

BIB204 NT2 Early Church

Unit 3 Study Resource

Commentary on Acts of the Apostles

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Acts X

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X: 1, 2. The scene changes from Joppa to Cæsarea, about thirty miles northward along the Mediterranean shore; and we are introduced to another case for conversion, a Gentile and a soldier. (1) *“There was a certain man in Cæsarea named Cornelius, a centurion of the cohort called Italian, (2) a devout man, and one who feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God continually.”* We desire to examine, with great care, the process of this man's conversion, and begin by noticing the present religious elements of his character. He is a “devout man”—a man of deep religious feelings. He is not a devout pagan, but he “fears God,” the true God. He must, then, be somewhat acquainted with the Jewish religion. He is not identified with the Jews, being uncircumcised. He is not a timid or unfaithful worshiper of God, but has taught all his family the same worship. He gives much alms to the people, and is a praying man.

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At first glance, it might appear strange that such a man should *need* conversion. There are many men, at the present day, in whose favor not so much can be said, who flatter themselves that their prospects for eternity are good. They are honest in their business, honorable in their intercourse with men, good husbands and fathers, generous to their neighbors, and benevolent to the poor; what have they to fear at the hands of a just and merciful God? They forget that their obligations to God are infinitely higher than those to men, even to the dearest friends on earth; and that, therefore, it is the most inexcusable of all sins persistently refuse him the worship which is his due. This offense takes the hue of the blackest ingratitude, when we remember the blood which has been shed to touch our hearts, and to open up to us the way of pardon and eternal life. Of this crime every man is guilty who does not worship the living God, and submit to the ordinances of Jesus Christ. But Cornelius was a praying man, a devout worshiper of God, besides possessing every other virtue claimed by self-righteous sinners; yet it was necessary for even him to hear “words by which he *might be saved*.”²²⁴ Until a man can claim for himself something more than is here said of him, he may not flatter himself with the hope of salvation.

Under the former dispensation, the piety and fidelity of Cornelius would have given him an honorable place among the holy men of God; but this alone could not suffice him now. Jesus the Christ had stepped in between God and man, and opened, through the rent veil of his flesh, the only access to God. All heaven had confessed his authority, and the holy disciples on earth had come to the Father by him. But Cornelius was still calling upon God, without the name of Christ, and seeking to approach him by the old, not by the new and living way. He was in the same condition with any pious but unbelieving Jew of that or of our own age. It was necessary to his salvation that he should believe in Jesus and obey him. This would secure to him the pardon of his sins, which he had not and could not secure by worshipping according to the law.

3–6. This defect in his religious character was not a fault; it was only a misfortune. He was doing the best he knew how; and, if we may infer what he prayed for, from what he obtained in answer to his prayers, he was praying for additional knowledge, and perhaps for an interest in the salvation offered through Christ. Such a prayer, offered by such a man, is always acceptable to God. On a certain day he had fasted till in the afternoon, and at three o'clock was praying within his house,²²⁵ when, (3) *“He saw distinctly in a vision, about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in to him and saying to him, Cornelius. (4) He looked intently upon him, and was full of fear, and said, What is it, Lord? He said to him, Thy prayers and thine alms have come up for a memorial before God. (5)*

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And now, send men to Joppa, and call for one Simon who is surnamed Peter. (6) He is lodging with a certain Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the sea-shore. He will tell you what you ought to do.”

Here is an unconverted man praying, and his prayer is answered. But the circumstances of the man, the nature of the prayer, and the answer given, are all essentially different from those of unconverted men who are taught to pray by the Protestant sects of the present day. The man was not instructed in a knowledge of the Redeemer, and the way of salvation, and of his own interest in the same, but neglecting his duty, as in the case with the modern sinner. Neither was he praying for pardon, while postponing obedience to the gospel, as in these cases; but his prayer was for a *knowledge* of his duty, and he had no one by to instruct him. The answer to his prayer was given, not, as is now so often pretended, by sending forth the Spirit into his heart to speak his sins forgiven, but by sending an angel to tell him where he can find a *man* who will guide him in the way of salvation.

