



Good News for the Whole World! (Acts 9:32-10:48)

Commentary: Week Eighteen

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

2. Peter's Witness in the Coastal Towns [9:32-43](#)

With Paul home in Tarsus, the narrative focuses once more on Peter. He last appeared in connection with the Samaritan mission ([8:14-25](#)). Now he participated in the greater Judean mission, evangelizing the coastal cities. Finally, he would witness to a Gentile, a key incident in establishing the mission “to the ends of the earth” ([10:1-11:18](#)). This small section on Peter's witness to the coastal towns consists of two miracle stories: the healing of Aeneas (vv. [32-35](#)) and the raising of Dorcas (vv. [36-43](#)).

(1) The Healing of Aeneas [9:32-35](#)

[9:32-35](#) Peter is described as “traveling about,” evidently indicating a preaching tour. He stopped in Lydda to visit the “saints” there. Just how the Christian community began there we are not told. Perhaps it was the product of Philip's ministry, since he would have passed through Lydda on his journey northward from Azotus to Caesarea ([8:40](#)). At Lydda, presumably in the Christian community, Peter found a paralytic by the name of Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years. Peter took the initiative to heal Aeneas without any request, much as Jesus did on occasion (cf. [Luke 7:13-15](#); [13:12](#)). The healing was accomplished by a healing word, calling on the name of Jesus. Peter then told Aeneas to rise and “prepare [his] couch” (“take care of your mat,” NIV). The expression is thoroughly ambiguous. It could be taken in the sense of his folding up his mat, just as Jesus commanded another paralytic to rise and take up his ([Mark 2:11](#); [Luke 5:24](#)). The same wording, however, is used for preparing a couch for dining, the Jewish custom being to dine while reclining on a couch. If Peter's directions are taken in this sense, the reference would be to the man's thorough recovery and taking of sustenance for further strength (cf. [Luke 8:55](#); [Acts 9:19](#)). In either case, Aeneas's ability to rise to his feet and prepare the mat is certain evidence that his paralysis had been cured.

Lydda was located in the fertile coastal plain of Sharon, which extends north from Joppa to Mt. Carmel. Luke said the people of the region turned to the Lord as a result of Aeneas's healing. One recalls how the news of Jesus' miracles also spread to the surrounding neighborhood and attracted crowds to him. As we have seen before, the miracles in Acts are signs of the power of Jesus and often serve as the initial basis that leads to ultimate commitment. They are never, however, a substitute for faith (cf. [3:19f.](#) with [3:19f.](#)).

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 244-264.

An interesting linkage exists between the two healing stories in [9:32–43](#). For one, the person healed is designated by name, which was usually not the case in early miracle stories and perhaps reflects vivid community reminiscence. Second, the Christians are referred to as “saints” in both accounts (vv. [34](#), [41](#)), a point the NIV obscures by using “believers” in v. [41](#). “Saints” is a rather rare designation for believers in Acts. Finally, the command to “rise” (*anastēthi*) is central to both healings, Aeneas from his paralysis (v. [34](#)), Dorcas from death (v. [40](#)). These close relationships could indicate that these two stories of Peter’s healing in the Plain of Sharon were bound inseparably in the tradition Luke followed.

(2) The Raising of Dorcas [9:36–43](#)

The story of Dorcas is reminiscent of earlier raisings of the dead, such as Elijah’s raising the son of the widow of Zarephath ([1 Kgs 17:17–24](#)) and the raising of the Shunammite woman’s son by Elisha ([2 Kgs 4:32–37](#)), both of which are in turn echoed in the story of the widow’s son, who was raised by Jesus ([Luke 7:11–17](#)). The closest correspondence of all, however, is to be found in Jesus’ raising of Jairus’s daughter ([Luke 8:49–56](#); [Mark 5:35–43](#)).

[9:36](#) The story takes place in Joppa, the main port city of Judea, located on the Philistine coast some ten or eleven miles northwest of Lydda. In Joppa was a “female disciple” named Tabitha. Luke provided the translation “Dorcas” for his Greek readers. Both terms mean *gazelle* in English. She is described as “always doing good and helping the poor,” which enhances the pathos of her death.

