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Church of God Mission Academy

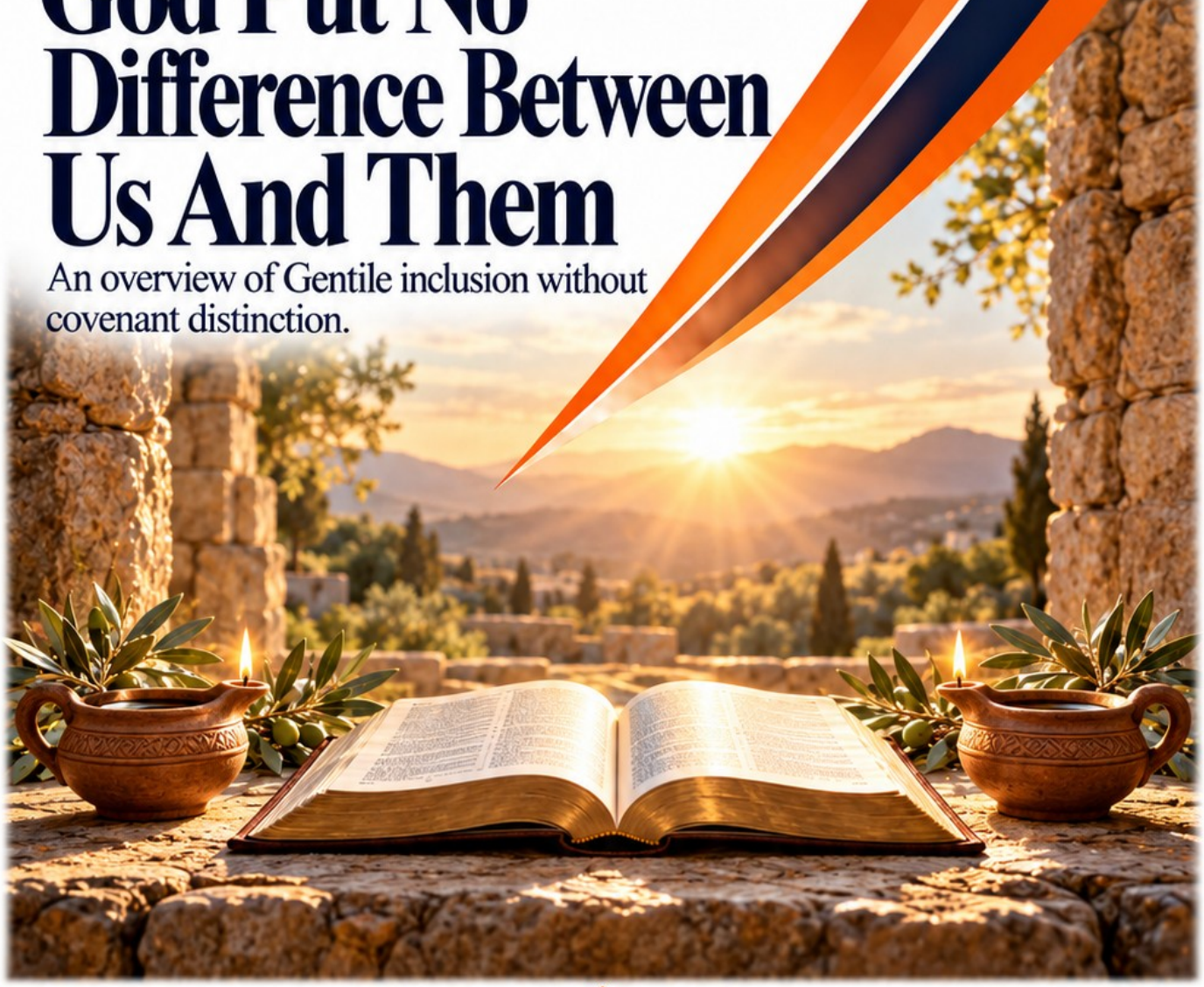
STUDY GUIDE 73

Ordinances Fulfilled in Jesus Christ

STUDY GUIDE 6 OF 12:

God Put No Difference Between Us And Them

An overview of Gentile inclusion without covenant distinction.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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The book of Acts is an inspired and truthful record of the period of transition. However, the fact that an action is recorded does not automatically make that action a permanent New Covenant command. We must distinguish between what God had already established in Jesus Christ and how believers understood and responded to that reality while the transition was taking place.

This Study Guide examines the historical evidence as the Gospel moved from its Jewish setting towards the Gentiles. We will consider how God dealt with the understanding of Peter, the Jerusalem believers and the wider Church. The central question is: What does Acts actually show God doing as He brought the Church beyond the former covenant boundaries?

The answer is seen most clearly in the way God received Gentile believers. He did not require them first to become Jews or enter the Mosaic covenant order. He acted directly, gave them the Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith and demonstrated that former covenant distinctions could no longer govern spiritual standing in the New Covenant Church.

Peter later expressed this truth plainly when he said that God *"put no difference between us and them."* This Study Guide will therefore allow us to watch the transition happen through the inspired record of Acts.

Divine reality came first, while human understanding followed. God acted according to the New Covenant reality already established in Jesus Christ, and believers had to bring their understanding into agreement with what He had done.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What did God's reception of Gentiles reveal about their need to enter the Mosaic covenant?

Personal Reflection

How does God acting before human recognition challenge the way you judge who belongs to Him? What difference should this make to your own response?

Action Step

What do you want to understand more clearly about God purifying hearts by faith without former covenant requirements? State one specific conclusion you need to correct or confirm in the Bible, and how it will affect your conduct.

INTRODUCTION

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The book of Acts records the historical events of the transition from the former covenant order to the New Covenant reality established in Jesus Christ. These events reveal how God brought the Gospel beyond the former Jewish covenant boundaries. Jesus had already made the direction of the Gospel clear.

Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**:

> *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

Jesus also said in **Mark 16:15**:

> *"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."*

The commission was already clear. The Gospel would begin in Jerusalem, move through Judaea and Samaria, and continue outward to the nations.

However, Acts shows that Jewish believers did not immediately understand every implication of that commission. The problem was not that God had failed to reveal His purpose. Human understanding still had to come into agreement with what God had already established.

The book of Acts records how God corrected former Jewish assumptions, acted directly among Gentiles, gave them the Holy Ghost without first requiring entrance into the Mosaic covenant order, and brought the Church to recognise that He had *"put no difference between us and them."*

Divine reality came first, while human understanding followed. God acted according to the truth already established in Jesus Christ, and the people had to recognise what His actions revealed.

That brings us to the first major section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did Jesus' worldwide commission establish the direction of the Gospel before the events in Acts?

Personal Reflection

What does the difference between a clear commission and developing understanding help you recognise about your own learning?

Action Step

As you read about Gentile inclusion, how will you distinguish what God had established from what people still needed to understand? Explain one boundary you will stop using to judge spiritual belonging, and what you will do differently.

THE GOSPEL BEGAN IN A JEWISH WORLD

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The Introduction established that Jesus had already made the direction of the Gospel clear. It would begin in Jerusalem, move through Judaea and Samaria, and continue *"unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

However, Acts begins in a world that was still overwhelmingly Jewish. Jerusalem remained the centre of Jewish religious life, the Temple still stood, and circumcision, the Law of Moses,

ceremonial distinctions and Jewish customs remained deeply established among the people to whom the Gospel was first proclaimed.

Therefore, the opening chapters of Acts naturally reflect that setting. The Gospel began among people whose lives and thinking had been formed within the former covenant world.

Jerusalem Was the Beginning Point

Jesus had already told His disciples where their witness would begin. Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**:

> *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

Jerusalem was the appointed starting point, but the starting point was not the permanent boundary of the Gospel. The earliest believers recorded in Acts were largely Jewish. They had been raised with the Law, the Temple, circumcision, sacrifices, ceremonial distinctions and Jewish customs.

For generations, these things had shaped their understanding of obedience and covenant identity. Therefore, when Jewish people believed in Jesus Christ, they did not instantly lose every assumption formed within that former covenant world. They had received the reality, while their understanding still carried the influence of the former order.

The Temple also remained standing throughout most of the period recorded in Acts. Its continued visibility could easily make the former order appear as though it still possessed the same authority it once held.

