

— 10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION —



insight



Eleven short essays  
that explore ministry  
to international students

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INTERNATIONAL

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# Foreword

BY **ALAN TOWER** *National Director, Friends International*

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**W**e don't want international student ministry to be complicated, surely? Well, it's not. It can be as simple as sharing a cup of tea together and interchanging stories about life, culture, experience of studying in the UK, and facing the big issues of life with faith in Christ.

However, we don't want this ministry to international students to be shallow, simplistic or superficial. Many international students are working through the enormity of a challenge to their world views as they encounter a European culture that is confusing enough for those of us who have been here all our lives. On top of this, these students find themselves in a United Kingdom that is struggling to live up to its name and understand its own basic values, its role in the world or how to go about life (individually and together) on many levels.

Therefore, Insight fulfils an important role to help those engaged in international student ministry to be challenged and resourced to flourish within the ministry that God is calling them to. From sharing a cup of tea with an international student, to the challenge of understanding deep seated world view differences—the need for good preparation and stimulating articles is enormous. Experienced authors and engaged reflective practitioners bring us digestible (if chewy!) offerings to keep us sharp at the coal face.

This is why a decade of regular publications of Insight has been so fruitful and merits the republishing of a selection of key articles to refresh our memory and encourage us. Look through and see how you have moved forward in ministry practice, or reflect on areas that bring a new or recurring challenge to how we minister.

I want to thank and congratulate the Insight team of commissioners, editors and authors for their service to us in the international student ministry community through the past ten years of publications. I happen to know it is not a very large, highly paid, endlessly resourced team, and they have achieved wonders through God's inspiration and encouragement which has blessed many. Thank you!

**ALAN TOWER**

# Introduction

BY **LYNETTE TEAGLE** *Insight Editor-in-chief*



**W**hat a difference a decade makes. When the first issue of *Insight* went to press, self-driving cars were still science fiction, a tablet was medication, and Airbnb was still merely the dream of innovative minds rather than a byword for convenient holidays.

Some things, however, don't change. In this 10th Anniversary issue of *Insight*, we celebrate writing and thinking which represent some of the unchanging values which we hold in Friends International.

We celebrate a dependence on God, whose Holy Spirit enables us to negotiate the changes in the international student population with love and perseverance.

We celebrate a commitment to deeper thinking and reflection on the hows and whys of what we do, knowing that the task of making biblical truth understandable for a range of ages, nationalities and cultures requires skill as well as inspiration.

We celebrate the fact that the Gospel is multi-faceted, speaking into all religions and traditions, transforming lives in ways that we can only marvel at.

We celebrate that the call to share Christ cross-culturally is the mission of university students reaching their peers, as much as church volunteers giving practical support to international families, spouses and children.

We celebrate the truth that discipleship continues long after students return to their homeland, that the carefully planted seeds of Christian living sown in hearts here in the UK continue to grow and flourish over the years and miles, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

We celebrate our partnership with colleagues and friends from parallel ministries such as IFES, UCCF, South Asian Concern, Wycliffe Bible Translators and Mahabba, whose wisdom and practical experience enrich our understanding and bring depth to the work which we do.

It's been an exciting and encouraging ride, and our hope is that *Insight* will continue to stimulate your thinking and refresh your ministry well into the next decade.

In Christ,

**LYNETTE & THE INSIGHT TEAM**



SECTION ONE

# Laying the Foundations



## Crossing Frontiers: A study on Acts 10

BY JONATHAN LAMB

If you've made a plane journey recently, you'll know that the business of overseas travel isn't getting any easier. In some airports there are longer and more detailed security checks, interrogations, strip searches and form filling.

Some time ago, I made a trip where I had to fill out a customs form: *Are you carrying any fruit, plants, large amounts of foreign currency, electronic equipment, weapons, Kalashnikovs?* There was even a box which asked: *Are you carrying any radioactive materials? (Did I put the nuclear waste in my case or in my shoulder bag?)*

We might have expected that crossing frontiers these days should be getting easier. After all, one of the obvious features of our world is the growing inter-connectedness that is expressed through so many aspects of globalisation. If the old days were characterised by division—by the wall—then our world is characterised by integration—not the wall, but the Web!