[9:37–38](#) While Peter was still in Lydda, Tabitha became sick and died. According to custom, her body was washed for burial. It was then placed in an upper room, which was not particularly the custom. Perhaps this was the most available room. It could also be that the Christians of Joppa were performing, as it were, a symbolic act, indicating their faith that she would rise. In any event, knowing that Peter was close by—a distance of three hours journey by foot—they sent two men to Lydda to urge Peter to hasten to Joppa without delay.

[9:39](#) When Peter arrived at Joppa, he was taken to the upper room and there greeted by a group of widows who were in mourning. [Acts 6:1–6](#) already evidenced numerous Jewish Christian widows. In the later Pauline churches a special order of “senior” widows looked after the other widows in the congregations ([1 Tim 5:9f.](#)). Though such a degree of organization probably had not developed in the churches of Dorcas’s day, her charity to the widows would qualify her as a genuine precursor of those women who helped widows so that the church would not be burdened ([1 Tim 5:16](#)). The helplessness of these widows further heightens the pathos of the story. Their neediness is exemplified in their showing Paul the tunics and robes Dorcas had made, which they probably were wearing.

[9:40](#) Peter requested that they leave him alone in the room with the body, just as Jesus had sent everyone from the room except the girl’s parents and his three most trusted disciples when he raised Jairus’s daughter ([Mark 5:40](#)). Falling to his knees before the body, Peter prayed, turned to the body, and said, “Tabitha, arise.” Naturally Peter addressed her by the Aramaic form of her name, and Luke was careful to preserve the distinction. He had used the Greek form Dorcas in his narrative (v. [39](#)). But Luke was perhaps aware of more than a linguistic nicety. Jesus’ words to Jairus’s daughter were, “Little girl, arise,” which Mark preserved in the original Aramaic form, “*Talitha koum*” ([Mark 5:41](#)). In Aramaic, Peter’s words would have been almost identical, “*Tabitha koum*”—only a single consonant’s difference. In the Aramaic churches who cherished the story of Tabitha, the similarity would not be missed. In the

footsteps of his Master, and through the power of his Master (the *prayer* shows that), Peter worked the same miracle of “resurrection.” As with Jairus’s daughter, the widow’s son at Nain, Lazarus, and Dorcas, it was not a matter of resurrection but of resuscitation, of temporary restoration of life. But all the miracles of raising from the dead are in a real sense “signs,” pointers to the one who has power even over death and is himself the resurrection and the life for all who believe and trust in him.

9:41–42 The story concludes with Peter presenting Dorcas alive to “the believers and the widows.” That the widows are separated from the believers does not indicate the widows were not Christians but serves to single them out as the group who served to benefit most from her restoration to life. The description that Peter “presented” her to them reminds one of the similar expression of how Elijah “gave” her son back to the widow of Zarephath ([1 Kgs 17:23](#)) and how Jesus “gave” her son back to the widow of Nain ([Luke 7:15](#)). In these two instances the restoration of an only son to a destitute widow was indeed a gift, and Peter’s presentation of Dorcas alive was no less a gift to the widows of Joppa. As with the healing of Aeneas, so with the raising of Dorcas, the news spread quickly in Sharon’s Plain; and many believed in the Lord, in the *risen* Lord.

9:43 Peter remained in Joppa, residing with a tanner who shared with him the name of Simon. Luke often mentioned the names of hosts or the particular trade of persons. He had an eye for human-interest detail. This particular tanner lived by the sea. This location may be due to the fact that tanners used sea water in their trade, but the ultimate significance of the “address” would be to help Cornelius’s messengers find Peter in the story that follows. In a real sense, Peter had been moved by God ever closer to Caesarea, where the greatest demonstration of God’s leading would take place when Peter was urged to witness there to the Gentile Cornelius.

