

CORNELIUS AND REBAPTISM

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One of the theological convictions of that branch of the American Restoration Movement known as the Church of Christ is that salvation is by grace, through faith, in or at the time of baptism. In other words, baptism is understood to be the moment of salvation, the time at which the penitent believer receives through faith the blessings associated with identification with Christ.¹ It is the divinely prescribed way of calling out in faith for God's mercy in Christ, a kind of acted out "sinner's prayer."

In contrast to this consensus on the necessity of baptism, there is a longstanding disagreement within the Church of Christ over whether it is essential for an immersion in water to qualify as baptism that the one being immersed understand that his or her sins were not forgiven prior to the immersion.² Some are convinced a baptizand's mistaken belief that his or her sins were forgiven prior to the immersion disqualifies the immersion as a baptism and thus leaves the person alienated from Christ. The person remains a non-Christian until being immersed again ("rebaptized") with a proper understanding of baptism's connection to salvation.³ Others are convinced that a submission to immersion that is motivated by one's faith in Christ qualifies as baptism despite the baptizand's error about the timing of forgiveness. The person becomes a Christian and receives the promised gift of forgiveness (and all other blessings of union with Christ) even though the person mistakenly believed he or she had received that gift prior to baptism.⁴

The purpose of this note is to suggest that Acts 10:34-48 is more significant to this debate than often is realized. Its relevance becomes apparent when the narrative is understood as explained below.

Acts 10:1-22 reports that, while Peter was staying in Joppa, the Roman centurion Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier to invite him to come to his house in Caesarea. Peter was told in advance by the Spirit to accompany the men (Acts 10:19-20; 11:12), and he and six Jewish Christians from Joppa did so the following day (Acts 10:23b, 45; 11:12). Cornelius had invited Peter, pursuant to an angel's instruction, with the expectation that Peter would present a message from the Lord by which Cornelius and his household would be saved (Acts 10:22, 33; 11:14). Peter obliged, as recorded in Acts

¹ See, e.g., Jack Cottrell, *Faith's Fundamentals* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard Publishing, 1995), 71-82; John D. Castelein, "Christian Churches/Churches of Christ View" in *Understanding Four Views of Baptism* (eds. Paul E. Engle and John H. Armstrong; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 130-135. Both of these scholars identify with the Christian Church, but they articulate well the common view of the Church of Christ.

² See Roderick Chestnut, "John Thomas and the Rebaptism Controversy (1835-1838)" and Jerry Gross, "The Rebaptism Controversy Among Churches of Christ" in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins* (ed. David W. Fletcher; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 203-239, 297-332.

³ E.g., Owen D. Olbricht, *Baptism New Birth or Empty Ritual?* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Co., 1994), 149-166.

⁴ E.g., Jimmy Allen, *Re-Baptism? What One Must Know to Be Born Again* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1991), 4-7, 39-48.

10:34-43 (cf. Acts 15:7). He preached to Cornelius and the other Gentiles gathered at the house that Jesus was the Spirit-anointed, miracle-working, devil-opposing Lord of all who was crucified, resurrected, and appointed as the judge of the living and the dead. Peter declared in v. 43 that it had been prophesied of Jesus that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name.

Verse 44 states that, while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all those hearing the message. This is a reference to Cornelius and the other Gentiles, those who were hearing the message for the first time, as identified in Acts 10:24, 33.⁵ This is indicated by the fact the Jewish Christians present were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, who alone were reported to be speaking in tongues and extolling God (Acts 10:45-46). When Peter recounted the event to the church in Jerusalem, he specified twice that the Holy Spirit fell on *them*, meaning on the gathered Gentiles in distinction from Peter and his companions (Acts 11:15, 17). The Spirit fell on the Gentiles as he had previously fallen on the Jewish believers at Pentecost (Acts 11:15). Peter made the same distinction when speaking of the event at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:8). Indeed, the focus of the entire Cornelius narrative is on Gentile acceptability to receive the gospel. It is about how God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for his name (Acts 15:14).