Communication networks, international travel, the World Wide Web, pluralism and multi-culturalism—all these, it is suggested, mean that there are fewer frontiers, fewer barriers in an increasingly inter-connected world. As Tony Benn says in his *Letters to his grandchildren*, “the global village can be experienced on every London bus.” That's certainly true in many parts of Britain. As a graduate in Geography it pains me to say it, but missiologists these days tell us that ‘geography is over’.

But this is not the whole story. The paradox of our world is that alongside growing integration, there are increasing signs of fracture. The debate in the UK, especially since the London bombings in July 2005, has included questions as to why distinct ethnic and religious groups are failing to integrate into British society.



This fragmentation is expressed not simply in major religious or ethnic divisions. We find it between the various nations that make up the UK, within distinct regions, whether Cornwall, or Yorkshire, or the Home Counties, and within our cities and neighbourhoods—there are frontiers, boundaries, cultural prejudices everywhere.

One of the exciting features of Luke's account in the book of Acts, of course, is the way in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ, preached in the power of the Spirit, dismantled the various alienations that were present in the first century.

The Holy Spirit was breaking down barriers and creating a new society—a remarkable internationalism that didn't mean squashing the diversity, but that crossed the boundaries, removed the dividing walls, creating a new fellowship.

In Acts 10 we reach a very significant moment in Luke's account of the developing mission of the church. It's probably the most significant story in the whole book in terms of crossing frontiers, and the challenge of cross-cultural mission as the Gospel advances.

### THREE SCENES

#### Scene 1 (vv 1–8) takes place in Caesarea.

We are introduced to Cornelius, a centurion in the Italian regiment. It is clear from the opening verses of the chapter that the Spirit was already at work in him, and verse 2 gives us a remarkable description: *He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.*

Whilst we know that there is a terrible moral and spiritual decline in our own culture, this passage reminds us there are still those who are searching for the reality which only Christ can bring. And in our work with international students, we know that many might have abandoned traditional faiths, but have not given up on spirituality. There are still many opportunities to win a generation which often displays some kind of spiritual hunger.

But the other significant thing about Cornelius is this: he is a Gentile, and he is a Roman soldier. For Palestinian Jews this meant one thing: he was the enemy. Gentiles were outsiders; they were excluded from God's special covenant.

Add to that the fact that Cornelius carried responsibilities in the army of occupation, and here was a real target for hatred and loathing. But in the unfolding story of the spread of the Gospel, this was a pivotal moment. God was at work in Cornelius, and through a vision he was told to seek out Peter: *"Now send men*

*to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea"* (v5). This he duly did.

#### Scene 2 (vv 9–23) takes place in Joppa.

Joppa was a predominantly Jewish town, and Peter had been there encouraging young believers. Interestingly, Peter had already begun to see that there might be a wider mission for the church beyond the Jewish community.

He had mixed with all kinds of people and gradually his Judaistic straight-jacket was being loosened. He was staying with Simon the tanner. For the orthodox Jew, leather workers were definitely considered to be amongst the unclean, routinely handling animals that weren't kosher. So it's intriguing that it was here at Simon's house that Peter had a vision that would transform his perspective on God's purposes, and would shake his prejudice.

It was lunchtime, and Peter was on the roof praying; he'd prayed long enough to feel hungry! Maybe he could smell lunch cooking, or he could smell Simon's animal skins. And in the mysterious vision he saw something like a sheet descending from heaven, containing all kinds of animals—clean and unclean. And a voice said, *"Get up Peter. Kill and eat."* (v13)

Amongst them were some animals that clearly would disgust the orthodox Jew. So Peter objected: *"Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."* (v14)

The voice replied, *"Do not call anything impure what God has made clean."* Or as the New Living Translation reads, *"If God says something is acceptable, don't say it isn't."*

Luke tells us this happened three times, before the sheet disappeared back into heaven. Peterson paraphrases the events which follow: *As Peter, puzzled, sat there trying to figure out what this all meant, the men sent by Cornelius showed up.* It's a story full of supernatural co-ordination, because God is in control of the unfolding events of one of the most significant dramas in the story of Christian mission.

The Lord made it clear to Peter that he needed to go with the men who were looking for him, which brings us to scene 3.

#### Scene 3 (vv 23–48) takes place back in Caesarea.

By now Peter had come to understand that the vision back in Joppa was

not to do with clean and unclean animals, but to do with people. His opening words indicate as much: *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?"*

There could hardly have been a better platform for Peter's evangelistic sermon. Cornelius had gathered a large crowd of relatives and friends, and after explaining the sequence of events that had led him to call for Peter, Cornelius said, *"Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."* (v33).