3. Peter’s Witness to a Gentile God-Fearer [10:1–11:18](#)

Chapter [10](#) marks a high point in the church’s expanding mission. God led Peter to witness to the Gentile Cornelius. Through that experience Peter became fully convinced of God’s purposes to reach all peoples and hence became one of the greatest advocates of the mission to the Gentiles. The Hellenists had been the leaders in this outreach, Philip having evangelized Samaria and having baptized the Ethiopian eunuch. The latter incident in many ways parallels that of Peter and Cornelius. Like Cornelius, the eunuch seems to have been both a “God-fearer” and a Gentile. The significant new development in chap. [10](#) is that Peter became committed to the Gentile mission. His testimony would be instrumental in leading the mother church in Jerusalem to endorse the Gentile mission and thus lend it legitimacy and continuity with the ministry of the apostles ([11:1–18](#); [15:7–11](#)).

The Gentile mission was not an easy step for the Jewish Christians to take. It involved two major issues. One was the question of whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to become Christians, i.e., should they undergo Jewish proselyte procedure when they were converted to Christianity? This would have required the circumcision of male converts and the adoption for all converts of such Jewish legal distinctives as the kosher food laws. Because God granted the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles in Cornelius’s home without their subscribing to proselyte procedure, Peter became convinced that such Jewish conversion procedures were not necessary for the Christian mission to the Gentiles (cf. [15:7–11](#)). The second major issue involved the question of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Since Gentiles did not follow kosher practices, Jewish Christians like Peter were exposed to a real situation of compromise when they associated with them. It is not by chance that Peter’s vision at Joppa involved the question of clean and unclean foods. His association with the Gentiles in Cornelius’s home raised that question acutely. Both questions were answered for Peter in the experience with Cornelius because he was convinced that God accepted Gentiles without circumcision and that he could

himself in good faith enjoy table fellowship with his Gentile-Christian brothers and sisters. The issues were not, however, fully settled for the Jewish Christians as a whole. Both issues resurfaced at the Jerusalem Conference (chap. [15](#)) after Paul and Barnabas's successful mission to the Gentiles, and a compromise solution was agreed upon at that time.

[Acts 10:1–11:18](#) is the longest single narrative in all of Acts. This in itself witnesses to the great importance Luke placed on the incident. It usually is organized into seven separate “scenes.” The narrative begins with the vision of Cornelius ([10:1–8](#)) and immediately follows with a corresponding vision of Peter ([10:9–16](#)). The two visions link together and result in Peter's journey to Cornelius's home ([10:17–23](#)). Three scenes take place at Cornelius's house. Peter's initial encounter with Cornelius involved their sharing their visions with each other ([10:24–33](#)). This was followed by Peter's sermon to Cornelius and his associates ([10:34–43](#)). The sermon was broken off by God's intervention when he sent the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles ([10:44–48](#)). The final scene takes place in Jerusalem, where Peter defended his conduct with Cornelius before the Christians there and convinced them of God's intention to reach the Gentiles for Christ ([11:1–18](#)). There is considerable duplication between the scenes. Cornelius's vision is told four times ([10:3–6](#), [22](#), [30–32](#); [11:13–14](#)). Peter's vision is given in detail twice ([10:9–16](#); [11:4–10](#)). In fact, all of [11:3–17](#) is basically a summary of chap. [10](#).

This device of repetition serves a twofold function. First, it makes for a vivid narrative; it is related in dialogue, which gives the reader a sense of “being there.” Second, and more significantly, it underlines the importance of the event. It will be repeated yet a final time in Peter's testimony at the Jerusalem Conference ([15:7–11](#)).

(1) The Vision of Cornelius [10:1–8](#)

[10:1](#) The narrative begins by introducing the first main character. His name was Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian regiment who resided in Caesarea. Each of these details is significant. That he was mentioned by name is perhaps indicative that he was well known in the early Christian communities for whom Luke wrote. He was a military man with the rank of centurion, which placed him in command of 100 soldiers.

