



The Story Of Salvation
NCTM Tuesday Night Studies 2010
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27. The Early Church in the book of Acts

The apostle Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addressed the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea with a powerful sermon. He proclaimed the resurrected Jesus as Lord and Messiah, the one they had crucified. The Holy Spirit not only empowered Peter's words, but powerfully worked in the hearts of many people. Those who came to faith in Jesus received the gifts of repentance and forgiveness of sins and were baptised. On the day of Pentecost about three thousand persons were added. On subsequent days the Lord kept on adding to their number those who were being saved (Acts 2:47). The Lord himself, as Jesus said, is building his church (Mt 16:18) or as Peter had proclaimed, the Lord is "calling" his people to himself (Acts 2:39). Those who believed

devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:42–47a).

In these verses we get a glimpse of the life of the earliest church. The new believers seriously and earnestly persisted in four things,

- a. The apostles' teaching.
- b. The fellowship.
- c. To the breaking of bread and
- d. The prayers.

The apostles' teaching

We know what was taught by the apostles. We have the New Testament. The believers lived in a state of wonder and awe as they saw every day the stark reality of God in healing and deliverances and changed lives of people being added to the church.

The fellowship

And Luke does not mean tea and biscuits after the church service. Fellowship (*koinonia*) is built on the root meaning: common, having in common, sharing. "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." *Koinonia* (fellowship) means having things in *koina* (in common). They shared their possessions as freely with the needy as though they did not even own them. We find this again in Acts 4:32–35.

The breaking of bread

This may refer to the Lord's Supper, or it may refer to simple table fellowship. "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." Breaking bread and eating their food was done with glad and generous hearts. They just loved to be together with one another in this way almost every day. That was the kind of love the early Christians had for each other when they stood in awe of God.

The Prayers

This may mean the formal prayers when gathered in the temple or when they were together in their homes, “praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.” Most probably both. John Piper writes. “Luke says they focussed on God—they praised God. These were not the kind of churchy get togethers where you can talk all night about church, but not about Jesus. When they got in touch with each other, they got in touch with God. They prayed.”¹

Michael Green comments: “No doubt the primitive attempt at communal living at Jerusalem was a failure, but what a glorious failure! Until there is a real sharing of money and possessions...unbelievers are unlikely to remark on the quality of our fellowship. Real *koinania* in the Holy Spirit means that we cannot stand apart from those with whom we have this fellowship, no matter that it costs.”²

The Jesus Movement

Pentecost is a Jewish feast. Peter, a Jew, preached to the Jews who lived in Jerusalem and Judea and to devout Jews from every nation under the sun. He quoted from the Hebrew Bible. Early Christianity and the early church were what we could call a Jesus Movement. They were Messiah-ites. In its first years, this was a religious sect which blossomed exclusively within the confines of Judaism, and revolved around Jerusalem as its spiritual home. The original followers of Jesus were all Jews, and they had no intention of being anything other than faithful and pious Jews. There does not seem to be a desire to preach the gospel to the despised Samaritans and the infidel Gentiles. The converted Jews continued to worship in the Jerusalem temple, to obey the Law of Moses. The living heart of their faith was not so much the death as the resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus was executed, despair had overwhelmed His followers; they seemed to have a dead leader and a lost cause. It was Jesus’ resurrection from the dead that transformed these broken and despairing people into the fiery apostle and martyrs of a new faith. In the thought and preaching of the early Church, the resurrection was seen as God’s mighty vindication of all Jesus’ claims: He really was the long-promised Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world, and the source of God’s gift of the Holy Spirit to all who obeyed Him. From then on the entire history of the Christian Church is rooted in one central reality—the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Messiah) from the dead. If Jesus of Nazareth had not risen, there would be no Church history. By the end of the first century this Jewish movement had almost exclusively become a Gentile movement. How did this astonishing change take place?

The book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit tells us how the Church dealt with the problem of the Hellenists versus the Hebrews, and the overcoming of the Church’s negative attitude towards the Samaritans and the Gentiles. All was under the relentless drive of the Spirit.

