

THE WAYS OF GOD IN THE ACTS

by W.W. Fereday

W.W. Fereday traces the unfolding purposes of God through the book of Acts, highlighting the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church.

4 Chapters

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The Ways of God in the Acts

The Ways of God in the Acts: 1. The Calling of the Jews

The Calling of the Jews.

Chap. 2.

IT is important, to a due understanding of the ways of God in Christianity, to have a clear perception of the teaching contained in the Acts of the Apostles. In that book we have the three great facts particularly brought before us: (1) the descent of the Holy Spirit, according to the promise of the Lord Jesus; (2) the formation of the church of God—the body of Christ, and the house of God; and (3) the propagation of the gospel of Christ far and wide.

But there are differences in the divine action which we do well to note. It is a true remark that in studying the scriptures we learn more by looking for differences than for similarities. Many generally occupy themselves with looking for parallel passages in the word, supposing it to be the best way of acquiring a knowledge of the truth; but, while not slighting this method, our souls learn greatly by carefully noting the many differences that are there, and looking to the Spirit of God about them. In the Acts we have the Spirit dealing respectively with Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles, varying somewhat His method in each connection. It is these important variations we now propose to consider.

Acts 2 shows us the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus, before leaving His own, promised the precious gift to His disciples (John 14-16). In Acts 1 we get the Lord, after His resurrection, tarrying awhile with His own before going to the Father; putting before them in some sort their new position (not yet of course telling them of union with Him as one body), and speaking to them generally of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God. They were to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father; He declares to them, “ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.” In chap. 2 the promise is seen fulfilled: the baptism of the Spirit takes place.

Now this was a wholly new thing: the saints of God had never experienced the like before. From the very beginning there have been those who through grace have been born of the Spirit; but the gift of the Spirit, sealing individual believers and baptizing all into one body, is an entirely new order of blessing, founded on redemption. That mighty work being now accomplished by which God has been vindicated and glorified, and the divine sin-purger having taken His seat on high, God is able in a righteous way to lavish every gift upon all who believe in His beloved Son. And, as one may say, Jesus received the Holy Spirit twice; first at Jordan for Himself, then on His return to glory for His saints. At Jordan the Father expressed the delight of His heart in Him as the perfect man on earth, “and the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon Him” (Luke 3:22); so that He could afterward say of Himself, “Him hath God the Father sealed” (John 6:27). But when risen and ascended, Peter could declare, “therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, He hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear” (Acts 2:33).

But the manner of the Spirit's coming was quite different in the two cases. Upon the Lord He came like a dove; the form in connection with the disciples was "cloven tongues like as of fire." Why the difference? He came upon the Lord Jesus in a form suited to the character of the blessed One Whom He was sealing. Christ was the meek and lowly One, not quenching the smoking flax, nor breaking the bruised reed. What more apt emblem of meekness than a dove? As for the disciples, they were to be witnesses as the Lord told them; hence tongues. They were cloven, for the testimony was not to be confined to the Jews, as in the day of Matt. 10—though it was to them first, as we shall soon see—but it was to branch out to Gentiles also, "to all that are afar off, as many as the Lord our God shall call." The tongues were of fire, the usual symbol of divine holiness in judgment; for the testimony of God, while bringing blessing, nevertheless judges all before it, giving no quarter to all that is of fallen man.

But let none suppose from the fiery form that this is the baptism of fire spoken of by John the Baptist in Matt. 3. John said of Christ, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." To these words doubtless our Lord alludes in Acts 1:5, "John truly baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence"; but with marked omission of "and fire." If Matt. 3 be examined, it will be seen that the baptism of fire is judgment—"He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." This is not yet; through God's longsuffering grace the baptism of the Spirit is an accomplished fact: the baptism of fire awaits another day.

The first great result of the coming of the Spirit was a striking testimony to the Jews: "To the Jew first;" "Beginning at Jerusalem." It was the feast of Pentecost, and many were in Jerusalem from far and near. To their utter surprise unlearned and ignorant men began to speak in other tongues, and to declare the wonderful works of God. This was plainly the hand of God. The men had not learned the languages; yet Parthians, Medes, Elamites, &c., heard them speaking in the tongues wherein they were born. Tongues are for a sign to unbelievers (1 Cor. 14:22). Thus did God surmount the confusion brought in at Babel. The day had not come for its removal; but God would have men of every tongue hear the glad tidings of His grace. The opinions as to the marvel were various. Some seemed thoughtful and said, "What meaneth this?" Others mocking said, "These men are full of new wine."