One is immediately reminded of Jesus' encounter with a centurion at Capernaum who was described as well respected by the Jewish community, much like Cornelius ([Luke 7:1–10](#)). Centurions generally are depicted in a favorable light throughout the Gospels and Acts, and this may well be evidence of the success of the early Christian mission among the military. Cornelius's division is described as the “Italian regiment,” a group that is documented as occupying Palestine after A.D. 69. The place of his residence is of some importance, since Caesarea was from A.D. 6 the provincial capital and place of residence of the Roman governor. Unlike Lydda and Joppa, which were mainly inhabited by Jews, Caesarea was a Hellenistic-style city with a dominant population of Gentiles. Originally a small town named Strato's Tower, it was rebuilt on a grand style by Herod the Great, complete with a man-made harbor, a theater, an amphitheater, a hippodrome, and a temple dedicated to Caesar. There was a substantial Jewish minority there and considerable friction between the Jews and the larger Gentile community. It was fitting that it should be the place where Peter came to terms with his own prejudices and realized that human barriers have no place with the God who “does not show favoritism.”

[10:2](#) Cornelius already had some preparation for the gospel he was soon to hear. Luke described him as “devout” (*eusebēs*) and “God-fearing” (*phoboumenos ton theon*). There is some question about whether the term “God-fearer” should be seen as a technical term designating a special class of Gentile adherents to the Jewish synagogue who had not taken the full step of becoming proselytes to Judaism. Cornelius, however, was clearly a Gentile who worshiped God and supported the Jewish religious community. In fact, he was described as performing two of the three main acts of Jewish piety—prayer and almsgiving. (Only fasting is not mentioned.) In short, his devotion to God put him well on the way, preparing him

for receiving the gospel and for the full inclusion in God's people that he could not have found in the synagogue.

10:3 In the course of the practice of Cornelius's piety, God spoke to him. Cornelius was keeping one of the three traditional Jewish times of prayer, the afternoon hour of 3 p.m., which coincided with the *Tamid* sacrifice in the temple. God's agent was an angel who appeared to him in a vision. Frequently in Luke-Acts God used prayer time as the opportunity for leading to new avenues of ministry. Prayer is a time for opening oneself up to God, thus enabling his leading. Visions occur frequently in Acts as a vehicle of divine leading, which illustrates that the major advances in the Christian witness are all under divine direction. In no case is that clearer than in the present instance. Cornelius and Peter took no initiative in what transpired. Their mutual visions illustrate that all was totally under God's direction.

10:4 Cornelius's response to the heavenly epiphany is understandable. It was a response of awe and reverence (*emphobos*), not of cowering fear (v. 4). Much like Paul, Cornelius addressed his heavenly visitant with a respectful "Lord." The angel responded by noting that God was aware of his piety. His prayer and his acts of charity had gone up as a "memorial offering" in the presence of God. The term "memorial" (literally, "remembrance," *mnemosynon*) is Old Testament sacrificial language. Cornelius's prayers and works of charity had risen like the sweet savor of a sincerely offered sacrifice, well-pleasing to God (cf. [Phil 4:18](#)). The importance of Cornelius's piety is reiterated throughout the narrative (vv. [2](#), [4](#), [22](#), [35](#)).

10:5-8 One would like to know the content of Cornelius's prayer. Could it possibly have requested his full acceptance by God, his full inclusion in God's people? At this point the angel revealed nothing to Cornelius about his ultimate purpose for him, simply that he was to send to Joppa for a certain Simon named Peter. The additional note that Peter was staying with the tanner Simon serves to link the narrative with the previous ([9:43](#)) and was essential in providing the needed directions for locating him. Still very much in the dark about what God had in store for him, Cornelius neither questioned the angel further nor hesitated in complying with directions. He called forth two of his servants and a "devout" soldier, who probably was a worshiper of God like himself. The Greek text adds that all three "continually waited on him," which is a classical expression for "orderlies," for those who are most tried and true. Cornelius was thus careful to choose his most trustworthy attendants to go to Joppa and seek Peter.

(2) The Vision of Peter [10:9-16](#)

10:9 Joppa was about thirty miles to the south of Caesarea. Having set out the same day as Cornelius's vision or early the next morning, the attendants approached Joppa about noon the next day. Peter in the meantime had gone up to the roof of Simon's house in order to pray. Hungry and waiting for a meal to be prepared, he fell into a trance.