In the case of the eunuch, an angel appeared to the preacher and sent him to the inquirer. In this case, the angel appears to the inquirer, and tells him to send for the preacher. In both cases, the only work of the angel was to bring the two men together, face to face. Thus, again, we see an insuperable necessity, in case of a scriptural conversion, for the presence and co-operation of a human agent, showing that the divine influences, whatever, and however numerous they may be, reach the heart *through* the word of truth. The prayer of Cornelius was answered, like that of Saul, by referring him to inspired authorities within the Church. This shows how vain, at the present day, must be every prayer for direct answers from heaven, in reference to the pardon of sins. If a verbal answer to such prayers could be obtained, we are bound to conclude, from these precedents, that it would still be, “Go to Damascus and it shall be told you,” or “Send men to Joppa for Simon whose surname is Peter, and he will tell you what you ought to do.” Peter and Ananias are before us now, with the same instruction which they gave then, and it is useless for us to offer for what we have in hand, prayers which Saul and Cornelius offered for what had not yet been granted. The directions given by the two teachers, in these cases, and by other inspired men, is all that God granted to sinners then, and it is certainly all that we have a right to ask for now.

The necessity for the spoken word in order to the conversion of men is not only exhibited in these mission of angels, but it also explains the occurrence, in the two cases of Cornelius and the eunuch, of an agency not discernible in other cases. If no heavenly messenger had been sent to Philip, he could not have known that there was an Ethiopian on the road to Gaza, reading his Bible, and ready to hear the gospel. And if no angel had appeared to Cornelius, he could not have known that he had any interest in the blood of Jesus, or any right to send for Peter. No human being could have informed him, because all others, including Peter, were as ignorant of it as himself. An interposition from heaven is necessary; but when it occurs, it provides only for just such demands of the case as could not be supplied without it. The multitude on Pentecost needed no such angelic aid, for the preacher was before them, and each party was conscious of the right to speak, on the one hand, and the right to obey, on the other. So with us. When we wish any information, or the enjoyment of any religious privilege, we have the apostles before us, face to face. Their words are in our hands, and may be in our minds and hearts. We have no need for heavenly apparitions or illuminations; and if we expect them, we will be disappointed, or deluded. If a man in ignorance prays for a knowledge of salvation, this incident in the case of Cornelius, instead of encouraging him to pray on, actually answers his prayer, by telling him to send for some man who understands the gospel, and will guide him as Peter did Cornelius.

Before proceeding further in this case of conversion, we wish the reader to observe that enough has occurred already to secure Cornelius' recognition as a genuine convert, by the prevailing Protestant parties of this day. Let any man come before the Church with such an experience as his, saying, "I have been for many years a devout man, worshipping God as well as I knew how, giving alms to the poor, praying continually, and teaching all my family the fear of God. Yesterday afternoon, at three o'clock, I was praying, according to my custom, when suddenly a holy angel stood before me, and said, Thy prayers and thine alms have come up for a memorial before God." Who would doubt that he was "powerfully converted," or dare to insinuate that there was anything else necessary in this case? He would receive the right-hand of fellowship at once. Yet, so different was the apostolic procedure, that the man was now only prepared to *hear words* by which he *might* be saved. How long will religious men allow their inventions and traditions to nullify the word of God?

7, 8. (7) "*And when the angel who spoke to Cornelius went away, he called two of his household servants, and a devout soldier of those who attended him, (8) and having fully related all these things to them, he sent them to Joppa.*" The two servants are included in the household, who with him feared God, and the soldier selected had also learned the same great lesson. None but men of such character would be suitable messengers in a case like this.