It's not every day you have that opportunity. So Peter began to preach. And the rest of the chapter demonstrates that God was forming His new family, His new society—one that was not restricted by race, or nationality, or privilege, but which was to be an inclusive community, an international family.

Herein are three foundation truths and three visual aids that shape our ministry amongst international students.

## THREE FOUNDATION TRUTHS

### 1. God accepts all

Peter began to speak: *"I see very clearly that God doesn't show partiality. In every nation He accepts those who fear Him and do what is right."* (vv 34–35).

God has no favourites. It's been said that the Jews had twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism—they had become filled with racial pride and hatred. But when God spoke to Abraham thousands of years earlier, His choice of Israel had nothing to do with elitism.

God chose Abraham and his family in order, through them, to bless all the families of the earth. If only the Jews had had eyes to see it, this global missionary vision was repeated time and again by the prophets. God's purposes are for the rescue of all men and women, irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, or economic status.

So the first theological foundation for the new family is: God accepts all. Peter doesn't mean here that everyone who lives a good life is on their way to heaven, or everyone irrespective of their religion. He's going to make it clear that entry into God's family is through Jesus. But the invitation is to all.

## 2. Jesus is Lord of all

*"You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace, through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all."* (v36)

The way the sentence is constructed, this last phrase is emphatic. It's almost as if Peter had finally realised that Jesus was not only Lord of the Jews. He truly was Lord of all.

His vision of Jesus had been too small; his awareness of God's mission had been distorted by racial prejudice; his idea of God's family was too restricted. Jesus was not only the Messiah, but he was also the Saviour and Lord of all.

## 3. Salvation is available to all

*"All the prophets testify about Him that 'Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.'" (v43)*

Everyone, says Peter, Gentiles as well as Jews—everyone who believes in who Jesus is and what Jesus has done—everyone without exception, receives forgiveness of sins.

As one commentator writes, *'This "everyone" crashes through the barrier of race and nationality.'* It is good news for all. It is not that every religion leads us to God. That's ruled out by Peter's insistence in these verses that Jesus is the Saviour, the Lord and the Judge (verses 42 and 43). But the good news of salvation is for all, irrespective of their background.

These, then, are the three foundation truths that Peter preached and which are the basis of our work in Friends International, and of God's new society. *God accepts all—Jesus is Lord of all—Salvation is available to all.*

But as Peter was explaining this, some dramatic events overtook proceedings. And the rest of the chapter tells us of three visual aids which demonstrated the reality of what Peter had proclaimed.

## THREE VISUAL AIDS

### 1. The coming of the Spirit (v44)

Peter's preaching was interrupted by the outpouring of the Spirit on everyone in the house. The small group of Jewish Christians present as witnesses were astonished to see that the Holy Spirit has poured out 'even' on the Gentiles (v45).



Having carefully prepared a sermon, it's frustrating for any preacher to have that disrupted by the Holy Spirit! This is sometimes described as the Gentile Pentecost, and it was a visual confirmation in the house of Cornelius—the Gentile Roman soldier—that the Gospel was for these Gentiles too. God had accepted them. It's one of the reasons why the foundation for our work amongst internationals must be prayer—prayer for this same ministry of the Word and Spirit, which transforms lives and even communities.

## 2. Baptism (v47)

Peter insisted that the Gentile believers were baptised. He wanted to demonstrate that, since they had received the Spirit, they should not be regarded as outsiders. They were members of the same family, and baptism was the mark of family membership.

And the passage demonstrates that baptism was enough: there were no other Jewish cultural demands made on them. That was to be an issue in subsequent discussion, but it reminds us of an important issue: that true conversion amongst our international friends does not mean a loss of their own cultural identity. They retain this whilst becoming members of the new society which Jesus introduces.

## 3. Hospitality

There are quite a few references to fellowship or hospitality in the text. As a further practical demonstration of the fact that the Gospel crosses boundaries, v48 tells us that Peter was invited to stay with them for a few days. As we've seen, Jews would certainly not wish to darken the door of Gentiles in this way, but now the Gospel made the difference.

They were fellow members of God's family. They ate and drank together. Peter taught them more of their new-found faith. And the walls of prejudice and suspicion fell. They were one community formed by the Spirit through faith in Jesus.

