

SECTION THREE: *MOVEMENT 1*
The Gospel Released from the
Jewish Social Isolationism (9:32-11:18)



The first major movement of Section Three concerns itself with Peter's travels. It is perhaps a point worth mentioning that according to Acts Peter did travel: Paul was not the only one to do so (cf. 1 Cor. 9:5). His travels brought him in fact to a point where he confronted the Gentile world and was used of God formally and officially to open the way for the Christian gospel to be taken to the Gentiles. His visit to Cornelius may not have been the first visit paid by a Jewish Christian to a Gentile. That is not the point. The point is that Peter's visit to Cornelius explicitly raised the theoretical and scriptural principles involved in such visits, and settled the matter at the highest level for all time.

But before Luke launches into the record of this crucial visit to Cornelius, he is led to select two incidents that occurred at an earlier stage in Peter's preaching tour. The brevity of these two stories suggests that, while important in their own right, they are in some sense preliminary to the main story. The first of them contains only four verses, the second no more than eight. If the main story is to talk about holiness, what have these two preliminary stories to say that might be relevant to that?

AENEAS (9:32-35)

"As Peter traveled about the country," says Luke, "he went to visit the saints in Lydda" (9:32). Notice the term "saints," that is "holy ones." Luke uses various terms in Acts to denote his fellow members of the faith. "Disciples" is his favorite one: he uses it about thirty times. "Christian" is naturally very rare: he records the first time it was ever applied to the disciples (11:26), and he uses it only once thereafter (26:28). But "saints" is

also rare: it occurs in 9:13, here in 9:32, again in 9:41, later in 26:10, and nowhere else in Acts.¹ It is possible, therefore, that Luke uses the words "disciples," "saints" and "Christians" as small change, without any particular emphasis on their exact connotation. But the fact that he uses "saints" on two occasions in these preliminary stories, just before the long story on holiness, is surely no accident. Here are two preliminary stories about saints, Jewish Christian saints. Both contain a miracle, and both miracles lead to a crop of conversions among the general public: for both are exhibitions of what the Lord Jesus Christ can do in relation to this matter of sainthood.

The two stories present certain contrasts: one concerns a man, the other a woman. The woman while she lived was full of good works. The man by contrast had few good works to show: he was a paralytic and had been bedridden for eight years. It was not his fault, of course, that he could do no work. All the same, it was sad to see a full-grown man so permanently and helplessly disabled, without the strength either to make his own bed or to get his own meals. "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you," said Peter (9:34), "Get up and tidy up your mat" (or "get yourself a meal": the Greek can mean either). Immediately he did so, with the result that when the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon saw the former paralytic healed and at work, able to look after himself, they "turned to the Lord" (9:35).

The paralysis was literal and the healing a physical miracle. But we shall not be far wrong if we suppose that, as with our Lord's miracles of physical healing, this miracle too conveyed a deeper lesson. Our Lord's multiplication of loaves and fishes pointed to Himself as the Bread of Life (Jn. 6). His gift of physical sight to a blind man pointed beyond itself to His ability to impart spiritual sight (Jn. 9). His healing of a paralytic and the man's subsequent ability to walk and work were explicitly offered as a demonstration of the reality of the forgiveness the man had received (Lk. 5:17-26). So too with Aeneas' healing. It was in the first instance an exhibition of supernatural physical power that advertised the reality of the risen Christ. But surely it was more. It did not of course carry an implicit promise that every paralytic or quadriplegic will be instantaneously healed upon becoming a Christian. History has shown otherwise. But it did point to Christ's ability to empower all His people; in the metaphorical language of Hebrews 12:12-13, to reinvigorate their drooping hands and paralyzed knees. Then, as the NEB puts it, "the disabled limb will not be put out of joint, but regain its former powers."

It is all too easy for Christians to give people an impression of holiness that repels them. It is true, of course, that all believers are "saints" by calling. They have been sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:10). In this sense one believer is no more a saint than another. The members of the church at Corinth, troubled by faults and failings and impurities and divisions though they were, are addressed as

“saints” (1 Cor. 1:2), just as the believers at Rome (Rom. 1:7) or at Philippi (Phil. 1:1) or anywhere else are.