9–16. The scene of the narrative now changes again, from Cæsarea back to Joppa, and to the house of the tanner, where we left the Apostle Peter. Leaving the messengers of Cornelius on the way, Luke anticipates their arrival, and relates how Peter was prepared for the favorable reception of their message. (9) "*Now, on the next day, while they were on their journey, and were drawing near to the city, Peter went up upon the house to pray,* 133 *about the sixth hour. (10) He was very hungry, and desired to eat; but while they were preparing, he fell into a trance, (11) and saw heaven opened, and saw a certain vessel descending, like a great white sheet tied by the four corners, and let down to the earth; (12) in which were all kinds of four-footed animals and wild beasts and reptiles of the earth, and birds of the air. (13) And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill and eat. (14) But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing common or unclean. (15) And the voice spoke to him again the second time, What God has cleansed, do not you call common. (16) This was done three times, and the vessel was taken up again into heaven.*"

In order to fully appreciate the necessity for this vision, we must remember the prejudice of the Jews against uncircumcised Gentiles. Previous to the Babylonish captivity, they had too great an inclination to intimacy with their idolatrous neighbors; but that terrible affliction cured them of idolatry, and when they returned to their own land, they put away, at the instigation of Nehemiah, all the idolatrous wives among them.²²⁶ This was the beginning of a reaction toward the opposite extreme, and such a state of feeling was finally induced, that, in the traditions of the elders, it was regarded as a sin even to go into the house of one who was uncircumcised. The disciples of Jesus had been educated from their childhood to an intense degree of this prejudice, and there were facts in the history of Jesus calculated to foster rather than to eradicate it. They had heard him say, "I am not sent save to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."²²⁷ They had seen him work no miracle for a Gentile except under the protest, "It is not proper to take the children's food and cast it to dogs."²²⁸ And when he had sent them out on their first mission, he had commanded them, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and enter not into a city of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."²²⁹ It is true, that in their final commission he had commanded them to disciple and immerse all nations; but they very naturally interpreted this in the light of past experience, and concluded that all

nations were to be gradually absorbed into the Jewish commonwealth by circumcision, and afterward brought into the Church. They had not hesitated, therefore, to immerse proselytes, and even to give them office in the Church,²³⁰ though they still regarded it as a sin to enter the house of a Gentile who was uncircumcised.²³¹

This fact in the mental state of the apostles shows that they were not guided by the Holy Spirit into all truth at once, but their knowledge was extended according to the demands of the occasion. It was a prejudice, however, belonging to them as Jews, which had prevented them, thus far, from perceiving the particular truth here involved; and this involves the conclusion that prejudices previously were capable of impeding the inspiring influence, so that special measures were required for their eradication.

The time had now arrived when this prejudice must be uprooted from the heart of Peter. If it were a part of the work of the indwelling Spirit to act immediately upon the heart, then there need be nothing more done with Peter than for the Spirit thus to act. But there is not the slightest intimation of any such action. On the contrary, influences of an entirely different nature are brought to bear upon him, and to them the effect is plainly attributed. A series of significant objects are presented to his eye, certain words are addressed to his ear, and a combination of facts are brought to bear upon his understanding. Falling into a trance, while hungrily awaiting his noonday meal, he sees descending from heaven, and then spread out before him, a great sheet full of animals, both clean and unclean. This vision conveys no meaning, until he hears the words, "Arise, Peter; kill and eat." He now understands it as indicating that he shall eat unclean animals. But this is so shocking to his sense of propriety that he exclaims, in perplexity, even to the invisible God who had spoken to him, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing common or unclean." But he is commanded, "What I have cleansed, do not you call common." The vessel is brought near to him, and the same words repeated three times. Then the vision closes, and he recovers from the trance.