Yet the New Covenant had already been established in Jesus Christ. Visible continuation did not mean continuing covenant authority. The Temple could still stand while Jesus Christ was already the New Covenant reality.

Jewish believers were hearing and receiving the Gospel while living in a world where the former covenant system still surrounded them. The Temple remained visible, Jewish customs continued, and the Law of Moses still shaped the expectations of many people.

At the same time, Jesus Christ was being proclaimed as the fulfilment of what that former order had pointed towards. The transition therefore required people whose thinking had been formed under the former covenant to understand more fully the reality now found in Jesus Christ.

The Jewish Setting Explains Much of Acts

This background helps us understand why Acts contains so many events involving Jewish customs, circumcision, the Temple and questions concerning Gentiles. The Gospel did not begin in a religious vacuum. It began among people whose lives had been shaped for generations by a covenant God Himself had once established. Therefore, when Acts records Jewish practices or assumptions, we should neither assume that everything Jewish was wrong nor assume that everything Jewish was intended to become permanent New Covenant practice.

Beginning in a Jewish World Did Not Mean Remaining There

The historical setting must be recognised before the action is interpreted. The Gospel came first within the Jewish world, but Jesus had already said that the witness would extend *"unto the uttermost part of the earth."* The strongly Jewish character of the opening chapters of Acts must therefore not be mistaken for the final boundaries of the New Covenant Church.

The direction was already established:

- Jerusalem;
- Judaea;
- Samaria;
- The uttermost part of the earth.

Gentile believers had not grown up under the Law of Moses, Temple worship, circumcision or Jewish ceremonial separation. Their inclusion would therefore expose an important question:

Were Gentiles required to enter the former Jewish covenant system before they could belong to Jesus Christ? Acts will answer that question clearly.

The Gospel began within a deeply established Jewish covenant world. The Temple still stood, Jewish customs remained powerful, and the first believers naturally carried the influence of that former setting. However, beginning within that world did not mean the Gospel was intended to remain within its boundaries.

Jesus had already commanded the Gospel to go to all people. The next question is therefore unavoidable: if the commission was already clear, why did the early believers take time to move fully beyond those former boundaries?

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does the Gospel beginning in a Jewish world not make that setting its permanent boundary?

Personal Reflection

How might a familiar religious setting influence what you expect from people who come to Christ? What does this reveal about an assumption you have held?

Action Step

What would help you distinguish your own religious background from the basis on which God receives people? Identify one conviction or attitude that this teaching challenges. What specific response will you make?

THE COMMISSION WAS CLEAR, BUT UNDERSTANDING LAGGED BEHIND

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that the Gospel began within a deeply Jewish world. Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law of Moses and generations of covenant practice formed the background of the first believers.

However, Jesus had already made the direction of the Gospel clear. The difficulty was not a lack of revelation. The difficulty was that human understanding lagged behind what Jesus had already revealed.

Jesus Had Already Commanded a Worldwide Gospel

Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**:

> *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

The direction was clear:

- Jerusalem;
- Judaea;
- Samaria;
- The uttermost part of the earth.

Jesus also said in **Mark 16:15**:

> *"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature."*

The commission had therefore been given before the events recorded in Acts unfolded. God's purpose was already established.

Jerusalem was the appointed starting point, but the command did not end there. It moved outward through Judaea and Samaria and towards the uttermost part of the earth.

Therefore, the strongly Jewish character of the opening chapters of Acts cannot be used to prove that the New Covenant Church was intended to remain within former Jewish covenant boundaries. The starting point must not be mistaken for the final destination.

Peter's Own Words Reveal the Difficulty

Although the commission was clear, Peter's own words show that his thinking concerning Gentiles still needed to change. Peter said in **Acts 10:28**:

> *"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."*

Peter had already heard Jesus say that the witness would go *"unto the uttermost part of the earth."* He had also heard the command to preach the Gospel to *"every creature."*

Yet Peter still said, *"God hath shewed me."* This tells us exactly where the difficulty lay. Jesus had not failed to give the command. Peter had not yet understood all that the command required.

The Gospel did not become universal only when Peter entered the house of Cornelius. God's purpose had already been declared.

What changed was Peter's understanding of that purpose. The revelation was already clear, while human understanding was still developing.

This is one of the clearest examples of what we mean by transition. The transition was not taking place in the truth, but in the people who had to understand and walk in that truth.

The former covenant had contained real distinctions between Israel and the Gentile nations. Circumcision, ceremonial requirements and other outward practices had reinforced that separation for generations.

Therefore, Jewish believers did not instantly lose every assumption connected with that former world. The command of Jesus was universal, but their inherited framework could still remain narrow. God had to bring their understanding into agreement with the New Covenant reality.

The delay in moving fully towards the Gentiles does not mean that Jesus had left His commission unclear. Neither does it mean that God was uncertain about whether Gentiles should hear the Gospel.

The purpose was already settled. The delay reveals the continuing influence of former covenant thinking upon the first Jewish believers. The commission was clear, while the understanding lagged behind.

When the early believers hesitate, question or struggle with Gentile inclusion, we must distinguish between:

- What Jesus had already revealed;
- What the believers had not yet fully understood.

The first was settled, while the second was developing. This distinction allows us to follow the history of Acts without allowing temporary human limitation to redefine divine purpose.

The commission was clear before the disciples fully understood its implications. Jesus had already commanded the Gospel to go into all the world and to every creature. The delay was not in God's revelation but in human understanding.

The next major event brings this issue into full view. God dealt directly with Peter's inherited Jewish assumptions and prepared him to enter the house of a Gentile.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why did Peter still need correction concerning Gentiles after Jesus had commanded a worldwide Gospel?

Personal Reflection

What does Peter's experience show you about knowing Jesus' words without fully understanding their meaning? Which part of your own understanding does it challenge?

Action Step

Is there an expectation about people from another background that you want to examine in the light of Jesus' worldwide commission? Explain. Name one choice in your own life that should change because of this truth, and explain why.

PETER AND CORNELIUS - GOD CORRECTED JEWISH UNDERSTANDING

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that the commission was already clear. Jesus had commanded the Gospel to go into all the world and to every creature.

Yet Peter still carried assumptions formed within the former Jewish covenant world. The account of Cornelius in Acts 10 therefore gives us one of the clearest pictures of the transition taking place.

God did not change His purpose. He corrected Peter's understanding of the purpose He had already revealed.

Cornelius Was a Gentile

Luke introduces Cornelius as a Gentile centurion. Luke wrote in **Acts 10:1-2**:

> *"There was a certain man in Caesarea called Cornelius, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, A devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway."*

Cornelius stood outside the natural covenant identity that had distinguished Israel from the Gentile nations, yet God was already dealing with him. The events that followed would answer an important question:

Could God receive Gentiles directly through Jesus Christ without first bringing them into the former Jewish covenant order? Acts 10 records God's answer through what He did. Before Peter met Cornelius, God dealt directly with Peter's understanding. Luke wrote in **Acts 10:9-16**:

> *"On the morrow, as they went on their journey, and drew nigh unto the city, Peter went up upon the housetop to pray about the sixth hour: And he became very hungry, and would have eaten: but while they made ready, he fell into a trance, And saw heaven opened, and a certain vessel descending unto him, as it had been a great sheet knit at the four corners, and let down to the earth: Wherein were all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven."*

Peter's immediate response was *"Not so, Lord."* Those words show how strongly his former covenant understanding still shaped his response. God was preparing Peter to move beyond the framework in which he had been formed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did Peter's response to the vision reveal the strength of his former understanding?

Personal Reflection

How willing are you to reconsider a familiar religious belief when the Bible challenges it? What difference should this make to your own response?

Action Step

What would help you listen carefully when a Bible truth challenges an expectation you have held for a long time? Consider someone whose background differs from yours. What change in your thinking or treatment of that person is needed?

Peter Did Not Immediately Understand the Vision

The vision did not instantly give Peter complete understanding. Luke wrote in **Acts 10:17**:

> *"Now while Peter doubted in himself what this vision which he had seen should mean, behold, the men which were sent from Cornelius had made enquiry for Simon's house, and stood before the gate,"*

Peter *"doubted in himself what this vision... should mean."* The revelation had been given, but Peter still had to understand what God was teaching him.

Once again, divine revelation came before full human understanding. While Peter was still considering the vision, the men sent by Cornelius arrived.