Then Peter stood up with the eleven. What grace, that Peter of all the apostles should be so used I am aware that the Lord had said to him, "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven"; and that here he is opening the door to the Jews, as in chap. 10. to the Gentiles. Still what abounding grace that he should be first to preach in the name of the risen Jesus! It was the preaching of a restored backslider. Grace had so wrought that he could calmly charge the Jewish nation with denying and crucifying Messiah. They might have retorted that he also had denied Him. But Peter had confessed his sin and been forgiven; and his conscience was clear and happy before God.

Let us notice his preaching. He explains the remarkable event of the day. He repudiates the insinuation of drunkenness, reminding them of the early hour, and brings forward Joel's prophecy. Had not the prophet spoken of an effusion of the Spirit in the last days? Why then need they be surprised at what had occurred? Not that Joel's prediction received then its complete fulfillment; for the Spirit was not yet poured out upon all flesh, nor had there been signs in heaven above and in the earth beneath; but it then had an incipient accomplishment—an outpouring of the Spirit had

taken place.

Peter's style in preaching Christ is noticeably different from Paul's. The apostle of the church starts with Christ as glorified, showing the wondrous results of His death and resurrection in the light of the glory with the counsels of God now accomplishing on the ground of it. Peter, on the contrary, speaks of Jesus as One Whom the Jews had known among them, marked out by God by miracles and wonders and signs; but Whom they had crucified and slain, showing also that God had raised Him and put Him at His own right hand. He had been delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. The Jews and their rulers, not knowing Him nor the voices of the prophets read every day, had fulfilled them in condemning Him (Acts 13:27). But God raised Him up, and David had spoken of it in the Psalms, as Peter proceeds to show. The time was when Peter and his companions needed to be shown Christ in the Psalms (Luke 24:27). Now he quotes several and presses them upon the consciences of his hearers. Psa. 16 is the first witness (with perhaps a clause from Psa. 21 in ver. 28). Of Whom had David spoken? "Thou wilt not leave My soul in Hades, neither wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption."

Did the Psalmist speak of himself? Nay, he was both dead and buried, and his sepulcher was known to all the Jews; he has not yet known resurrection, and certainly not exaltation by the right hand of God. But, "being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins according to the flesh he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; he, seeing this before, spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, neither His flesh did see corruption." This includes an allusion to Psa. 132 to which is added the crowning word from Psa. 110:1. The solemn conclusion of all was that God had made the crucified Jesus Lord and Christ.

What a position for the Jewish nation! convicted of the deepest enmity against God, of utter blindness as to the scriptures, of the betrayal and murder of their Messiah. The awful truth pressed itself home upon many— "they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Now notice carefully the answer, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Why this order? Why is repentance pressed rather than faith? And why must baptism precede remission of sins and the gift of the Spirit? especially as a very different order is to be observed in the case of the Gentiles in Acts 10. The answer is to be found in the peculiarity of the circumstances. These proud Jews stood convicted of the rejection and murder of Messiah. God would have this deeply felt (therefore repentance is pressed), and would have them submit to baptism in the name of the One they had despised ere blessing could be theirs. Will any say this is the usual order? It is exceptional and extraordinary; and in it we see the perfect wisdom of God's ways.

Peter assured them that the promise was to them and their children, and to all that are afar off, as many as the Lord shall call (including Gentiles); and exhorted them to save themselves from the untoward generation which was about to be visited with judgment (see also ver. 47).

Those who received His word ("gladly" is a doubtful word. See Matt. 13:20) were baptized: and the same day were added 3,000 souls. Thus did God commence His new thing in the earth, the church of God. The waiting company received the, baptism of the Spirit, and thus became the body of Christ, though as yet they knew nothing of the doctrine of it. The 3,000 were introduced by

the gift of the Spirit into the same blessed place. No such portion had been enjoyed by saints, however favored before that day. The church had no existence in O. T. times, save in the counsels of God. Christ must take His seat on high as the glorified head, and the Spirit must descend, ere such a thing could exist on earth.

