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Peter's Defense Of Gentile Salvation

I want to talk today about our heritage as Gentile Christians. This can be traced back to Acts 10. I want to turn to Acts 11 which presupposes Acts 10 and watch how a Jew first defended our heritage. This man stood up for us and if it wasn't for this man, from a human standpoint, there wouldn't be many Gentile Christians. Let's read the passage starting in Acts 11:1. "Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ²And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, ³saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴But Peter began *speaking* and *proceeded* to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, ⁵"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, ⁶and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. ⁷"I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' ⁸"But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹"But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.' ¹⁰"This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. ¹¹"And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were *staying*, having been sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²"The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man's house. ¹³"And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; ¹⁴and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' ¹⁵"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶"And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with

water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’¹⁷“Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?”¹⁸When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life.”

In Acts 11:1 we find Peter’s defense of the Gentiles entrance into the Church apart from circumcision. Verse 1, **Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.** ²**And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,** ³**saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”** Now, what we have here essentially is a doctrinal conflict in the early church; a conflict over what God was doing with Gentiles. Peter is immediately confronted with the opportunity to give an apologia, a defense. Sometimes we are called to give a defense and we are always to be ready to give a defense. Yet I have encountered multiple times Christians who think giving a defense is wrong and if you do get into some kind of defense you’re unspiritual or worse you’re wasting your time or you’re not filled with the Holy Spirit or something. I think that’s baloney and here’s why. If believers who are filled with the Spirit don’t argue then Peter would have been written off and God’s purpose for Gentiles would not have been accomplished. Peter has to defend his beliefs. What were his beliefs? That God was now accepting Gentiles the way they were, uncircumcised. So Peter has to defend his beliefs. What good is it really to have a belief but you can’t really defend it? Peter tells us later on in his first epistle that you better be ready to defend your position, you better be ready to give an apology, not an I’m sorry, a defense of the truth, an explanation for why you believe what you believe or why you acted the way you acted in a given circumstance. Peter learned this by experience because right here they jumped him like a pack of wolves and he had to give a defense, he had to give a cogent argument for why he went into Cornelius’ house and why he sat down at that table. So let’s watch how he gave a defense so we can learn how to always be ready to give a defense.

Verse 1, **Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.** The news must have spread pretty fast. **Judea** was the entire region around Jerusalem, a rather large area. What news did they hear? It would sound

something like this to our ears, “Dogs get to go to heaven.” That was the headline that was floating around. Jews thought Gentiles were dogs. Some rabbinic commentators said that the Gentiles were the kiln that God used to start the fires of hell. So this was startling news. Verse 2, **And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, took issue** is a little weak, it means they were firmly opposed to him, an inceptive imperfect and it means no sooner had he got in town than they all ganged up on him and verbally assaulted him.

If you're not careful you'll read verse 2 as saying well, they're just Jews. No, that's not so because all the Christians in Jerusalem were Jews at this point, so **those who were circumcised** are Christian Jews and understanding that we have the first faction of legalists in the Christian Church. These people are going to be around for a while in the NT, the whole book of Galatians is about these Jewish Christians that said, “Gentiles can come into the Church, but they have to come through circumcision, it's faith plus circumcision and they're not saved until we have their flesh.” Now, there are a lot of ideas floating around about legalism and we want to straighten those out because some people have the idea that if you ever mention a law and say “This is the standard,” then you're a legalist. And that's not the case at all.

So let's look at the legalist crowd vs the licentious crowd. Everyone has a tendency toward one of these crowds. You may take the licentious route and I may take the legalist route. And you may think I'm sinful and I may think you're sinful. But we're both equally sinful. Neither is better than the other as a principle of spiritual growth, of sanctification. There are two things you have to have to grow, to be sanctified. One is the law; that is the word of God, the content of God's will. No one can ever grow without taking in the word of God, no matter how many prayer meetings you go to, no matter how many hymns you sing, no matter how many testimonial meetings you attend, that will not sanctify you. The only thing that will sanctify you is when you take in the word of God, period. That's an absolute statement that can be defended from the word of God. The word of God is the means of sanctification.

But there's something else that's also necessary and that is God's grace; God has got to enable you to attain the standards of the law or the standards of His word, whether it's the OT standards, the law of Moses or the New Testament standards, the law of Christ, it doesn't make any difference, grace

is necessary. So two elements are continually needed: one the standard and two the means to reach the standard. Those are always the keys to sanctification. The results are love, joy, peace, all the fruit of the Spirit, the mechanics involved are law and grace.