Luke wrote in **Acts 10:19-20**:

> *"While Peter thought on the vision, the Spirit said unto him, Behold, three men seek thee. Arise therefore, and get thee down, and go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them."*

The movement towards the Gentiles was therefore not Peter's invention. The Spirit directed him to go. God was bringing Peter's understanding into agreement with His already-revealed purpose. When Peter arrived, he openly acknowledged the difficulty created by his former Jewish understanding.

Peter said in **Acts 10:28**:

> *"And he said unto them, Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath shewed me that I should not call any man common or unclean."*

Peter first described his former understanding and then explained what had changed: *"But God hath shewed me."* God had not changed His purpose. God had changed Peter's understanding.

Peter now understood that the vision concerned more than food. God was correcting the way he regarded people.

Peter Began to Understand That God Is No Respecter of Persons

Peter's developing understanding became even clearer as he spoke. Peter said in **Acts 10:34-35**:

> *"Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him."*

Peter said, *"Of a truth I perceive."* Acts allows us to watch his understanding develop. He now spoke of *"every nation."* The Gospel was moving exactly as Jesus had already commanded.

Peter did not bring Cornelius under the Law of Moses. His message centred upon Jesus Christ.

Peter said in **Acts 10:36**:

> *"The word which God sent unto the children of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ: (he is Lord of all:)"*

God Acted While Peter Was Still Speaking

The centre of Peter's message was not circumcision, Temple worship or entrance into the Mosaic covenant. Then something happened that neither Peter nor the Jewish believers with him controlled. The centre was Jesus Christ, who is *"Lord of all."*

Luke wrote in **Acts 10:44-46**:

> *"While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,"*

The timing is important: *"While Peter yet spake these words,"* the Holy Ghost fell on those who heard the Word. The Jewish believers had not gathered to decide whether Cornelius could be accepted. God acted first, and those of the circumcision who believed were *"astonished."*

Their astonishment shows how significant the event was. God was demonstrating something their former covenant understanding had not prepared them to expect.

Cornelius did not cause God to change His plan, and Peter did not persuade God to include the Gentiles. The event revealed what the New Covenant already meant.

The Gospel belonged to all people, Jesus Christ was Lord of all, and former covenant boundaries could no longer determine whom God could receive. Divine reality came first, while human understanding followed.

Acts 10 therefore does not show God gradually deciding what the New Covenant would become. It shows believers gradually understanding what God had already established in Jesus Christ.

God used the experience of Cornelius to correct Peter's former Jewish understanding. The worldwide Gospel had already been commanded, but Peter still had to learn that he should call no person common or unclean. God then acted among the Gentiles while Peter was still

speaking, demonstrating that His New Covenant work was not confined within former Jewish covenant boundaries.

The next section will examine the significance of the order in which these events occurred. The Jewish believers did not first approve Cornelius and then ask God to receive him. God acted first, and human recognition followed.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did the events at Cornelius's house explain the meaning of Peter's vision?

Personal Reflection

What does Peter learning to call no person common or unclean lead you to consider about your own attitude towards others?

Action Step

What personal response do you want to make to the truth that Christ is Lord of all people? Explain. Identify one personal response you will make, trusting in Jesus Christ rather than your own religious effort.

GOD ACTED BEFORE JEWISH APPROVAL

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section showed how God corrected Peter's understanding and brought him into the house of Cornelius. What happened next is especially important because God acted before the Jewish believers could decide whether Cornelius and his household should be accepted.

They did not first become Jews, receive circumcision or enter the Mosaic covenant order. God acted first, and human recognition followed.

The Holy Ghost Came While Peter Was Still Speaking

Luke records the exact timing of God's action. Luke wrote in **Acts 10:44-46**:

> *"While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter,"*

Notice the words: *"While Peter yet spake these words."* Peter had not finished speaking, and the Jewish believers had not gathered to decide whether the Gentiles had met former covenant requirements. God acted while Peter was still preaching Jesus Christ. The Holy Ghost came before the Jewish believers could impose the former covenant framework upon them.

Luke tells us that those *"of the circumcision which believed were astonished."* Their astonishment is significant. These were Jewish believers whose expectations were still shaped by the former covenant world, and God had now poured out the Holy Ghost upon Gentiles.

The event forced them to face the New Covenant reality directly. God had acted among people whom their former religious framework had taught them to regard as outside the covenant people.

The order of events is important. God did not first ask Peter and the Jewish believers whether they were willing to admit Gentiles into fellowship. Neither did He wait until they had established a Jewish procedure by which Gentiles might become acceptable. He acted according to His own New Covenant purpose.

Divine acceptance came before human approval. The Jewish believers then had to bring their understanding into agreement with what God had already done.

Cornelius and his household did not first become part of natural Israel. They did not first receive circumcision, come under the Law of Moses or enter Temple worship.

God gave them the Holy Ghost. This demonstrated that the former covenant system was not the necessary entrance into the New Covenant.

The Gospel was not Gentiles entering Judaism before coming to Jesus Christ. The Gentiles were being brought directly to Jesus Christ.

The Holy Ghost Was God's Own Witness

Peter later explained the meaning of what had happened. Peter said in **Acts 15:8**:

> *"And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;"*

Notice the expression: *"Bare them witness."* God Himself bore witness concerning the Gentiles by *"giving them the Holy Ghost."* The decisive testimony was not an outward Jewish covenant mark. The decisive testimony was the inward work of God.

Peter also said: *"God, which knoweth the hearts."* The Jewish believers could see nationality, circumcision and outward religious history. God knew the heart.

Former covenant identity had been marked outwardly, but here God demonstrated His acceptance by His own inward work. Human beings were called to recognise what God had already performed.

Human Recognition Followed Divine Action

The Jewish believers did not create the spiritual reality. They recognised it after God had acted.

The order was:

- God acted;
- The Gentiles received the Holy Ghost;
- The Jewish believers witnessed what God had done;
- Their understanding had to come into agreement with the divine reality.

Once again, divine reality came first, and human understanding followed. Suppose the Jewish believers had remained uncomfortable with what happened. Their discomfort could not undo the work of God.

Suppose they had preferred to preserve the former boundary between Jew and Gentile. Their preference could not reverse what God had already demonstrated. Human approval did not create the reality, so human objection could not cancel it.

The significance of Cornelius is greater than the salvation of one household. God was showing the Church that the former covenant boundary was no longer the route through which people had to pass in order to come to Him.

The Gentiles were not being absorbed into the Mosaic system. They were being brought directly to Jesus Christ.

That is why this event is so important to the transition. It shows not only that Gentiles could receive the Gospel, but that they could receive it without first becoming Jews.

God acted among Cornelius and his household before Jewish believers could impose the former covenant framework upon them. He gave them the Holy Ghost and bore witness to their acceptance Himself. Human recognition followed divine action.

Peter later had to explain this event to the believers in Jerusalem. His conclusion was simple:

If God had acted, Peter could not stand against what God had done. That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does God giving the Holy Ghost before Jewish approval establish about the acceptance of Gentile believers?

Personal Reflection

How does this order challenge reliance on human approval as the basis of belonging to Christ? What does this reveal about an assumption you have held?

Action Step

How could you recognise God's inward work without adding your own outward conditions to His acceptance? Identify one practice or belief you will test against the Bible, and explain what you are prepared to change.

"WHAT WAS I, THAT I COULD WITHSTAND GOD?"

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that God acted among Cornelius and his household before Jewish believers could impose the former covenant framework upon them. The Holy Ghost came upon the Gentiles while Peter was still speaking.

The Jerusalem Believers Questioned Peter

Luke wrote in **Acts 11:1-3**:

> *"And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them."*

Peter then returned to Jerusalem, where the Jewish believers had to decide whether they would recognise what God had already done. Notice the contrast. They had heard that the Gentiles *"had also received the word of God,"* yet their immediate concern was that Peter had entered the house of uncircumcised men and eaten with them.

Their response shows how strongly former covenant distinctions still influenced their thinking. God had already acted, but human understanding was still catching up with the divine reality.

Peter did not answer their objection by appealing to his personal opinion. He explained the events and pointed them back to the work of God. God had prepared Cornelius, given Peter the vision, directed him by the Spirit to go, and then given the Holy Ghost to the Gentiles while Peter was speaking.

The question was no longer whether Peter personally preferred Gentile fellowship. The question was whether the Jerusalem believers would recognise what God Himself had already done.

