



## The First Gentile Convert The Speech at the Home of Cornelius

### Acts 10

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#### Repentance

Brian, a friend of mine, is a wholesaler in ladies' fashion clothing. At his regional and national meetings of sales representatives bad language is conventional. On one such an occasion, after enduring the agony of hearing the name of Jesus banded around for as long as he could stand it, he deliberately introduced to a sentence a four-letter word which has distinct sexual connotations. His colleagues were shocked, and he began to explain how more devastating, to his mind as a Christian, had been their casual and unthinking blasphemy throughout the evening. How did he gain such a firm zeal for the honour of Christ? Six years ago he was a dissolute agnostic. Widowed young, he turned to drink, and his thriving business ended in massive debt. In despair he sought the help of Christian neighbours, and the turning point came when the vicar gave him this invitation, 'Your kind of life has got you nowhere; why not try mine?' Brian received Christ and rejoices in him daily through times of trouble as well as times of joy. But his witness at work is one measure of the radical change which Christ has brought to him. Simon Peter had such a radical change. But his was even more radical because his outlook was shared with a whole community whose traditions, in part, were well over one thousand years old. He was a Christian, a Jewish Christian, who had discovered that Jesus Christ, 'killed by man in accordance with God's deliberate will, had been raised by God from death, having escaped corruption' in line with David's prophecy. Now exalted on high, Jesus had sent the Holy Spirit on all flesh, on lay people like himself (not scribes, Pharisees, priests), who, speaking in tongues, reached Jews and proselytes from countries all over the inhabited world, gathered at Jerusalem for the Jewish feast of 'weeks', of Pentecost according to the Greek name. For Peter this outpouring of the Holy Spirit was on the sons and daughters of Israel, and that prophecy opened the door for *whoever calls* on the name of the Lord to be saved. At this time these Christians visited the temple and to that extent were more orthodox Jews than the men of Qumran, the monks on the shores of the Dead Sea. Peter was a fulfilment Jew, one who saw Jesus Christ fulfilling the promises of the covenants made by God with Abraham and others.

But God was not limiting salvation to Jews. Peter found this hard to accept. At Antioch, some time after the conversion of Paul, he had begun to eat at the table with Gentile Christians. And after receiving objections from other Jewish Christians he withdrew, to Paul's great disgust (Gal. 2). However, by that time Peter was working through the change God had begun in him, and yet he was trying to keep in with those who had not shared his experience. That experience had been the vision of traditionally unclean animals, the command to meet Cornelius, and now the interrupted sermon (Acts 10). His change was radical; it was a

cultural revolution; its impact on the inhabited world was far greater than the Renaissance or the Communist manifesto. It opened up the world to God. And this is our mission, 'Go ye into all the world' (Matt. 28), and our equipment for fulfilling that task is *radical change*. No-one wants the old coat when a new and better one is offered free. That is the challenge to mission, with which the churches are faced in our new society today. *Metanoia*, repentance, the classic response called for by Christ in Galilee (Mk 1:14-15) and by Peter at Pentecost and on the succeeding days, is not a superficial alteration of opinion. It is revolution, a total re-orientation towards God, to all that he offers and all that he commands. And Peter, like us, was called to that.

#### The interruption

The climax of the change occurred as Peter was preaching. Cornelius had invited him to tell him and his friends 'all the things commanded to you by the Lord' (Acts 10:33). He had not finished preaching when the Holy Spirit fell on these Gentiles in the way in which he had fallen in the presence of Jews and proselytes gathered for the Pentecost celebrations. The promised Spirit had come on Gentiles too. Peter could not see why, in that case, they should not be baptised into Christ *without* the circumcision applied to proselytes. Other Jewish Christians would protest ferociously later against by-passing the fulfilment scheme of God – Abraham – Jewry – Christ's Church, leaving out the vital mark of Abraham's covenant, namely circumcision. Paul would later rationalise this 'by-pass' in Romans 4, but Peter worked logically through the revolution. *They*, Cornelius and co., had simply asked to hear what Jesus had been taught by God so far. God had now gone a step further and sent his Spirit upon Gentiles, directly, unmediated by Jewish culture.