Now the legalist and the licentious person have grace and law out of balance, they tend to overemphasize one or the other. Let's take the legalist. The legalists do, or try to do, without grace. This is operation flesh, its pure performance, operation boot strap, put on a show in front of everybody else, put on your fake smile and you're a spiritual giant. You can always see this in those people who go beyond the biblical standards. For example, I grew up in Baptist circles and the Baptists don't believe in dancing. If you're caught dancing you're out of the inner circle. I always point out, "Show me a verse, show me a passage, give me a reason I can't dance. David danced. Why can't I dance?" "Oh, it's not spiritual?" "Why is it not spiritual?" And it always comes down to some phony standard. Now some forms of dancing are wrong, but are there really no forms of dancing that reflect the biblical standard?

So, what has Mr Legalist done? Mr Legalist has destroyed grace because he's defined spirituality independent of grace; it's all produced by the energy of the flesh. So the legalist lowers the law and eliminates grace; that's always what he does, you can always test for legalism this way. It may take you a little while to check it out but if you come across this kind of behavior pattern being imposed upon a Christian group some place, ask yourself, is this a Scriptural standard or is this something other than a Scriptural standard?

Then the licentious person, what does the licentious person try to do? He catches on to the word grace and he wants to eliminate the requirements of God's will from his life and so he talks about grace, grace, grace, grace, grace, and very carefully he redefines sin so that what he's doing is not sin, maybe it's the way he's doing it. Take the Christian businessman - he has his product and he's trying to sell his product and so he gives the pitch and it's all the great things about his product and the customer says, "Now Mr. Businessman, what about this?" And Mr. Businessman very carefully steers him away from those things, lessens their importance, and by doing this he never tells him the weaknesses of the product. And thinks to himself; I haven't lied, I withheld information but I haven't lied. But do you not see that in effect you have lied, you have not been straightforward, and you have

deceived. That's the licentious person, always re-defining, re-defining re-defining sin so that the way I did it was not sin. You're only fooling yourself, everybody else can see what you're doing is sin. So these people end up basically doing away with God's standard altogether all in the name of grace of course. You can do whatever you want as long as you do it this way. Both the legalist and the licentious believer generate a false spirituality. One emphasizes law to the exclusion of grace, the other grace to the exclusion of law. But both are operating via the flesh and therefore neither can effect spiritual growth, you have to have both law and grace to get the growth. Law, there is a standard, God's will for my life in the word of God and then grace being the enablement to accomplish His will for my life. Because I can no more do it by my own strength than I can cause the planets to rotate. The flesh cannot carry out the will of God, that's why the grace of God is necessary.

Now let's apply this to the situation at hand. Peter's been to Cornelius' house. Cornelius received the word of God. But Cornelius wasn't circumcised. That's basically the problem in verse 3, say Peter, **“You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”** Now to them the physical act of circumcision is the big issue. But as legalists what have they done. They've done what the legalist always does, they lower the standard so the flesh can keep it. Anyone can take a knife and cut the flesh. It doesn't take the grace of God to do that. But what did God want, what was the real standard? God in the OT was using physical circumcision only as a picture of what? The need for spiritual circumcision. There was always a spiritual reality behind the physical picture and it was the spiritual circumcision that God wanted. He never intended for the physical circumcision to become the end all, but that's the legalist spirit of these circumcised Jews who pointed out that Peter went in to an uncircumcised man's house and ate with him, that is, had fellowship with him.

Now Peter had in fact gone in to uncircumcised men, he had eaten with them. But Peter had learned in the vision that God accepted Jew and Gentile purely on the basis of grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. He had been there and seen it himself. It wasn't necessary to circumcise them, he preached the word and in the middle of a sentence the Spirit fell on them. There was nothing Peter could do. Once that happened what was he going to do, “Alright boys, it's time for your circumcision.” He couldn't do that. They

