

CORNELIUS AND PACIFISM

By Allon Maxwell

As a pacifist, committed to the ideal that one cannot become a child of God, without also becoming a peacemaker, I am regularly asked about Cornelius, who became a Christian whilst still a Roman soldier ([Acts 10](#)).

Let us be clear about this. I do not say that a soldier cannot become a Christian.

However, I do believe that a soldier cannot give meaning to his profession of Christianity, without repenting. And I do believe that Christian baptism is only to be given on the basis of clear evidence of repentance which results from belief in the Gospel.

In the case of a soldier, real belief in the words of Jesus will certainly lead to a change of heart about making war.

Jesus taught clearly that it is the peacemakers who are the children of God.

A soldier who wants to follow Jesus must learn to love his enemies and do good to them. He must lay down his weapons.

I can draw no other meaning from the words of Jesus.

What then about Cornelius? Did he leave the army?

The awkward truth is that the Bible does not tell us one way or the other, what Cornelius did about his army service.

We cannot use his case, as it stands alone, either to justify remaining in the army, or leaving it, following conversion.

Did Cornelius know what Jesus preached about peace making, before he made his decision? Did he have enough information to know the potential cost of his decision?

It is surely not without significance that Peter refers in his sermon, to the GOOD NEWS OF PEACE. It seems certain that what is recorded in Acts is a condensed version of what Peter actually said.

If that is true, then we may be certain that Peter included enough in what he did say about the teaching of Jesus on peacemaking, to enable Cornelius to understand the full meaning of repentance for a soldier and to count the cost of his decision to follow Jesus.

What we do know for certain, about Cornelius, is that he responded to Peter's sermon about obedience to God ([Acts 10:34-35](#)).

He responded to the Good News of the PEACE preached by Jesus, ([Acts 10:36](#)), and the forgiveness that follows belief in the message, ([Acts 10:43](#)).

We know that Cornelius committed himself to Jesus in such a way that God was able to pour out the Holy Spirit exactly as He did for Peter and for those others who believed on the day of Pentecost.

We also know, from [John 14:15-17](#), that the Holy Spirit can only be received by those who love Jesus and obey Him.

This is confirmed by Peter, in [Acts 5:32](#).

It therefore seems inescapable that what God saw in Cornelius, was a heart's commitment to follow Jesus without reservation.

That would inevitably lead Cornelius to a re-evaluation of his future as a Roman soldier.

Could he, as a follower of Jesus, continue to fulfil the duties of a Roman soldier?

Could he, for example, believe the Gospel and still continue to follow orders which might require him to execute or imprison a fellow believer?

Could he pass on a command to the soldiers under him, which might lead to the killing of fellow Christians?

Can we, for a moment, imagine that Cornelius was in charge of the soldiers who years later beheaded Paul or crucified Peter?

Could it possibly be a Christian soldier who received and obeyed the order to put James to the sword?

Could he now defend himself or the empire and still fulfil his new calling to turn the other cheek to the aggressor?

Could he continue as part of an occupation army, dedicated to maintaining "peace" at sword's point, under threat of violence and death for those who refused?

The answers are surely obvious.

History records the fate of many other Roman soldiers who became Christians and laid down their arms in obedience to their new calling.

They paid the price in their own blood.

What then of Cornelius?

I confess that I do not know for certain, what became of him.

It is, of course, possible that he failed his test when the time came and that he fell away from Christianity, when he faced tribulation and persecution on account of his calling to be a peacemaker.

The parable of the sower does allow for that possibility. ([Matthew 13:20-21](#))

However, that does seem unlikely. It is surely far more credible to speculate that this first Gentile Christian to receive the Holy Spirit, went on to prove his repentance by obeying the Gospel of Peace, paying the inevitable price for being the first Roman soldier to become a Christian peacemaker.