But it does now exist, and the souls before us were brought into it on that memorable day. "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers." Steadfast continuance is good. To some Paul had to say, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 5:7). Not so in Jerusalem on the Pentecostal day. There are four things to be noticed here. (1) "The apostles' doctrine." What else did they, or do we, want? Apostolic doctrine is the standard and test of truth as John declares, "We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6). Are we prepared to bring all our ways and the teaching we accept to this test? Tradition is of but little worth, however ancient and widely received; what was "from the beginning" alone has a claim upon our souls. (2) "Fellowship:" What a mercy that we are not called to walk alone! In a hostile world, what a relief to the heart that God has given us the fellowship of saints! Do we value it sufficiently?

No saint is self-sufficient; we all need what God has for us by means of our brethren. But our fellowship must be holy. Better far to walk alone than compromise the Lord's name. In such a case His grace will be made sufficient for the soul, as many can testify; but such is not the ordinary Christian path, but fellowship. (3) "The breaking of bread." This had clearly a larger place in the Christianity of those days than now. While continuing daily in the temple, they broke bread "at home" on (at least) the first day of the week (Acts 20). Love was too fresh to be satisfied with a monthly or quarterly remembrance of Christ. In our day the very name is well-nigh lost, to say nothing of the reality. What are the sounds around us? One tells us of the mass, another of the sacrament; but how often do we hear God's titles, "the breaking of bread," and "the Lord's supper?" (4) "The prayers." They felt the solemnity of their position in the midst of enemies, and valued united prayer. When the apostles were "let go" in chap. iv., they at once sought out "their own company," and together they gave themselves to prayer. Do we feel our need? It is sorrowful to see saints, who are regular in their attendance at the Lord's table, indifferent to the prayer-meeting. What can be said of their condition of soul?

It is truly a lovely picture the Spirit brings before us here; first love, ardent faith, and earnest zeal for the glory of the absent Lord. But as yet all in the church were Jews; others were to be called, as succeeding chapters will show.

The Ways of God in the Acts: 2. The Calling of the Samaritans

Acts 8

WE have had before us the descent of the Holy Ghost, and His baptism of the waiting saints, constituting them the church—the body of Christ, and the house of God. We also saw that by means of the preaching of the gospel some 3,000 Jews were brought into the new circle of blessing. The following chaps. (3-7) show continued overtures to the nation. Peter promised them on God's part that, if they would repent, their sins should be blotted out, the times of refreshing should come from the presence of Jehovah, and He would send Jesus back to them. Their treatment of Stephen was the climax of their rejection of the testimony. They cast him out, and stoned, him, sending a messenger after the Lord (as it were) saying, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

In this chapter we see the work of God extending, and reaching the Samaritans. This was quite in keeping with the Lord's word in Acts 1:8, though the twelve were not the honored means. The rage of the enemy was the immediate cause of this spread of the gospel. At the time of Stephen's death, "there arose a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." It is strange that the twelve, who were in the forefront of the testimony, and consequently special objects of the enemy's spite, should have been allowed to remain. It is a fair question also, whether they should not have gone elsewhere with the gospel. To them the Lord had said, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." And He had also laid down as a general principle long before, "when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another" (Matt. 10:23); a principle carried out clearly by Paul and his companions later, even to the shaking off the dust of their feet (Acts 14:6; 17:10-14). However, God in His wisdom made important use of their presence in Jerusalem, as we shall presently see in stirring up persecution for the church. The enemy, as often before and since, over-reached himself. It only led to the spread of the truth, for "they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word." Satan never intended this. His aim was the suppression, not the spread, of the testimony.

We see a similar state of things in Phil. 1. Satan had succeeded in getting Paul imprisoned, which at first sight was a real calamity; but see how God wrought through it! The apostle was enabled to speak of Christ in quarters where he could not have gone in the ordinary way; and besides, many brethren in the Lord, who were perhaps silent in his presence, were bold in his absence to preach the word without fear.