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17–20. Restored now to his natural state of mind, Peter remains upon the housetop, reflecting upon the vision, and wondering if there was not some meaning in it besides that in reference to unclean animals. The question was soon solved. (17) "*Now when Peter was doubting in himself what this vision which he had seen could mean, behold, the men who were sent from Cornelius, having inquired out the house of Simon, were standing at the gate; (18) and calling, they inquired if Simon surnamed Peter was lodging there. (19) But Peter was still thinking of the vision, and the Spirit said to him, Behold, three men are seeking you. (20) Arise, therefore, and go down and go with them, doubting nothing, for I have sent them.*" In the skillful arrangements of divine wisdom, all the separate influences which are to remove Peter's prejudices are adjusting themselves for combined and harmonious action. Those men have been on their journey two days, but God had measured their steps to the house of Simon, and timed the appearance of the vision to the motion of their feet, so that when they reach the gate he is still on the house-top absorbed in reflection; but ere they are admitted to the house, the Spirit has sent him down to meet them, and to go with them.

21, 22. He knows nothing, as yet, of the nature of their mission, neither does he yet understand any better than before the meaning of the vision. (21) "*Then Peter went down to the men, and said, Behold, I am he whom you are seeking. What is the cause for which you are come? (22) And they said, Cornelius, a centurion, a just man, and one who fears God, and of good report among all the nation of the Jews, was warned from God by a holy angel to send for you into his house, and to hear words from you.*" Upon hearing these words, the whole truth at once flashed upon the mind of Peter, and the agencies which for two days had been preparing to uproot his prejudice, sprang upon it with their combined force. No less than an angel from God has sent these men to call me into the house of a Gentile,

to preach the gospel to him. My vision of clean and unclean beasts is explained. God has cleansed the Gentiles, 135 and I am no longer to call them unclean. The Spirit has commanded me to go with these men, without doubting. The authority of God, of an angel, of the Holy Spirit, all impel me. I can resist no longer. His prejudice is gone, and doubtless he feels a new thrill of joy as his heart tremulously enlarges to take the whole world within the embrace of his philanthropy.

23. As the Spirit had directed, he does not hesitate as to the line of duty, but at once announces to the messengers that the journey shall begin to-morrow. (23) *“Then, calling them in, he lodged them; and on the next day Peter went out with them, and certain brethren from Joppa went with him.”* It was a wise precaution that he took other brethren with him, so that the whole of this new movement might be properly attested by competent and disinterested witnesses.

24. During the four days which had elapsed, Cornelius had made no secret of the vision he had witnessed, but had communicated it to such friends as were likely to take the same interest in it with himself. Having presumed, with all confidence, that Peter would come, and knowing the time that the journey would require, all was in readiness for his arrival. (24) *“On the next day they entered into Cæsarea. Cornelius was waiting for them, having called together his kinsmen and intimate friends.”* These friends and relatives, it must be remembered, and not the mere family of Cornelius, were the chief part of the audience about to be addressed by Peter.

25–27. (25) *“Now as Peter was coming in, Cornelius met him, and fell down at his feet and worshipped. (26) But Peter raised him up, and said, Stand up. I myself also am a man. (27) And conversing with him, he came in and found many who had come together.”* It is not in keeping with the character of Cornelius to suppose that he rendered to Peter such worship as is due to God. But prostration was the common attitude of approach to a superior, as it yet is in eastern countries, and Cornelius was but complying with this custom. To Peter, however, it appeared as if he intended something more, and hence the rebuke.

28, 29. Upon entering the house of this Gentile, side by side with him, and into the presence of others who were likewise uncircumcised, Peter deemed it proper to inform them of his reason for thus departing from a well-known Jewish custom. (28) *“And he said to them, You know that it is unlawful for a Jew to attach himself to, or to come into the house of one of another nation. Yet God has showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean. (29) Therefore, I came without objecting when I was sent for. I ask, then, for what purpose you sent for me?”* This speech shows clearly that Peter had interpreted the vision of unclean beasts as referring to men as well as to animal food.