But that is only one side of the story. True saintliness will sooner or later begin to make its presence felt; for it is not a form of weakness, encouraging people to remain in spiritually immature dependence on others, all the while obsessed with “difficulties” and “problems.” True saintliness is positive, vigorous, active, maturely self-supporting, and able spiritually to stand on its own feet. Jesus Christ our Lord has the power to make us holy in this practical sense; to release us from unhealthy inhibitions and weaknesses; to make us strong and active in the work He gives us to do and so to make us an advertisement to the world of what true Christian saintliness is.

DORCAS (9:36-43)

Dorcas was no paralytic: she was “always doing good and helping the poor” (9:36). Moreover, it is probably true to say that she learned her good works from Judaism even before she became a Christian. Christianity has no monopoly of good works. True Judaism has a long and sustained tradition of generous care for the poor, inculcated throughout the generations by both Moses and the prophets. Then what can Christ add to the impetus that Judaism already gave to such practical holiness?

The story is that Dorcas died, but that Peter came and raised her from the dead. Her resurrection was, presumably, only a resuscitation, like the cases reported in the Gospels. Even so, it must have been for her an amazing, unforgettable experience that remained with her for the rest of her days. Only picture her situation. She had been busy at her social relief when death intervened and brought all her work to an end. But soon she opened her eyes again, and there stood none other than the apostle Peter himself, who raised her up and took her to the next room. And there were the people for whom she had worked so hard before she died, and they were greeting her with unbounded joy and gratitude. And there, too, was the work she had done, the garments she had made, and the widows had been showing them to the great apostle himself (9:39). Such gratitude, such honor, such recognition of her labors! If ever a woman caught sight of the lasting effect and value of her work, that woman was Dorcas when she was raised from the dead. It surely gave her an added impetus to go on working with all her might for the rest of her life.

Now we may regard her story, if we care to, simply as a museum piece of ancient history, an extraordinary kind of miracle rare enough even in the time of our Lord and His apostles and infinitely rarer since, as again history has shown us. But if we do, we shall impoverish ourselves. Our Lord’s raising of Lazarus (Jn. 11), like Peter’s raising of Dorcas, was only a resuscitation, but our Lord used it as a sign of greater things: as a pointer, first of all, to Himself as the Resurrection and the Life, and then to the

full resurrection of all His saints at His second coming. And if He so used Lazarus' resuscitation, we could scarcely be wrong to draw similar encouragement from that of Dorcas. Our work for God and man is valuable in and of itself for the good it does in this life. But its significance and value do not end in the grave. The certain fact of Christ's resurrection, the glorious prospect of our own resurrection or transformation at His coming, assure us that our labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:50-58). We too shall see our work again.

Here then is encouragement to persist in toil, and a warning not to indulge in shoddy workmanship. When the Lord comes and the dead are raised and the living caught up together with them to meet the Lord, all must "appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one must receive what is due" to him or her "for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). If our works survive Christ's inspection, then ours will be a fourfold joy. First, the sheer joy of knowing we have pleased the Lord. Secondly, the joy of experiencing the eternal gratitude and friendship of those we helped on earth (Lk. 16:9). Thirdly, the joy of seeing the work we did in our lifetime last eternally. And on top of that, a reward from the Saviour Himself (1 Cor. 3:12-14).

But it will be possible to find our work judged as unworthy and substandard, and burned up under the Lord's investigation. A believer in that position will still be saved, since salvation is a gift, and was never at any stage a reward for work done. But such a believer will sense a fourfold loss. First, the realization of not having pleased the Lord. Secondly, the wasted opportunities to make eternal friends: no one's eternal gratitude, no one's special friendship. Thirdly, nothing to see for life's work. And fourthly, no reward (1 Cor. 3:15).

Let us, therefore, make sure that our holiness is of the practical kind, like Dorcas, and that the bright certainty of the resurrection keeps us always "abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58, AV).