Verse 4 in our chapter has occasioned a good deal of discussion in days ancient and modern. It is a difficulty with some that the saints as a general class should be represented as "preaching the word." That it is a serious verse for officialism is readily granted; but it is God's truth, and if traditional ideas did not becloud the mind, all who bear the Lord's name would understand it. The simple fact is that all set forth what they knew of the Lord Jesus. Every Christian is responsible to

do this, as far as God gives grace and opportunity, though it is not denied that there are special gifts from Christ, as evangelists, &c. But in these there is no room for man; it is the ascended Lord Who gives, the servants are responsible to Him alone, and the church is but the receiver of the blessing.

Among the scattered ones who preached, Philip is particularly noticed by the Spirit. "Philip went down to a city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them." This laborer was one of the seven who were set apart to distribute the church's bounty in Jerusalem.

There is no connection between the office of a deacon, and the gift of an evangelist, save that in a general way "they that have used the office of a deacon well, purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3:13). The modern notion of a deacon appointed to "read holy scriptures and homilies in the church" &c., "and to preach if he be admitted thereto by the bishop," in contrast with a priest ordained to forgive sins, and to be a dispenser of the holy sacraments, had no existence in simple apostolic days. As a deacon, Philip was chosen by the assembly, and appointed by the apostles; as an evangelist (which the Spirit elsewhere expressly declares him to have been), he had received his gift from Christ, neither the church nor the apostles having aught to say or do in the matter (Acts 21:8, Eph. 4:11). His services as deacon being no longer required (the Jerusalem saints being scattered), he is seen exercising his gift in dependence on the Lord.

Note, he preached Christ unto them. Compare verse 34 where the same Philip is seen dealing with the eunuch, "he preached unto him Jesus." Why the difference? Simply this. The Samaritans, though a foreign race, had for centuries taken Jewish ground. They had their temple on Mount Gerizim, they had the Jewish scriptures, spoke of "our father Jacob," and appropriated the Jewish hope—the coming of Messiah (John 4:12, 25). Philip therefore took them on their own ground, and announced the Christ unto them. The preaching was accompanied by many signs, as the casting out of unclean spirits, &c., "and there was great joy in that city." One man in particular was arrested. Simon the sorcerer (of whom tradition has very much to say, largely no doubt fabulous), had for years held great sway over the minds of the Samaritans, "giving out that himself was some great one," and had gained the title of "the great power of God." Numbers believed Philip's testimony and were baptized, Simon among them, astonished at the miracles and signs which were done. Alas! it was these which struck him, not the word of God. Contrast Sergius Paulus in Acts 13:12. Faith founded on miracles is but little worth. The Lord, when here, would not trust Himself to such (John 2:23-25). Miracles may arrest and convince the intellect (and confirm faith where it exists): the word of God alone can lay bare the heart and conscience. This the unhappy Simon never knew.

But tidings of the good work reach Jerusalem; and when the apostles heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent unto them Peter and John. Did Philip resent and regard as intrusion the coming of men whose place in the church was greater than his own? Nay, the work was one, whether in Jerusalem or Samaria, and all were equally interested. Besides, the power of the Spirit was too deeply felt all round to leave room for such petty feelings. And God had a special reason for sending Peter and John at that time. The new converts had not received the Holy Ghost, the great characteristic gift of Christianity, but had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. The apostles prayed for them, and laid their hands on them; and they received the

Holy Ghost. Why this order? Why did they not receive the Spirit when they believed, as the Gentiles later in Acts 10? Herein we may see the wisdom of God. Samaria and Jerusalem had been for centuries antagonistic religious centers; and had God dealt with the Samaritans exactly as with the Jews, who can say that the rivalry might not in time to come have revived under a Christian name? Have we never known such a thing in Christianity? Who does not know of the jealousy in early days between the great sees of Christendom, particularly between Rome and Constantinople, resulting at last in a total breach between east and west? God would leave no open door for this in Philip's day. Hence they must wait for the coming of the apostles from Jerusalem, ere the gift of the Spirit could be theirs. Thus did God bind the work together, and preserve unity. The saints on earth, whether Jews, Samaritans, or Gentiles, are one body, linked to the one Head in glory by the one Spirit sent down from on high. Independency of any sort misses the mind of God completely.

