

The Great Commission and Cornelius

Many people believe that Cornelius was saved the moment the Holy Spirit fell on him. I disagree. The account of his conversion is recorded in Acts 10.

It is clear that the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his household before their baptism (Acts 10:47). At its core the issue is whether or not water baptism is for the remission of sins as stated in Acts 2:38 and many other passages (1 Peter 3:21, Acts 22:16, John 3:5, Mark 16:16). Or, is there some other way God has designed for man to receive remission of his transgressions?

I want to address something I had overlooked until I was doing some reading where it was brought to my attention. In his preaching to Cornelius and his household about Jesus, Peter said in Acts 10:43, "To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." (NKJV) In the very next verse (verse 44), we are told that "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word." (Acts 10:44 NKJV)

I want you to take a closer look at verse 43, three words there that I had overlooked. What were they? The words "through His name." It was pointed out to me that words do have meanings and they are not just written to take up space. "Through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:43 NKJV)

Here is the point: the phrase "through His name" designates a relationship with the name. Meaning what? For that, we have to go back to the Great Commission Jesus gave in Matt. 28:18-20. Let me quote that:

"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen." (Matt. 28:18-20 NKJV)

Here is something the reader may not be aware of, a thing easily overlooked. Do you know the word translated "in," where it says "in the name," should correctly be translated by the word "into"? That is to say, the Greek means "into." If you do not believe that, check it out for yourself by getting a New American Standard original edition reference Bible and checking the side margin or center column references. If you do not have one, here is what you will find: the exact words, "Lit., into." Lit. means literal, meaning "into" is the literal translation. The original American Standard translation of 1901 used the word "into" in the text itself, as does the more recent Literal Translation of the Bible.

So what is the big deal, you may ask? Jesus is teaching that when we are baptized in water, as per Acts 2:38, we are being baptized into a relationship not only with Him but also with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Does this comport with other scriptures? Yes, it does. Here are some passages that do not just teach that we are baptized into Christ but

specifically state it. (I add that no one doubts that the baptism of the Great Commission is water baptism since man is directed to perform it.)

“Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3 NKJV) Gal. 3:27, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” (NKJV) One gets into Christ by water baptism.

Please note what Paul said in 1 Cor. 1:13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (NKJV) Do you know that the word “in” here should be the word “into”? Again, check it out using the references I have already alluded to. The Corinthians were not being baptized into a relationship with Paul, or any other man, but with Christ, and he wanted them to know that.

I think it goes without saying that all agree the Christian has a relationship with the Holy Spirit, and the scriptures also teach the same relationship with the Father and the Son, Jesus. Hear Jesus, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word (is baptism for the remission of sins, Acts 2:38, a part of the word?—DS); and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (John 14:23 NKJV) Jesus again speaks in John 17:20-21, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.” (NKJV) See also Rom. 8:9-11.

The point I am trying to make is that when we are baptized according to Jesus, the baptism of the Great Commission, we are put into that relationship with Him where He dwells within us, as does the Father, and the Holy Spirit—we in them, they in us. In voluntarily coming into this relationship, we are willingly and gladly bringing ourselves into submission to their authority and receive all the blessings that go along with that.

That the baptism of the Great Commission was water baptism goes without saying, as the command was made to men to do this. Only God, not man, can baptize one in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, those they taught and baptized were to go out and do the same thing (“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” Matt. 28:20 NKJV) and that, perpetually, down through time. This is the “one baptism” of Eph. 4:5 and the baptism that establishes a relationship with Christ.

Now, let us make the application to the case of Cornelius. I quote again Acts 10:43, “To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” (NKJV) So here is the argument. That which we are to receive through His name (the remission of sins) is a little hard to receive, is it not, unless and until we have some relationship with that name (with Him)? That relationship is granted by way of obedience to the Great Commission, wherein we are baptized into a relationship with Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.

But, there is more. What did the Great Commission of Jesus in Matt. 28 demand of a man? Two things—faith and baptism (Matt. 28:19). Disciples were first to be made, from which it is evident that believers were to be made, and then they were to be baptized.

Mark 16:16 makes it even clearer. “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16 NKJV) I have said before and say again, the problem with denominational teaching on this subject is that the import of what they teach is the same as if Mark 16:16 read, “He who believes and is not baptized will be saved,” for they say it is not essential. I believe Jesus’ words are clear.

Do I think it was certain that Cornelius would be saved prior to his baptism? If we are talking about God’s foreknowledge, yes, absolutely, just as were the faithful Old Testament prophets who were given the Holy Spirit, but neither were saved without the blood of Jesus which we come into contact with via baptism in our dispensation of time, the Christian dispensation. Paul says we are baptized into Christ’s death, which is where He shed his blood, “Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?” (Rom. 6:3 NKJV)

Now, would God place his Spirit upon one not yet in a saved condition (Cornelius)? He could; none of us would deny his power to do so. Would He do it? Who is to say He would not if he had a purpose in doing so? Might there be a purpose here? What?

The gospel was not being taken to the Gentiles as God intended. Some say as much as 10 years had transpired between that first sermon on the Day of Pentecost and Peter going to Cornelius, a Gentile. Even with Peter, an inspired apostle, it took a direct intervention from God himself to convince him he needed to go and talk with a Gentile about salvation. And, as all Bible students know, he took flak for it from the Jews back in Jerusalem and had to defend himself. What convinced those Jews that it was acceptable? Peter’s recounting the fact that the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles. Would they ever have gone on their own to the Gentiles had this not happened?

When God has a purpose, He may give His Spirit to even a vile sinner. Certainly, I do not place Cornelius in any such class, but I do know he needed the blood of Jesus. But, what I have reference to here is the case of one so vile he was a ringleader in the death of Jesus—Caiaphas.

The Bible says, “And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish.’ Now this he did not say on his own authority; but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation.” (John 11:49-51 NKJV)

Do I think the Holy Spirit remained with Caiaphas? Of course not. But, for a short period of time, because God had a purpose, it was given to him. God had a purpose in giving the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household. He accomplished that purpose. The Holy Spirit was not given to Cornelius to save him, nor was it given to him because he was already saved. Like everyone else, Cornelius had to believe and obey the gospel to be saved, and that included being baptized for the remission of sins, or as Jesus put it, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16 NKJV)

