

Over the last several weeks, we've been in a mini-series within the book of Acts as we've taken a closer look at the salvation of Cornelius and, consequently, the inclusion of the gentiles into God's redemptive plan. We observed the relationship between God's sovereignty in the work of salvation and our responsibility as the church to share the gospel with others. We watched as Peter wrestled over the meaning of a vision he had, as a sheet came down from heaven, filled with unclean animals, and God telling him to "Rise Peter; kill and eat." Eventually, Peter understood this to mean that God was welcoming gentiles into his kingdom. Then last week, we learned that to be a powerful witness, like Peter, comes from a transformed heart, a gospel-centered message, and a grace-filled invitation. These are the elements that we see on display in Peter's presentation of the gospel to Cornelius and his household. Now we get to see how all these elements come together incredibly as we are about to witness the miracle of salvation.

First, I would like to share a story with you about my oldest daughter, Harper. A few weeks ago, Harper came home from school telling us about a new friend she had made, Zachery. Her teacher had been telling the class for a few days that they would be getting a new classmate. Unfortunately, their new classmate wasn't so readily received by the rest of the class. You could imagine how proud Leah and I were as parents when Harper shared with us that she played with her new classmate during recess, so he had a friend. In the latest episode of "How was your day at school?" Harper shared with us that she took her new friend to the nurse when he fell at recess, missing out on her own recess time to ensure that Zachery was okay. This was very welcomed news to Leah and me as, most of the time, we have no idea if we're doing anything right as parents.

Funny enough, we've all experienced this on some level, and even as adults, we play this game. Even in church. Now we're a little less obvious about it. We call it having healthy boundaries, making it easier for us than simply admitting we don't like someone. If you remember, last week, Pastor Tim asked you to visualize the face of someone who'd you want to be saved. I am going to take it a step further and ask for you to broaden your scope to visualize the faces of your co-workers, classmates, friends, and family members who God has placed directly in your path. This is your mission field. Now consider with me that every time we neglect to share the gospel, for whatever reason, it's similar to those times you were overlooked in school to be selected for the team. It may be a silly illustration, but it's accurate.

If you remember, within our current series, we've discussed that there was a dividing wall of hostility within the temple, preventing the gentiles from knowing God and worshiping Him. If we were honest with ourselves, there are dividing walls of hostility within our hearts that prevent us from accomplishing the call of God our lives to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth.

One of the many challenges the early church faced is that they initially thought that when God wanted to save people from Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, it meant the Jews from within those areas. They didn't understand it to mean that God wanted to save people from within every tribe, nation, and tongue. So, what we are witnessing in this passage is unthinkable, but that's what I love about our God. He always does the unexpected. Now scripture is clear "God does not dwell in houses made by human hands." Acts 7:48 rather we are told in scripture that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). What we are about to see in this passage with Cornelius is unlike anything the Jews had ever thought possible. It challenges us to consider what prevents us from including others?

1. God includes others (even the gentiles)- v44-46

It tells us in this passage that while Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. The Holy Spirit interrupted Peter's sermon! While some of you would love for that to happen on a Sunday, we must continue reading to understand the significance of what is happening fully. It makes a distinction in verse 45, saying, "And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles."

We have two groups present. We have those who are circumcised, the Jews, likely men present during Pentecost and filled with the Holy Spirit, witnessing what has now become known as the Gentile Pentecost. These are unclean or common people who are being filled with the Spirit of God! This is what Jesus was trying to explain to Peter in his vision when he said to him, "What God has made clean, do not call common." It goes on to say in verse 46, "For they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God." We must pause here for a moment and try to understand what is happening.

It would be very easy for us to get hung up on this passage and build an entire theology that suggests Spirit baptism is a subsequent work of salvation marked by speaking in tongues. However, that's not what's happening in this passage. Thinking that way misses the significance of what's actually taking place. First, we have the Spirit being poured out on the day of Pentecost, in Acts 2, where the disciples spoke in tongues. Then in Acts 8:17, we see the Samaritans receiving the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. In these verses, we see the Gentiles receiving the Spirit in a way that mimicked what happened on Pentecost and would be unmistakable to the Jews who were present. What is happening and what can be easily missed is that God is including others. To borrow words from Luke, even the gentiles.

This was always God's plan. God saves us and fills us with His Spirit. Yes, even _____ and he can do the same thing for your neighbor, your co-worker, or your classmate.

2. The church includes others (symbolic confession)- v47

How do the early believers react to this? Peter responds to what God is doing in the Gentiles in the only way possible; like God, he includes them. He says, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter finally gets it.

Galatians 3:26-28 says, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Our identity is not found in the color of our skin, the amount of money we have in our bank, or our sex. Our identity is found in Jesus Christ. The primary way this is accomplished is through baptism. This is how we are identified with him. You see, if only we were people of God's word, we would see that God speaks to these issues! We wouldn't have to listen to the news nearly as much as we do or read articles from others on Facebook as if it were a reliable source. We wouldn't have to take the world's lead on issues like racism or sexual identity because God lays it all out for us in his word. Do you agree? Then for goodness sake, be baptized! If you have been saved and not baptized, you are disobedient. Don't be disobedient. Baptism is the identifier of a believer. Are you willing to be identified with Christ, or are you still holding on to other identities and keeping your options open?

Seriously though. I want to be clear, in no way, shape, or form does baptism result in our salvation, nor does it guarantee our salvation. We read in this passage that Peter commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and they asked him to remain with them for some days. Baptism is our public confession of faith; it's how we tell others that we now identify with Christ, and it's how we come into unity with the church. God included the gentiles by saving them and filling them with His Spirit, and now Peter commands the men with him to baptism them, welcome them, and include them in the church so that they are identified with Christ through their baptism.

I love that as we read this passage, Peter isn't the one doing the baptizing. As you will see, Peter will have to answer for his interactions with the gentiles, but now he has back up. Peter only preaches the message, but the other guys, baptized them, Peter made them accomplices. How about we become co-conspirators with Peter?

We learn a lot from Peter in his interactions with Cornelius, and his humble obedience to God was the key. Peter had no idea that God intended to make salvation available to the gentiles and fill them with His Spirit, but he was obedient to sharing the gospel everywhere he went. He learned that God includes others, yes, even the gentiles, and because God includes others, so should the church. The primary way in which we can do this is through baptism identifying with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

As Christians instead, of mistaking the wall of hostility for healthy boundaries, let's consider that maybe God has called us to share the gospel with people who are different from us, trusting that, like Cornelius, God is sovereignly calling people to salvation through his Son. He's using and I to share this good news. If God saved, even me, then who can't he save. If God included us

in salvation, as the church, let's be prepared to welcome others into the kingdom with open arms. And now we have the opportunity to celebrate another incredible gift to the church as we share in communion as the body of Christ. Let's look at 1 Corinthians 11 together as we prepare our hearts.