
Cornelius

from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia ¹

CORNELIUS kôr-nĕl'yəs [Gk. *Kornēlios* (Latin)]. A Roman centurion converted by Peter after both had seen divine visions (Acts 10:1–11:18), the first Gentile known to become a Christian.

The name is Roman and belonged to distinguished families in the imperial city, such as the Scipios and Sulla. Thus he was probably an Italian of Roman blood. Julian the Apostate reckons him as one of the few persons of distinction who became a Christian. He was evidently a man of importance in Caesarea and well known to the Jews (Acts 10:22). He was a centurion in the Italian COHORT, at Caesarea, the residence of the Roman procurator and headquarters of the Roman garrison in Palestine.

He is described as devout and God-fearing, the latter term often indicating a non-Jew who nonetheless embraced the monotheism of the Jews, read the Scriptures, and practiced more or less the Jewish rites. He was well reported of by the Jews, and his religion showed itself in prayer at the regular hours, and in alms to the people (of Israel). Moreover, he seems to have made his house a sort of church, for his relatives and friends were in sympathy with him, and among the soldiers who closely attended him were some devout ones (Acts 10:24, 27).

The story of his conversion and admission into the Christian Church is told in some detail in Acts 10. Nothing further is known of Cornelius, though one tradition asserts that he founded the church in Caesarea, and another legend that he became the bishop of Scamandros.

The exact importance of the incident depends upon the position of Cornelius before it occurred. Certainly he was not a proselyte of the sanctuary, circumcised, under the law, a

member of the Jewish communion. This is abundantly evident from Acts 10:28, 34, 45; 11:3, 18; 15: 7, 14. But was he not an inferior form of proselyte, later called “proselytes of the gate”? This question has been much debated and is still under discussion. Ramsay (SPT, p. 43) says that the expression “God-fearing” is always used in Acts with reference to this kind of proselyte. Such were bound to observe certain regulations of purity, probably those, this author thinks, mentioned in Acts 15:29, and which stand in close relation to the principles laid down in Lev. 17f for the conduct of strangers dwelling among Israel. Renan, on the other hand, says that Cornelius was not a proselyte at all, but simply a devout Gentile who adopted some of the Jewish ideas and religious customs which did not involve a special profession.

The importance of the whole transaction to the development of the Church seems to depend on the circumstance that Cornelius was probably not a proselyte at all. Thus we regard Cornelius as literally the firstfruits of the Gentiles. The step here taken by Peter was therefore one of tremendous importance to the whole development of the Church. The significance of the incident consists exactly in this, that under divine direction the first Gentile, not at all belonging to the old theocracy, becomes a Spirit-filled Christian, entering through the front door of the Christian Church without first going through the narrow gate of Judaism. The incident settled forever the great fundamental question as to the relations of Jew and Gentile in the Church. The difficulties in the way of the complete triumph of Peter’s view of the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the kingdom of Christ were enormous. It would have been indeed little short of miraculous if the multitude of Christian Pharisees had not raised the question again and again. Did they not dog Paul’s steps after the Council? Certainly Ramsay is wrong in saying that the case of Cornelius was passed over or condoned as exceptional,

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for it was used as precedent by both Peter and James (Acts 15:7, 14).

As for Peter's subsequent conduct at Antioch, no one who knows Peter need be surprised at it. The very accusation that Paul hurled at him was that for the moment he was carried into inconsistency with his principles (*hypókrisis*). Of course, this incident of Cornelius was only the first step in a long development; but the principle was forever settled. The rest in due time and proper order was sure to follow. By this tremendous innovation it was settled that

Christianity was to be freed from the swaddling bands of Judaism and that the Christian Church was not to be an appendix to the synagogue. The noble character of Cornelius was just fitted to abate, as far as possible, the prejudices of the Jewish Christians against what must have seemed to them a dangerous, if not awful, innovation.