10:10-16 Noon was not a usual weekday meal time. The custom was to have a light midmorning meal and a more substantial repast in the late afternoon. If Peter had missed his midmorning breakfast, it would explain his drowsiness all the more. Roofs were often covered with awnings. Perhaps that or the glimpse of a distant sail at sea provided the vehicle for the vision Peter had. He saw a large vessel or container like a large sheet descending from heaven, held by its four corners. Some interpreters suggest a symbolic meaning here, the four corners representing the ends of the earth in a vision, the ultimate meaning of which points to the worldwide mission. The sheet contained representatives of all the animals of the earth—four-footed animals, reptiles of the land, and birds of the air. It thus symbolized the entire animal world and included clean as well as unclean animals. A voice from heaven commanded Peter to rise, kill from among the animals, and satisfy his hunger. Peter was perplexed by the vision and protested vigorously. What the voice requested was strictly against the law. Never had he eaten anything defiled and unclean. The voice ignored his protest, reissuing the command and adding, "Do not call

anything impure that God has made clean.” The command came three times; each time Peter objected and fell into further confusion.

Some scholars feel that Peter’s vision dealt more with food laws than with interaction with Gentiles. This is to overlook the fact that the two are inextricably related. In [Lev 20:24b–26](#) the laws of clean and unclean are linked precisely to Israel’s separation from the rest of the nations. The Jewish food laws presented a real problem for Jewish Christians in the outreach to the Gentiles. One simply could not dine in a Gentile’s home without inevitably transgressing those laws either by the consumption of unclean flesh or of flesh that had not been prepared in a kosher, i.e., ritually proper, fashion (cf. [Acts 15:20](#)). Jesus dealt with the problem of clean and unclean, insisting that external things like foods did not defile a person but the internals of heart and speech and thought render one truly unclean ([Mark 7:14–23](#)). In [Mark 7:19b](#) Mark added the parenthetical comment that Jesus’ saying ultimately declared all foods clean. This was precisely the point of Peter’s vision: God declared the unclean to be clean. In [Mark 7](#) Jesus’ teaching on clean/unclean was immediately followed by his ministry to a Gentile woman ([7:24–30](#)), just as Peter’s vision regarding clean and unclean foods was followed by *his* witness to a Gentile. It is simply not possible to fully accept someone with whom you are unwilling to share in the intimacy of table fellowship. The early church had to solve the problem of kosher food laws in order to launch a mission to the Gentiles. Purity distinctions and human discrimination are of a single piece.

(3) Peter’s Visit to Cornelius [10:17–23](#)

[10:17–23](#) At this point Peter was still in the dark about the meaning of his vision. What possible point could this implied nullification of the food laws have? At that very moment the answer to his puzzle was beginning to come forth, as Cornelius’s messengers arrived at Simon the tanner’s. Now the Spirit spoke to him directly. With Cornelius it had been an angel; with Peter’s vision, a voice from heaven. Now it was the Holy Spirit. All three represent the same reality—the direction of God. Nothing was left to chance. All was coordinated by the divine leading. The Spirit directed Peter to the three messengers standing at the gate and identified them as men he had sent (v. [19f](#)). In accordance with the Spirit’s direction, Peter descended the outside staircase that led from the roof to the courtyard below, identified himself, and eagerly inquired why they were seeking him. By now he had a good notion that they were a key piece in the puzzle of his vision. The men replied with the information Peter needed, which is all material the reader has already encountered. Luke could have summarized by simply noting that they told him of Cornelius’s vision. Instead, by employing dialogue, he repeated and thus underlined the important points of the vision.

Two things in particular are emphasized—the devoutness of Cornelius and the leading of God. There is a slight advance over the original account of the vision in vv. [4–6](#). The messengers informed Peter that Cornelius was to “hear what you have to say” (v. [22](#)). Peter began to see the ramifications of his vision. He was to witness to this centurion whom God had directed to him. That Peter was beginning to understand is exemplified by his inviting them to spend the evening as guests. Already he was beginning to have fellowship with Gentiles he formerly considered unclean.