All this brought out what was in the heart of Simon. "When Simon saw that through laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Ghost was given, he offered them money, saying, Give me this power, that on whomsoever I lay hands, he may receive the Holy Ghost. But Peter said unto him, Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money. Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." He betrayed his utter ignorance of God. God has revealed Himself as a giver: for it is more blessed to give than to receive. He has given His Son, and in Him eternal life to us. The Spirit too is His gift, founded upon the work of Jesus. But of all this Simon knew nothing. It was power that had attracted him, and for power he craved. It was self-aggrandizement he sought, not the divine glory. Further, when Peter bade him repent and pray to God, he said, "Pray ye to the Lord for me." Where was confidence in God for himself? The Lord was to him unknown; perhaps a human intermediary could act on his behalf! So thousands of deluded souls have thought since. At this solemn point, scripture leaves him, and tells us no more.

The apostles returned home, evangelizing on their journey many villages of the Samaritans.

W. W. F.

The Ways of God in the Acts: 3. The Calling of the Gentiles

The Calling of the Gentiles.

Chap. 10.

THE time had now come, in the ways of God, for the presentation of the gospel in a formal way to the Gentiles; and Peter, spite of his strong Jewish sympathies and prejudices, was to be the honored means. This was quite in keeping with the word of the Lord to him in Matt. 16— "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." These words indicate no sort of princely supremacy (not even of a personal character, far less of a sucessional for all time); but it was a privilege and honor conferred upon the apostle. He had opened the door to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and 3,000 had entered; he was now to open it to the Gentiles. He had himself alluded to this day in Acts 2 (however little he then entered into it), saying to the Jews, "The promise is unto you and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." And speaking of the same thing in a later day, he reminded his brethren, "Ye know how that, a good while ago, God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15:7).

God would not have the moment farther deferred. The apostle had just been called who was to be the Lord's chosen vessel to bear His name before the Gentiles pre-eminently (Acts 9:15); it was fitting therefore that the door of faith should now be opened to such.

The individual first called was a remarkable character. "He was a centurion of the band called the Italian; a devout man, and one that feared. God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway." It was a rare thing probably for a Roman officer in a garrison town to be spoken of in this way. We read of one in the Gospels, who loved the Jewish nation and built for them the synagogue (Luke 7:5); but the usual character of such was in every way different. Instead of giving alms to the conquered, it was rather the custom to oppress and exact as far as possible. But we must look a little deeper here. All was not mere benevolence in Cornelius, but the fruit of a man quickened by the Spirit. Cornelius was not yet saved, for he had not yet had Christ presented to him as a Savior; but he was undoubtedly born of God. In Zaccheus's case, I think there is a difference. He merely spoke of giving half of his goods to the poor, and of restoring fourfold to any man he had wronged (Luke 19:8). This was kindness and conscientiousness; but Cornelius went much farther. Does an unconverted man fear God and pray to Him always? Assuredly not. Such fruit is never borne on the corrupt tree of the old man. "Do men gather grapes of thorns or figs of thistles?" (Matt. 7:16-18.) This godly Gentile was in reality pretty much where Old Testament saints were, born of God, confiding in Him, but not knowing accomplished redemption through a dead. and risen Christ, nor having received the gift of the Holy Ghost.

We must ever distinguish between the quickening work of the Spirit and sealing. The first was true from the first. Ever since grace introduced a hope for the sinner, there have been those in whom

the Spirit of God has wrought producing new life and faith in God; but the gift of the Spirit to believers is a wholly new thing, not true until Christ rose from the dead and went on high.

The truth as to Cornelius comes out even more clearly as we proceed with our chapter. "He saw in a vision evidently about the ninth hour of the day an angel of God coming in to him and saying unto him, Cornelius. And when he looked on him, he was afraid and said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God." How plain is all this! When did the prayers and alms of an ungodly man ever "come up for a memorial before God?" Such are "dead works," as valueless, if not as offensive, as wicked works.

To this interesting Gentile, then, the gospel of Christ was to be declared. The angel bade him send for Peter, who was then at Joppa, lodging with Simon a tanner. His obedience was prompt, his heart being simple before God; and two household servants with a devout soldier were dispatched.

At Joppa, meanwhile, the same God Who wrought with Cornelius at Caesarea, wrought with the apostle, graciously preparing him for what was before him. Peter is shown praying on the housetop (reminding us of Acts 6:4).

Falling into a trance he saw heaven opened and a vessel like a great sheet, knit at the four corners let down to the earth, filled with all manner of four-footed beasts, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. A voice bade him kill and eat. He objected, "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean."

