

## The Baptism of the Family of Cornelius

### Acts 10:34-48

Luke's summary of Peter's address at the home of Cornelius gives a succinct summary of the proclamation of the apostles. Peter gave more information about the life and work of Jesus before His crucifixion than his previous sermons recorded in Acts, because Gentiles could not have known as much about them as Jewish people did. However, the same pattern is there, stressing heavily Jesus' resurrection after His crucifixion.

The fact that, by the end of the day, Peter had ordered that the family of the Gentile Cornelius should be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ (Ac 10:48) is significant. Peter's companions were astonished to realise that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles (Ac 10:45).

This incident was similar to what happened at Pentecost for the first group of about 120 people in that for both the Spirit came before the actual baptism. For there were two groups of people at Pentecost, the 120 (Ac 1:15), who received Christian baptism after the Spirit was poured out on them in tongues of fire, and the rest, who made up the total to three thousand, and who received the Spirit, as Peter promised, at the temporal point of baptism (Ac 2:38).

We do not know how much Cornelius, the centurion, knew about the teachings of Jesus, but it is significant that there was no long period of instruction before baptism, as also with the Ethiopian (Ac 8) and the jailer at Philippi (Ac 16).

The account in Acts 10 is also significant in that it is one of the four passages in Acts that use the expression, "the gift of the Spirit", or simply, "the gift". The others are Acts 2:38, 8:20, and 11:17. In all four the context is baptismal.

Other NT passages tell us more about the Holy Spirit's connection to baptism. In John 3:1-8, Jesus said that people who are sinful because they have been born physically of sinful human parents need to be born of water and the Spirit. These are not two spiritual rebirths, one of water and another of the Spirit, but one rebirth through both water and the Spirit. Baptism is much more than a custom. People, including infants, need to be born again, and baptism is the only means through which this rebirth can come to infants. Some people disparage "water-baptism" and wrongly talk about the gift of the Spirit as an event subsequent to baptism, and also wrongly identify the gift of the Spirit with something that the Spirit gives, namely, speaking in tongues. Actually, the gift of the Spirit was, and is, the gift of the Holy Spirit Himself.

The instance at the home of Cornelius also shows, in spite of the actual order of the two, that baptism and the gift of the Spirit normally come together. Titus 3:3-8 mentions the two together as "the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

There are three passages in the New Testament that talk about "the seal of the Spirit" (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13; E 4:30). Some people say that this means confirmation, as a special sacrament that gives additional benefits that baptism does not give. Others take this to be an additional sacrament. Rather, the seal of the Spirit is baptism. Paul calls the Holy Spirit in Christians a "deposit" or "guarantee." That implies that those who have received it can clearly know that they have received it. Yet the apostle Paul talks about its reception as a distinct event in the past. Nowadays stockmen brand cattle, so that their real owners have a way to telling that they are theirs. In ancient times soldiers in an army were often branded, and so were slaves. Baptism is a mark by which God recognises His own, because His own name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has been placed on people. If people appear before God at Judgment Day without faith, the baptismal seal on them will show them up like the brand on soldiers who have deserted, like slaves who have run away from their real owners, and like duffed cattle.

The descent of the Holy Spirit on Cornelius indicated that he believed Peter's message, even though Peter had not finished preaching it. Baptism is related to faith in a double way. Baptism creates faith, even though adults are believers when they receive baptism. In addition, faith is the means through which those who are baptised receive the benefits of Christ. In a number of New Testament, expressions like "becoming believers" and "putting on Christ" refer to baptism. Paul wrote "When you heard the message of the truth, the good news that you have been saved, and when you became believers, you were also sealed in Him by the Holy Spirit, whom God promised." (Eph 1:13-14).

What happened after Peter did the very unusual thing of entering a Gentile's house and baptising his family is most revealing. Peter had to defend what he had done in the face of hostile questioning at Jerusalem. His reply stressed the similarity of the incident in Cornelius' house to the case of the first group of 120 followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost: "When I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them as He also did on us at the

beginning. Then I remembered the Word of the Lord, how He used to say: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' Therefore, if God has given to them the same gift as He gave us too when we became believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Ac 11:15-17). Although most of Jesus' followers had been disciples for about three years, and had received the baptism of John the Baptist, they traced their faith in Him to the day of Pentecost, when they received Christian baptism. Peter is saying that what happened at the home of Cornelius was a close parallel to the first disciples' own case. On both occasions there was the unusual thing that the Spirit descended unexpectedly before baptism, even though the usual thing is for baptism and the gift of the Spirit to come together.

There is an interesting reference to baptism in the context of becoming believers and receiving the Holy Spirit in Acts 19. Paul evidently noticed that there was something unusual about the group of twelve or so believers at Ephesus. He asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" (Ac 19:2). They lacked Christian baptism, although they had received the baptism of John the Baptist through Apollos (Ac 18:25, 19:2). They had never heard that there is a Holy Spirit. When they received Christian baptism, they also received a full measure of the gifts of the Spirit, including speaking in tongues and prophecy (Ac 19:6).

These references to baptism and becoming believers are important, because some people insist that all people must first become believers as adults, like Cornelius, before they may be baptised. They usually quote Mk 16:16, and say, 'first believe, then be baptised'. This is what they mean when they talk about "believers' baptism". However, if the order is stressed, it is not important. For in Matthew 28:19-20 the order is the other way around: 'Make disciples of all nations, baptising them... teaching them...'

There are several important passages that link baptism and faith directly. In Colossians 2:12 Paul wrote: "... since you were buried with Him by baptism, by which you were also raised with Him, through the faith that is worked by God, who raised Him from the dead." A parallel in Ephesians 1:19-20 shows that the faith is not in the working of God, (as many translations have it) but the result of God's working. Through baptism God works faith. This is the sense of the literal words, "through the faith of the working of God".

Galatians 3:26-27 directly links faith and baptism. It is also one of a series of passages in the New Testament that talk about baptism and use words like "as many as", "all", and "every" in ways that cannot exclude children, just as, at the home of Cornelius, if there were children there, they were included in what happened to the family. The incident at the home of Cornelius was one of four instances recorded in the New Testament when whole families were baptised. We cannot prove that there were children present in any one of these, but it would have been unusual, given the frequent presence of slave families in families at that time. The other references are Ac 16:16 (Lydia); Ac 16:33 (the gaoler); and 1 Cor 1:16 (Stephanas). We can also point to Col 1:11, where Paul refers to baptism figuratively as a circumcision made without hands. In the situation where Jewish boys were circumcised on the eighth day, it would be incredible that Paul would have used circumcision as a figurative parallel if Christians were not to baptise their infants.

All those who are baptised receive great benefits through it, the same benefits to baptism as flow from faith in Jesus. These benefits include: the forgiveness of sins, justification, being children of God, being members of the body of Christ, being joined to Jesus Christ in his death, burial and resurrection, being saved, and receiving the gift of the Spirit (compare Gal 3:2). The other passages that use general words in connection with baptism are Mt 28:19 (all nations) Ac 2:38-39 (every one, for you and for your children, for all), Rm 6:3 (all of you who were baptised) 1 Cor 12:13 (all baptised, all given the Spirit to drink). Gal 3:26-27 is another. It says that all of the Galatian Christians were believers, and were children of God, and had put on Christ like a piece of clothing because they had been baptised. Note the connective word at the beginning of v. 27: "<sup>26</sup> For you are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, <sup>27</sup> because all of you who were baptised into Christ put on Christ."