This sermon was unfinished; God interrupted it. In Acts 11:15 Peter does his action-reflection, his 'critical incident' report on the whole event, and he says 'When I had begun to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on us'. Biblical critics of an older generation believe that Luke has made a mistake at this point in claiming that the Holy Spirit descended when Peter began to speak. The assumption behind their claim is that the speech as reported in Chapter 10 was meant to be a summary of the whole speech, whereas Luke in Chapter 11 presents Peter as claiming that he had not completed the speech when the Holy Spirit descended. Hans Conzelmann does not agree. In his German commentary on Acts published over twenty years ago, and recently published in English, he claims that both the speech as reported in Chapter 10 and the reflection as reported in Chapter 11 are 'Luke's deliberate redaction' of the evidence he had at his disposal. He reckons that this coming of the Holy Spirit as the speech is in flow is a Lukan 'interruption', as in the case of the coming of the

Holy Spirit before the preaching of the *kerygma* in Acts 2. And that, dare one say it, is how the ministry of the Holy Spirit so often appears, an 'interruption'. Jesus's ministry of exorcism in Luke's Gospel so interrupted the mind cast of his religious critics who treated the age of prophecy as dead that they attributed his kingdom-action to the prince of the devils, to Beelzebul (Mk. 3:22). We seem to hear them saying, 'Let the pagans do such things in Hellenistic religions, but we can't have this accepted in Judaism, now can we, especially from a Galilean backwoodsman? He's got to be a heretic.' The most powerful event in world history, the resurrection, wrought, according to the very early fragment of Christian tradition preserved in Romans 1:3, 'according to the Spirit of holiness', was another such interruption: forlorn men could not accept its possibility from the women who claimed it. The cautious Thomas could not believe its possibility when the evidence stared him in the face. And this 'interruption' by God is still embarrassing theologians who feel that bending their scientific world view to this claim is intellectual suicide and will denigrate the Gospel among thinking men today, when great minds like Origen, Augustine, and in our day C.S. Lewis, have bowed to God at this point. Do not our hearts leap up as we remember the time when the Paraclete 'interrupted' our frame of reference, shattered such firmly held illusions and brought a vision of God to our life which we had never dreamt possible? Does our heart not flourish today with the daily, continual infilling with the Holy Spirit available to us in Christ, without which we do not stand in the apostolic succession of people 'filled with the faith and the Holy Spirit'? There is no shame in recognising our daily need of the best which our Creator has to offer us in Christ.

### The address

We do well to remember that Luke penned Acts. His speeches are summaries, and despite the many differences between them they do have common elements. One element which occurs in many, though not all, of the speeches in Acts is an outline of Jesus, marked out by God by a spectacular earthly ministry, killed, raised by God and exalted, and to this the response is repentance. This stereotyped pattern formed part, but not all, of the Pentecost speech and in broadest outline (not detail) recurs in the speech at the home of Cornelius. This pattern is believed by some, such as C.H. Dodd, to be a model of early Christian preaching. Another common element in the Acts speeches is the themes found recurring in Luke's Gospel such as the emphasis on the Spirit, on Christ the wonder-working saviour, and now exalted, and on the present eschatological experience enjoyed by the penitent community. These common elements are seen by commentators such as Haenchen as marks of a distinctive way in which Luke understood the events on which he reflects in Acts. Both perspectives are, no doubt, true, since all writing, creative or reported, contains a perspective, from where *we are* and that is one reason why personal development is so important a factor in ministry. The first Principal under whom I was privileged, after the Lord, to serve in Clifton Theological College, was a godly man, old-fashioned perhaps but godly. His reputation for protecting his early morning prayer time with the Lord by leaving any public engagement at 10 pm on the previous evening was so well known that a colleague who worked well at night said of him once, 'When you've gained a reputation for getting up early, you can afford to stay in bed till mid-day.' My