were already regenerate. To do that would have been to invalidate God's grace. So in verse 4 let's see how he argues his case and there are some principles for arguing here. Some of you because you get so eager because you learned something, for once in your life someone actually opened up the word of God to you, and you're so anxious to witness to people you run up to them and start ramming, cramming and jamming truth down someone's throat. They didn't even ask a question, they don't even know what the question is, let alone the answer you're giving them. And that's not right, that's not giving a defense. If that's you and all you're interested in is ruffling people's feathers, that's not the right spirit. Then there's those of you who would never argue a point of spiritual truth, and that I want to convince you is just as unspiritual, because we have Christians who show up week after week with their smiley faces and sort of bumble around here in a holy trance, so spiritual, never argue about anything, never talk about what the truth is, never discuss what God said. Do you see Peter in verse 4 with that mentality? Now boys, you believe your way and I believe my way, let's just agree to disagree. And notice one other thing about verse 4; Peter is an apostle, but he doesn't turn off the discussion by saying "Well, I'm an apostle, you take it from me bud!" Is that how he handles the situation? No. It says, **Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence**, that phrase there **orderly sequence** comes from Luke 1:3 when Luke tells Theophilus, "I've investigated everything and I lay it out for you in consecutive order. These are the facts of history and I give them to you in their orderly sequence."

In verses 5-6 he tells them where he was and the vision he saw which involved the dietary code of the OT. The voice he heard in verse 7, his response in verse 8, verses 9-10, this happened three times. Peter, unlike most of us who get the menu once in a restaurant, got it three times. Couldn't make up his mind what kind he liked. And finally, verse 11, look at what Peter pulls out as significant, "**And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house**, he recognizes the timing was providentially arranged. When those three men appeared at the house it clicked with Peter, "You're definitely orchestrating this Lord." Verse 12, **The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings** and that's a weak translation, **misgivings**, because Luke is trying to point something out you miss in the English translation because the words in verse 2, when the circumcised jumped him, it says they "took issue with him," that's the same word used

here in verse 12, “Peter, you go with them without taking issue. Don’t fight them Peter, you go without a fight, don’t worry, you’ll get to the fight later.” Now the fights were brought to him and he’s defending himself. He’s got to. And v 12 who did he bring along? **These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house.** These are his witnesses. They all went into the house, it wasn’t just Peter. He only needed two men to get every fact confirmed but He’s got six, which evidently shows you Peter knew the fight he would face and so when he went back to Jerusalem he made sure he told all six of these men, “You stay with me, don’t leave my side. You’re my witnesses.”

Verses 13-14 he recounts the double vision, Cornelius had a vision too. Not only do I have six witnesses, there were two visions, one on each side; all seven of us heard the testimony. He gave us a report, **how he had seen the angel in his house saying,** “Call for Simon **who is called Peter...**verse 14, **and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.’** Verse 14 he tells us something very valuable about salvation. He says that Cornelius, though he was positive to the word of God, though he prayed to God, though he gave alms to the Jewish people, he had done many good works but was that enough to be saved? Not at all. So next time you think about how great some person is, all the things they do for the church, all the time they spend in prayer, all the money they give, just remember, a person can do all that and never be saved. That’s Cornelius, a person can be that positive to the word of God and not be saved. And another thing here, **saved** is passive voice, you’re not going to save yourself, that would be active voice, you’re going to be saved by someone else, and that someone else is not Peter at the pearly gates, it’s God. God is the one who does the saving. Salvation is a gift; if we could do it ourselves it wouldn’t be a gift. All we do is receive it, it’s just like a Christmas present, it’s just handed to you, no strings attached. And the means of receiving salvation is the **words, the words,** specifically of the gospel, but the word of God is the instrument, the word of God is the power of God unto salvation. Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. No matter how long Cornelius sat there and prayed and contemplated his navel he wouldn’t move one inch toward salvation because that comes only by the word of God. And another thing I found interesting about this is this was all communicated by an angel. If that is so why didn’t the angel just give the gospel to Cornelius? You gave him all this but not the gospel? That’s right. Because the witnessing, in every

case I can find in Scripture, except one in the Tribulation, is always left to human beings, it's a human responsibility. You can never stand around your family and friend twiddling your thumbs saying, "If God's elected them they'll be saved." That's not a scriptural way of thinking. God is sovereign but He's not going to do your job for you. You wouldn't have a job to do if He wasn't sovereign. That's why we gather here four times a week, to train in the word of God so you'll know how to defend the truth, so you'll know how to give a testimony. There's no excuse.