Peter Remembered the Words of Jesus

Peter said in **Acts 11:15-17**:

> *"And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"*

Peter said, *"Then remembered I the word of the Lord."* What happened in the house of Cornelius brought his understanding into agreement with what Jesus had already said. Jesus had distinguished between John's baptism with water and baptism with the Holy Ghost.

Peter did not invent this distinction. He remembered the words of Jesus.

John baptised with water, while Jesus Christ would baptise with the Holy Ghost. Peter had now witnessed that greater work among Cornelius and his household. God gave them the Holy Ghost, and the Jewish believers had to recognise that Jesus Christ had performed the spiritual work.

This was a significant moment in Peter's understanding. Cornelius and his household were the first Gentile household explicitly recorded as receiving the Holy Ghost through faith in Jesus Christ. Until this event, the believers recorded in Acts had come from Jewish and Samaritan settings. Peter had witnessed God receiving Gentiles directly, without requiring them to enter the former Jewish covenant order.

Peter now recalled what Jesus had told the disciples years earlier concerning John's baptism with water and the baptism with the Holy Ghost. His return to Jerusalem, where he faced opposition from believers still influenced by former Jewish distinctions, would have given him much to consider. The record does not describe his private reflections, but his explanation reveals that he now connected what happened at Cornelius's house with the words Jesus had spoken.

This illustrates the essential principle of the transition: the truth had already been established by Jesus Christ, while the apostles were still growing in their understanding of it. Peter had commanded water baptism at Cornelius's house, yet he now recalled Jesus' words concerning the baptism with the Holy Ghost. This was the baptism through which Christ had received the Gentiles into His spiritual body. From this point onward, Scripture does not record Peter commanding or performing water baptism again. The fuller significance of this distinction will be considered when examining water baptism.

Peter said, *"God gave them the like gift as he did unto us."* The Gentiles did not receive an inferior or separate spiritual experience. The same God gave them the same gift.

Their spiritual standing therefore did not depend upon:

- Natural descent;
- Circumcision;
- Temple identity;
- Entrance into the Mosaic covenant order.

Peter connected the gift with those *"who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ."* Jesus Christ remained at the centre.

Peter's wording is important: *"God gave them the like gift."* Peter did not give the gift. The Jewish believers did not give it. An outward ceremony did not produce it.

God gave the Holy Ghost. The spiritual reality therefore rested upon divine action rather than human approval.

Peter then asked the only possible question: *"What was I, that I could withstand God?"* The issue had moved beyond Peter's personal opinion. God had already acted.

To reject those whom God had accepted would be to resist God Himself. Former covenant boundaries could not be placed above the work of God.

The Jerusalem Believers Recognised What God Had Done

Luke wrote in **Acts 11:18**:

> *"When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life."*

The believers had first contended with Peter. After hearing what God had done, they *"held their peace, and glorified God."*

They now recognised that God had also granted *"repentance unto life"* to the Gentiles. Once again, divine reality came first, while human recognition followed.

The Cornelius account did more than change Peter's understanding. God used the event to teach the wider Church.

The order was:

- God revealed;
- God acted;
- Peter understood;

- The Church recognised.

The reality was not created by human agreement. Human agreement came after divine reality.

Peter recognised that God had given Gentile believers the same gift of the Holy Ghost as Jewish believers. He remembered the words of Jesus concerning John's water baptism and baptism with the Holy Ghost, and he concluded that resisting those whom God had accepted would be resisting God Himself.

The Jerusalem believers then glorified God because repentance unto life had also been granted to the Gentiles. The next question was whether any former covenant distinction could still give one group greater spiritual standing than another. Peter later answered that question plainly:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did Peter's memory of Jesus' words help him explain why he could not withstand God?

Personal Reflection

What does the Jerusalem believers' change from objection to praise show you about receiving correction? Which part of your own understanding does it challenge?

Action Step

If a familiar religious boundary conflicts with what God has shown in the Bible, what would help you reconsider it honestly? Name a real relationship in which this truth should change your attitude or conduct. What response will you make?

GOD PUT NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US AND THEM

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section showed that Peter could not resist what God had done among Cornelius and his household. The Gentiles had received the Word of God, the Holy Ghost had been given to them, and the Jerusalem believers had recognised that God had also granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles.

The question later arose again when some believers insisted that Gentiles must come under former covenant requirements. Peter returned to the same evidence: What had God Himself already done?

Luke recorded in **Acts 15:1**:

> *"And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."*

This was not a minor disagreement. The teaching connected circumcision directly with salvation.

Luke continued in **Acts 15:2**:

> *"When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question."*

The issue was therefore brought before the Church: Must Gentile believers enter the former Mosaic order in order to be saved? Luke wrote in **Acts 15:5**:

> *"But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."*

Luke plainly says that these people *"believed."* Yet they were still insisting that Gentile believers must be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses.

This again shows the transition. Genuine faith in Jesus Christ did not mean that every former covenant idea had immediately disappeared.

Peter Returned to the Work of God

Human attachment to the former order could not determine the New Covenant requirement. Peter reminded the Church of what had already happened among the Gentiles.

Peter said in **Acts 15:7-11**:

> *"And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."*

Peter's words bring together the central truths of this Study Guide. God:

- Knew their hearts;
- Bore them witness;
- Gave them the Holy Ghost;
- Put no difference between Jew and Gentile;
- Purified their hearts by faith.

The decisive evidence was what God had already done. Peter begins with the words: *"God, which knoweth the hearts."*

The former covenant had visible marks. Circumcision was performed in the flesh, natural descent could be traced, and Temple worship was outward and visible.

Peter directs attention instead to the heart. The New Covenant question was being moved away from outward covenant identity and towards the inward work of God.

Peter then says that God *"bare them witness."* The Gentiles did not establish their own spiritual standing, and Peter did not establish it for them. God Himself bore witness concerning them by *"giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us."* This was divine witness, not human approval.

Peter says that God gave the Holy Ghost to the Gentiles *"even as he did unto us."* There was not one spiritual experience for Jewish believers and another for Gentile believers. The same God gave the same Holy Ghost.

Peter then states the central truth: God *"put no difference between us and them."* Their spiritual standing therefore did not depend upon natural ancestry, circumcision or former covenant identity. Under the former covenant, there had been a real distinction between natural Israel and the Gentile nations. Circumcision and the Law marked that distinction.

Peter now says that God put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers. This does not mean that natural ancestry ceased to exist. A naturally Jewish person remained Jewish by descent, and a Gentile remained Gentile by descent.

The difference removed was the difference in spiritual covenant standing before God. Jew and Gentile now came to God on the same basis through Jesus Christ.

Peter explains that God was *"purifying their hearts by faith."* He does not say that their hearts were purified by circumcision, Temple worship or entrance into the Mosaic covenant. God purified their hearts by faith.

The decisive New Covenant work had already taken place inwardly. Peter then asked: *"Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples?"*

The proposed yoke was the requirement that Gentile believers come under the former Mosaic order. Peter rejected that requirement because God had already given them the Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith and borne witness concerning them. The former covenant yoke could not complete what God had already done.

Salvation Was Through the Grace of Jesus Christ

Peter concluded: *"Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."* He did not say that Gentiles must become ceremonially like the Jews. He placed Jew and Gentile upon the same ground: the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. There was one salvation in Jesus Christ.

Paul expressed the same truth in **Romans 1:16**:

> *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."*

There was one Gospel and one salvation. The order of proclamation did not create two ways of salvation.

The Inward Work Came Before the Former Outward Mark

The controversy in Acts 15 centred upon circumcision, an outward covenant sign. Peter's answer was not to appeal to another outward mark. He appealed to what God had already done inwardly.

God had:

- Known their hearts;
- Borne them witness;
- Given them the Holy Ghost;
- Purified their hearts by faith;
- Put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

The inward work was already present. The former outward mark could add nothing spiritually necessary to their salvation.

What Could the Former Outward Mark Add?

If God had already given the Gentiles the Holy Ghost, circumcision could not give them the Spirit. If God had already purified their hearts by faith and borne witness concerning them, circumcision could not provide another necessary cleansing or make God's acceptance more complete.

Nothing spiritually necessary was lacking. The former outward mark could not add to the inward work God had already accomplished through Jesus Christ.

