

Christian water baptism, though accepted by most Christians as a divinely commanded practice in the church, is not uniformly understood nor fully appreciated for what it should communicate to us. The account of the conversion of Cornelius and his household climaxes with the outpouring of God's Spirit upon them and their subsequent baptism with water. A crucial issue, which makes this account so important, is highlighted when Peter returns to Jerusalem and is criticized for visiting and eating with uncircumcised men (11:1–3). Asking discerning questions about this account reveals one special importance of Christian water baptism.

**I. What was the critical issue?**

1. The book of Acts serves as a bridge between the Gospels and the Epistles. The account of Cornelius helps show how preaching the gospel to Gentiles and a church of both Jew and Gentile became assumed in the Epistles while hardly seen in the Gospels. Baptism had an important role.
2. The devoutness of Cornelius shows that the critical issue was not the level of religious devotion (Acts 10:1–6).
3. There are hints at the issue in Peter's vision and the Spirit's command not to hesitate to go with the three men looking for him (10:11–20).
4. The issue finally becomes clear when Peter states that it was against Jewish law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile (10:28). They could hardly believe that the uncircumcised could be saved and receive the Holy Spirit (10:45).

It was this issue of being Gentiles that Peter would need to pose the question, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?"

**II. What was God's answer to this issue of Jewish-Gentile division?**

1. God's answer began with the vision that He had given Peter in which he learned that he should not call unclean what God had called clean (10:28–29, 34–35).
2. God's answer continued with human task of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ in which it is clear that "everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through his name" (10:43).
3. God's answer climaxed with His divine choice to "grant even the Gentiles repentance unto life" (11:18).

Having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, nothing prevented the Gentile believers from being baptized and Peter staying with them (10:47–48; cf. 15:7–9). The division between Jew and Gentile, with which the early Jewish Christians struggled, was removed by God in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

**III. What part did baptism play?**

1. By baptizing the Gentile believers, the Jews acknowledged that God had made them clean (cf. Acts 15:9; Titus 3:5).
2. By baptizing the Gentile believers, the Jews acknowledged that God had given them His Spirit (cf. Acts 11:15–17; 15:8; 10:47).
3. By baptizing the Gentile believers, the Jews acknowledged that God had made both Jewish believers and Gentile believers one.

This ultimately answered the criticism of the circumcised in Jerusalem. Peter baptized the Gentile believers and stayed with them because God had "made no distinction between us and them" (Acts 15:9).

Today Christian water baptism is not only the believer's testimony of being a disciple of Jesus (Matthew 28:19–20), it is not only a picture of Christ's work in cleansing from sin, but also the church's public acknowledgment that the believer being baptized must be treated as one of us without social, racial, ethnic, or cultural distinction. In Jesus Christ Jews and Gentiles can benefit from God's promise to forgive (cf. Jeremiah 31:33–34) and fellowship together as one body in Christ.

*Questions for further thought and discussion:*

- How would you describe and evaluate Cornelius's faith at the beginning of Acts 10? Was it sufficient to be saved (cf. Acts 11:14)? Why/why not? Why is it clear that baptism was not needed for their salvation?
- What divisions between people might exist today with which Christians struggle? Are there any for you?
- When we allow social, racial, or ethnic distinctions to divide us, what does this say about our understanding of our condition in God's eyes, both before salvation and afterwards in Christ?
- How can we better encourage one another to live out what we confess in baptism?