

Baptism in the Spirit

Chapter 8

“The Holy Spirit and Cornelius Acts 10-11”

1. The relationship between Acts 2 and Acts 10

Cornelius was a Gentile, albeit a “*god fearing*” Gentile, but he was not a Christian. Under the ministry of Peter two events occurred to Cornelius and his friends. In the first place they are born again and secondly they are baptised with the Spirit. Chapter 10 furnishes us with the details of the events whereas chapter 11 gives meaning to those events.

Although we are right to speak of the conversion of Cornelius we must remember that the text does not actually detail this happening, Acts 10:44 “*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message*”. The emphasis seems to be upon the descent of the Spirit. However, as Peter later baptises this group it is safe to believe that Peter would never have baptised them without some assurance of their salvation, Acts 10:48 “*So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ*”. Following this incident it became known that the Gentiles were now being converted, Acts 11:1 “*The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God*”.

The term “*receive*” that Luke uses in the phrase, “*received the word of God*” (Greek δεχομαι meaning “*receive, welcome*”) is a significant word used in relation to salvation. The same word occurs in Acts 8:14 “*Samaria had accepted the word of God*” (Greek δεχομαι receive), which indicated their salvation, or in John 1:13 “*Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name*”. The emphasis from the beginning was on “*being saved*”, as Luke informs us, Acts 11:14 “*He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved*”. Peter’s preaching brought this evangelistic emphasis, Acts 10:43 “*All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*” Finally, the elder’s comment at the close of their discussion with Peter showed that they believe salvation had come to the Gentiles, Acts 11:18 “*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life’*”.

The second part of Cornelius’ experience (along with his friends) was their baptism in the Spirit, Acts 10:44-48, “*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, ‘Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have’*”.

Let us examine this passage. In the first place we note that the Spirit is said to fall upon all the people, Acts 10: 44 “*Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message*”. The term that Luke uses is “*fall*” (Greek ἐπέπεσεν from πλπτω “*to fall upon*”) which we noted in the previous study chapter 7. Now, as this same term is used in Acts 8:16 “*the Holy Spirit*

had not yet come (οὐδέπω γὰρ ἦν εἴ οὐδενὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιπεπτωκός, lit “fallen”) upon any of them”, this action of the Spirit must mean more than just conversion. The Samaritans were already converted when it is stated that the Spirit “fell” (NIV “came upon”) them. Thus, I believe, that we are able to say that the same experience was felt by Cornelius and his friends when Peter says, “the Holy Spirit came (Greek “fell”) on all that heard the message”. For the Samaritans, we concluded it meant “Spirit baptism” as after this event it could no longer be said that “they had simply been baptised into the name of the Lord Jesus”. It must be concluded that it could now be said of the Samaritans that they had been baptised in the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, notice how Peter in describes this “coming” of the Spirit” in Acts 10:45 does so as the “gift of the Holy Spirit” that had now been poured out on the Gentiles. The term “gift” (Greek δωρεα τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) is significant as it is the same term used in Acts 2:17 “you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”. It seems logical in this passage to assume that Peter’s reference to the “gift of the Holy Spirit” means exactly what he and his friends received at Pentecost. Thus, when returning to Acts 10 it would be correct to say that in the experience of Cornelius and his group the same “gift” of the Spirit had been received. Indeed, Peter, when explaining this event to the elders and in his desire to justify his baptising of Gentiles, he uses this kind of language, Acts 11:17 “God gave them the same gift as he gave us”. There again, the term “gift” (δωρεα) is used. Surely, Peter means that Pentecost was repeated for this group of Gentiles. On this basis Peter felt justified in baptising them.

Thirdly, let us take notice of the term “poured”, in Acts 10:45 “the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles”. The term “poured” (Greek ἐκκεχυσται) again is significant to our study. It is the same word that was used in Acts 2:17 where Peter quotes from the prophecy in Joel “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people”. I suggest that this once more associates the Cornelius experience directly with Pentecost and that Peter is saying therefore that Pentecost has been repeated.

Furthermore, let us consider the value and use of tongues in this account. Peter does not lay any stress upon the interpretation of the tongues or what contribution they may have made to the worship experience. His only interest is in the fact that the very existence of the tongues proves that Cornelius and his friends had received the same gift as they had at Pentecost, Acts 10:46 “For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God”, and thus he is at liberty to baptise them.

In this instance, attention should be drawn to the use of the opening conjunction, “For”. Peter is saying in effect, “We know that they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit because it was evident through them speaking in tongues”. For Peter, the speaking in tongues was the evidence that they had received this gift of the Spirit.

