

“Deep Humility”

Profiles of Faith #7: Cornelius
Read Acts 10-11:18

It doesn't take much to convince a person to change some things. We can usually persuade people to change the kind of car they drive, the décor of their house, or to switch from a PC to an apple (well, maybe that one isn't so easy!). It's just not that hard to get people to do things differently...unless you are asking them to change their minds regarding something like religious beliefs. There is no fortified city as strong as asking a person to consider that they might be wrong about deeply held notions, or to simply tweak them a bit to bring them more in line with scripture. That kind of change takes deep humility, which is precisely why Cornelius is such an impressive man of character.

It is a matter of fact that Jesus' biggest critics were Jews who did not want to see their faith in a new way. They had thought about God a certain way, were well acquainted with Jewish customs, and quite frankly did not want to believe that Jesus came along and changed that. It made them angry enough to have him killed. If we believe Jesus is the Son of God, we also have to believe their stubbornness literally cost them their lives. Not only is humility an admirable quality, it can actually save your life.

Cornelius was an exceptional person! The scriptures tell us he was a centurion (officer) in the Italian Regiment. This was also known as a “cohort,” which was a group of Roman soldiers probably numbering about 100 men. They were carefully selected and given a lot of responsibility. To be named to this post, Cornelius had to be a smart, multi-talented leader. He was probably not used to being wrong! In addition to his worldly career, he also had high spiritual ambitions. He and his family were devout, God-fearing people. “God-fearers” were known as Gentiles who worshipped the God of the Hebrews, but because they weren't Jewish, they weren't full converts. They remained uncircumcised, and did not follow the food laws or other special ordinances. Nonetheless, they were very serious about their faith. Cornelius “gave generously to those in need” and “prayed to God regularly.”

God had determined the early church was ready for the Gentiles to be brought in, so an angel of the Lord appeared to Cornelius and Peter separately, and after bringing them together for an explanation, he and his entire household were baptized in the name of Jesus by Peter. This was a monumental moment for the church in Acts, and I would suggest it was a monumental experience for Cornelius to show the humility required to submit to a new way of thinking about his faith. He could have fought Peter on a bunch of issues. He could have flatly denied that Jesus was the Son of God. His faith was authentic, so he easily could have taken offense at the idea that something was missing from their religious beliefs. He could also have insisted that he talk with someone a bit more impressive than this Peter, a lowly, unschooled fisherman who may have known less about Judaism than Cornelius! He could have done a lot of things wrong, but he chose the path of humility, and was saved.

I believe God wanted to provide a very powerful picture of Gentile inclusion into Christianity, so he chose a very powerful man and his family as the first Gentile converts. I also believe that in this story, he showed them and generations to come a very powerful picture of spiritual success – practicing the lost art of humility, openness to being wrong and changing on important things. Let's be inspired by his attitude and imitate his willingness to change his mind about things that really matter – let us strive to have deep humility.