God put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers. He gave both the same Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith and saved both through the grace of Jesus Christ. The former covenant yoke could not be added as a necessary requirement after God had already performed the inward work.

This raises another important question. If Gentile believers were not required to receive circumcision or come under the Law of Moses, through what path did they come to God? The answer is simple: the direction was not Gentile → Judaism → Christ, but Gentile → Jesus Christ.

They did not come to Jesus Christ through Judaism. They came directly to Him.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why did Peter reject circumcision and the Law as additions necessary for Gentile salvation?

Personal Reflection

What does God putting no difference between Jew and Gentile mean for your understanding of spiritual standing? What difference should this make to your own response?

Action Step

Is there an outward mark you have treated as making someone more acceptable to God? Explain what this means for your own judgement of others. State one specific conclusion you need to correct or confirm in the Bible, and how it will affect your conduct.

THE GENTILES DID NOT COME THROUGH JUDAISM TO CHRIST

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that God put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers. He gave both the Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith and saved both through the grace of Jesus Christ.

This reveals something very important about the direction of the Gospel: The Gentiles were not required to enter Judaism before they could come to Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ was the New Covenant reality to whom the former covenant had pointed.

If the Mosaic covenant had remained the necessary way into God's people, Gentile believers would first have needed to enter that covenant. They would have needed circumcision, the Law of Moses and the covenant identity of natural Israel.

Acts 15 rejected that requirement. God had already given the Gentiles the Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith and put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

The Church Was Told Not to Trouble the Gentiles

Therefore, the former covenant could not be placed between the Gentile and Jesus Christ. James expressed the conclusion reached at Jerusalem.

James said in **Acts 15:19**:

> *"Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:"*

Notice the words: *"Which from among the Gentiles are turned to God."* They had already turned to God. They were not waiting to enter the Mosaic order before they could belong to Him. The Church was therefore told not to trouble them by imposing former covenant requirements upon people whom God had already received.

God was not converting Gentiles into natural Jews. He was bringing Gentiles to Jesus Christ.

Natural ancestry did not change when a Gentile believed the Gospel. A Gentile did not become Jewish by blood. What changed was the person's spiritual relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The Gospel therefore moved beyond the former national covenant boundary. The New Covenant could not be made dependent upon natural Israel, physical circumcision or entrance into the Mosaic order.

The Gospel Came to the Jew First, but It Was the Same Gospel

Paul wrote in **Romans 1:16**:

> *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."*

Paul speaks of *"the gospel of Christ"* and says that it is *"the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."* The order of proclamation did not create two ways of salvation. There was:

- One Gospel;
- One salvation;
- One Jesus Christ.

Both Jew and Gentile had to come to Him. The Gospel came first to the Jewish people because they had received the former revelation and the Scriptures that pointed towards Jesus Christ.

However, this did not make Jewish covenant identity the permanent doorway through which every Gentile had to pass. Jewish priority in proclamation did not mean Jewish mediation in salvation.

The nations were not called back into the shadows. They were called directly to the Person to whom those shadows had pointed.

If Gentile believers had already:

- Believed the Gospel;
- Received the Holy Ghost;
- Had their hearts purified by faith;
- Been accepted by God;

then nothing spiritually necessary was missing. The former covenant could not make Jesus Christ more complete or make salvation more complete. An outward system cannot complete a salvation that God has already made complete in Jesus Christ.

The Direction of the Transition Was Away From the Former Boundary

The Gospel began within the Jewish covenant world because that was where the former revelation had been centred.

As the Gospel moved outward, however, people from the nations were not being drawn back into that former order. They were being brought directly to Jesus Christ.

God was not expanding the Mosaic order to include the nations. Jesus Christ was becoming the recognised centre for all people.

The Gentiles did not come to Jesus Christ by first entering Judaism. God brought them directly to Christ, gave them the Holy Ghost and purified their hearts by faith. The former covenant was not the necessary doorway into the New Covenant because Jesus Christ Himself was the way.

However, this does not mean that every Jewish believer immediately left former covenant practices behind. Acts records that many thousands believed in Jesus Christ and were still described as *"zealous of the law."*

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does salvation coming to the Jew first differ from Gentiles needing to come through Judaism?

Personal Reflection

What difference does one Gospel and one salvation make to the way you think about people of other nationalities? Is there a familiar expectation of yours that now needs reconsidering?

Action Step

How would you explain your own understanding of coming directly to Christ without making a religious background the doorway? Identify one personal response you will make, trusting in Jesus Christ rather than your own religious effort.

BELIEVERS COULD STILL BE ZEALOUS FOR THE LAW

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that Gentile believers did not need to come through Judaism in order to come to Jesus Christ. God had already received them, given them the Holy Ghost and purified their hearts by faith.

However, this did not mean that every Jewish believer immediately left former covenant practices behind. Acts records something remarkable many years after Pentecost: thousands of Jewish believers genuinely believed in Jesus Christ and were still described as *"zealous of the law."*

Paul Returned to Jerusalem

Near the later part of Acts, Paul returned to Jerusalem and met with James and the elders. Luke wrote in **Acts 21:17-20**:

> *"And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:"*

Notice the contrast. Paul reported what God had done among the Gentiles, and James and the elders glorified the Lord. Yet they also spoke of the many Jewish believers who remained *"zealous of the law."*

Luke does not describe these people as unbelievers. He plainly says there were *"many thousands of Jews there are which believe."*

They genuinely believed in Jesus Christ, yet the influence of the Law of Moses remained strong in their thinking and conduct. These verses demonstrate an important truth:

A person could genuinely believe in Jesus Christ and still need greater understanding concerning the implications of the New Covenant. These Jewish believers had come to Christ, but generations of former covenant practice had shaped their thinking. Their belief was real, while their understanding was still developing.

The fact that many thousands remained zealous for the Law did not mean that the Law of Moses had regained covenant authority. Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former order, and the New Covenant reality had already been established.

Their zeal therefore tells us something about the believers, not about the continuing authority of the former covenant. Continued practice does not automatically prove continuing authority.

Human conduct cannot reverse what Jesus Christ has already fulfilled. Luke says there were *"many thousands"* of believers who remained zealous for the Law.

A large number of sincere believers may continue a practice, and their sincerity may be genuine. Yet neither sincerity nor numbers can restore covenant authority to something Jesus Christ has already fulfilled.

Human zeal cannot undo divine fulfilment. Truth is established by what God has revealed and accomplished, not by how many people continue a former practice.

For generations, the Jewish people had lived under the Law of Moses. Circumcision, purification, Temple worship and ceremonial distinctions had shaped their religious life.

It is therefore understandable that these practices continued to influence Jewish believers during the transition. The issue was not dishonesty or insincerity.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How could thousands genuinely believe in Christ while remaining zealous for the Law?

Personal Reflection

How much do sincerity and large numbers influence your confidence that a practice is required by God? What does this reveal about an assumption you have held?

Action Step

What would help you examine a widely accepted religious practice before accepting it as necessary for your own life? Identify one practice or belief you will test against the Bible, and explain what you are prepared to change.

Concern About Paul's Teaching

Religious understanding can change more slowly than covenant reality. The reality had already come in Jesus Christ, while their conduct and understanding were still catching up with that reality. James and the elders explained that reports had reached Jerusalem concerning Paul's teaching.

Luke wrote in **Acts 21:21-22**:

> *"And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come."*

Their concern shows how sensitive the transition remained. Many Jewish believers were still deeply attached to former covenant customs, and Paul's presence in Jerusalem could create serious tension.

James and the Elders Proposed an Accommodation

James and the elders then proposed that Paul take part in a Jewish purification custom. Luke wrote in **Acts 21:23-24**:

> *"Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law."*

The purpose of the action is stated within these verses. It was intended to reassure Jewish believers who remained zealous for the Law.

This was a highly charged transitional setting. Paul's participation in this situation cannot be used to prove that purification under the Law of Moses became a permanent New Covenant requirement. The context explains why the action was proposed:

- Jewish believers remained zealous for the Law;
- There was concern about Paul's reputation;
- James and the elders sought to avoid serious conflict.

These circumstances belong directly to the transition. Accommodation within a transitional circumstance does not create permanent New Covenant doctrine.

The Early Church Was Not a Flat Picture

A recorded action must still be tested by the wider New Testament and by the completed work of Jesus Christ. Acts 21 warns us against speaking too casually about *"what the early Church did."* The early Church was not at one uniform level of understanding.

