

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Today's reading illustrates God's favor upon sincere seekers. He goes to great lengths to make sure they hear about Jesus. He still does today.

Cornelius, a Roman army commander in charge of 100 men, was stationed in Caesarea, a strategic Roman port on the Mediterranean Sea. His sincere faith was manifested by his "fear of God," his continual prayers, as well as his gifts to the poor, and none of these went unnoticed before the Lord. Cornelius and his household were chosen by God to be the first Gentiles in the body of Jesus Christ.

There was, however, an obstacle. The early church consisted entirely of Jews who did not mix with Gentiles, considering them unclean. Associating with Gentiles was unlawful (not according to God's Law, but according to their man-made traditions). Remember that Jesus had already commanded His disciples to make disciples of all the nations, or as the Greek says, all ethnic groups (Matt. 28:19). Jesus also told them that they would be His witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and the remotest parts of the earth (Acts. 1:8). But His message hadn't penetrated their minds very deeply! So God had to take drastic action to help the church overcome its prejudice carried over from Judaism.

Peter didn't immediately understand his God-given vision, but within time it became clear to him. Repentant Gentiles, just like repentant Jews, could be forgiven and cleansed by God and included in the church.

But here is a question I can't help but ask: If Cornelius had died before Peter's visit, would he have spent eternity in hell? It is hard for me to accept the idea that God would send a sincere, God-fearing, continually-praying, alms-giving Gentile to hell just because he had not believed a gospel that he had never heard, a gospel that had he heard, he would have immediately believed (as proven by the record)! Salvation has always been offered to anyone who would believe (see Romans 4:1-3), and this was true before, during, and after the old covenant. Cornelius was certainly a believer in the God of Israel before Peter ever arrived, and he was living out his faith.

All of this is to say that Cornelius and his believing household were not "saved" that day in the sense that they escaped a sentence of hell. That happened when they originally believed in God and repented. Cornelius and his household were saved that day in the sense that they came to believe in Jesus (whose life and ministry they already knew something about; see 10:37-38), were then born of the Spirit, incorporated into the body of Christ, and also baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Today's "gospel" often shares little resemblance with the one Peter preached. Note that Peter declared that Jesus is Lord of all and not just a Savior (10:36). Jesus had died on a cross and was resurrected on the third day (10:39-41). God had appointed Him as "Judge of the living and the dead," and He had ordered His disciples to solemnly testify of that fact (10:42). The prophets had foretold of Jesus (10:43) and God will welcome every person "who fears Him and does what is right" (10:35), which is another way of saying that repentance is required for salvation. The primary benefit for those who believe is "the forgiveness of sins" (10:43), which obviously implies the truths of humanity's guilt and God's wrath. Give me that old time religion!

It goes without saying that Cornelius and those gathered believed everything Peter told them. They didn't need to pray a "sinner's prayer." The Lord immediately confirmed that they were full-fledged members of His family by pouring out His Spirit on them just as He had done on the day of Pentecost on 120 Jews. It was so convincing that Peter ordered them to be baptized in water.

How did Peter and the others know those gathered had received the Holy Spirit? They heard them speaking in other tongues (10:45-46). So we see a continuation of the pattern we have been observing in Acts. Speaking in other tongues is a biblical evidence for baptism in the Holy Spirit.