Though Peter was just getting warmed up (Acts 11:15),⁶ his words about Jesus and his announcement that forgiveness was available through faith in him produced faith in the gathered Gentiles. The gift of the Spirit given to the Gentiles was the same gift the Jews had received *when they believed* in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 11:17). As Peter explained at the Jerusalem Council, God chose him to be the one through whom the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe (Acts 15:7). Knowing the Gentiles' hearts, God gave them the Holy Spirit, *having cleansed* (καθαρίσας) their hearts by faith (Acts 15:8-9).⁷ In other words, the Spirit was given after God cleansed the

⁵ "The Spirit falls on all 'the hearers', i.e. Cornelius, his relatives and his friends – not Peter and the Joppa Christians, who are rather the witnesses to attest this event (*pace* Wendt, 185)." Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (trans. Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn, rev. by R. McL. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 353. These Gentiles were assumed to be generally familiar with Christ's life and ministry (10:37), but they had not heard the saving message that Cornelius had been instructed to invite Peter to deliver (10:22, 33; 11:14). At the very least, this means they had not had Christ's nature and status or the theological significance of his work proclaimed to them.

⁶ Dunn asks rhetorically whether the phrase "as I began to speak" in 11:15 is "any more than a vigorous way of speaking intended to highlight the suddenness and unexpectedness of the Spirit's coming . . . and to be taken no more literally than our 'I had hardly started speaking when . . .'" James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 80. See also, I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 197; and F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 235.

⁷ The aorist participle is normally antecedent to the action of the main verb. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 555, 614; David Alan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 124-125. This is reflected in the ESV and is implicit in the causal sense given to the participle in the NIV, NJB, and TNIV. Barrett observes, "[T]he cleansing of the heart probably means for [Luke] the forgiveness of sins (cf. 13.38f.) and inward renewal with a view to future obedience." C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 2:717. In Heb. 10:22 the heart of the Christian is said to have been "sprinkled from an

Gentiles' hearts on the basis of their faith response to Peter's message.⁸ In keeping with the declaration of 10:43, they had believed in Jesus and received forgiveness.⁹ The Gentiles' acceptability to receive the gospel had, through their faith in that message, become their acceptance by God (Acts 11:18). To apply Paul's words to the situation, it was because they were sons that God gave them the Spirit (Gal. 4:6).

Some resist this understanding because they believe the norm of baptism preceding salvation is absolute. If God were to make an exception to that order he would, in their view, contradict his revelation about the nature and purpose of baptism. So whatever the text means it cannot mean that these Gentiles were saved prior to baptism. That drives the conclusion that the gift of the Spirit received by these Gentiles was distinct from the gift of the Spirit that accompanies and indicates salvation, the latter often being labeled the gift of the *indwelling* Spirit.

This alleged distinction faces the difficulty noted above that the gift of the Spirit was given to the Gentiles after their hearts had been cleansed by faith, meaning after their sins had been forgiven. That is precisely when one would expect the gift of the Spirit that accompanies salvation, the gift that is common to Christians, to be given, as that gift is linked with forgiveness (Acts 2:38).¹⁰ Moreover, the phrase "the gift of the Holy Spirit" (ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) occurs in the New Testament only in Acts 10:45 and Acts 2:38 (cf. Acts 11:17). Both times it is used by Peter, and in 2:38 it clearly refers to a gift bestowed in conjunction with salvation.¹¹ Notice also that Peter three times identifies

evil conscience," meaning cleansed from guilt by the sprinkling of Christ's blood, a clear reference to the removal of sin. See, e.g., William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 286.

⁸ "Since elsewhere the gift of the Spirit comes to people who repent and believe (cf. 11:17f.), the implication is twofold: first, that the Gentiles present responded to the message with faith; and, secondly, that God accepted them and sealed their faith with the gift of the Spirit. Once Gentiles had been given the opportunity to hear the message, they responded, and God received them." Marshall, *Acts*, 193-194. Likewise Dunn states, "Here the primacy of the Spirit as a mark of God's acceptance is plain beyond dispute. The implication is clearly that Cornelius had believed (10.43; so explicitly in 11.17 and 15.7, 9)." James D. G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 399. See also, Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (eds. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 10:883; and Bruce, *Acts*, 230.

⁹ "The tie [of v. 43] with v. 44 should not be missed: as Peter speaks the Holy Spirit comes on all who 'hear' (= believe) his message. The faith that receives forgiveness receives the Holy Spirit – among other things, the Spirit as the inseparable attesting seal of that forgiveness." Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Justification in Luke-Acts" in *Right With God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 121. "It was the Spirit who had confirmed for Cornelius and his household the forgiveness of sins through Christ's name (Acts 10:43)." Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 544. "Readers must supply the implications of what it means that Gentiles have received the Spirit. Again, remembrance of the first Pentecost story helps, for there Peter declared that the coming of the Spirit accompanied 'the forgiveness of sin' (2:38). God has cleansed these Gentiles and forgiven them." J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2007), 175.