PETER AND CORNELIUS (10:1-48)

It sounds a very strange thing when you first hear it, that it was a concern for holiness that initially acted as a barrier against the spread of the gospel by the early Christians. But so it was. Left to himself, Peter would never have entered the houses of uncircumcised Gentiles and eaten with them, because to his way of thinking it would have contravened the Old Testament laws on holiness. Peter and his fellow Jews who kept those laws were "saints"; people who did not keep them were "unclean." It was wrong for "saints" who wanted to please God by maintaining their holiness to mix socially and to eat with "unclean" people. And, therefore, if taking the gospel to Gentiles meant entering their homes and eating with them, it could not be done. Holiness would not allow it.

Our first reaction on hearing this might perhaps be to dismiss this

whole concept of holiness as nonsense or worse, and to attribute it to appalling narrow-mindedness on the part of Peter and his particular circle of fellow Jews. But we must not do that. Perhaps they had exaggerated the requirements of the Old Testament law in their desire to prevent themselves from coming anywhere near breaking it. But it was God who gave the law. And it is to be noticed that when the Lord gave Peter his vivid object lesson and Peter objected to the Lord's command, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat" (10:13), God did not say, "Oh, Peter, do not be so narrow-minded. Forget those foolish superstitions and restrictions. Eat, man, and enjoy yourself." No, of course not. It was God Himself who had laid down those laws, and He certainly was not blaming Peter for having loyally done his best to obey them. What the Lord did say was that the laws were now repealed (10:15).

But that pushes the question one stage further back. Why ever did God lay down these laws in the first place?

The purpose of the Old Testament food laws

A widely held view has been that God did it because He was concerned for the health and hygiene of His people. In those far-off primitive days, so the argument goes, when people had no scientific understanding of germs and viruses, and no refrigeration to stop meat going bad, God forbade the eating of certain animals, birds, and fish, to protect His people from the poison that those creatures could easily carry.

But this explanation is inadequate. When the Lord Jesus was on earth He canceled these food laws—see Mark 7:19: "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean." And that was not because science and technology had advanced so far in His day that it was now safe to eat foods that up till that time had been a danger to health! If they had been dangerous to eat in Moses' days, they were still dangerous to eat in our Lord's time. If they were now fit to eat, it was because they were consecrated by the Word of God and prayer, as Paul subsequently put it (1 Tim. 4:4-5).

A better explanation of the Old Testament food laws would start from observing the reason why our Lord canceled them:

Nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him "unclean." For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach...

...What comes out of a man is what makes him "unclean." For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean" (Mk. 7:18-23).

What our Lord was concerned about, therefore, was real *moral* uncleanness, and very forcefully He made the point that physical food entering the body cannot defile a man morally or spiritually: for it touches his stomach, not his heart.² Now the very fact that the disciples did not at first

understand Him (see Mk. 7:15-18), and He was obliged to repeat His lesson, shows that the apostles had originally confused these two things. They originally thought that eating “unclean food” defiled a man morally, when of course it did not.³ It was God’s prohibition on certain kinds of food that made eating it defiling, not the food in itself.

And this is the crucial point that is made to Peter in his vision. When Peter protests against eating anything common or unclean, the voice replies: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). In what sense, we must ask, had God cleansed it? Obviously not by ridding the food of poisonous chemicals and viruses, so that from now on pork would never give anyone a tape-worm! He had cleansed it in the sense of removing the prohibition He once put on it, and allowing Peter and all others to eat it: they could now eat it with a clear conscience.

If then we have established that it was God’s prohibition that had originally made the food unclean, rather than any intrinsic poison in the food itself, we are left with the question: Why did God originally forbid Israel certain foods?

The answer is: To teach them certain lessons by introducing the categories of ceremonial cleanness and uncleanness.

Leave aside for the moment these food laws. Israel as a nation was separated out from the other nations to enjoy a special relationship with God and to carry a special role among the nations. As Balaam put it, “I see people who live apart and do not consider themselves one of the nations” (Num. 23:9). As God explained to them at Sinai: “...out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5-6). In accordance with this special role, therefore, they were commanded naturally enough to keep themselves pure from the moral and spiritual uncleanness that so polluted the Gentile nations. Listing and prohibiting the sexual immoralities, the religious idolatries, the commercial dishonesties, the infanticide, demonism, and incest prevalent among the Canaanite nations, God explained:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants...And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you (Lev. 18:24-28).