30–33. (30) *“Then Cornelius said, Four days ago I was fasting until this hour, and at the ninth hour I was praying in my house, and behold, a man stood before me in bright apparel, (31) and said, Cornelius, your prayer is heard, and your alms are had in remembrance before God. (32) Send, therefore, to Joppa, and call for Simon who is surnamed Peter. He is lodging in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea-shore. When he comes he will speak 136 to you. (33) Immediately, therefore, I sent for you, and you have done well that you have come. Now, then, we are all present here before God to hear all things which are by God commanded you.”* In this last remark Cornelius speaks for his friends who were assembled, as well as for himself. As was becoming the occasion, he had gathered in, to hear the expected messenger, only those who were willing to hear him as a messenger of God. In the statement that they were all present before God to hear what he had commanded, there was an implied pledge to obey what they might hear, and there is no doubt, from the sequel, that such was their purpose.

34, 35. The scene before Peter enlarges his conceptions of the purpose of God; for he now sees that his mission is designed not for the benefit of Cornelius alone, but for a large number of his Gentile friends; and if for all these, then, there is to be no further national limitation to the gospel. He gives utterance to this conception. (34) *“Then Peter opened his mouth and said, In truth I perceive that God is not a respecter of persons; (35) but, in every nation, he that fears him and works righteousness is acceptable to him.”* This expansive thought was sufficient to burst asunder all the exclusive bonds of the Mosaic institution, and should be sufficient now to explode the equally injurious theory of an arbitrary predestination of certain men and angels to their eternal destiny.²³² It is a positive declaration that God respects not *persons* but *character*. To *fear* him, and to *work righteousness*, and not any other distinction between persons, is the ground of acceptability with him.

36–38. Cornelius has now related to Peter such an experience, as, we have seen above, would secure him recognition as a genuine convert to Christ among Protestant sects; but Peter was so far from regarding it in this light, that he proceeds to preach to them as he would to other sinners. We will consider his speech by the sections into which it naturally divides itself. (36) *“You know the word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all,) (37) the word which was published throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the immersion which John preached, (38) concerning Jesus of Nazareth, how that God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power; who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, because God was with him.”* From this it appears that Cornelius and his friends were familiar with the personal history of Jesus, and even with the message of peace which God has caused him to preach to the children of Israel. The information which they lacked, therefore, was only that which referred to their own interests in that message.

39. Not content with assuming that these facts were familiar to them, Peter gives them a surer foundation for their convictions, by presenting the testimony upon which he relies to prove the facts. (39) *“And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they slew, hanging him upon a tree.”* In view of the fact that Cornelius had been “warned from God by a holy angel,” to send for Peter and hear what he had to say, no confirmation of this his testimony was needed. They were prepared to receive everything he might say to them as a message from God. 137

40, 41. The crowning fact of the gospel comes next in the statement. (40) *“Him God raised up the third day, and showed him openly; (41) not to all the people, to be witnesses chosen by God beforehand, even to us, who did eat and drink with him after he arose from the dead.”* Here Peter states, by way of commending to his hearers the evidence of the resurrection, a fact which has been so differently construed by infidels, as to be made a ground of objection to it; that is, that the witnesses were chosen for the occasion. Whether Peter or the infidels are right in judgment, depends entirely upon the grounds of the choice. If they were chosen because of a dishonest desire to prove the fact, or because of the ease with which they might be deceived into the belief of a fact which had no real existence, then it may be rightly regarded as a suspicious circumstance. But the reverse is true in both particulars. Such was the situation of the witnesses, that there was great danger both to property and person, in giving their testimony, and therefore every motive to dishonesty prompted them to keep silent rather than to testify. They were also the least likely of all the men of Israel to be deceived, because of their long familiarity with the person of him who was to be identified. Peter, then, was right; for the fact that *such* witnesses were chosen beforehand is proof that no deception was intended; while the fact that they “did eat and drink with him after he arose from the dead,” rendered it impossible for them to be deceived.