Some believers had moved further beyond former covenant assumptions than others. Some remained strongly attached to the Law. Some actions reflected New Covenant truth, while others reflected the continuing influence of the former order.

Therefore, when someone says that the early Church performed a particular action, further questions are necessary. We must ask:

- Which believers were involved;
- At what stage of the transition;
- Under what circumstances did the action occur;
- Was the action an accommodation;
- Does later New Testament teaching preserve it as permanent.

Acts 21 proves that genuine believers could remain strongly attached to the former covenant long after Jesus Christ had fulfilled it. Their zeal reveals the continuing influence of the transition; it does not restore the Law of Moses to permanent New Covenant authority.

This provides another important piece of evidence. Peter had first needed God to correct his understanding concerning Gentiles, but even after he knew the truth, he later acted in a way that contradicted what he already knew.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must Paul's participation in the Jerusalem purification arrangement be read in its stated circumstances?

Personal Reflection

How does recognising different levels of understanding among early believers change your view of an early Church example? Which part of your own understanding does it challenge?

Action Step

When you hear that early believers followed a practice, what will you examine before accepting it as necessary for yourself? Name one inherited expectation you will reconsider and explain how Christ's fulfilment changes your response.

PETER COULD ACT CONTRARY TO TRUTH HE ALREADY KNEW

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section showed that many Jewish believers could genuinely believe in Jesus Christ and still remain strongly influenced by the Law of Moses. Peter now gives us another important example of the transition. Earlier, he had needed God to correct his understanding concerning Gentiles. By the time he came to Antioch, the situation was different.

Peter already knew the truth, yet he later acted in a way that contradicted what he knew. Peter was no longer ignorant of God's work among the Gentiles. He had entered the house of Cornelius, seen the Holy Ghost given to Gentile believers, explained before the Jerusalem believers that he could not withstand what God had done, and later declared that God had *"put no difference between us and them."* Peter therefore understood that Gentile believers did not need to become Jews before they could belong to Jesus Christ.

He knew that God had:

- Given them the same Holy Ghost;
- Purified their hearts by faith;
- Accepted them;
- Removed the former difference in spiritual standing.

Peter Freely Fellowshipped With Gentile Believers

Paul wrote in **Galatians 2:11-12**:

> *"But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed. For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision."*

Yet Scripture records that Peter later failed to act consistently with that truth. Before certain men arrived, Peter *"did eat with the Gentiles."* His conduct initially agreed with what God had already shown him.

Fear Changed Peter's Conduct

Paul tells us exactly why Peter withdrew: *"Fearing them which were of the circumcision."* However, when those men came, Peter changed his behaviour. God had not reversed what God had shown Peter concerning Cornelius. The Holy Ghost had not restored the former covenant boundary.

Peter's conduct changed because of fear and religious pressure. His knowledge had not changed, but his conduct did.

This gives us an important distinction. A believer may know the truth and still act inconsistently with it because of fear, pressure or concern about the opinions of others.

Paul continued in **Galatians 2:13**:

> *"And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation."*

Peter's action influenced others. Even Barnabas was affected.

Yet the fact that several believers followed Peter did not make the action correct. Numbers did not turn wrong conduct into truth.

Paul did not treat Peter's position as an apostle as proof that his action must be right. He said plainly that Peter *"was to be blamed."* That statement is decisive. An apostle performed the action, other believers followed him, and yet Scripture tells us that the action was wrong.

Peter's Conduct Did Not Agree With the Gospel

Paul wrote in **Galatians 2:14**:

> *"But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?"*

The standard was not Peter's position or behaviour. The standard was *"the truth of the gospel."* Apostolic conduct itself had to remain subject to revealed truth. Paul measured Peter's action against that truth and found his conduct inconsistent with it.

The Gospel did not become true because Peter acted correctly. The Gospel was already true.

Peter's conduct either agreed with that truth or failed to agree with it. In this case, Scripture says that it failed to agree.

Human conduct must be measured by revealed truth. Revealed truth must never be reshaped to justify human conduct. Peter withdrew from Gentile believers, but his action did not make Jewish and Gentile separation spiritually valid again.

God had already:

- Given the Holy Ghost to Gentiles;
- Purified their hearts by faith;
- Put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

Peter's withdrawal changed none of those realities. Human conduct cannot reverse divine reality.

Peter's experience gives us two different examples of transition. Earlier, with Cornelius, Peter lacked full understanding. Later, at Antioch, Peter had the understanding but failed to walk consistently with it.

Therefore, two different problems must be recognised:

- Incomplete understanding;
- Inconsistent conduct.

Both situations appear in the New Testament record, and both must be recognised when interpreting historical actions. Peter already knew that God had accepted Gentile believers, yet he later withdrew from them because of fear. Paul corrected him because his conduct did not agree with *"the truth of the gospel."* Therefore, even apostolic conduct cannot reverse divine reality or become permanent doctrine when Scripture itself shows that the conduct was inconsistent with the truth.

The transition was therefore visible not only in individual decisions but also in the wider movement of the Gospel. The Gospel continued steadily beyond the boundaries of the former covenant world.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How did fear lead Peter to act against what he already knew about Gentile believers?

Personal Reflection

What does the influence of Peter's withdrawal on others lead you to consider about your own conduct under pressure?

Action Step

How could you respond when religious pressure encourages you to exclude someone on a basis the Gospel does not support? What assumption will you examine, and how will your response change if it does not agree with the Bible?

THE GOSPEL MOVED BEYOND THE FORMER COVENANT BOUNDARIES

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section showed that even after Peter understood that God had accepted Gentile believers, religious pressure could still affect his conduct. Yet Peter's inconsistency could not reverse what God was doing.

Throughout Acts, the Gospel continued to move outward beyond the boundaries of the former covenant world. The movement was geographical, but it was also spiritual. Jesus had established the direction before the events of Acts unfolded. Jesus said in **Acts 1:8**:

> *"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."*

The movement was clear:

- Jerusalem;
- Judaea;
- Samaria;
- The uttermost part of the earth.

The Gospel Moved Into Samaria

Luke wrote in **Acts 8:5-8**:

> *"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria, and preached Christ unto them. And the people with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with loud voice, came out of many that were possessed with them: and many taken with palsies, and that were lame, were healed. And there was great joy in that city."*

Notice the centre of Philip's preaching: *"Preached Christ unto them."* Jerusalem was the beginning, but it was not the final boundary. The Gospel was not taking people back towards Jerusalem as the necessary centre of salvation. It was taking Jesus Christ to them.

The Gospel Then Moved to the Gentiles

The account of Cornelius moved the Gospel beyond another major boundary. Peter entered the house of a Gentile. God gave the Holy Ghost. The Jerusalem believers eventually recognised that God had also granted repentance unto life to the Gentiles.

Acts 15 then established that Gentiles were not required to come under the Law of Moses in order to belong to God. The direction was becoming unmistakable.

The Gospel was moving beyond the former national covenant boundary. This movement involved more than missionaries travelling farther from Jerusalem.

Under the former covenant, natural Israel had possessed a distinct covenant position. The Temple stood in Jerusalem, circumcision marked the covenant people in the flesh, and the Law contained outward distinctions separating Israel from the nations. As the Gospel moved outward, those former boundaries could no longer determine spiritual standing before God.

Gentiles did not need to enter the Mosaic system in order to reach Christ. Christ was being preached to them where they were.

Jesus Christ Became the Recognised Centre

Jesus had already revealed that worship would no longer be centred upon one geographical location. Jesus said in **John 4:21-24**:

> *"Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."*

Jesus said: *"Neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem."* The geographical centre was no longer the determining reality. The spiritual reality had come.

The movement of the Gospel in Acts therefore agreed with what Jesus had already declared. The Gospel moved outward while Jesus Christ became the recognised centre.

If the former covenant order had remained the permanent structure for God's people, Gentiles would ultimately have needed to enter that structure. They would have needed circumcision, the Mosaic Law and the Jewish covenant system.

But Acts records something different. God gave Gentiles the Holy Ghost, purified their hearts by faith, and put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The former covenant boundary was not being enlarged. It was being left behind as the Gospel moved into the New Covenant reality found in Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote in **Romans 10:12-13**:

> *"For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."*

Notice the words: *"The same Lord over all."* Jew and Gentile were not being offered different spiritual arrangements. There was:

- The same Lord;
- The same Gospel;
- The same salvation.