(4) Shared Visions [10:24–33](#)

[10:24–26](#) Peter and the three messengers set out the next morning accompanied by several of the Jewish Christians from Joppa. According to Peter’s report in Jerusalem, there were six of the latter ([11:12](#)). After spending the night en route, they arrived at Caesarea on the fourth day from Cornelius’s original vision (cf. v. [30](#)). Cornelius had invited a number of relatives and close friends to hear Peter, and they were all gathered at his home when the party from Joppa arrived. This would prove to be of considerable importance to subsequent events. The movement of the Spirit in Cornelius’s home would not be an isolated conversion but would involve a considerable number of Gentiles, what Luke called “household” salvation ([11:14](#)). As Peter entered the house, Cornelius fell at his feet in a gesture of reverence

and respect. Peter protested vigorously— even more in the Western text, which adds, “What are you doing?” to the Alexandrian reading, “I am only a man myself.” Compare the similar protest of Paul and Barnabas when the Gentiles at Lystra attempted to sacrifice to them as gods ([Acts 14:14f.](#)).

[10:27–29](#) After a polite introductory conversation with Cornelius, Peter related the unusual circumstances of his coming. He did not tell of his vision but rather of the conclusion he had drawn from the experience. Everyone present needed to realize how unacceptable it was for a Jew to associate closely or even visit in the home of a person of another race. God, however, had shown Peter that he should not call another person common or unclean (v. [28](#)). Actually, Peter’s vision had only related to unclean foods, but he had understood fully the symbolism of the creatures in the sheet. All were God’s creatures; all were declared clean. God had led him to Cornelius, and God had declared Cornelius clean. The old purity laws could no longer separate Jew from Gentile. Since God had shown himself no respecter of persons, neither could Peter be one anymore. Still, Peter had not realized the full implication of God’s sending him to Cornelius. He did not yet understand that God intended him to accept Cornelius as a *Christian brother*. So he asked Cornelius why he had sent for him. Cornelius responded by reiterating his vision (vv. [30–32](#)).

[10:30–32](#) This is now the *third* time the reader has encountered this experience. It is virtually a summary of vv. [3–8](#) with slight variations, such as the notice that it was now four days since the vision occurred and the fact that he spoke of a “man in shining clothes” rather than an angel. A man in shining clothes is, of course, an angel; so it is merely a variation in expression. Even Peter’s location in Joppa is repeated in detail. The emphasis and the reason for the repetition is to underscore the importance of the divine direction that led to this scene. Peter was not yet fully certain *why* he was at Cornelius’s house.

[10:33](#) Everyone there, however, *including* Peter, was certain of one thing: *God* had brought them together. Cornelius also knew that God brought Peter to him to share something important. That is why he assembled family and friends. All were now waiting to hear the Lord’s message from Peter (v. [33](#)). God had led him to Cornelius’s house. But Peter had a message, *the* message, the word of life. It was now clear to him why God had led him there. He was to bear his witness to the gospel before this gathering of Gentiles.

(5) Peter’s Witness [10:34–43](#)

[10:34–35](#) Peter’s sermon is somewhat unique among the speeches in Acts. Since it was addressed to Gentiles, one would expect it to differ somewhat from the other sermons of Peter, all of which were addressed to Jews. Still, it is quite different from Paul’s sermons addressed to the Gentiles of Lystra ([14:15–18](#)) and Athens ([17:22–31](#)).

Cornelius and his family already were worshipers of God and thus had some prior preparation for the gospel. Peter could have assumed such knowledge on their part and not have to start by first introducing the basic monotheistic message of faith in God as he did when preaching to pagan Gentiles. Peter’s sermon at Cornelius’s basically followed the pattern of his prior sermons to the Jews but with several significant differences. One is found at the very outset, where he stressed that God shows no favoritism, accepts people from every nation, and that Jesus is “Lord of all.” This emphasis on the universal gospel is particularly suited to a message to Gentiles. Peter’s vision had led him to this basic insight that God does not discriminate between persons, that there are no divisions between “clean” and “unclean” people from the divine perspective. The Greek word used for favoritism (v. [34](#)) is constructed on a Hebrew idiom meaning *to lift a face*. *Peter saw that God does not discriminate on the basis of race or ethnic background, looking up to some and down on others. But God does discriminate between those whose behavior is acceptable and those whose attitude is not acceptable. Those who reverence God and practice what is right are acceptable to him* (v. [35](#); cf. [Luke 8:21](#)).