These, then, were moral and spiritual prohibitions. But to reinforce them, God added laws providing for ceremonial cleanness:

You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground—those which I have set

apart as unclean for you. You are to be holy to Me [or, to be My holy ones] because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be My own (Lev. 20:25-26).

These ceremonial and ritual laws would have both a positive and a negative effect. Positively, they reinforced in Israel's thinking that as a nation they were separated *to* the Lord; specially set apart for Him. However morally and spiritually clean the members of another nation might have been, they did not have the role that Israel as a nation had. Israel's role, as a kingdom of priests, was special, indeed unique. The ceremonial separation from certain kinds of food which other nations ate reinforced and underlined the fact that they were in a special sense separated to the Lord, especially "holy" in a ritualistic way.

Negatively, these food laws had an immediate practical effect: they made social mixing with Gentile nations difficult, since Israelites could not eat Gentile food. This would not only reinforce the fact that Israel was a special nation, but also act as a constant reminder that Israel was to avoid the moral and spiritual uncleanness of the Gentiles.

Now of course not all Gentiles were as corrupt and filthy as the Canaanites. But here too was a problem: many Gentiles were guilty of corrupt habits. How could Israel therefore be protected from their influence? The way God used was to build a wall between Israel and *all* Gentiles. Just as a parent will do with a child: not all men are child-molesters, but enough of them are to make it a wise and sensible thing for parents to do, to forbid their young children to take candy or money or car-rides from *any* man they don't know.

And the analogy holds good for a further point. Parents may forbid their early-teenage daughter from going to certain sleazy parts of a city. They do so, not because they think their daughter is essentially better than other girls, but rather because they know that their daughter is essentially no better than others. She has the same human nature as others. She too could be corrupted as others have been. A good apple put among bad ones does not improve the bad ones: *they* corrupt *it*.

Israel under the law, says Paul, was like a child (Gal. 4:1-3); and God treated them appropriately. He put a wall of ceremonial food laws around them to remind them that they were a people separated to God, and to protect them as far as possible from Gentile pollution. The need for, and the importance of, that wall can be seen from their history: when they disregarded the wall, they generally became as corrupt as the other nations.

The abrogation of the Old Testament food laws

But, of course, the wall-technique had its limitations and weaknesses. First, it led unintentionally to Israelites thinking that they were intrinsically better than Gentiles; whereas of course they were not. The Old Testament itself showed them that God's choice of them was attributable

not to their superiority but to God's sovereign love. Secondly, it led to a confusion between moral and spiritual holiness on the one side and ceremonial holiness on the other. Even the disciples were amazed when our Lord pointed out that no food, in and of itself, defiles a man morally or spiritually: it does not touch his heart, but only his stomach (Mk. 7:14-23). And human nature being what it is, the temptation was always there to concentrate on the externals of ceremonial holiness and to neglect real internal, moral, and spiritual holiness—like those Pharisees of whom our Lord said: "You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness" (Lk. 11:39).

Thirdly, it led to the false idea that Israelites were God's favorites, whatever (evil) they did, whereas the Gentiles were rejected by God whatever (good) they did. Paul had to remind his fellow Jews:

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a law-breaker (Rom. 2:25-27).

A lack of recognizing this principle on the Jews' part led to much misunderstanding and a great deal of hostility on the part of Gentiles. There was a natural jealousy and resentment anyway against Israel for their claim that they stood in special relationship with God and carried a special role. The Gentiles found what to them was Israel's stand-offishness and their holier-than-thou attitude difficult to take. But when individual Jews could be utterly unprincipled in business and yet still regard themselves as "saints," fit for other Jews to eat with, while Gentiles of personal integrity and business rectitude were dismissed as unfit to eat with, the potential for disgust, resentment, and anger was unlimited.