¹⁰ This point is unaffected if καθαρίσας in Acts 15:9 is understood in a simultaneous sense, as the association with cleansing remains.

¹¹ "It is significant that the very same writer (Luke) in the very same book (Acts) has the very same speaker (Peter) use the very same phrase ('the gift of the Holy Spirit') on two separate occasions. It would seem that Luke intends his readers to make a connection here." David H. Warren, "Can Anyone Withhold the

the Gentile experience at Cornelius's house with that of the Jewish disciples on whom the Spirit fell at Pentecost (Acts 10:47; 11:15-17; 15:7-9). There is no suggestion that those Spirit-baptized Jewish disciples were subsequently baptized in water,¹² so one is to understand from the narrative that what they received included the gift of the Spirit common to Christians, it being essential to Christian identity, life, and fellowship. The same is to be understood of the analogous coming of the Spirit at Cornelius's house, the "Gentile Pentecost." And finally, Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12 that speaking in tongues is a manifestation of the one Spirit who is shared by all Christians not something given to the unsaved.

Given these facts and the strong coupling of salvation and reception of the Spirit throughout the New Testament,¹³ one would need unambiguous evidence that the gift of the Spirit received by the Gentiles at Cornelius's house (10:47) was divorced from salvation. I am aware of no such evidence.

This is not to deny, of course, that the receipt of the Spirit at Pentecost and Cornelius's house (or at Samaria and Ephesus) included atypical dimensions. It is to say that the physical manifestations that accompanied the gift of the Spirit on those occasions were in addition to rather than instead of the normal association of the Spirit with salvation. Each of those occasions involved the Spirit's initial coming on multiple individuals who functioned as representatives of specifically identified groups (Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, and disciples of John). The Spirit unmistakably marked his coming on those representatives to leave no doubt that God had indeed made the life of the new age available to the members of those groups. So the fact the Spirit flagged his presence in those initial converts should not be construed to mean he was present in some way unrelated to their salvation. On the contrary, the physical manifestations were to ensure that his presence could not be doubted precisely because that presence was a mark of their new life in Christ. That was the divine message.

The granting of salvation prior to baptism in the case of the Gentiles at Cornelius's house is consistent with a strong baptismal theology if one recognizes that God has nowhere bound himself never to alter the timing of salvation in relation to baptism. The norm is clearly set forth in Peter's programmatic statement in Acts 2:38 and confirmed throughout Scripture¹⁴ and church history,¹⁵ but it is an overreading to

Water?" in *Early Christian Voices* (eds. David H. Warren, Ann Graham Brock, and David W. Pao; Boston: Brill, 2003), 133.

¹² As disciples they presumably had submitted to the pre-Spirit baptism administered in Christ's name (Jn. 3:22; 4:1-2; 7:39), so unlike the Gentiles at Cornelius's house, the coming of the Spirit on them at Pentecost was not understood to require their immersion. They were more like the Samaritans on whom the gift of the Spirit was delayed after their baptism, albeit for a different divine purpose.

¹³ E.g., Jn. 7:39; Acts 5:32; Rom. 8:9-10, 15; 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11, 17; 12:13; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 3:2, 14; 4:29; 5:25; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Thess. 2:13; Tit. 3:4-6; Heb. 6:4; 1 Jn. 3:24; 4:13.

¹⁴ "[I]n the Acts and Epistles baptism is the supreme moment of the impartation of the Spirit and of the work of the Spirit in the believer." G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 275. "As we have observed, it was the careful plan of the Book of Acts to teach the divine will for the most intimate connection of baptism with the gift of the Spirit." Frederick Dale Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 256. Even in the exceptional case of the Samaritans in Acts 8:4-17, Luke confirms (v. 16) that the gift of the Spirit normally accompanies baptism

conclude that God left himself no room to vary the order of things in fulfillment of his purposes in salvation history. Acts 10 is a case of his doing just that.