The Movement Exposed the Temporary Nature of the Former Boundaries

As long as the Gospel remained largely within the Jewish world, former covenant practices could continue to appear prominent. But as the Gospel moved towards the nations, something became increasingly clear:

Jesus Christ was the centre for all. Those practices could not define the permanent Church of Jesus Christ.

A Church reaching every nation could not be spiritually defined by covenant marks that had belonged specifically to natural Israel. The permanent reality had to be greater than the former national boundary. That reality was Jesus Christ.

The movement of the Gospel in Acts was more than geographical. It was also covenantal. The Gospel moved beyond Jerusalem, natural Israel and the former covenant boundaries while Jesus Christ became the recognised centre for Jew, Samaritan and Gentile alike.

Yet throughout much of this movement, the Temple still stood in Jerusalem. Its continued visibility could make the former order appear as though it still possessed covenant authority. That distinction now needs to be examined carefully.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How was the Gospel's movement beyond Jerusalem more than a geographical change?

Personal Reflection

What does Christ becoming the recognised centre for all nations mean to your understanding of worship and belonging? Is there a familiar expectation of yours that now needs reconsidering?

Action Step

How would you assess a claim that a particular place or national identity is necessary for your access to God? Identify one personal response you will make, trusting in Jesus Christ rather than your own religious effort.

THE TEMPLE REMAINED VISIBLE WHILE ITS COVENANT AUTHORITY HAD ENDED

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section showed that the Gospel was moving beyond the former covenant boundaries. It began in Jerusalem, moved through Judaea and Samaria, and reached outward to the nations.

Yet throughout most of the period recorded in Acts, the Temple was still standing in Jerusalem. This creates an important distinction:

The First Covenant Had Already Been Taken Away

The writer of Hebrews said in **Hebrews 10:9**:

> *"Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second."*

The continued visibility of the Temple did not mean that the former covenant still possessed continuing covenant authority. The outward system remained visible for a time, but Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former order and established the New Covenant reality. Notice the order: Scripture does not say that God would wait until the Temple was destroyed before taking away the first covenant. *"He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second."*

The former covenant was not preserved beside the New Covenant as another continuing spiritual arrangement. Jesus Christ had fulfilled the former order, and the New Covenant had been established.

The Temple remained standing. The priesthood continued functioning, sacrifices were still being offered, and Jewish religious life continued around Jerusalem.

Yet none of these visible things could reverse what Jesus Christ had already accomplished. Physical continuation did not equal covenant continuation. The outward system remained visible, while its former covenant authority had already reached fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews said in **Hebrews 8:13**:

> *"In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away."*

Notice the two statements. The first covenant had already been *"made... old,"* yet the visible system was *"ready to vanish away."*

These are not the same thing. Its covenant standing had already changed, while its outward system had not yet disappeared from sight.

"Ready to Vanish Away" Did Not Mean the New Covenant Was Still Waiting

That is exactly the historical setting in which much of Acts took place. When Hebrews was written, the Temple still stood. The priesthood still functioned, and sacrifices and ceremonial practices remained visible.

Therefore, the writer could speak of the old order as *"ready to vanish away."* But the New Covenant did not have to wait for the Temple to disappear before becoming true.

Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former order. The later disappearance of the Temple would remove from sight what had already lost its former covenant authority. This helps explain why Jewish believers continued to struggle with former covenant practices.

They believed in Jesus Christ, yet the Temple still stood before them. Priests still ministered, sacrifices continued, and family and religious customs remained deeply established.

The visible existence of the former system could make it appear as though it still possessed the same authority it had always possessed. But Scripture teaches otherwise. What remained visible was not necessarily what remained covenantally authoritative.

Spiritually, the New Covenant reality had already come in Jesus Christ. Historically, the former outward system remained visible for a generation.

This explains why Acts contains overlapping practices and mixed understanding. But there were not two equally valid covenants operating side by side.

The Temple Was No Longer the Centre of True Worship

Jesus had already revealed this before the events of Acts unfolded. Jesus said in **John 4:21-24**:

> *"Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."*

Jesus said, *"Neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem,"* showing that the overlap was historical, not covenantal. There was one New Covenant reality in Jesus Christ. Jerusalem could remain physically present while ceasing to be the necessary centre of true worship. True worship was now *"in spirit and in truth."*

The centre was no longer a building. The reality was Jesus Christ.

This distinction must govern how we read Acts. When we see:

- Temple attendance;
- Jewish customs;
- Purification;
- Vows;
- Other former covenant practices;

we must remember the historical setting. The outward system had not yet disappeared. But its continued appearance does not prove that its former covenant authority remained. The shadow could remain visible for a time after the reality had already come.

The Temple and former Jewish religious system remained visible during the period recorded in Acts, but their continued visibility did not mean that the Old Covenant still possessed continuing authority. Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former order and established the New Covenant reality.

The visible former system would eventually disappear altogether. That historical removal did not create the New Covenant. It removed from sight what Jesus Christ had already fulfilled.

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why did the Temple remaining visible not mean its former covenant authority continued?

Personal Reflection

How could the visible continuation of a religious system influence your judgement of its spiritual authority? What does this reveal about an assumption you have held?

Action Step

When something religious remains impressive or familiar, what would help you test its authority by Christ's fulfilment? Identify one practice or belief you will test against the Bible, and explain what you are prepared to change.

THE END OF THE TRANSITIONAL GENERATION: A.D. 70

BACK TO CONTENTS

The previous section established that the Temple remained visible even though its former covenant authority had already ended. That visible overlap did not continue indefinitely.

The Temple still stood while the Gospel was preached, while Jewish believers were learning to leave former covenant thinking behind, and while the New Covenant reality was being proclaimed throughout the nations. Then, in A.D. 70, the Temple was destroyed.

That destruction did not establish the New Covenant. It brought the visible Old Covenant Temple system to its final historical end.

Jesus Had Already Foretold the Destruction of the Temple

Matthew recorded in **Matthew 24:1-2**:

> *"And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down."*

Jesus was speaking about the Temple buildings that stood before His disciples. The Temple was still magnificent and active, but Jesus declared that it would be destroyed.

Its physical continuance was temporary. Jesus also said in **Matthew 23:36**:

> *"Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation."*

The warning was directed to the generation then living. Approximately forty years separated the ministry of Jesus from the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

One Generation of Mercy

This period must not be understood as though the Old Covenant remained spiritually valid until A.D. 70. It had already been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The Temple remained standing while the Gospel continued to be proclaimed, giving that generation opportunity to hear the truth and turn from the shadows to the reality found in Jesus Christ.

The period was therefore one of:

- Mercy;

- Witness;
- Transition.

The New Covenant was already established while the former system remained visible. The Psalmist wrote in **Psalm 95:10**:

> *"Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:"*

The wilderness generation had been given truth, opportunity and time, yet unbelief prevented them from entering what God had prepared. In a similar way, the generation living between the ministry of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem was given sustained witness concerning Jesus Christ. The parallel should not be forced beyond what Scripture supports, but it does show an important principle: A period of mercy does not mean that judgement will never come.

Acts Ends Before the Temple Is Destroyed

Acts closes with Paul in Rome and does not record the destruction of Jerusalem or the Temple. Therefore, Acts ends while:

- The Temple is still standing;
- Jewish customs remain visible;
- Believers are still zealous for the Law;
- Circumcision controversies continue;
- Purification practices still appear;
- Tension between Jewish and Gentile believers remains.

The historical setting had not yet reached its visible conclusion. In A.D. 70, Jerusalem fell to the Romans and the Temple was destroyed. The sacrifices ceased, the Temple priesthood could no longer continue its service there, and the centre of Jewish ceremonial worship was removed.

A.D. 70 Did Not Create the New Covenant

This distinction must remain absolutely clear:

What had remained visible throughout the transitional generation was finally removed from sight. The New Covenant did not begin in A.D. 70.

Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former covenant. The New Covenant had already been established. Believers had already been born again.

The Holy Ghost had already been given. Gentiles had already been received. God had already put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

Therefore:

The destruction of the Temple did not create a new spiritual reality. It removed the visible system whose covenant authority had already ended.