With the incarnation of the Son of God, "the time had fully come" (Gal. 4:4). The people of Israel were now to leave their childhood and learn to live and be treated as grown-up sons. One of the first things to go was the food laws. Our Lord Himself canceled them, as we have earlier seen (Mk. 7:18-23). The disciples had not at once seen the implications of this, and even when they saw them, some of them would prove slow in living up to them fully. But now a crucial moment had come: the gospel must go out to the Gentiles; nothing must be allowed to stop or hinder it, or to becloud its message. Peter had to be given a direct, personal, vivid object-lesson from the Lord Himself that the food laws had been canceled and that he was therefore free to eat with the Gentile Cornelius in the course of taking him the gospel.

Imagine the anomalous situation that would have arisen if Peter had not learned the lesson. Cornelius was a man of exemplary morals and

piety. Gentile though he still was, he had abandoned his ancestral idolatry and turned to the worship of the one true God of Israel, and was in fact respected by his Jewish neighbors. He gave generously to those in need, and prayed to God regularly. Moreover, he had heard of the Lord Jesus and wished to learn more about Him. Yet because he was not circumcised and did not observe the food laws, he was not a "saint." Peter would have refused to eat with him or even to enter his house. On the other hand, take the likes of those Pharisees and Sadducees whom our Lord denounced (not all Pharisees were bad or denounced). They were inwardly rapacious, hypocrites, and cruel. In heart they were so far away from God that they murdered His Son. Yet they were "saints"! Peter, had he ever been invited, would have felt perfectly free to eat with them!

No, the time had come for change. God, who had instituted the food laws, had now canceled them. He had made (that is, pronounced) all foods clean. Peter was not to go on calling common (that is, ceremonially unfit for a "holy" people to eat) foods that God had now pronounced to be clean. He could go and eat Gentile food, in a Gentile's house, along with Gentiles. Since it would no longer be breaking a divine commandment, it would not defile his heart or conscience, and the food of itself would not of course touch his heart or defile him morally or spiritually.

Christianity, then, was making a very big break with Judaism when Peter entered Cornelius' house. But if Christianity was breaking with such an important element in Jewish holiness, what was it putting in its place? The wall was invented to serve a necessary practical purpose. It was not ideal, but it was better than nothing. The world had not changed. It was still a defiled world, no friend either to grace or to God. Was Christianity going simply to break down the wall, take a permissive attitude, and say uncleanness no longer mattered? Of course not! It will require higher standards than Judaism, more realistic, more demanding. But at the same time it will provide a power for holy living that Judaism never knew about.

The Christian way of holiness

The Christian way of holiness, then, is now to be set out in the rest of Movement 1: first in Peter's sermon in Cornelius' house; and then in the further explanation he gives to his Christian brothers in Jerusalem.

As he entered Cornelius' house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. Peter made him get up at once. For here was lesson number one: "I am only a man myself" (10:26). He was a Jew. No matter: he was only a human being just like the Gentiles. There are not two classes of human being, one of higher, the other of lower rank.

Peter was also an apostle of the Lord. Yet even so he would not allow Cornelius to bow at his feet in honor of the office he held. In spite of his office, he was a man still on the same human level as Cornelius.

Then Peter acknowledged how he himself had had to be corrected by

God. "You are well aware," he said, "that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him; but God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (10:28). So very often it is the man who admits that he himself has recently had to be corrected and to change his views who makes the most readily acceptable teacher of others.

But we must stay a moment with the lesson which Peter says God had taught him. "God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean" (10:28). The lesson the Lord taught Peter in the vision was about food: the Lord had lifted all prohibitions, He had pronounced all foods to be clean; therefore Peter was to stop regarding these foods as common, that is as unfit for saints, holy people, to eat. But now God has gone on to show Peter a further lesson. No *human being* is to be called common or unclean ("impure or unclean," NIV, would be tautologous).⁴

What does that mean? He cannot mean, can he, that there are no unclean people in the world? Paul says of some people that "Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity..." (Eph. 4:19). Peter does not wish to contradict him, does he? Even Peter himself, describing the way Gentiles live, says that they live "in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry" (1 Pet. 4:3).