This of course is an important plank in our work with international students. Whether for Christian or non-Christian, this ministry is a vital one for crossing frontiers and building bridges, an environment for teaching, encouraging, discipling, for welcoming and receiving.

Three foundation truths; three visual aids; which lead us to...

## THREE IMPLICATIONS

### 1. How do we see people?

The story of Acts is not only the story of the growth of the church. It is especially about how faith in Christ breaks through the religious, racial and national boundaries of that day. It's all about crossing frontiers.

And one of the clear lessons of this chapter is that we must learn to see the world as God sees it, to realise that each person is in need of the one Saviour, Jesus Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 5:16 Paul explains that having met Christ he now looks at other people differently. *"So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."* He doesn't judge them by the standards of this world, whether by external image or by nationality or culture. To recognise that Christ died for all (v14) will mean that we look at other people with a new perspective.

Do you ever sit at an airport or train station with the crowds passing by, or walk through the city centre late at night, with all kinds of people on the streets? How do we see people? How do we see a Muslim, an Arab, or a black youth? An upper-middle class wealthy conservative, or a beggar in the city centre?

We should ask ourselves if we see each person as made in God's image, as someone for whom Christ died. The New Testament shows that we should not judge people by the world's yardstick, or the prejudices of our own culture. Instead, we see each person as someone whom God loves and longs to bring into His family.

It took God's intervention in remarkable ways to shake Peter, to challenge his disobedience. And I know it is the Spirit's work to change me. British culture conditions me to think and behave in a certain way. Worse, as David Smith has pointed out in commenting on this passage, we sometimes fail to distinguish biblical absolutes from culturally conditioned beliefs and practices<sup>1</sup>, and this is where we need special openness in our work with internationals.

On my travels I am often challenged to think carefully about what is essential to Christian life and practice, and what I have borrowed from my culture. Similarly, meeting Cornelius opened Peter's eyes. *"I now realise ..."* he said. And this is often our experience if we approach our work with internationals with the same

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1 Smith, David. *Mission after Christendom*, Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2003.

humility: that is, we need to adopt the position of the learner, not always the teacher.

## 2. How do we see the church?

It's clear from this passage that in God's family there is no room for discrimination or prejudice. The church should be the one place where the divisions which mark our society are rendered completely irrelevant.

There is no room for churches that are deliberately exclusive to a particular class or generation, or which fail to welcome people from different ethnic backgrounds. There is no room for the prejudices of our upbringing, or for the racial, sexual and economic discrimination of our culture.

If we truly demonstrate that kind of racial community, as the new society which dismantles barriers to fellowship, then we will be a powerful witness in a fractured world.

There is the need, for example, to integrate internationals in our churches. This is something Acts 10 urges us to consider. As internationals come to faith and become involved in their local church, this not only provides community, and equips them for service when they return home, but it also transforms our own Christian fellowships and more naturally reflects the radical new community which is the true church.

## 3. How do we see our mission?

The third implication of this passage also shouts at us. We know that Jesus is the Saviour of the world—that the Gospel is for all.

This will be a familiar message to us. Our churches preach it. But the issue in Acts 10 is one which we need to pray about in our work with international students today. As Chris Wright observes, *"It took angels and visions to move Peter beyond theological conviction to practical action."*<sup>2</sup>

That's what we must pray for—God's intervention in British evangelical churches, transforming our worldview, opening our hearts to the truth, engaging our congregations in the work of ministry amongst internationals everywhere.

What about the 140 different nations represented by the hundreds of

thousands of internationals here in the UK? What about the stigmatised immigrant communities? What about the asylum seekers and refugees in Europe? Or the billions around the world who have never heard of what Peter describes in v36 as the *'good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all'*?

Might we be slow in the task of mission because of similar prejudice to Peter? What we have seen is this: God accepts all; Jesus is Lord of all; salvation is available to all. So that shapes our mission; that universal perspective pushes us to cross frontiers of all kinds and to engage in the task of sharing the good news amongst our international friends, as well as globally through our wider task of mission.

We thank God for the work and witness through Friends International. It would be a strategic development if, by God's grace, we became a Christian community that modelled Acts 10—for believers like us who need Peter's experience, or our international friends who, we pray, will have the Cornelius experience.

*This article is taken from the message given by Jonathan Lamb at the Friends International Oxford 25th Anniversary Celebrations on November 13th 2010.*

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2 Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2006, p515.

END OF PREVIEW