Peter was basing this statement specifically on Cornelius. Throughout the narrative his piety had been stressed—his constant prayers, his deeds of charity. This raises the problem of faith and works. Was God responding to Cornelius’s works, “rewarding” him, so to speak, by bringing Peter with the saving gospel and granting him his gift of the Spirit? One must be careful not to introduce Paul’s theology into a context that is not dealing with the same issues, but one should also note that even Paul was capable of describing the impartial justice of God as being based on one’s good or evil works ([Rom 2:9–11](#)). The early church fathers struggled with the question of faith and works in Cornelius, and perhaps Augustine’s view offers as good an answer as any. Cornelius, like Abraham, had shown himself to be a man of faith and trust in God. God was already working his grace in him, and it manifested itself in his good deeds. Now God would show him his greatest grace in the gospel of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Spirit. The stress on both Cornelius’s devoutness and his works is perhaps, then, a good corrective to an abused doctrine of grace with no implications for behavior and a reminder of James’s dictum that at base, faith and works are inseparable.

10:36 As with Peter’s other addresses in Acts, considerable stress is placed on God’s act in Jesus Christ. This theme is introduced in v. [36](#), where Peter stressed the good news of peace through Jesus Christ. There is an interesting interplay in the verse between the limited nature of the gospel’s beginnings and its unlimited scope. God sent the gospel message to his people, “the people of Israel.” But its *content* was peace, the peace Christ brings, who is “Lord of all.” If he is truly Lord of *all*, then the gospel *and* Christ’s peace are for all peoples, not just the people of Israel. Verse [36](#) echoes [Isa 52:7](#); [57:19](#). In [Eph 2:17](#) Paul employed the latter passage to argue the universal gospel and the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile in Christ. Peter also had come to see that it is a natural corollary that there can be no barriers between those who profess Christ as “Lord of all.” He could not allow such nonessentials as particularistic Jewish food laws to separate him from Gentiles like Cornelius who were, like him, those for whom Christ died. Where Christ is Lord of all, a worldwide witness and a worldwide fellowship of believers free of all cultural prejudice are absolutely imperative.

10:37–38 Verse [37](#) begins the explicit treatment of Jesus’ life, which continues through v. [42](#). This section is unique among the speeches of Acts in the amount of attention it gives to the ministry of Jesus. The other speeches of Peter emphasize the death and resurrection, as does this speech (vv. [39–40](#)). Only the sermon in Cornelius’s house, however, provides an outline of Jesus’ earthly ministry (vv. [37–38](#)). In fact, these verses are almost a summary of the outline of Jesus’ life as presented in Mark’s Gospel: the baptism of John, the Galilean period with its extensive healing ministry, the death and resurrection. That Peter began the summary of Jesus’ career with “you know” (v. [37](#)) is interesting. He could perhaps have assumed that Cornelius, residing in Caesarea, would have heard some prior report of John’s baptizing and Jesus’ reputation for miracles. Paul later made a similar assumption that these events could not have escaped king Agrippa’s knowledge because they “did not happen in a corner” ([26:26](#)). His reference to Jesus’ being anointed with the Spirit (v. [38](#)) most likely refers to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism ([Luke 3:22](#)). In turn, the anointing with the Spirit is closely tied with Jesus’ miracles in Luke’s Gospel, as it is here ([Luke 4:18f.](#), citing [Isa 61:1f.](#)).

10:39–42 In v. [39](#) Peter turned to his role as apostolic witness to the entire ministry of Jesus (cf. [1:22](#)) and above all to his death and resurrection. As in [5:30](#), Jesus’ crucifixion is described as “hanging him on a tree.” As always in Peter’s speeches, the crucifixion is attributed to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In v. [40](#) the familiar kerygmatic formula occurs: *they* killed him, but *God* raised him up on the third day. Particularly striking and unique to this sermon is Peter’s stress on Jesus’ appearance to the apostles after his resurrection, even his eating and drinking with them. This emphasis would have been particularly important in preaching to Gentiles like Cornelius for whom the idea of a bodily resurrection was a new concept (cf. [17:18](#)). Peter concluded his treatment of the apostolic witness by referring to Jesus’ command for them to preach the word ([Acts 1:8](#)) and especially to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God as eschatological judge (v. [42](#)). The role is that of the Danielic Son of Man, and Peter perhaps was interpreting the title in terms that would have been comprehensible to a Gentile.