Alright, verse 15, **"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning." I began to speak.** What that means is that Peter had just started the sermon. He hadn't even told them everything he wanted to tell them. If we go back to 10:34-43 we see a summary of what he said and he probably went into the four or five OT passages he cited and explained. And when they heard the word the **Holy Spirit fell on them.** What had Peter done? He had given them the truth, he had given them history. Why? If all we're trying to do is get people to have irrational faith why worry about history? Not so in the Scriptures. Faith is rational, faith is based on true historical events expressed in propositional language and as Peter spoke of these space-time historical events that Cornelius and his house understood and believed...**the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning,** notice that phrase **just as He did upon us at the beginning.** That's a crucial phrase. When Peter saw this happen to Cornelius and his household and they spoke in tongues his mind flashed immediately back to what had happened to the Jews on Pentecost, inferring we might add, that tongues was not a common experience, he had only seen this on two prior occasions, Acts 2 and Acts 8, he mentions Acts 2 because he's speaking to a Jewish audience. What's he saying? There was no difference between what we Jewish apostles experienced in Acts 2 and what these Gentiles experienced in Acts 10.

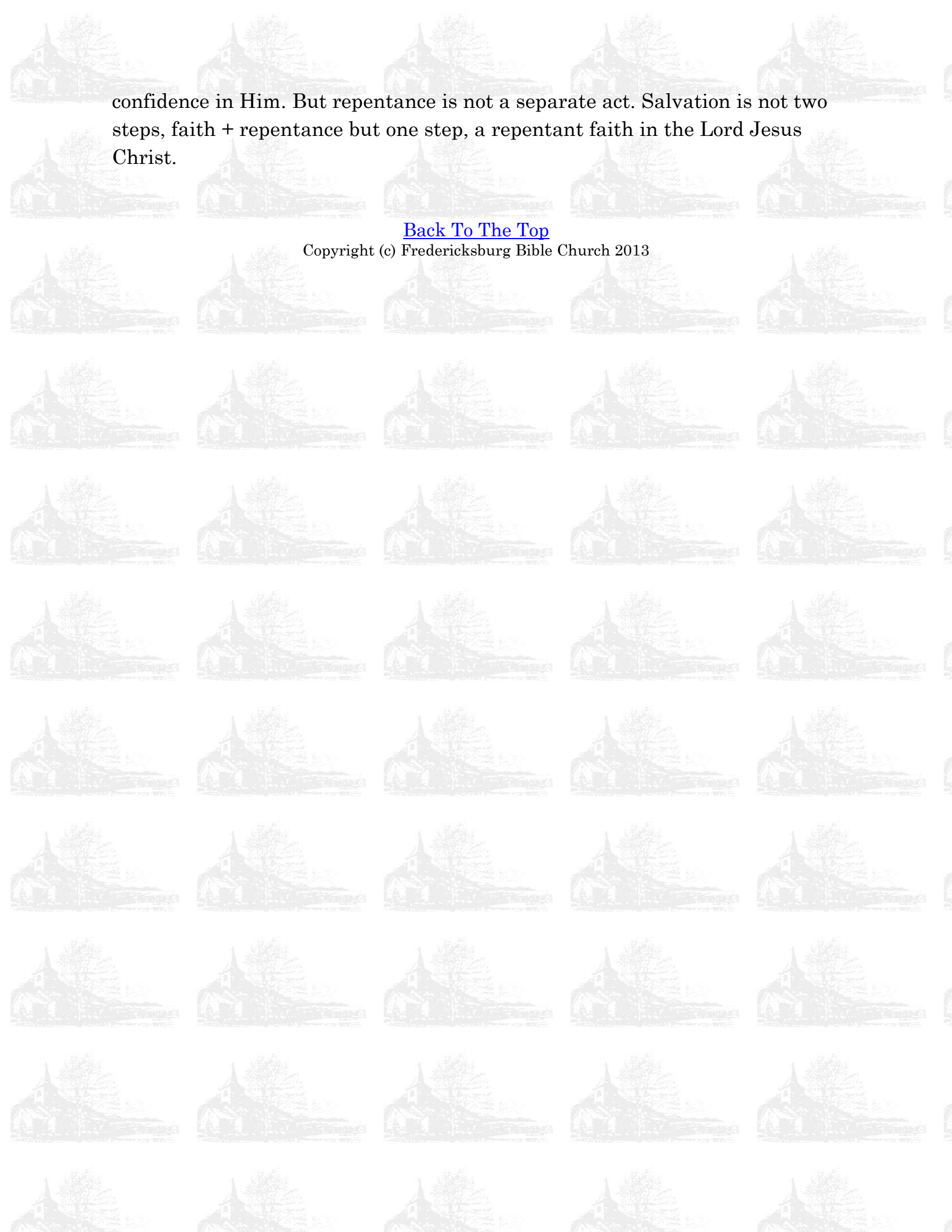
Notice the expression **at the beginning,** that's a reference to Acts 2. We want to elaborate on this so let's read through verse 17, **"And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'**
¹⁷**"Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ,** and the gift there is baptism of the Holy Spirit. So now you have both Jews and Gentiles baptized by the