The answer was given, "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common." To make it all the more emphatic; this was done thrice, and "the vessel was received up again into heaven." Thus did the Lord graciously wait on His servant's scruples, and instruct him as to the new work of grace now in hand. Fleshly distinctions were to obtain no longer, uncircumcised Gentiles were to be brought in, and blessed on common ground with the believing Israelite.

The middle wall of partition was now broken down, however slow those of the circumcision might be to comprehend it. While Peter pondered the vision, the servants of the centurion arrived, and the Spirit instructed him to go with them, doubting nothing. He had the precaution to take with him certain brethren from Joppa as witnesses, and to silence objectors afterward. Cornelius would have worshipped him, but Peter took him up, saying, "Stand up, I myself also am a man." Compare with this the indignation of Paul and Barnabas when the men of Lystra would have offered them sacrifice (Acts 14:14), and the words of the angel in Revelation whom John was disposed to worship (Rev. 22:9). These servants knew their place, and what was due to the Lord.

Considerable and charming simplicity is to be observed in Cornelius throughout. There was simple following of the Lord in all things step by step, and when he had Peter beneath his roof he said, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." There was no reserve, and no desire for the suppression of any part of the counsel of God. What a contrast with this day of itching ears! Peter has at last perceived that God is no respecter of persons, but that in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him. This does not go beyond the admission of the fact, that blessing is for Gentiles as truly as for Jews; as yet the truth of the one body was not declared. Of this Paul was the honored administrator. To him it was given to unfold the heavenly union of all saints with the risen and

exalted Head by the Holy Ghost. Peter went no farther than to admit the Gentiles to an equal place with the Jews: "God gave them the like gift as unto us."

His preaching is characteristic. He speaks as ever of the Lord Jesus as One Who had walked up and down among the Jews, having been anointed by God with the Holy Ghost and with power. He went about doing good, Peter and his companions being witnesses, yet was slain, hanged on a tree, but raised by God on the third day and shown to chosen witnesses. All these were public and notorious facts (he could say to his audience— "Ye know"); but Cornelius and his kinsmen and near friends had never before heard of an interest for themselves in that blessed One. They knew His path among, and His presentation to, the Jews; but they were Gentiles! Now they learn that He is a Savior for all—for "whosoever." He is the appointed Judge of living and dead; but is that all? "To Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins."

What a message from God to needy men! At once solemn and blessed, it wrought immediately with this first Gentile company that heard it. Generally audiences are divided after a discourse; as in Acts 28:24, "And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not." But there was no such division here. "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word." Though not stated, it is implied that all believed the testimony. The Spirit is given only to believers, as we read. "After that ye believed, ye were sealed with the holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). Peter's companions were astonished, "because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost." Why should they have been? Why so slow to rise to the thoughts of God? Peter afterward said, "God gave them the like gift as unto us" (Acts 11:17). Mere fleshly standing is no more, distinctions have no place in Christianity, salvation is available to flesh, whether Jew or Gentile. "There is no difference." Signs accompanied the gift, for these new believers began to speak with tongues, and magnify God.

What hindered now their formal reception among Christians? Who could withstand God? Consequently Peter asks, "Can any man forbid water, that these should be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord." Baptism is nowhere spoken of as a command (save to the evangelist), but as a privilege granted to all who are Christ's (compare Acts 8:35).

It is a sign of death—death with Christ—a figure of salvation and the washing away of sins. In apostolic days, when things were done according to God, it was the first act of the believer. As remarked before, the order here varies noticeably from that in chaps. 2. and 8.

In chap. 2. the conscience-stricken Jews must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ ere they could have remission of sins, and the gift of the Spirit.

In chap. 8. the Samaritans were baptized by Philip, but had to wait for the Spirit's seal till the apostles came down. In the first case God would humble the proud rejectors of His Son unto the very dust; in the second God would preserve unity.

Here at Caesarea neither consideration had a place, consequently the Holy Ghost fell upon them at once. They heard of remission of sins through faith in the name of Jesus, they received the testimony, and then the Spirit of God. This is what we are warranted to expect. Let the gospel be but simple and full, and God will not fail in His blessed part. To His name be all praise.

W. W. F.

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