

Acts

Acts 10:1-48 - So, who's the real Christian here?

In the previous session on **Acts 9** - when talking about the many different kinds of deaths we experience in this life now - in among those deaths was **disillusionment** and this statement, that “Disillusionment is a real killer too, when you find out after years of trying to be acceptable in God's sight by living an impressively upright, moral, devout religious life and giving tons of money to the church and keeping all its rules and rituals, you then find out all your efforts aren't what Christianity is all about.”

That could be a rather startling and discouraging statement for some, who might then ask, “But where is the evidence to back it up?” Well, it's right here in **Acts 10**, in the story of **Cornelius**.

At first glance, Cornelius is probably the kind of person we'd all want to be like as Christians. He also represents us well too, because, like us, he's a non-Jewish Gentile. Unlike most of us, though, he's a military man, a highly trained killing machine in the Roman army, the most powerful army at the time, and he's risen through the ranks to the level of centurion in command of a regiment numbering a hundred men (10:1).

But that again is something we might aspire to, because reaching that rank in such an army meant Cornelius was a highly disciplined man. Not even a spark of laziness in him. He was tough. And faced with daunting circumstances he'd been trained to be mentally ready and willing to take them on, no questions asked, and certainly no complaints. So there's a rugged strength to the man, that his men and his peers must have deeply respected. And wouldn't God be looking for something exactly like that in us Christians too?

But look what else Cornelius had going for him, and again things we might aspire to as Christians, because Cornelius and his entire family “were devout and God-fearing,” plus “he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly,” **Acts 10:2**. Luke also mentions in **verse 22** that Cornelius was “respected by all the Jewish people” - which is outstanding, because Cornelius was a Roman soldier, many of whom were known for their cruelty and their contempt for the Jews. The Romans could also confiscate anything they wanted from the Jews - land, houses, and property - but, rather than take from the Jews, Cornelius gave generously to them. He truly was an amazing man.

And God thought so too, because in **Act 10:3** Cornelius “had a vision,” in which he “saw an angel of God,” who told him in **verse 4**, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance (or memorial offering) before God.” In other words, God held what Cornelius was doing in high regard. It was like an offering to him. It was also clear evidence, as Peter states in **verses 34-35**, that “God does not show favouritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Does that mean, then, that Cornelius was a Christian? We couldn't be blamed for thinking so, right? I mean, the man was not only accepted and held in high regard by God, he was also risking his life being exposed as loving the enemy, so what else did he need? Would we not throw our arms open to such a man and welcome him to church, and within a very short time ordain him as a Deacon?

But there are 43 verses yet to go in this story, including the angel's command in **verse 5** to “send men to Joppa to bring back **Peter**,” which Cornelius immediately went to work on in **verse 7**. But the story then abruptly switches to Peter who, like Cornelius, also has a vision. In **verse 11**, Peter “saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners.” And inside the sheet, **verse 12**, were “all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.” To Peter's surprise a voice then says in **verse 13**, “Get up Peter (from praying in **verse 9**). Kill and eat.”

We know back in **verse 10** that Peter was hungry, but when he saw what the sheet contained he replied in shock in **verse 14**, “Surely not, Lord. I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.” It was totally against Peter's religion - in his case the Law of Moses that banned the eating of certain animals and birds to separate Israel from the Gentile nations around them. **The law**, then, took priority in Peter's mind, which he used as a defence **against** doing what he knew was “the Lord” in **verse 14** telling him what to do.

Unlike the “God-fearing” Cornelius, who would likely have said, “Yes, sir,” and immediately done what he was told, Peter actually argues, and instead of coming before God as a “memorial offering,” he's thoroughly told off in **verse 15**, when the voice says, “Don't you call anything impure that God has made clean.” Or “How dare you argue with God,” and down comes the same sheet twice more in **verse 16** to get the point across to Peter that he was dead wrong in his thinking.

So now we've got this very odd situation of the Spirit-filled Peter acting far worse than the God-fearing Cornelius. **So, who's the real Christian here?**

The irony now is that these two men are about to meet, and the Holy Spirit also makes it clear to Peter in verses 19-20 that they're supposed to meet, so "the next day," **verse 23**, Peter travels back with the soldier and two servants Cornelius had sent to bring him back in verse 7.