No, to understand his meaning we must read what he says in its context. As an Israelite, he regarded himself by definition as "holy" because he was a member of the "holy" nation and because he kept the ceremonial food laws and washings. Gentiles, on the other hand, he held to be by definition "common": they were not members of the holy nation; he regarded them as unclean, because they were not circumcised, and did not keep the ceremonial food laws and ablutions. It was that situation which Peter saw was now changing. If God had canceled the prohibitions on food and pronounced all foods clean, Gentiles were no longer "unclean" because they ate certain foods. More profoundly: if God were now doing away with Israel's special privilege, destroying the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile, Gentiles were no longer "common" by definition, nor Israelites "holy" by definition. Jew and Gentile stood alike on the same platform. There were no longer any second-class people or nations.

Peter, taken indoors, addressed the company that had gathered. His opening words were: "Of a truth I perceive, I grasp the fact that God is no respecter of persons; that is, He does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear Him and do what is right" (10:34-35).

Is this yet another lesson? And if so, how has he learned it? Why, he has just heard Cornelius' explanation of what led him to ask Peter to come: four days ago an angel appeared to him as he was praying and said, "Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor" (10:31); and the explanation has taught Peter that good works are good works, and the fear of God is the fear of God, whoever it is that does

the works and shows the fear. It does not matter what nation a man comes from: God does not accept one man's good works because he is a Jew and reject another's because he is a Gentile. God does not ignore one man's fear of God and prayers because he is a Gentile and accept another's because he is a Jew. There is no difference in God's sight—in this there never has been. This is not something new. God had made a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles in the area of the role and the holiness and consecration he expected from Israel; but not in the area of morality. Israel's sin was sin, just like the Gentiles.' The Gentiles' good works were good, just like Israel's.

Peter, then, has learned what Paul later says in Romans 2:6 and 9-11:

God will give to each person according to what he has done...There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.

Peter is not saying (and neither is Paul) that any man, no matter of what nation, can merit, and attain to, salvation on the ground of his good works. For this principle that God does not show favoritism applies elsewhere as well: "There is no difference [that is, between Jew and Gentile], for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22-23). What he is saying is that God values and accepts people's good works without partiality, and altogether independently of what nation they come from.

It was a very fortunate thing, therefore, that Peter learned this lesson before he began to preach to Cornelius. How unfortunate it would have been if he had walked into his house and begun his sermon by declaring that Cornelius was an unclean Gentile, and that even his righteous deeds were as filthy rags. For Cornelius would have replied, "That's strange: for the other day, an angel came and told me that God had heard my prayer and remembered my gifts to the poor!"

We must not confuse two separate issues. Judged in the light of God's absolute standards of holiness, everyone's good works are little better than filthy rags. Certainly, if we attempted to depend on them for salvation, His law would have no option but to condemn both them and us. It is to be noted that though the angel had told Cornelius that God had remembered his good works, he also told him that he still needed to be saved (11:13-14). Cornelius made no attempt to claim his works as deserving salvation. When he eventually heard of the possibility of forgiveness and salvation through Christ, he did not retort: "I don't need salvation: my good works are just as good as yours." He humbly admitted his need of forgiveness and accepted salvation solely through faith in Christ.

But the fact that people's good works cannot earn them salvation does not mean that God is not interested in their doing, or attempting to do, good works. It is possible that we give people the wrong impression here:

being so anxious to break their dependence on good works for salvation, we are in danger of giving the impression that it is no good their trying to do good works before they are saved, and that it does not in the end really matter all that much whether they do good works after they are saved either, because salvation is not of works. And so we are in danger of producing a race of evangelicals who think that they are automatically better than the unsaved simply because they are believers, disciples, saints, even if their home-life, their business ethics, and their works of charity are far inferior to those of people who make no profession of being saved.

The truth is that God loves good works, and He *is* interested in the good works even of people who are not yet saved. He “remembered Cornelius’ gifts to the poor” (10:31). He read them as the practical expression of Cornelius’ desire to please God. Cornelius feared God, was searching for God, searching for salvation and fellowship: his works were the sign of the sincerity of his search. And God in response sent an angel to tell him how to find an evangelist who could show him how to be saved.

And though salvation is not of works, the result of salvation is to produce good works: “our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ...gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:13-14; cf. AV, “zealous of good works”).