godly boss wrote a book entitled *The Man Behind the Ministry* and his whole argument, based on the Scriptures and on his considerable ministerial experience in Devon and Oxford, was that the ongoing personal development of the minister is the key to effective ministry. Where then was Luke the minister as he wrote the Acts and this speech? What was his vision, as he wrote up this address? Most of our information must come from the address itself, following the analytic method of discerning the author from his or her product. But there is also a place for looking at external evidence, since the acts of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament are part of a historical continuum of which the writing of these books is part. The analytic method on its own can be circular – look at the document to infer its orientation and background; from that supposed orientation and background interpret the document, and so on. However, any historian seeking to discern the historical continuum will, with a critical eye, ask what the contemporaries or near contemporaries thought about the historical situation. Now with the Gospels and Acts this is very difficult, since the titles to the Gospels 'According to Mark', *etc.*, are not, strictly speaking, part of the texts. So it is with Acts. And the accounts of the authors appear in some cases about a hundred years after the document was first published. However, it is worthwhile giving serious attention to some of that evidence and seeing whether it illumines the text. That I shall now do, taking an ancient testimony which Adolf Harnack at the turn of this century dated before Irenaeus, the first apologist to attempt to give us a rationale of the Gospels. This evidence from the anti-Marcionite prologue to Luke goes like this:

Luke is a Syrian of Antioch, a doctor by profession, who was a disciple of the apostles, and later followed Paul until his martyrdom. He served the Lord without distraction, unmarried, childless, and fell asleep about the age of eighty-four (Latin—74) in Boeotia, full of the Holy Spirit. (H. Conzelmann, *Acts*, xxxii)

Without being dogmatic about the truth or falsity of this ancient testimony, the placing of Luke in his active life at Syrian Antioch illuminates some of the firm convictions of many scholars that Luke uses in Acts 10 sources which show a particular interest in Jerusalem, in Antioch and in Paul. Communication between Jerusalem and Antioch was good and early (witness Galatians), and from there Paul and Barnabas were sent out. Now the location of Syrian Antioch was a near-Eastern hub: now in South Turkey, it was a key city of 50,000 people with a large Jewish population in a direct land line between Palestine to the south and Asia Minor to the north and beyond that Greece. Its port, Seleucia, gave routes to Cyprus and Greece. A person serving there would pick up a cosmopolitan vision. And I can easily imagine Luke scanning from south to centre, out to the west to Cyprus and north to Asia Minor and Greece from his eastern axis. His address reflects that kind of cosmopolitan culture, and it is hailed by critics (Wilkins, Conzelmann, Stanton and Marshall) as in a class of its own for the variety of its information and concepts. Briefly consider this:

### 1. The headline on God: he favours no one

His universal standard is strictly applied. 'I now realise how true

it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right'. Deuteronomy and Micah in the Old Testament, Paul and Peter's first letter in the New Testament teach this, and according to Kuhn, some Jews did as well. The way the Christian writers work this through is to show that the good life is acceptable in God's sight when it leads to a recognition of its own inadequacy and to acceptance of the Gospel (I.H. Marshall, *Acts*). As a child, and a student recently introduced to Protestant theology, I was turned off by the *Kyries* in the communion service. The ten commandments I could accept as appropriate; the *Kyries* seemed redundant if you know that you are already forgiven. Growing older has altered my perspective. I still think using Greek in an English service is rather exclusive for the majority of our population, but the fact that throughout my life as a Christian I need and receive the mercy of God is very clear. Like the adulterous cardinal in the Australian soap opera *The Thorn Birds* I need to admit to human failure before I can exercise an effective priesthood. God respects no one for his or her background or talent. And this truth in Peter's speech becomes not a spur for Western ascetic introversion so typical of some of our so-called spiritual classics but a motive for preaching the Gospel outside our own class or set. It liberated Peter to preach freely to the Gentiles whom his Jewish family reckoned beyond the pale.

