornelius is considered to be the first Gentile Christian—that is, he was the first non-Jewish, uncircumcised, follower of Christ.

A Gentile Christian was revolutionary at the time: Christianity had, until then, been a Jewish sect. It was such a monumental event for the Christian church, that Cornelius would go on to become the poster boy for Gentile Christians.

This was a crucial step towards fulfilling both the Great Commission, "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19 ESV)

It is clear that Luke puts great emphasis on this goal, in his writing of the book. Right at the start, in Acts 1:8, Jesus tells the apostles that they will encounter the Holy Spirit, then preach in Jerusalem and Judea, then in Samaria, and then the whole earth.

In other words, first to the Jews; then to the Samaritans (half Jews-half Gentiles); then to the Gentiles. This was Jesus’ final command to his disciples on earth.

Luke records the coming of the Holy Spirit and preaching to the Jews in Acts 2, preaching to the Samaritans in Acts 8, and, finally, preaching to the Gentiles (Cornelius and his household) in Acts 10.

Luke was extremely deliberate to show that this progression towards preaching to the whole world (Gentiles), was prophesied, divinely orchestrated, and commanded by Jesus himself.

# A Theological Conversion

But the issue of Gentile Christians was highly debated, both before and after this event. It cannot be understated how difficult this transition would have been for some of the Jews in these debates. In fact, it could have split the church.

Gentiles were not just 'not Jews,' they were "unclean." Even just vising Cornelius' house was a cultural and religious taboo for Peter, never mind the fact that Caesarea, where the story takes place, was, in the words of Benjamin R. Wilson, a "frequent setting for tensions and conflicts concerning Jewish communal boundaries and Jew-Gentile relations."

The fact that Cornelius was a Roman Centurion would only have made it worse, especially given anti-Hellenization sentiments present in many Jews of the day.

In a sense, Peter, as well as many other believers (if not all of them), needed a theological 'conversion' just as Cornelius needed a religious one, in order for the Great Commission to be fulfilled. In fact, it could be said that Peter's 'conversion' was the harder of the two.

In other words, it was harder, at that time and place, for a Christian to accept a Gentile into the fellowship than it was for a Gentile to hear the Gospel and believe.

And yet, the account of Cornelius' conversion is so striking, with so much supernatural evidence, that the believers in Jerusalem had their minds changed *immediately*. Not only did they learn to accept that the Gentiles were also a part of God's plan, they praised God for the fact.

# An Example for the Future

Almost immediately following Cornelius' conversion, the Gospel began to reach the Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas, having met resistance from the Jews, began to preach to the Gentiles instead, no doubt encouraged by the actions of Peter, and helped sow the seeds that would blossom into the church of Antioch, one of the most significant Christian churches of the day, if not in all history.

Luke continued to describe the Gospel spreading throughout the world, well past Israel, for the rest of Acts, and over the years, more and more fully Gentile churches started to grow.

From Antioch, where Paul and Barnabas had preached to the Gentiles even before the Jerusalem Council, Paul's missionary journeys began.

Cornelius got a foot in the door for the Gentiles, and in Antioch, God opened the door wide.

The challenge for us today is to be reminded that the Gospel truly is for *everyone* and *anyone.* As hard as it may be for us to imagine, there is no one on this earth, no matter their current situation or their past, that is not able to be a Christian.

Cornelius' conversion was a significant turning point for the early church in many ways, including a step away from Judaism and the start of a new religion, complete with fully-Gentile churches across the Mediterranean and soon the world.

Jesus’ commands to spread the Gospel to every corner of the earth is a prophecy dating back to Abraham, and we are as much a part of that mission as anyone else, and that means putting aside our prejudices the way the early Jews, including Peter, had to do.

When we think of a person we imagine to be ‘too far gone’ or ‘too unreachable,’ God warns us not to treat such people he has “made clean” with contempt, and shows us, with Cornelius, and his entire household, that the Holy Spirit can do miraculous things that we may never have imagined.

# Bibliography

Bock, Darrell L. *Acts* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

Fernando, Ajith. *Acts* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

Fitzmyer, Joseph A. "The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts," *Theological Studies* 35:4 (1974), 741-744.

Greulich, Megan. "When God Orchestrated the Impossible," *Mutuality* 15:4 (2008), 3.

Nguyen, VanThanh "Luke's Point of View of the Gentile Mission: The Test Case of Acts 11:1-18," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 3 (2011), 85-98.

Palmer, Darryl W. "Mission to Jews and Gentiles in the Last Episode of Acts" *The Reformed Theological Review* 52:2 (1993), 62-73.

Wilson, Benjamin R. "Jew-Gentile Relations and the Geographic Movement of Acts," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 80:1 (2018), 81-96.