Fifthly, let us consider the phrase “praising God”, Acts 10:46. The Greek has μεγαλυνόντων τον θεον. The significance of this word is that it is the same term that is used in Acts 2:11 “we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”. The Greek μεγαλυνω in Acts 10:46 means “enlarge, amplify,, magnify and exalt”. In Acts 2:11 the Greek is τα μεγαλεια του θεου ιε, “the great, magnificent, wonderful things of God”. In both situations the use of tongues was to praise and magnify the glory of God. In both situations such expressions present as the proof and indication of the baptism of

the Spirit. Clearly, Peter is indicating that Cornelius has received exactly the same experience as those seated in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost.

Finally, in the words of Peter, Acts 10:47 "*Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have*", I suggest we have evidence for suggesting that Cornelius experienced a repeat of Pentecost, "*they received the Holy Spirit just as we have*" (Greek ὡς καὶ ἡμεῖς "*as also us*"). Similarly, when Peter stood before the elders in Jerusalem he described the same event using it as justification for baptising these Gentiles, Acts 11:17 "*So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us....*".

As we seek to explore this interesting parallel between Acts 2 and Acts 10, we find Peter's interpretation in Acts 11 to be most illuminating. I am not convinced at all that when Peter refers to his own experience and that of the other apostles "*...as He gave to us...*" he is referring to John 20:22, the episode when Jesus breathed upon them and said "*receive the Holy Spirit*". Peter uses the phrase "*..... at the beginning*". The "*beginning*" must refer to the beginning of the Church life as witnessed by those on the Day of Pentecost.

The phrase in Acts 11:17 "*..... who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ*", is rendered in the and RSV as "*when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ*", and in the AV as "*...who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*". The use of the aorist participle (πισευσασι) can be variously rendered and does not give any direct indication as to whether the action took place before, simultaneous or even after the action of the main verb. It cannot be argued from the Greek that the baptism of the Spirit takes place at the same time as believing. That is, that Baptism of the Spirit is simultaneous with conversion, or is regeneration. The Greek will not allow for this particular argument. The most appropriate way to translate the aorist participle is, "*having believed*", where the emphasis is not on the timing of the "*believing*" but on the very fact that they did believe.

2. The Purpose of the Incident

It is usual to present the account from Acts 10 and 11 in parallel with Acts 8, and to teach that both episodes merely show that the door of salvation had now been opened to the non-Jews, i.e., Samaritans and Gentiles. The giving of the Spirit in such an unusual manner was divine demonstration of their acceptance.

I have sought to show from my exposition of Acts 8 that this is not the meaning of that passage. Can this interpretation, however, be placed on the Conelius incident given the remark that was made in Acts 11:18 "*When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, `Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life`".* Certainly this event exonerated Peter from the charge that he had wrongly by baptising the Gentiles. In support of this argument, reference is made to Acts 15 where the apostles confirm God's acceptance of the Gentiles by saying, Acts 15:8 "*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...*".

However, in the Acts 10 and Acts 11 accounts I suggest that the apostle, his friends and elders were glorifying God for two, not one divine act. They are praising God for the descent of the Spirit, Acts 10:45 *“And those of the circumcision who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also”*. Additionally, they are praising God for the conversion of the Gentiles, Acts 11:18 *“When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’”*.

Undoubtedly both are united in the one event, but I suggest that there are two issues here. The confusion arises due to conversion being simultaneous with the Baptism of the Spirit. I further suggest that Acts 15:8-9 addresses both of these issues, the Gentiles Baptism in the Spirit and their conversion, *“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith”* (compare the two sets of words underlined). Those who reject this view (e.g., James Dunn) have omitted to take into account the conjunction *“and”* at the beginning of verse 9. Unfortunately the NIV also omits it but the RSV includes the conjunction and thus the verse reads, *“...Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith”*.

Conclusion

The purpose of this account, therefore, is two fold. In the first place it relays to the Church the significance of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church. This was a momentous truth and it took some time for them to understand what it meant, especially Peter who had to be severely reprimanded by Paul for his duplicity over this matter (see Galatians 2:11).

Clearly, in order to present to the Jewish Church (initially Church was largely Jewish) that God had accepted both the Samaritans and the Gentiles, some significant evidence was required. Yet, included in the fact that the Gentiles and the Samaritans had been justified by faith, was the fact that they were also recipients of the Holy Spirit. It was necessary for God to demonstrate that, when Peter stated that the *“...promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him”*, (Acts 2:39), it meant the Gentiles and Samaritans as well. In the phrase, *“everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Him”* is a universal statement. Both the Gospel and the Baptism of the Spirit are meant to be universal. No longer do the Jews hold the supreme position. As Joel stated in the Old Testament, *“God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh”* (Acts 2:19).

The main issue before us within these studies is whether Pentecost is repeatable. I suggest that this is confirmed in these two events, Acts 8 and Acts 10.

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