The Hebrews and the Hellenists

Not everything was going smoothly in the earliest Jerusalem community. There arose a tension between two different cultural groups (tribes): the Aramaic speaking Jews and the Greek speaking Jews. In general the Hebrews thought of themselves as being the true Jews, born and bred in their Jewish homeland. The Hellenists were looked upon as partly foreign and perhaps corrupted by contact with despised pagan societies. They tended to think of themselves as being more cultured and civilised than their Palestinian cousins, who they thought were rather narrow-minded and too traditional. These existing problems between those two groups carried over into the Jerusalem Church, despite their common faith in the risen Messiah. We noticed how the

¹ From: [The Fear of God and Freedom from Goods](#). A sermon preached by John Piper on the 2nd of December, 1990.

² Green, Michael, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), pp. 104–105.

earliest church cared for their poorer members who would have been the orphans and widows. However, the Hellenists complained that their widows were not getting a fair deal. Acts 6:1–6 tells us how the apostles tackled that problem. Seven men of good standing and full of the Spirit and of wisdom were appointed. All seven had Greek names indicating they had been chosen from the Hellenists.

The non-traditional attitudes of the Hellenistic Messiah-ites surfaced in a dangerous way when they began to take a more openly critical standpoint towards the history and traditions of Israel. Their fresh views showed less respect for the temple and the law of Moses than was customary. Their spokesman was the Hellenist Stephen and his lengthy speech recorded in Acts 7 shows us the sort of criticisms that the Hellenistic believers could make of Jewish history and tradition. This provoked and outraged the Jewish religious authorities and led to the first great persecution of the Church. Stephen was murdered and many believers were forced to flee from Jerusalem. Mainly the Hellenistic believers were affected. The more traditional Aramaic speaking believers, represented by the apostles, were mostly left alone. Luke makes clear that the apostles were not affected by the persecution (Acts 8:1). “Ordinary Palestinian believers who were scattered from Jerusalem would have dispersed into other parts of Palestine, and then reassembled in Jerusalem after the trouble had died down, as Acts 11:1 indicates. Hellenistic believer, however, appear to have left Palestine entirely.”³

The Samaritans receive the Gospel

Who were the Samaritans? They were partly related to the Jews and traced their inheritance all the way to their father Jacob. When the Northern Kingdom was taken in exile other nations came and mixed with them. Their religion was very similar to Judaism. They recognize the Pentateuch as the written Word of God, yet rejected the other books of the Old Testament. They practiced circumcision, and observed the Sabbath and festivals, but their worship had been deeply influenced by other things. They worshipped in their temple on Mt. Gerizim. They expected the Messiah as announced in the books of Moses. Jews and Samaritans are separated by many centuries of deep hostilities. The land was regarded as unclean and contact with these people like sharing a meal or a common cup with them made a Jew unclean (Jn 4). Marriage between Jews and Samaritans were considered illegal. Their interactions had led to blood shed and abiding hatred—In A.D. 6 and 7, some Samaritans had scattered bones in the Jerusalem temple during Passover and in 52 A.D. Samaritans massacred Galilean pilgrims. John explains that they have nothing to do with one another (Jn 4:9). We can see this immense hostility in the response of the disciples when entering a Samaritan village where they were not allowed to stay: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Lk 9:54)

The church in Jerusalem was doing so well as the early chapters 2–6 of Acts tell us. “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Knowing the negative attitude towards the Samaritan, how long would it have taken before the good news about Jesus Messiah would be preached in Samaria? But the Holy Spirit caused persecution and the scattering of the believers was the event which first took the Jesus Movement into the non-Jewish world, which Luke narrates in Acts 8. It was not one of the 12 apostles who was responsible for bringing the gospel to the Samaritans but a Hellenistic Christian named Philip. He and fellow believers

³ Needham, N.R., *2000 Years of Christ's Power. Part One: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1997, 2002), pp. 44–47.

broke through the age-old divide between the Jews and the despised Samaritans. What a great miracle!

Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word. Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did, for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many who were possessed; and many others who were paralysed or lame were cured. So there was great joy in that city (Acts 8:4–8).

This tremendous good news filtered down to the church in Jerusalem and they sent Peter and John to them.

The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15–17).

Why was it necessary for the apostles to be sent down? Geoff Bingham writes: “Answers could be many. E.g. ‘The Samaritans needed to be welcomed into the Church by those from Jerusalem.’ ‘The apostles needed to see the gift of the Spirit was for the Samaritans also.’ ‘The Samaritans needed to be reassured and know that the breach was healed between (Christian) Jew and (Christian) Samaritan.’ What is clear is that the Samaritans had a virtual ‘Samaritan Pentecost’, and did receive the Spirit through the instrumentality of the apostles...Most commentators agree that something visible happened which left no doubt as to the acceptance by God of the Samaritans.”⁴ It was only then that the apostles themselves proclaimed the good news in many Samaritan villages (Acts 8:25).

The Gentiles receive the Gospel

The salvation of the Samaritans was a central point between the preaching of the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2) and the preaching of the gospel to full-blooded Gentiles (Acts 10).

If the gulf between Jews and Samaritans was wide, the gulf between them and Gentiles was enormous. In the Old Testament circumcision was the covenant sign for the people of God. It symbolised consecration to God and became a mark of Israel’s distinctiveness. On the contrary uncircumcision represented the Gentiles, those outside the covenant with God. Uncircumcision became a symbol for stubbedness and unbelief. The Gentiles as uncircumcised were indeed the people of rebellion and disobedience, and they were thus viewed with contempt. The gentiles were regarded by Jews as “dogs” and are so called in the incident of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:27). It is written in the Jewish literature that “as the sacred food was intended...not for the dogs, the Torah was intended to be given...not for the Gentiles.” In the Bible and in many countries today a dog is a different animal than our darling pets. They are an utterly unclean animal, a filthy scavenger disposing of refuse and even dead bodies. The animal thus symbolises uncleanness. For the Jews the Gentiles are like dogs in their way of life, they live without the Torah, especially without its purity laws.⁵ They should as far as possible be altogether avoided, because they were unclean and their houses were unclean.

Something extraordinary needed to happen for the apostles to venture into Gentile territory or even enter a home of a gentile, which is just not done. The apostles were still so much stuck in their Jewish culture that they were still reluctant to go to the Gentiles despite the Lord Jesus’ examples and his word to them to bear witness to the ends of the earth (Lk 24:47).

⁴ Bingham, Geoffrey C., *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Blackwood: New Creation Publications Inc., 1982), pp. 46–47.

⁵ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery. An encyclopedic exploration of the images, symbols, motifs, metaphors, figures of speech and literary patterns of the Bible.* General Editors: Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 324–325.

Cornelius and the Gentiles (Acts 10:1 - 11:18)⁶

With the word of the Lord steadily bearing fruit and increasing, the time had come for the gospel to cross the barrier that separated Jews from Gentiles and to be presented directly to the latter. Events moved to a new stage as God prepared for their entry into his people, The length of this account of Cornelius and the Gentiles (sixty-six verses in all) and the way it is told twice indicate its very great importance to Luke in the context of Acts.¹⁸ The passage stands in a strategic position within the book: it constitutes the climax to its first half as well as to Peter's apostolic ministry, and signals a fundamental turning point in Luke's narrative of the spread of the gospel to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8).

Four issues receive special emphasis in Luke's presentation of the material: first, the early church resisted the idea of Gentiles being evangelized directly or accepted into the Christian fellowship without first becoming Jewish proselytes (cf. 10:14, 28; 11:2-3, 8). With the apostolic testimony at Pentecost to Jesus as Lord and Christ, and the mighty outpouring of the Spirit, the universal movement had begun (Acts 2). What started with the twelve in Jerusalem continued throughout Judea and Samaria and was moving towards the ends of the earth (1:8). Yet the apostles have to be 'sold' on the Gentile mission, which is extraordinary given Jesus' commission to them to bear witness to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8; cf. Luke. 24:47) and their experience of Pentecost.¹²⁰ Peter was reluctant to go to the Gentiles, visiting Cornelius and his Gentile friends only after he had been constrained by divine revelation (10:9-16). His preaching of the gospel in the home of those who were 'uncircumcised' aroused great alarm among believers in Jerusalem who later took him to task for his conduct (11:1-3).'

Secondly, it was God himself who introduced Gentiles into the church and miraculously showed his approval (cf. 10:3, 11-16, 19-20, 22, 30-33, 44-46; 11:5-10, 13, 15-18). The divine initiative and action are patently clear throughout the narrative: by means of divine visions and revelations to Cornelius and Peter, through God's preparing the hearts of the Gentiles to hear the gospel, and by his pouring out the Holy Spirit upon them, cleansing their hearts by faith and granting them repentance unto life. God's Holy Spirit, who confirmed the word of the gospel, declared by his manifest presence that these Gentiles were truly God's children.²³ 'The Holy Spirit's coming upon Cornelius and the others in a manner strictly comparable to Pentecost is the final and most compelling indication of the new divine initiative (Acts 10:44-46; 11:15)' (Rapske 1998: 241).

Thirdly, it was Peter, the leader of the Jerusalem apostles, rather than Paul, whom God used as the human instrument to open the door to the Gentiles (cf. 10:23, 34-43, 47-48; 11:15-17). Peter's speech to Cornelius is described as 'the message God sent to the people of Israel telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ' (10:36), in other words, what was promised in Isaiah 52:7. According to the prophet, Jerusalem's coming redemption would be displayed 'in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God' (52:10). With Cornelius' conversion, 'what was promised by the prophet and picked up by the programmatic Acts 1:8 begins to unfold further'.¹²⁴ Since Jesus is truly 'Lord of all' (v. 36), then the conversion of the Gentiles is a necessary consequence. Luke is concerned to make clear the connection between the salvation of Israel and the Gentile mission, and what better way to do this than by showing that God used Peter, the leader of the Jerusalem apostles, to initiate Jesus'

⁶ The following text is from Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth* (New Studies in Biblical Theology, vol. 10, Apollos/IVP, Downers Grove, 2001), pp. 142–5.

mission to the Gentiles through his apostolic testimony. Peter has already borne witness to Israel in Jerusalem, he was involved in the coming of the Spirit upon the Samaritans, and is now God's chosen witness to open the door of faith to the Gentiles (cf. 1:8). The twelve, then, continue the ministry of the Lord's Servant which had to do with Israel's redemption, on the one hand, and divine salvation reaching the ends of the earth, on the other (Is. 49:6).

Fourthly, the Jerusalem church subsequently accepted the Gentiles' conversion to Jesus the Messiah without insisting that they come via the Jewish route. Although called to account for his actions in the house of Cornelius (11:2-3), Peter explained to the Jewish believers' 25 in Jerusalem how God had prepared him with the vision of clean and unclean animals, then led him to Cornelius' house where he and his Gentile friends gladly heard the message of salvation. For Peter and the others, however, the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit on all who heard the apostolic message was decisive confirmation that God had graciously cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles and accepted them. The apostle realized that the words of the risen Christ to him and his fellow-disciples (1:5) which had been fulfilled at Pentecost were fulfilled anew here. When the Jerusalem believers heard Peter's account, they had no further objections but praised God, acknowledging that he had 'even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life' (11:18).

The Cornelius episode was not simply an exceptional situation, but had paradigmatic and normative significance: it was to 'the Gentiles', that is, 'as a class of people, not to Cornelius and his friends alone', that God has given this repentance. 127 Significantly, when Peter later rehearsed this story before the Jerusalem Council (15:7-11), he did not just recount a personal experience, but drew emphatic theological conclusions from the incident in order to justify Paul's work among the Gentiles generally. The incident is 'for Luke the test-case par excellence for the admission of Gentiles into the Church' (S. G. Wilson, 1973:177).