42, 43. Having now followed the career of Jesus from the beginning to his resurrection and exhibition of himself alive to the witnesses, Peter proceeds in regular order to the next historical fact, the giving of the apostolic commission. (42) “*And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is he who is ordained by God the judge of the living and the dead.* (43) *To him all the prophets testify that every one who believes in him shall, through his name, receive remission of sins.*”

The declaration that every one who believes in him shall receive remission of sins has been construed as proof that remission of sins is dependent on faith only. But the fact that Peter is here stating what Jesus commanded the apostles to preach should prevent such a construction of his words; for, in the commission to which he refers, immersion is connected with faith, as a condition of pardon. His words must be construed consistently with this fact. There is no difficulty in doing this, for it is a common apostolic usage to employ faith as an equivalent for the conditions of pardon. To deny that immersion is for remission of sins, because, in a condensed statement like this, it is not specifically mentioned, is not less subversive of the truth than to deny that repentance is a condition because *it* is not mentioned. It is not sufficient to reply to this, that repentance was always *implied* in genuine faith; for it certainly was not more uniformly attendant upon faith than was immersion. It would be difficult to find, in apostolic times, a penitent believer who was not *immersed*, without unnecessary delay, as a genuine believer who was not *penitent*. All believers who repented were invariably immersed. Of course, we exclude from this remark all cases which occurred previous to the date of the commission. 138

If any one, dissatisfied with this explanation, is disposed to insist that Peter's declaration, that *every one* who believes in Jesus shall receive remission of sins, must include those—if any there be—who believe, but are not immersed, we have but to show the absurdity of the assumption by referring to a parallel case in which there can be no dispute. The Apostle John says: “*Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him, and he in God.*”²³³ He who would conclude from this remark, that the only condition of communion with God is to *confess* that Jesus is his Son, subverts the truth no more than he who makes the assumption in question; for the universality of the declaration is the same in both, and there is no limitation expressed in either.

There is no one fact more distinctly stated in Acts that that believers should repent and be immersed for the remission of sins:²³⁴ hence, there can scarcely be a grosser perversion of the word of God than to construe other statements of the Scripture so as to deny the truth of this. A condition of pardon once stated can never be set aside by any less than express divine authority.

It should be observed, further, that the statement in question is not absolutely that “every one who believes in him shall receive remission of sins;” but that he shall receive it “*through his name.*” The expression, “through his name,” was not thrown in here at random; for the inspired apostles never spoke at random. It has a well-defined meaning, and was intended to qualify the sentence of which it forms a part. What we receive *through* his name certainly can not reach us until we attain some connection *with* his name. But we are *immersed into* his name with that of the Father and the Holy Spirit; hence it is at the time of this immersion, that the believer receives remission of sins *through* his name.

44–46. We are next informed of a fact which is new to this narrative, and was very surprising both to Peter and his companions. (44) “*While Peter was yet speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were hearing the word,* (45) *and the believers of the circumcision who came with Peter were astonished, because on the Gentiles was poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit.* (46) *For they heard them speaking in tongues, and magnifying*

God.” The matter of astonishment to the Jewish brethren was not merely that these men received the Spirit; for if Peter had gone on to finish his discourse, promising them the gift of the Holy Spirit as he did on Pentecost,²³⁵ and had then immersed them, these brethren would have understood, as a matter of course, that they received the Holy Spirit. And if, after this, he had laid hands on them, as he did on the Samaritans, even miraculous manifestations of the Spirit could have created no surprise. The circumstances which caused the astonishment were: *First*, That the Holy Spirit was “poured out” upon them directly from God, as it had never been before on any but the apostles; *Second*, That this unusual gift was bestowed upon *Gentiles*. 139

In attempting to classify the manifestations of the Holy Spirit known in this history, we are compelled to distinguish the case before us from the gift of the Spirit enjoyed by all disciples in common, by the fact that these parties “spoke in tongues;” and from the gift of the Spirit bestowed on the Samaritans, by the fact that it was bestowed without prayer or imposition of hands. We have no event with which to classify it except that which occurred on Pentecost. That these two events constitute a class by themselves is further evident from the fact that these two parties alone are said to be “*immersed* in the Holy Spirit.”²³⁶ These two are the only instances of immersion in the Holy Spirit on record, and they are distinguished from other gifts of tongues, in that they alone were bestowed without human agency.

