

How the Salvation of Cornelius Refutes Calvinism by Will Duffy

The Bible's account of the salvation of Cornelius challenges a crucial foundation to Calvinist theology, which is their belief in monergism, the idea that man has nothing to do with his salvation. In this extreme view, the only acting party is God. Consider a lifeless puppet, lying in a heap, literally without the ability to do anything. The only thing that can give the puppet "life" is the puppeteer. He lifts the strings and the puppet "comes to life." Such is the salvation experience, Calvinists claim. Mankind is dead, just like the lifeless puppet. No man has the ability to seek God, to desire salvation, to repent, to have faith, nor to believe the gospel, until God has picked up the strings. In a convert's regeneration, all these things happen, it is said, virtually simultaneously.

Cornelius' conversion falsifies monergistic salvation. Though a significant character in the book of Acts, this army officer is often overlooked, even forgotten. We meet Cornelius in Acts 10. He lives in Caesarea, where he is stationed as a centurion of the Roman army:

There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian Regiment, a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always. Acts 10:1-2

Monergism would necessitate that Cornelius has already been regenerated at this point. For Calvinism would not describe an unsaved man the way Luke describes Cornelius here. Yet prior to his conversion, Cornelius was a devout man, and feared God. He also gave alms and prayed to God always. Though contradicted by numerous biblical examples, according to Calvinism, unregenerate men cannot do good in the sight of God. And in contrast to Ezekiel's warning to the man whose "righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered", regarding Cornelius, the Apostle Peter says, "Cornelius, your prayer has been heard, and your alms are remembered in the sight of God" (Acts 10:31). Yet the book of Acts shows clearly that Cornelius had yet to experience salvation.

Not only were Cornelius' prayers heard, but God even responded.

About the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius!" And when he observed him, he was afraid, and said, "What is it, lord?"

So he said to him, "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa, and send for Simon whose surname is Peter. He is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea." Acts 10:3-6

God responded to Cornelius by telling him to send men to Joppa for a man named Peter. Why does Cornelius need to send for Peter? Well, Cornelius is a Gentile God-fearer. God-fearing Gentiles were sympathetic to Jews and Judaism. They were not proselytes. Proselytes were Gentiles who had fully converted to Judaism, circumcision and all. Cornelius was an uncircumcised Gentile "who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews." (Acts 10:22) So what does the Lord want this man to do who already prays and fears God? Isn't that enough? God wants Cornelius to become saved, to obtain salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. In Acts 11, Peter recounts that he was sent to this household so that Cornelius would be saved.

And he [Cornelius] told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' Acts 11:13-14

When the angel appeared to Cornelius, he told him that Peter would tell him words by which he "will be saved." This is future tense and tells us that God sent Peter to Cornelius so he could become saved and experience salvation through Jesus Christ. Cornelius was a God-fearer whose prayers were heard and whose alms were "remembered in the sight of God", though he had not yet believed in Jesus Christ. God sent Peter to speak of Christ's death and resurrection so Cornelius could receive salvation. And that's what Peter did.

This presents a real problem for Calvinists who struggle to answer the simple question: "When was Cornelius saved?" Their theology forces them to argue that Cornelius is a saved, regenerate man when first mentioned in Acts 10. But Peter's subsequent visit and his words in Acts 11:13-14 say otherwise. The believer must either accept Acts 11:13-14 and reject Calvinism, or they will have to ignore or try to explain away the passage.

Cornelius sent three men to summon Peter in Joppa. When Peter asked the reason they had come, they respond in Acts 10 with a description of Cornelius.

And they said, "Cornelius the centurion, a just man, one who fears God and has a good reputation among all the nation of the Jews, was divinely instructed by a holy angel to summon you to his house, and to hear words from you." Acts 10:22

Again, Cornelius is portrayed as a just man who fears God and, important to Peter, has a good reputation among the Jews. But even still, Peter said that it was unlawful for him to go into a Gentile's house. So God used the vision of the unclean foods as instruction for Peter to go (Acts 10:28). Peter complies and a day later arrives at the house of Cornelius. Though not fully comprehending why he is there (Acts 10:29), he asks Cornelius, "for what reason have you sent for me?" Cornelius recounts being visited by an angel and was commanded to send for Peter

who "will speak to you." (Acts 10:32) Evidently the words Peter will speak were very important. So Cornelius is ready to listen.

The next ten verses record the sermon, if you will, that Peter preached to Cornelius. The entire message can be summed up in two words: Jesus Christ. Peter preached Jesus Christ to Cornelius.