Peter has no clue as yet why Cornelius has sent for him, and it's quite a surprise when Peter finds "a large gathering" of Cornelius' "relatives and close friends" waiting for him (verses 24-27). Peter is now in the same situation as Cornelius, going against what the culture demanded, and for Peter it was going against his religion too, because the law banned a Jew from even entering a Gentile house, **verse 28**, and especially a house full of Gentiles. Both men were now in uncharted waters and taking a huge risk.

"BUT," Peter says in **verse 28**, "God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean," so when Peter found out he was being sent for by Cornelius a Gentile Roman soldier in verse 22, it had obviously been made clear to Peter by then that God had something huge in mind. "So when I was sent for," in **verse 29**, this time Peter obeyed and "came without raising any objection." The question still remained, though, as to why Cornelius had sent for him (verse 29).

Cornelius tells what happened at his end, the vision and the command to send for Peter, and finishes off with, so "here we all are now in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us," **verse 33**.

And now we find out why these two men needed to be brought together; it's because **both** of them had something to learn about what true Christianity is.

Cornelius, for instance, needed to learn that the heart and core of Christianity is not about being religious, sincere, earnest, generous, or living a good, clean, moral, praying life. That may even surprise some Christians, but why would the Holy Spirit have Peter go to Cornelius if Cornelius was already being a Christian? Cornelius was already an accepted and much appreciated "memorial offering" before God, so what more did he need to be a Christian?

What Cornelius needed, as we find out in **verse 45**, was "the gift of the Holy Spirit." And, as Peter explains in **verse 36**, the Spirit is given to those who believe "the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all" - the "good news" being that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power," **verse 38**, to "heal all who are under the power of the devil, because God was with him." It was what **Jesus was all about** that Cornelius needed to hear.

That's because Jesus had been raised from the dead, **verse 40**, to be "the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead," **verse 42**. It's not one's moral goodness, therefore, that decides who's living and who's dead, it's what "all the prophets testify about Jesus, that everyone who **believes in him** receives forgiveness of sins through his name," **verse 43**. Moral goodness didn't get Cornelius forgiveness for his sins either; only Jesus had been appointed by God for that. The focus for Cornelius, therefore, was trust in Jesus, because Jesus held the keys to eternal life, through forgiveness and his power to overcome the devil.

The irony of all this was that Peter hadn't truly understood this himself yet either, because he was still thinking the law of Moses ruled his life, and it was his obedience to that law that still carried on into Christianity. He thought the law was the judge of the living and the dead, and only law keepers received eternal life. And it took three times for the sheet full of animals to be shown to Peter before he got the message that God accepts people who aren't obeying the Jewish law and don't need to - like Cornelius.

Cornelius, meanwhile, was in danger of thinking morality and being a good person was the judge of the living and the dead. God appreciated him being a good person, and praying to be a good person too, and especially when he was going against the tide of the Roman culture and putting himself at such huge risk. So it's not surprising that God chose him as the first Gentile to become a Christian, because any belief in God opens the door to God giving a person more understanding, And Cornelius certainly had belief all right.

But moralism didn't make Cornelius a Christian any more than legalism made Peter a Christian. But Cornelius didn't know that, and nor did Peter, so this story was choreographed by the Holy Spirit to teach both men a vital lesson as to what Christianity at heart and core is truly about.

And from what Peter said in **verse 38**, Christianity at heart and core is about the ministry of Jesus freeing humanity from the deceptions and control of the devil. Or to put it in our terms today, Jesus died to destroy the pandemic of Satanic viruses that have poisoned the human mind since the Garden of Eden, and he's now alive directing the Holy Spirit to create an immunity to those killer viruses so we can be permanently free of them individually.

With that in mind we can answer the question on page 1, "So, who's the real Christian here" - Cornelius or Peter? They both are - and anyone else is too, who's been given the understanding by the Holy Spirit that Jesus died and now lives to "heal all who are under the power of the devil" (verse 38). And the proof of it will be the healing he does in us personally.