## 2. The new status of Jesus Christ: Lord of all

Verses 36-38 put the Gospel in story form: the preaching by Jesus, Lord of all, his anointing by the Holy Spirit, his good works and ministry of healing and deliverance from Satan 'because God was with him'. This story form is unique here among the Acts speeches, and the content, according to Graham Stanton, is distinctive. Remarkably, it shows side by side the sheer humanity of Jesus as a preacher and healer accompanied by God and his universal status as lord of all. His ministry is located in Galilee, Judaea and Jerusalem, following Luke's pattern in his Gospel. Peter's words 'send out the word', 'gospelling peace' (verse 36), 'heal' (verse 38), recall Psalm 107:20 'He sent forth his word and healed them' and Isaiah 52:7 'the feet of him who brings good tidings and publishes peace'. As such it has a Jewish orientation. But the description of Jesus as a 'divine man' 'doing good' is very Hellenistic. It has a Gospel parallel in the Lukan description of Hellenistic rulers as do-gooders (Luke 22:25) and pagan parallels in the legendary wonder-working preacher Apollonius of Tyana and in the legendary description of Heracles by Epictetus as one who 'had no dearer friend than god'. Moreover, the status of 'lord of all' is used by the Greek poet Pindar of Zeus, by the historical novelist Plutarch of the Egyptian god Osiris and by Stoic philosopher Epictetus of the emperor Caesar. Luke from his pivot at Antioch sees Peter beaming the overlordship of Jesus like a laser around the Mediterranean inhabited world. There is no one for whom Jesus is not profoundly revolutionary, life-demanding, if only we put his true status into words which command total allegiance from our contemporaries. And at the same time he is to us the God-centred working person.

## 3. His life, death and resurrection were seen by witnesses

In other speeches and in Paul's letter to the Corinthians the claim is made that there were witnesses to the resurrection. Here the

claim goes further back: 'We are witnesses of all that he did in the land of the Jews, and Jerusalem. Whom they killed on a tree, this man God raised on the third day and gave him to be seen, not to everybody but to witnesses chosen beforehand sovereignly by God, we who ate and drank together with him after his being raised from the dead'. Here and 1 Corinthians 15 alone outside the Gospels refer to the resurrection *on the third day*. We have here in Luke's presentation of Peter's speech details which reflect an early tradition. The tree-hanging again echoes Paul, in Galatians 3:13 (also Acts 5:30) as he shows that Jesus took us on and took our place so radically and so completely that he became a curse for us, in terms of the teaching of Deuteronomy 21:22f. Can you imagine the thrill and excitement of Luke as he wove into his tract this truth so long preserved in the Christian community – Jesus died for *me*, for *us*? Can you imagine the thrill of Peter after the despair of the crowing cock and the frightened huddling in the upper room, confused by Jesus's promise of return? Can you imagine Peter's thrill in being able to say to Cornelius and co., 'I saw it all happen'? What is *your testimony* to the risen Jesus? Have you not walked with him, have you not talked with him? Were you not born again when his Spirit touched your life? 'He touched me, yes he touched me and oh the joy that floods my soul'. Or is he still a fairy-tale, a childhood myth, a figure who has receded during your theological studies from your twentieth century heart to the portion of your brain marked 'Information about the ancient world'? Please do not think me unsympathetic with doubt. I am not. I know what it is to go to the Principal of my theological college and tell him in an embarrassed way that emotional involvement with an agnostic girl-friend has left me with no faith in God at all. But, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is but for a season (sometimes short, sometimes long), the dark night of the soul in which our faith must plumb the depths of God with no props – and then the light dawns and like Plato's trainee philosopher-kings we come out of the tunnel into the light and can testify with far firmer conviction (and with a more genuine humility) 'This God has done'. We can stand before the people of God and the pagan world and say 'This God has done'. As Lord Coggan said to me one Quiet Day at Wycliffe Hall, 'Leave your doubts in the study and take your certainties to the pulpit'. We are ordained of God as witnesses. And people are crying out for good news.

## 4. The rest is ministry

As Peter began to recount the benefits which God has brought from his treatment of Jesus, the benefits which the apostles were commanded to announce, – the forgiveness of sins envisaged in Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and, in the Alexandrian, LXX canon, Daniel; as he began to announce the benefits, before he had the chance to invite his hearers to repentance as he did in other speeches, there was, as Conzelmann puts it, an 'interruption'. God shared with the Gentiles, the outsiders, the Spirit promised long to his covenant-people. And we Europeans, East Asians, Americans, Africans, Australasians, join the Lebanese, Palestinians and Israelis as we too have the Spirit of God descend on us and we speak with Spirit-inspired language and praise God.