There is only one passage of Scripture in even apparent conflict with this conclusion, which, from the interpretation frequently given to it, demands some notice in this connection. It is the statement of Paul: “By one Spirit we were all immersed into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free, and have all been made to drink of one Spirit.”²³⁷ If the apostle intends by this to assert that all the disciples “were immersed in the Holy Spirit,” then this immersion was not peculiar to the apostles and the house of Cornelius. The question turns upon the reference of the word *immerse*; whether it is to immersion in water or immersion in the Spirit. It is settled by the fact that the immersion here spoken of is that which introduces “into the one body.” We know by the commission that immersion in water brought its proper subjects “into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” But when, and by whatever means, men were brought into the relation expressed in these words, it is indisputable that they were brought into the one body. It was immersion in water, therefore, by which “all were immersed into one body.” Moreover, the immersion in the Holy Spirit did not have this effect; for the apostles were in the one body *before* they were immersed in the Spirit, and Cornelius was immersed in the Spirit *before* he was immersed into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This makes it certain that the passage in question is not in conflict with our conclusion. As to Paul's assertion that the immersion into one body was “*by* one Spirit,” the words “*by* one Spirit” are a declaration that the immersion had taken place under the *direction* of the one Spirit who was the author of all the gifts mentioned in the connection in which the passage occurs.²³⁸

The immersion of Cornelius and his friends in the Holy Spirit previous to their immersion in water has been urged as proof that remission of sins takes place before immersion. But it can furnish no such proof unless it be first proved that the Holy Spirit could not be imparted to a man who was yet unpardoned. If Cornelius had been a man of gross wickedness, there would seem to be some incongruity in such an impartation; but, in view of his real character, and the fact that God had previously sent an angel to express his approbation of his conduct, there appears no incongruity in this circumstance.

This incident in the conversion of Cornelius can not, in any way, be held as a precedent for us; from the fact that it was a miraculous gift, and therefore peculiar to the age of miracles. It may as well be regarded as necessary 140 to see the Lord as Saul did, in order to a genuine conversion, as to be immersed in the Spirit as Cornelius was. It is, therefore, a very gross deception to urge upon the people that they should receive the Spirit, after the precedent of Cornelius, before they are immersed.

47, 48. The true explanation of this unusual circumstance is given in the following words, together with Peter's own explanation of it in the eleventh chapter:²³⁹ *“Then Peter answered, (47) Can any man forbid water, that these should not be immersed, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? (48) And he commanded them to be immersed in the name of the Lord. Then they requested him to remain some days.”* The use that Peter made of it expresses the design of its occurrence. That use was to remove all possible objection to the immersion of the parties. In any other case which had occurred, or which occurred after this, no such objection could have existed. The very fact, therefore, which led to this unusual occurrence, was an exceptional circumstance, which furnishes the strongest proof that this case is not a precedent for imitation in this particular.

Before he was interrupted, Peter had already proceeded so far with his discourse as to reach the subject of faith, and of remission of sins, and immersion must have been the next word upon his lips, if he had proceeded after the model of his sermon on Pentecost. The interruption, therefore, did not break the thread of his discourse, but enabled him to proceed with greater confidence to the very conclusion which he had intended. He first appeals to the brethren, to know if any objection yet lingered in their minds, and finding none, he commanded them to be immersed *in the name of the Lord*.

Let us now recall the fact that Cornelius had been directed to send for Peter to hear “words by which he and all his family might be saved.”²⁴⁰ Peter has come, and delivered his message. He has told him of Christ, in whom the man now believes. He has commanded him to be immersed, and it has been done. This is the whole story of the conversion. When it was accomplished, the painful anxiety which he must have experienced during the last four days was removed, and his present happiness is indicated by the cordiality with which he invited Peter to remain with him some days.