One characteristic element of other sermons by Peter has to this point been lacking in this one—the proofs from the Old Testament Scriptures. Peter seems to have been moving in this direction when he referred to the witness of the prophets to Jesus (v. [43](#)), and he connected this closely with repentance and forgiveness of sins. Perhaps Peter’s line of thought was related to Jesus’ words to the disciples after the resurrection, where the Scriptures that predict Christ’s suffering and resurrection are also closely tied to repentance and forgiveness in his name ([Luke 24:46–48](#)). In any event, Peter seems to have been moving toward his appeal with the references to the coming judgment and to repentance and forgiveness through Jesus’ name. He was, however, cut short. The miracle of repentance and forgiveness occurred before he could even extend the invitation, and the Spirit sealed the event.

(6) The Impartiality of the Spirit [10:44–48](#)

[10:44–48](#) As they listened to Peter’s words about forgiveness for everyone who believes in Christ, the Holy Spirit suddenly descended upon all the Gentiles assembled in Cornelius’s house (v. [44](#)). They began to speak in tongues and to praise God (v. [46](#)). It was an audible, visible, *objective* demonstration of the Spirit’s coming upon them. Peter and the Jewish Christian brothers from Joppa witnessed the event and were astounded that God had so given the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles (v. [44](#)). It has often been described as the “Gentile Pentecost,” and that designation is appropriate. In v. [47](#) Peter practically gave it that designation when he described the Gentiles as having received the Holy Spirit “just as we have.” Like the Pentecost of Acts, it was a unique, unrepeatable event. It was scarcely programmatic. The sequence, for one, was most unusual, with the Spirit coming before their baptism. The pattern of a group demonstration of the Spirit invariably accompanies a new breakthrough in mission in Acts. We see it in the initial empowering of Pentecost, the establishment of the Samaritan mission ([8:17–18](#)), the reaching of former disciples of John the Baptist ([19:6](#)), and the foundation of the Gentile mission and its legitimation for the Jerusalem church.

Always the demonstration of the Spirit serves a single purpose—to show that the advance in witness comes directly from God, is totally due to divine leading. This was especially important in this instance. Peter had already shown his own hesitancy to reach out to Gentiles. More conservative elements in Jerusalem would be even more reticent. Only an undeniable demonstration of divine power could overrule all objections, and God provided precisely that in Cornelius’s house. Surely the Spirit had already moved among the Gentiles gathered there in a more inward experience of repentance and faith. Luke hinted at this. The very last words in the Greek text of Peter’s sermon before the Spirit descended are “everyone who believes in him.” The faith of the Gentiles is even more explicit in Peter’s report to Jerusalem, where he compared his own experience of belief in Christ and receipt of the Spirit with the experience of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles ([11:17](#)).

Peter called for the baptism of the Gentiles (v. [47](#)) in language that is highly reminiscent of the Ethiopian eunuch’s request for baptism ([8:36](#)). As with the eunuch, there was now no barrier, no way anyone could hinder (*kōlyō*) the baptism of these Gentiles and their full inclusion into the Christian community. The NIV obscures the similarity in the questions “Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” and “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized?” Both questions involve the verb “to hinder.”

Another obstacle had been overcome in the ever-widening scope of Christian mission, the barrier of national and racial particularism and separatism, the barrier of prejudice that looks down on others as “un-clean.” It is interesting that Peter gave orders for them to be baptized. Evidently he did not baptize them himself but committed the task to some of those who had accompanied him from Joppa. This is further evidence that the early Christian leaders put no premium on *who* administered the rite.

The narrative concludes with the note that Peter spent several days with his new Christian brothers and sisters in Caesarea (v. [48b](#)). This inevitably involved table fellowship, but that now presented no

problem for Peter. It would, however, constitute a major difficulty for more conservative Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem.