

WAS CORNELIUS SAVED BEFORE WATER BAPTISM?

-by A. Ralph Johnson

The Bible plainly teaches that we are baptized *into Christ* (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27; 1Cor. 12:13). In Ac. 10:44-48 Cornelius was baptized in the Holy Spirit, followed by baptism in water. It is sometime argued that the fact that Cornelius was baptized in the Holy Spirit before baptism in water shows that one is saved before water baptism.

Perhaps the simplest answer is that baptism, whether in the Holy Spirit or in water, is the point at which one comes into Christ. Christ baptized in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8). We are baptized in water (Mat. 28:19). It may be that the result is the same. However, it is not conclusive, and there is certainly no basis for maintaining that Jesus continues to baptize in the Holy Spirit today.

The problem is, how could the Household of Cornelius have received baptism of the Holy Spirit without having “remission of sins”? Remission was to be received “*through His name*” (Acts 10:43) and it was in water that they were baptized “*in the name of Jesus Christ.*” (Acts 10:48. cf. Matt 28:18-20; Acts 2:38; 8:16; 19:5.)

In Acts 11, Peter explains to the Jews at Jerusalem how God had signified both by vision and by baptism of the Holy Spirit that Gentiles should also be accepted (11:17; 15:8). Cornelius had been told that Peter would tell him “*words*” whereby he would be “*saved*” (11:14). However, the Holy Spirit “*fell upon*” them as Peter “*began to speak*” (11:15), indicating that his words were not completed. Thus, by viewing the words he was saying when he was interrupted and considering them with the words that he spoke immediately after the event, it may be possible to know just how these words could provide salvation.

In 10:34-42 Peter tells Cornelius of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, and that He will judge the living and the dead. In verse 43 he begins to tell what they must do to be saved (cf. Ac. 2:37; 22:10). He declares that “*Through his name, whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins.*” Notice that immediately after the interruption of this message Peter turns to the need for “*water*” and “*commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*” (10:47-48).

The requirement for baptism to be “*in the name*” ties verse 48 directly to verse 43 which says that *remission of sins* is “*through His name.*” We may therefore reasonably conclude that Peter is here speaking the “*words*” whereby they were saved.

We find this same relationship between baptism and the name of Christ in many other passages. In the Great Commission Jesus told them to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, “*baptizing them into (eis) the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*” The companion account, in Mark 16:16, adds, “*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved...*” (Mat. 28:19).

On the day of Pentecost, in answer to their stricken cry of “*what shall we do?*” Peter commands them to “*Repent and be baptized, every one of you in (epi) the name of Jesus Christ unto (eis) the remission of your sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For to you is the*

promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto Him. And with many other words he testified and exhorted them, saying, save yourselves...They then that received the word were baptized and there were added unto them three thousand souls” (2:37-41).

In Acts 22:16, after Saul (Paul) had seen Jesus (v.8); asked, “*What shall I do, Lord?” (v.10); had gone to Damascus, where he was to be told what he “*must do*” (22:10; 9:6); was three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking (9:9); prayed (9:11); had seen a vision of Ananias coming and laying hands on him that he might receive his sight (9:12); was healed (22:13); yet, after all of this he still had his sins. Ananias said to him, “*Why do you wait? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name” (cf. Rom. 10:13-17).**

In each of the above cases we find several things in common with the conversion of Cornelius: 1. Calling on the name of Christ; 2. Forgiveness of sins; and 3. Salvation,--all accomplished in obedience to the command to be baptized.

Water baptism is indicated by examining the cases. In Mt. 28:19 the baptism was to be done by those sent out. In Ac. 2:38-41 it was something that they were exhorted to do. In Ac. 22:16 the necessity to “*arise*” would only fit water baptism. This was the same baptism as that of the Eunuch (8:36-39) and the Jailer (16:33). This is the “*one baptism*” (Eph. 4:5) into “*one body*” (Eph 4:4 cf. 1:22-23), that was cleansed “*by the washing of water through the word*” (Eph 5:26). It was in obedience from the heart (Rom 6:17) to the words (Acts 11:14; Rom 10:17) spoken through the Holy Spirit that they were all baptized into one body (1Cor 12:13). Water baptism continued after Holy Spirit baptism had ceased with the call of the Gentiles. This is the same one in which the heart is “*sprinkled from an evil conscience*” (with blood --Heb. 10:19; 9:13,14) and the body is “*washed with pure water.*” It is the one in which water, Spirit and blood “*agree in one*” (1Jn. 5:6,8), and in which one is “*born of God*” (1Jn. 5:4; Jn. 3:5; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:13).

In this baptism the emphasis is on “*faith in His name.*” Without the “*appeal to God for a clear conscience through the resurrection of Christ,*” it is invalid (1Pe. 3:21) and must be performed again (Ac. 19:1-5). This is not salvation by “*faith only*” (James 2:14, 19, 24) which is “*dead,*” being alone (2:17, 20, 26). Obedience from the heart (Rom. 6:17) works with faith to give it life (James 2:22; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12, 13). (Cf. Heb. 5:9; 1Pe 1:22; Ac. 5:32; Lk. 6:46; Mat. 7:21-26; Jn. 15:14; James 1:22-25).

The twelve disciples at Ephesus who had been baptized with John the Baptist’s baptism “*unto repentance*” were rebaptized “*into (eis) the name of the Lord Jesus*” (Ac. 19:1-6). The Samaritans (Ac. 8:16) likewise had not yet had the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them, but were already baptized “*into (eis) the name of the Lord Jesus.*”

In Gal. 3:26-27, Paul makes the whole matter perfectly clear when he explains that the process of becoming “*children of God by faith in Christ Jesus*” is accomplished by “*putting on Christ*” in being “*baptized into Christ.*” “*If any man is in Christ he is a new creature*” (2Co. 5:17) and is therefore under “*no condemnation*” (Rom. 8:1).

It was quite possible that the Holy Spirit could act upon one who had not yet been cleansed by the blood of Christ (Lk. 2:25; 1Sam. 10:10; John 11:51), and may have done so in the case of Cornelius in order to show that the gentiles were acceptable to God (Ac. 11:17). There is no statement to the effect that Cornelius had his sins forgiven before he was baptized in water. He had to “*obey the gospel*” (Rom. 6:17;10:16; 2Thes 1:8; 1Pe. 4:17) just like everyone else. He had to “*arise and be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord,*” (Ac. 22:16) just like Paul. He had to “*Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*” in order to be “*saved,*” just like those on Pentecost (Ac. 2:38,40; 11:14,18).

In baptism we are “*baptized into (eis) Christ.*” We are “*Baptized into His death*” (Rom. 6:3,4) in which we are “*reconciled to God*” by contact with his blood and so “*justified*” and “*saved*” from God’s wrath (5:,10). Our old man is “*crucified with him that the body of sin might be done away*” (6:6). Having *died with Christ* in baptism (6:3,4) we are *justified from sin* (6:7,18; Col. 2:13) through “*obedience from the heart to that form of teaching which was delivered*” (Rom. 6:17). Just like the Israelites who began their escape from Egypt through the leading of God before being “*saved*” the day they were baptized in the cloud and in the sea (1Cor. 10:1, 2; Ex. 14:13, 15, 28-30) so God’s Spirit may have come upon Cornelius before actually being saved in water baptism.