We now have three individual cases of conversion before us, each detailed with great minuteness. In some particulars they are precisely alike; in others, they are quite different. But they are all three genuine cases of conversion; and, therefore, the points in which they differ are not essential to conversion, but are accidental circumstances arising from the peculiarities of the individual case. Now, in order that we may learn what is essential to conversion, and what among all the cases on record, are accidental circumstances, we must be guided by the following rule. Whatever is common to all cases is necessary to a scriptural conversion; but whatever we find in one case which certainly did not occur in all others, is a peculiarity of the individual cases in which it occurs. The points in which all the recorded cases agree are the points in which all subsequent conversions must agree with them. 141 The points in which they differ are points in which subsequent conversions may differ from them. In order to determine that certain features are not essential, it is only necessary to find cases in which they do not occur. In order to determine that any one is essential, we must find it in all cases, or find it prescribed in some general law expressly designed to govern all cases.

While the three cases already before us are fresh in the memory, and before points of difference become multiplied by additional cases, so as to confuse the understanding, we propose to institute a comparison between

them, in the light of the rule just prescribed. Leaving out of view the difference in character, occupation, and social position, of the eunuch, Saul, and Cornelius, which show only that the gospel is adapted to all men without regard to previous character or position, we will only notice those differences which might form the ground of erroneous conclusions. *First*, then, in the cases of the eunuch and Cornelius, there was the visible appearance of an angel; and many converts of modern times have related, as part of their experience in conversion, similar apparitions. But there certainly was not in Saul's case the appearance of an angel; therefore, such an appearance is not necessary to conversion. *Second*, The Lord himself appeared to Saul and conversed with him; but he certainly did not to either the eunuch or Cornelius. It is not necessary, then, to see the Lord. *Third*, Saul mourned and prayed for three days after he believed, and before he was immersed; but Cornelius and the eunuch did not; therefore, protracted sorrow and prayer are not necessary to conversion. *Fourth*, Cornelius was immersed in the Spirit, but Saul and the eunuch were not; therefore, immersion in the Spirit is not essential, but a circumstance arising from the peculiarity of a single case.

The points in which these cases agree are chiefly these: they all heard the gospel preached, with miraculous evidence to sustain it; they all believed what they heard; they were all commanded to be immersed; they were all immersed; and after immersion they were all happy. If, then, we do not hereafter encounter recorded cases from which some of these items are certainly absent, we must conclude that at least all of these are necessary to scriptural conversion. When other cases are before us, we will institute further and more complete comparisons.

We would be glad to know more of the history of Cornelius, so as to determine how far, even in times of peace, the profession of arms is compatible with the faithful service of the Prince of Peace. He is the only soldier of whose conversion we have an account in the New Testament, and of his subsequent career we know nothing. Whether, amid the scenes of blood and desolation not many years after most wickedly visited upon Judea by the army in which he was an officer, he resigned his office, or made shipwreck of the faith, we can not know till the great day. Let it be noted, however, that his is an instance of a soldier becoming a Christian, not of a Christian becoming a soldier. It furnishes a precedent for the former, but not for the latter. Whether Peter instructed him to resign his position in the army or not, is to be determined not by the *silence* of the historian in reference to it, but by first determining whether military service is compatible with the moral teachings of the New Testament. If Jesus and the apostles had 142 been, for more than thirty years previous to the publication of Acts, teaching that Christians should not take the sword, it was not at all necessary for Luke to say that Peter so instructed Cornelius.

[224](#)Acts xi. 14.

[225](#)Verse 30.

[226](#)Neh. xiii. 23–31.

[227](#)Matt. xv. 24.

[228](#)Matt. xv. 26.

[229](#)Matt. x. 5, 6.

[230](#)See Com. vi. 5.

[231](#)Acts xi. 3.

[232](#) See Westminster Conf., ch. iii: sec. 5.

[233](#) 1 John iv. 15.

[234](#) See Acts ii. 38.

[235](#) Acts ii. 38.

[236](#) Compare i. 5 with xi. 16.

[237](#) 1 Cor. xii. 13.

[238](#) See 1 Cor. xii. 3–13.

[239](#) Acts xi. 15.

[240](#) Acts xi. 14.

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