Instead of beginning his sermon by emphasizing Cornelius’ sinfulness and need of salvation, Peter therefore began on another tack altogether. He presented the gospel as the good news of peace through Christ (10:36): it was sent to the people of Israel—there’s no denying Israel’s special role as the messenger—but Jesus Christ “is Lord of all.” As Paul would put it, that same Lord over all is rich to “all who call on Him” (Rom. 10:12).

Secondly, he presented the life and activity of the Lord Jesus. The story, he reminded them, began with the baptism that John preached, calling on people to repent and prepare for the coming of the Lord. He came. God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and power; and “He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with Him” (10:37-38).

How delightful this is! Cornelius was a man who sincerely sought to do good and help the poor. Peter presents for his admiration and faith the supreme Doer of good. Even at this level Christ unites both Jew and Gentile. Serious moralists, people who genuinely love goodness and seek to do good, whatever their race, nation, or background, must and do admire the goodness of Jesus Christ. “We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem” (10:39). There spoke an apostle, chosen for this very purpose (1:8, 21-22). But now comes the bombshell. “They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree” (10:39).

Who did? Whatever for? A flood of questions bursts in on the mind. The statement is so stark! Doubtless, of course, Luke is only giving us a

summary, not a verbatim report. Even so, the brevity of the statement is extraordinary. What an admission! Peter does not actually say, "The Jews killed Him." Others joined with them: Herod, Pilate. But what a thing for a Jew to have to tell a Gentile: that the Jews, the saints, the people blessed with a God-given religion, zealous for righteousness, with a privileged role among the nations, killed the supreme Doer of good! And not only killed Him, but hanged Him on a tree. That was a penalty given out to the worst of criminals. Anyone hanged on a tree was in Jewish thought "cursed by God" (see Deut. 21:22-23). How could the human heart, the religious mind, be so perverse as to condemn the fairest life that ever lived as though it were the foulest? What has privilege, "sainthood," the "better than-the-Gentiles attitude" achieved if it has come to this? How bankrupt the religion, how woefully far short the good works. And this is not a Gentile accusing the Jews: this is a Jew confessing to a Gentile what his Jewish nation have done to Jesus!

But are Gentiles any better? Of course not! It has been an ever-increasingly loud protest by the Jews in recent decades that the fearful sin of anti-Semitism has been fostered by the Christians' teaching of each generation of children that it was the Jews who killed Jesus. There is some truth in the protest. Christendom has been guilty of grievous pride and cruelty. But it has been the pride and cruelty of a Christendom unregenerate and evil. Every true Gentile Christian will without hesitation confess that he is no better than the Jews who crucified Jesus. They plotted His death and used the Romans to drive in the nails, but each and every Gentile Christian will say that it was his own sin too that crucified Jesus. For this is the very heart of the gospel: He bore our sins in His body on the tree. The enmity against God exposed by the crucifixion of God incarnate is an evil that lies in every human heart, Jew and Gentile.

Here, then, at the foot of the cross of Christ, Jew and Gentile are on the same level: there is no room for boasting or pride; neither is superior to the other. They stand together in their common sinfulness.

"But God raised Him from the dead" (10:40), and commissioned some of His servants to witness the reality of that resurrection: "[we] ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead" (10:41). To preach the resurrection is to preach a fact. It is not a mythical way of saying that we hope and believe that in another world somewhere beyond death this world's wrongs will be put right. It is a statement of literal fact. God has reversed men's decisions: His Son was raised from the dead, physically and bodily.

"[We] ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead," said Peter (10:41). How significant, therefore, that Peter was now commanded to go and eat and drink with Gentiles!

Those, then, who witnessed His resurrection were now commissioned to explain its significance: "He commanded us to preach...and to testify that He is the One whom God appointed as judge of the living and the

dead" (10:42). We have heard this so often that perhaps it has lost its power to startle and surprise us. But see what it is saying: not "God is going to be judge," but "Jesus of Nazareth is going to be judge." God's appointment of Him to be judge is because of His sinless manhood. He is man: He has lived in our world. His judgment will be just, because He never sought His own will (Jn. 5:30). He is the standard of comparison. It leaves no room for the Gentile to answer back: "I'm as good as you. What right have you to condemn me?" It leaves the Jew no room for feeling superior, for the Jews crucified Him.

