

## ***The Declaration of Baptism: Full Status in the Body of Christ***

### ***Acts 10***

Over the course of this morning, twelve people will be baptized. In preparation for these baptisms, I want us to consider the fascinating account in Acts 10 - the account of some of the first Gentiles (non-Jewish people) who were baptized. This decision to baptize Gentiles was a major milestone in the history of the early church because the assumption was that to be a good Christian you first had to be a good Jew. As we'll see, baptizing these Gentiles was a declaration that they had the same status before God as Jewish Christians.

Here's how Luke records what happened. On the coast of the Mediterranean Sea was a city named Caesarea. In that city was a man named Cornelius, a Roman centurion (he was in charge of around a hundred soldiers). Even though he was a Gentile, he and his household had great respect for and devotion to the God of the Jews. He expressed this devotion by praying continually and giving alms/money to the poor in Caesarea.

At about 3:00 one afternoon Cornelius had vision in which an angel of God told him that his prayers and his giving to the poor were pleasing to Him. He also told him to send for a man named Peter who was staying in the town of Joppa, about 35 miles to the south. Cornelius sent two servants and a soldier to bring Peter back.

Meanwhile, the next day around noon, Peter was in Joppa up on the roof of a house praying. He too saw a vision in which "an object like a great sheet" came down out of heaven being lowered by four corners to the ground. The sheet was filled with all kinds of four-footed animals and crawling creatures, and birds of the sky. A voice (presumably God's) said, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" Peter said, "No Lord, I've never eaten anything unholy and unclean." A second time the voice came, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy." This happened a third time and then the object was taken up into the sky.

While Peter was pondering this vision, the Holy Spirit told him that three men were downstairs looking for him and that he should go with them to Caesarea. The next day Peter and several other believers from Joppa accompanied the three men back to Caesarea. [see Note #1]

Listen to Peter's message from God to Cornelius and his household:

34 Opening his mouth, Peter said: "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, 35 but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. 36 "The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)— 37 you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. 38 "You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. 39 "We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in

Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. 40 “God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, 41 not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. 42 “And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. 43 “Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”

Verses 44 through 46 describe what happened next:

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. . .

What Luke describes here has been called the “Gentile Pentecost” because this description mirrors so closely the account of the Jewish Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. In Acts 2 we have the same elements: the Holy Spirit coming from heaven (2:2) with the result that they began to “speak in other tongues” (2:4). In both accounts those who heard were “amazed” when they heard them “exalting God.” Luke describes the conversion of Cornelius and his household as a second, Gentile Pentecost.

This connection was not lost on Peter. Notice his comment in verse 46 and 47:

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?”

Peter He is anticipating that ***some would want to refuse the waters of baptism to*** Gentiles like Cornelius. [see Note #2] Two days earlier, Peter himself would have refused to baptize Gentiles. But now Peter’s answer would be, “Of course we can’t refuse the waters of baptism to these Gentiles! If God has given them the Holy Spirit and included them in the Church, the body of Christ, who were are we to object?!?!” [see Note #3]

Baptism is an acted out parable of what has happened to a person spiritually. The person is put under the water to symbolize that s/he has died and been buried with Christ; the person is brought up out of the water to symbolize that s/he has been raised to a new way of life (see Romans 6:1-7).

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.

By baptizing Cornelius and his household, Peter and the other believers were declaring that they had full status in the body of Christ. ***Baptism declares that a believer has full status in the body of Christ.*** There are no second-class Christians. Every person

who believes and is given the Holy Spirit can be baptized as a declaration that s/he is a son or daughter of God Himself.

Years later when Paul was urging the church at Ephesus to fight for their unity, he wrote (Ephesians 4:4-5):

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.

There aren't two baptisms - one for Jews and one for Gentiles; there is one baptism because there is one body of Christ. This reality is important for existing believers and for new believers being baptized.

### ***Importance for existing believers in the Church:***

If God doesn't show partiality, we shouldn't show partiality. Like Peter, we need to learn to stop thinking in terms of insiders and outsiders when it comes to new believers. The temptation for those of us who've been followers of Christ for a long time is to become Pharisees, to become like the "elder brother" in the parable of the prodigal son - feeling entitled because we've been at this so long, to become suspicious or jealous of those who have a new and vibrant faith. Sometimes there is a temptation to want people to "pay their dues" before we'll treat them like family.

The challenge for us is to welcome new believers into the church fully and wholeheartedly regardless of their age, their gender, their nationality, their ethnicity, socio economic status, or how long they've been in the church. Those being baptized today range from young kids to college students or older; some have been in the church for years and others for weeks or months. There are no second-class Christians.

### ***Importance for believers being baptized:***

My main challenge to you is to never underestimate what God wants to do in your life. The very Spirit of God dwells within you. He wants to teach you and refine you and use you in the lives of others in amazing ways. This will happen as you keep in step with the Spirit and as you abide in Christ and let His words abide in you.

### ***Notes:***

Note #1: Various scholars and commentators have noticed the similarities between Peter and Jonah (the prophet in the Old Testament). Both of them spent time in Joppa - Peter was staying there in the home of Simon the tanner and Jonah went there to catch a ship to run away from God. Both of them were called by God to preach message to Gentiles - to the household of Cornelius and Jonah to the city of Nineveh. Both of them were reluctant to go - Peter because Gentiles were considered unclean and Jonah because he hated the Ninevites. In both cases God used His power to convince them

that His compassion was unstoppable - in Peter's case through a dream and in Jonah's case through a very large fish.

Note #2: The word translated "refuse" is used numerous times in the New Testament for one person hindering another person from experiencing God: Jesus said, "do not hinder the little children from coming to Me" (Matthew 19:14); He told the scribes and Pharisees that they "hindered" people from entering the kingdom (Luke 18:16).

Note #3: When Peter recounts this experience in chapter 11, he says, "if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17) Peter implies that Cornelius and his household **also** believed.