In demonstrating he had saved the Gentiles who accepted Peter's message by unmistakably giving them the gift of the Spirit, God showed that under the new covenant there was no place for a Jewish nationalism that would withhold baptism from believing Gentiles until they submitted to circumcision. To break through Jewish resistance to administering baptism to the uncircumcised, God demonstrably saved the Gentiles prior to baptism.¹⁶ In doing so, he said loud and clear that it was his will for Gentiles to be saved *as Gentiles*. And since baptism is the rite in which salvation normally is granted, his will that Gentiles be saved as Gentiles was rightly understood to mean that baptism must not be withheld from believing Gentiles. As Peter concluded in Acts 10:47-48, and repeated in Acts 11:17, to do so would be to oppose God.

The fact the baptism in their specific case would not be the time of their salvation, that gift having already been given, is beside the point. God was communicating by his action that the baptism of believing Gentiles was not to be conditioned on their being circumcised. That point was able to be made by saving them prior to baptism precisely because of the understood normal coupling of baptism and salvation.

To bring the discussion to the "rebaptism" issue, though the baptism of these Gentiles was preceded by the gift of the Spirit, which signified their salvation, it nevertheless is described by Peter simply as baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48), which is how Peter elsewhere refers to the baptism shared by all Christians (Acts 2:38).¹⁷ Certainly this is intended to convey that these Gentiles received the one baptism of which Paul speaks in Eph. 4:5 and that Luke mentions throughout Acts. To conclude otherwise would be contrary to the thrust of the entire narrative. That is crucial because it means that Christian baptism is not defined by its results or consequences, by the

by stating that the Spirit had "not yet" come upon the Samaritans (contrary to the normal expectation) and that they had "only" been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus (contrary to the normal happening). Paul's question in Acts 19:3 assumes the same connection.

¹⁵ Everett Ferguson states in the conclusion of his monumental study *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 854: "Although in developing the doctrine of baptism different authors had their particular favorite descriptions, there is a remarkable agreement on the benefits received in baptism. And these are present already in the New Testament texts. Two fundamental blessings are often repeated: the person baptized received forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38)."

¹⁶ "God had to give so clear an indication of his will otherwise even Peter might have hesitated to take such a step in the case of Gentiles without first requiring them to be circumcised." James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Narrative Commentaries (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 146. "With subtlety Luke argues in his narrative that the Jewish church had rationalized the divine plan for the inclusion of Gentiles: Yes, God would accept the Gentiles into his church, but first they must become Jews. Before Gentiles can be baptized in water, they must undergo a circumcision of the flesh. But here in the story of Cornelius, God showed the Jewish Christians that their assumption was clearly wrong." Warren, *Voices*, 137.

¹⁷ The difference in prepositions is not significant. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 182; G. R. Beasley-Murray, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament" in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:1210-1211.

blessings that accompany it. Even where those blessings have already been granted, the immersion to which the believer submits qualifies as baptism.

What does this post-salvation immersion have in common with the normal pre-salvation immersion so that both qualify as Christian baptism? What is the constant, the thing that unites them so that both constitute baptism despite their different results? I submit it is that both are expressions of faith in Jesus Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. It was because these Gentiles had come to trust in Jesus as the one described in the gospel preached by Peter (Acts 15:7-9) that they submitted to Jesus' will, as revealed through Peter, that they be immersed. That is the same faith that motivates the immersion of believers who have not yet been forgiven and received the Spirit. Both are expressions of faith in Christ as the basis of God's salvation blessings regardless of when those blessings were received in relation to the immersion.

If the essence or criterion of baptism, the thing that makes it baptism rather than a mere immersion in water, is indeed whether one's submission to it is motivated by faith in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel, it is a mistake to define it in a way that excludes immersions motivated by such faith. We do so when we conclude that a baptizand's mistaken belief that he or she was already saved disqualifies the person's immersion as a baptism. The Gentiles at Cornelius's house demonstrate that one can be motivated to submit to an immersion by one's faith in Christ, thus making it a baptism, even when blessings normally attendant to baptism have already been received. If faith in Christ can motivate submission to an immersion when salvation has already been given, it can do so when one mistakenly believes that salvation has already been given.¹⁸

¹⁸ This does not mean, of course, that every immersion of a believer is a baptism. One obviously can be motivated to submit to an immersion for reasons other than one's faith in Christ as he is revealed in the gospel. Nor does it mean that we should cease to teach the truth about baptism. Not only must we do so because we are called to proclaim the truth of God but also because denying the truth of baptism's significance in conversion can cause people to treat it with less urgency than it deserves.