But the next startling—joyfully startling—thing is: all the prophets witness to this, that all who believe on Him receive forgiveness through His name (10:43)—*forgiveness*, not condemnation, guilty though both Jew and Gentile are. Once more there is no difference between Jew and Gentile: the same One is Lord of all, richly blessing all who call upon Him. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:12-13).

Here then is the basis of true Christian holiness: it is found at the foot of the cross, Jew and Gentile both on a common level: both sinners before God, in spite of their religion and good works. Both forgiven on exactly the same terms: as a free gift through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Neither is left with anything to boast about over the other; everything to rejoice in together.

That is the first element of true holiness: the realistic discovery of sin: and then of forgiveness. But there is a second element. While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The Jewish believers who had come along with Peter were amazed. Because, of course, the gift of the Holy Spirit demonstrated that God had accepted these repentant and believing Gentiles exactly as He had accepted repentant and believing Jews. And He had done so, notice, on the ground of their faith in the Lord Jesus. He and His atoning death were not only the only basis, but the totally adequate basis. Faith in Him leads to complete acceptance for everyone: nothing needs to be, nothing may be, added. And so on that ground Peter commanded them to be baptized in water. If God had accepted them, so must the Jewish Christians (10:44-48).

PETER: THE SEQUEL (11:1-18)

Luke adds a sequel to this story; and this will help us grasp further the significance of this coming of the Holy Spirit on the Gentile believers. When Peter got back to Jerusalem, the Judaic Christians criticized him for going into a house of uncircumcised men and eating with them (11:1-3). So Peter explained patiently and in detail the whole story: the lesson God had taught him—the vision, the invitation to visit Cornelius, who had been commanded by an angel to send for him; and then God's decisive action in giving the Gentiles His Holy Spirit. "As I was speaking," Peter explained, "the Spirit came on them. God gave them the same gift as He

gave us. And who was I to oppose God? God did it. I couldn't help it. I only spoke. God did the rest!" (11:15-17). Well argued, Peter!

Significant for our purpose, however, is how he described this coming of the Holy Spirit: "I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (11:16).

Here is the second element in true holiness: first, forgiveness through the death and resurrection of Christ; but secondly, empowering through the Holy Spirit to lead a life of true holiness and witness for the Lord.

And now we see why God could afford, so to speak, to knock down the wall He once put around Israel. In those days they knew nothing of the baptism in the Holy Spirit; knew nothing of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them to empower them to live holy lives. The best that could be done, therefore, was to put a wall round them and keep them from mixing with tainted Gentile society. But of course it had its weaknesses. A wall *outside* and *around* did not make the Israelites inside it any holier in themselves. And what final answer is it anyway if holiness depends on keeping people shut away from the real world?

But with redemption and cleansing provided by the death of Christ, it became possible for the Holy Spirit to come and dwell in each believer and so to give the believer the power to live a holy life, so that the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus might set us free from the law of sin and death, and that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. Now with the wall gone, but the Holy Spirit within them, the believers would be free to go anywhere in the world to take the gospel to every creature.

And there is something more. At the time, Peter and his fellow apostles may not have realized that there was a further implication in Gentiles as well as Jews being baptized in the Holy Spirit. But not many years would pass by before Paul would be inspired to write: "We were all baptized in one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor. 12:13). Here was the end to the middle wall of partition: Jews and Gentiles, fellow members sharing the same life, incorporated in the same body of Christ.

This, then, is Christian holiness as distinct from Jewish holiness.

But to return to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. When they heard Peter's story, they dropped all objections, and glorified God (11:18). All credit to them. To lose a privileged position, held for centuries, might have seemed to some a painful bereavement, but not to them. Those who have experienced the inexpressible and immeasurable grace of God in Christ as an inexhaustible free gift, feel themselves so rich that they can afford to share all they have equally with all others. They gave God the glory; for what a magnificent God of matchless grace it showed Him to be: "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (11:18). Does "even the Gentiles" sound a little odd? Why not just "Gentiles"? Well then

re-phrase it, in order to see the amazing grace of it all: "So then, God has granted even *us* repentance unto life."

With this glorious climax, we have reached the end of Movement 1.