...Jesus Christ—He is Lord of all— v. 36

...God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power...for God was with Him v. 38

...we are witnesses of all the things [Jesus] did...whom they killed by hanging on a tree v. 39

...Him God raised up on the third day v. 40

...He arose from the dead v. 41

...it is [Jesus] who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead v. 42

...whoever believes in Him [Jesus Christ] will receive remission of sins. v. 43

The entire gospel message is found in Peter's sermon. God wanted Peter to preach Jesus and the message of the cross to Cornelius. At this point Peter has uttered a mere six sentences and while he is still speaking the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius. Peter later says that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius just as he "began to speak" (Acts 11:15). Importantly, the first Gentile conversion reported in the New Testament is that of Cornelius.

So consider this event in light of the Calvinist doctrine of regeneration. Calvinists acknowledge that a man receives the Holy Spirit immediately upon regeneration. So was Cornelius regenerated when he received the Holy Spirit after believing in Jesus Christ? Or was he regenerated long before that, which enabled him to fear God, to be heard by the Lord, and to please God through the giving of alms? This conundrum for the Calvinist explains the title of this article, *How the Salvation of Cornelius Refutes Calvinism*.

When the other apostles and Christian brothers get wind that Peter went into the house of an uncircumcised man and ate with him, they were not pleased. When Peter went to Jerusalem, they immediately contended with him.

You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" Acts 11:3

Peter was forced to defend himself. "God sent me" was a great defense. Peter recounted everything from the beginning, starting with the vision of unclean foods, the men who sought

him in Joppa, meeting Cornelius in his house, and Cornelius receiving the Holy Spirit. Peter tells the saints in Jerusalem and the apostles that the angel told Cornelius that Peter would speak words by which Cornelius would be saved.

And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, "Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved." Acts 11:13-14

Peter concludes with the point that God has given to Cornelius the same gift as He gave to the apostles when they believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.

If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God? Acts 11:17

This is significant! Peter's plea to his fellow apostles is that Cornelius was given the same gift upon his belief that they were given following their belief. Recall though that Calvinism does not allow belief in Jesus Christ until the moment of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. As for those in Jerusalem, after they heard Peter out, they glorified God. And they reached a startling conclusion.

When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." Acts 11:18

Since Cornelius accepted Jesus Christ through Peter's preaching and was granted eternal life by God in response to his repentance, the apostles understood this to mean that God had also granted repentance to life for all Gentiles. That is, now even the Gentiles could repent to receive everlasting life! Please note though, that in the theology of Calvinism, repentance to life happens simultaneously with the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.

Thinking back to Acts 10, if a Calvinist claims that Cornelius was regenerated by God and received the Holy Spirit at the moment he believed in Jesus, that would refute their own theology because Cornelius had previously feared God, had his prayers heard, and did good in the sight of the Lord, all of which is impossible, Calvinists claim, for an unregenerate man.

Cornelius' impact on the church is great as he factors into the Jerusalem Council, one of the most important events in the history of the church. This Council forever altered history. It was there decided that Paul would go to the Gentiles and the other apostles would go to the Jews. Peter stood to share his experience at the house of Cornelius, knowing that it would help resolve the intense dispute that had arisen over what Gentiles needed to do to be saved. Peter reports that God sent him to the house of Cornelius so he could hear the gospel and believe.

And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe." Acts 15:7

Peter did not understand initially why God sent him to Cornelius. But afterward, he realized that it was so that Cornelius would hear the gospel and believe. Peter then reminds everyone that God gave the Holy Spirit to this Gentile, Cornelius, just as He did to them. And in doing so, God made no distinction between the Jews and Gentiles, and purified the heart of Cornelius by faith.

So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Acts 15:8-9

Peter concludes by stating the reality that Cornelius was saved in the same manner as the apostles.

But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus we shall be saved in the same manner as they. Acts 15:11

"They" is referring to Gentile converts, including Cornelius and his household. Peter rightly understands that the salvation experience he witnessed, that he took part in, was for all intents and purposes the same as his. Even though Peter is a Jew and Cornelius is a Gentile, they were both saved by faith in Jesus Christ.

Calvinists should take a harder look at the salvation of Cornelius. There they can see that the foundations of Calvinism are simply unbiblical. The monergist view of salvation is false. The idea that man is dead and therefore cannot call out to God, pray to God, fear God or even do good is unfounded. Cornelius in his own personal salvation experience, disproves this notion.