

Baptism and Unity in the Body of Christ
Acts 10:47

This morning six persons will be baptized, two in each service. As we prepare for these baptisms, I'd like for us to consider the account of a baptism in the book of Acts as well as two other Scriptures.

The book of Acts describes how the message about Jesus spread from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. The original followers of Jesus were Jews in and around Jerusalem who followed the teachings of the Law (i.e., the Old Testament). Subsequent followers of Jesus were Gentiles who lived across the known world and who didn't follow the teachings of the Law. The book of Acts explains how the thinking of the original Jewish followers of Jesus needed to change so that Gentile converts to Christianity were welcomed into the body of Christ and not made to feel like second class citizens of the kingdom of God.

This same issue is very relevant in the church in our day. It is very common for those who are part of the dominant culture in the church to make others feel second class. Sometimes this happens innocently, and other times it happens intentionally. Those who comprise the majority when it comes to race, economic status, and education need to be careful not to make others feel unwelcome and unwanted. We need to avoid giving off the vibe of superiority. So what we're going to notice in Acts is very relevant in our day and in this church.

An incident recorded in Acts 10 was instrumental in changing the minds of Jewish Christians (who were dominant in the early church). In Acts 10 we read about Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army who lived in Caesarea. Cornelius was a Gentile who feared God and who was very generous toward the Jewish people.

One afternoon an angel of God appeared to him in a vision and told him to send for a man named Peter who was in the town of Joppa. Cornelius sent three men to bring Peter back to Caesarea. Meanwhile, Peter had just had a vision which convinced him that the dietary regulations of the Law had become obsolete; there were no longer unclean animals. Because of this dream, Peter agreed to go with the three men to Cornelius' house (even though it was unlawful for a Jew to visit and eat with Gentiles).

When Peter heard that Cornelius had been visited by an angel of God, he then fully understood that "God is not one to show partiality" - that anyone from any nation "who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (10:35). Peter proceeded to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household. He told them about Jesus' teachings and miracles, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. Peter concluded by telling them that "everyone who believes in [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins" (10:43).

Beginning in verse 44 we read this:

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. 45 All the circumcised believers who came with

Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. . .

Just as on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them, they spoke in tongues (languages which they had not learned). Here tongues were tangible evidence that God had indeed forgiven their sins and now lived within them through His Spirit. Even though it's not explicitly stated here, we can safely assume that God poured out His Spirit upon them because they believed the gospel.

46 . . . Then Peter answered, 47 "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay on for a few days.

Peter's logic in verse 47 is significant. "Surely," Peter reasoned, "***no one can refuse the water*** for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" If God didn't treat Gentiles any differently, how could Jewish believers treat them differently? If Jews who received the Holy Spirit are baptized, how can Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit be refused the water of baptism?

Peter is making the basic point that ***everyone who has received the Holy Spirit*** has a ***right*** to be baptized. Baptism isn't a privilege granted to a select few; it was not reserved only for Jewish believers. J.I. Packer once made the analogy that "just as everyone who joins the Army has a right to wear 'the patch' on their sleeve, every believer in Jesus has a right to be baptized."

Because Peter understood this, "he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (which was a shortened version of being baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit). Baptism was not only a declaration by Cornelius and the others that they believed in Jesus; baptism implicitly declared that there was no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ. The walls of separation have been broken down.

The other two Scriptures we are going to consider this morning make a connection between baptism and unity in the body of Christ. The first is 1 Corinthians 12. In that chapter Paul repeatedly makes the point that there is ***one*** body of Christ, not many. In 1 Corinthians 12:13-14 Paul writes this:

13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many.

When he mentions baptism he is ultimately talking about the baptism by the Holy Spirit which happens at conversion; but water baptism may also be in view because just as we saw in Acts 11, those who had been baptized by the Holy Spirit were also baptized in water. His point is that since we've all been baptized by the same Spirit, we are part

of the same body; it doesn't matter whether you're Jew or Gentile, slave or free. Just as we each have one physical body with many members, so too the body of Christ is a single unity with many members. The same body of Christ is comprised of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation and from every segment of society.

The second Scripture is in Ephesians 4. Significantly, when Paul urges the church at Ephesus to fight for their unity, he mentions baptism. In Ephesians 4:1-6 we read this:

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Paul doesn't tell us to **create** unity; he says we are to **preserve** the "unity of the Spirit" that already exists. Notice how Paul continues:

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Just as there is one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, and one Father, there is also one baptism (not many). Everyone's baptism declares the same thing. John Stott's comment on this passage is that, "The unity of the church is as indestructible as the unity of God Himself. It is no more possible to split the church than to split the godhead" (*The Message of Ephesians*, p. 151). Of course we often fail to live out this unity in the visible world, hence the challenge to be "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." But the spiritual reality remains the same: there is one body because there is one Spirit, one Lord, and one Father.

Today's baptisms are reflect our unity in the body of Christ. Those who are being baptized all have the same standing before God as every other believer who has ever lived. We celebrate this spiritual reality today through baptism.

As we prepare for baptism, turn your attention to the screen where you'll see and hear a portion of the stories of all six who are being baptized today.

Baptisms:

8:00 - David Wilkinson, John Berkebile

9:30 - Eliana Goss, Mason Barker

11:00 - LaQuinta Brown, Fala Lin