Spirit and observe v 17, this happened **after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ**. This is one thing that is uniform throughout the transitional Book of Acts; and that is no one is baptized by the Spirit until after they had believed. Now there may have been years between the moment a person believed and when they received the Spirit, as in the case of the apostles, they had believed in the Messiahship of Jesus during the Gospels but they were not **baptized with the Spirit** until Acts 2. But that's not the norm. The norm is a person believes and they are immediately baptized by the Spirit but because the Church doesn't begin until the day of Pentecost then believers before that were not part of the Church. The Church began completely Jewish on the day of Pentecost with the baptism of the Spirit. Then the Church took in Samaritans in Acts 8 by the baptism of the Spirit. Finally the Church took in Gentiles in Acts 10 with the same baptism of the Spirit. So three groups, all entered the same Church, the same way, with the same authenticating miracle of tongues. Coincidence or design? I'd say design, It's not true that every time someone believed they spoke in tongues, not true. It's just these three occasions and because these three groups shared this it pointed to unity, unity of the new organism being created, the one new man in Christ, the Church. And how did they enter it? What does Peter say in verse 17? Peter says by believing. 160 times the NT says it's by believing. It's always by faith alone. And yet, what I've always found interesting about this passage is how do Peter's opponents describe the believing in v 18? By repentance, **"Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."** Repentance unto eternal life. Repentance here is an equivalent to believing. To believe is to repent. So it's valid to tell an unbeliever they need to repent as long as it's not a separate act you are telling them to do but a part of the same act of believing. That means it has to be understood what is meant by repent. Repent just means a change of mind and necessarily when we believe we have a change of mind. So it's fine to say repent, just make sure the other person knows what you're saying and don't confuse repentance with turning from sin or any other hogwash that people have made out of this word. All it means is that you are having a change of mind and that is necessarily involved in faith because faith is confidence or reliance on another. So if I believe in Jesus I am putting my confidence in Him whereas before I was not putting my confidence in Him, so I've had a change of mind concerning Him. The two go together, faith and repentance, in a salvific context, are inseparable.

And finally, what was the result of this in verse 18? How did they respond to Peter's defense? **they quieted down and glorified God.** That's the proper response, to glorify God. This was a magnanimous thing, that God would accept Gentiles on no other condition than faith. He didn't have to get circumcised, he didn't have to come through circumcision, he didn't have to put himself under the yoke of Moses, it was just faith. God had done this, God had granted this, it was an occasion to glorify God and we should glorify God that He has granted us this.

Now in summary, Peter went to the home of Cornelius the Gentile. He went there because God showed him a vision three times of a Gentile menu and God also sent him some visitors from Cornelius' house and the Spirit gave him a message. He recognized this was providence. God was telling him to do something no God-fearing Jew could imagine; to go into the home of an uncircumcised Gentile and preach the gospel. So Peter did and they believed and were baptized by the Spirit. But when Peter got back to Jerusalem the news had gotten out and immediately he had to give a defense for his actions. To do so he gave an orderly, logical defense. God had made it clear that He was receiving Gentiles on the basis of grace through faith in Christ alone by the authentication of tongues. Peter even had six other Jews present who testified this was the case; salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, apart from circumcision, apart from works, apart from the Mosaic Law, salvation is only in Christ.

What can we learn? What can we take away from such a marvelous hour in Gentile history? First, always be ready to give an orderly, logical defense. That's why we're training, not just for our own souls being fortified against unbelief, but also so that those who do not believe will believe. Second, the Church is not Israel but the Church is Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles all grafted into the same organism by the same faith, baptized by the same Spirit, authenticated by the same tongues. The nation Israel is put on the backburner for the time being but in the future, when the Church is complete the nation Israel will be back on the front burner. God has a program for Israel and the Church. Third, faith is sometimes a synonym for repentance, or repentance is used as metonymy for faith. Metonymy means a part for the whole and if repentance is a necessary part of faith then in v 18 repentance is being used as metonymy for faith. It is simply necessary to faith that men have a change of mind about Jesus Christ, otherwise how could you put your



confidence in Him. But repentance is not a separate act. Salvation is not two steps, faith + repentance but one step, a repentant faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

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