The order is important:

- Jesus Christ fulfilled the former covenant and established the New Covenant reality;
- The former Temple system remained visible for a generation;

- The Temple system was removed from sight in A.D. 70.

The historical destruction followed the spiritual fulfilment. It did not cause it.

The transitional period had a purpose. It allowed Jewish believers time to move from former covenant thinking into the liberty and unity of Jesus Christ.

But transition, by its very nature, is temporary. The destination was not permanent mixture between the former order and the New Covenant. The destination was the full recognition of the New Covenant reality in Jesus Christ.

By the time the Temple was destroyed, the Gospel had already moved far beyond Jerusalem. Gentiles had been received, and the Gospel was spreading throughout the nations.

The Temple could fall without destroying the Church because the Church was not the Temple system. The life of the Church was in Jesus Christ.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 brought the visible Old Covenant Temple system to its final historical end. It did not establish the New Covenant. Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former order, and the New Covenant was already in force. A.D. 70 removed from sight what Christ had already fulfilled.

We have now followed the transition from Jerusalem, through the inclusion of the Gentiles, the correction of Jewish understanding, the continuing influence of the Law, and finally the disappearance of the Temple system itself. The next question is unavoidable: What does all of this teach us when we come to the ordinances?

That brings us to the next section:

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why did the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 not create the New Covenant?

Personal Reflection

How does distinguishing historical removal from spiritual fulfilment clarify your understanding of Christ's work? Which part of your own understanding does it challenge?

Action Step

What would help you keep Christ's completed work as the basis of your understanding when considering the events of A.D. 70? Name one choice in your own life that should change because of this truth, and explain why.

WHY THIS MATTERS TO THE ORDINANCES

BACK TO CONTENTS

We have now followed the transition through the major events recorded in Acts. The Gospel began within a Jewish world. The commission was already clear, yet human understanding lagged behind.

Peter had to be corrected concerning Gentiles. God acted in the house of Cornelius before Jewish believers approved what He was doing. Peter later declared that God had *"put no difference between us and them."*

Continued Practice Does Not Automatically Mean Continued Authority

Acts also shows that genuine believers could remain zealous for the Law, that even Peter could act contrary to truth he already knew, and that the Temple remained visible after its covenant authority had ended. All of this has direct importance for our study of the ordinances. Acts must be read in the light of the New Covenant reality already established in Jesus Christ. One of the clearest lessons from the transition is that an outward practice may continue after its former covenant authority has ended.

Acts 21 records many thousands of Jewish believers still zealous for the Law. Paul participated in a purification arrangement proposed by James and the elders. The Temple was still standing, and Jewish customs remained visible.

Yet none of these facts restored the Law of Moses to covenant authority. Therefore, when we later find an outward practice continuing in Acts, we cannot simply reason: *"They did it, therefore the Church must always do it."*

Sequence Does Not Automatically Establish Cause

The account of Cornelius gives us another essential principle. Peter said in **Acts 15:8-9**:

> *"And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith."*

God had already:

- Borne witness concerning them;
- Given them the Holy Ghost;
- Purified their hearts by faith;
- Put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

The correct question is whether Scripture establishes continuing New Covenant authority for that practice. The spiritual work was already present. Therefore, if an outward act occurred afterwards, that act cannot be credited with causing what God had already done. Something occurring after salvation does not mean that it caused salvation.

When we later study water baptism, communion and feet washing, we must ask:

- Had the person already believed on Jesus Christ;
- Had the person already received the Holy Ghost;
- Had God already purified the heart;
- Had God already borne witness concerning the believer;
- Had the person already been born again;
- Had the spiritual reality already come.

If the answer is yes, the outward action cannot be made responsible for producing an inward reality that Scripture says was already present. The Jewish believers initially struggled to recognise Gentile believers because their thinking was still shaped by former covenant distinctions. But God settled the matter by His own action.

He gave the Holy Ghost. Peter therefore said: *"What was I, that I could withstand God?"*

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can an outward action performed after God's inward work not automatically be credited with producing it?

Personal Reflection

How does the order of events at Cornelius's house change the way you assess the purpose of an outward ceremony? What difference should this make to your own response?

Action Step

Which claim about an ordinance do you want to examine by asking what God had already done inwardly? Explain. State one specific conclusion you need to correct or confirm in the Bible, and how it will affect your conduct.

The Inward Work of God Establishes Who Belongs to Him

This gives us an important principle for every later ordinance question. We must not allow an outward ceremony to become the test of belonging when God has already shown how a person belongs to Him. The greater question is not simply, *"Has an outward act been performed?"* The greater question is, *"Has God performed the inward work?"*

Paul wrote in **Romans 8:9**:

> *"But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."*

The identifying reality is the Spirit of Christ within. If Jesus Christ dwells within the born-again believer, that believer belongs to Him. No outward ceremony can make the believer more His.

Acts 15 is especially instructive because the controversy concerned circumcision. Some believers wanted to require an outward covenant mark after God had already accepted the Gentiles.

Peter rejected that reasoning. The Holy Ghost had already been given. The heart had already been purified by faith. God had already put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

Christ Must Never Become Christ Plus a Ceremony

The former covenant mark could not be made necessary to complete the inward work. That principle must also govern our study of later outward practices. This is the danger we must guard against. A person may say that salvation is by Jesus Christ, yet then add an outward action as though Christ alone were not sufficient.

The result becomes:

- Christ plus circumcision;
- Christ plus water;
- Christ plus bread and a cup;
- Christ plus feet washing;
- Christ plus another outward requirement.

But Paul wrote in **Colossians 2:10**:

"And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:"

The believer is *"complete in him."* An outward ceremony cannot complete someone whom God says is already complete in Christ.

Acts records people at different stages of understanding. Some continued former customs. Some acted through accommodation.

Some were influenced by religious pressure. Some had not yet understood the full implications of the Gospel. Some knew the truth and did not always walk consistently with it.

Therefore, an action recorded during the transition cannot be allowed to redefine the completed salvation taught throughout the New Testament. The doctrine must interpret the action. The action must not overturn the doctrine.

Another mistake is to assume that because an outward action appears more than once, repetition itself proves permanent New Covenant authority. But the Law, Temple attendance, circumcision controversies and Jewish customs also appear repeatedly in Acts.

Repetition proves that something occurred. It does not by itself prove that something was permanently commanded for the Church.

We must ask whether the practice:

- Belongs to the New Covenant reality;
- Is commanded as permanently binding;
- Agrees with completed salvation in Jesus Christ;
- Is preserved as necessary after the transitional setting is understood.

The New Covenant Must Interpret the Transition

We therefore need the correct order of interpretation. We do not begin with a transitional action and then make the New Covenant conform to it.

We begin with the clear reality established in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment. The believer is complete in Him. The Holy Ghost is received in the new birth.

The Spirit of Christ identifies those who belong to Him. Jew and Gentile are accepted on the same basis. God purifies the heart by faith.

The New Covenant must interpret the transition. When we later study water baptism, communion and feet washing, the same questions must govern each practice.

We must ask:

- What had God already done inwardly;
- What spiritual reality had already come;
- Does the outward act produce that reality;
- Does Scripture establish the outward act as permanently necessary;
- Does the practice agree with the believer's completeness in Jesus Christ.

We Must Not Create New Covenant Identity Marks Without Scriptural Authority

The outward representation must never become greater than the spiritual reality. Natural Israel had visible covenant marks, and circumcision was one of them. But God put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers. The decisive reality was inward.

Therefore, we must be careful not to take another outward practice and make it the new mark by which we decide who belongs to the Church. A person cannot be made a member of the body of Christ through the performance of an outward ceremony.

Belonging is spiritual. The identifying reality is the Spirit of Christ.

The transitional practices recorded in Acts must never be allowed to redefine the completed salvation and spiritual reality already established in Jesus Christ. Continued action does not necessarily mean continued authority. Sequence does not prove cause.

God may already have performed the inward work before an outward action occurs. Therefore, every ordinance must be tested by the New Covenant reality found in Christ Himself.

Acts has shown the pattern repeatedly: God acted, human understanding followed, and the reality was established. That brings us to the conclusion of this Study Guide:

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does the indwelling Spirit identify belonging to Christ rather than an outward covenant mark?

Personal Reflection

What does completeness in Christ mean to you when an outward ceremony is presented as spiritually necessary? Is there a familiar expectation of yours that now needs reconsidering?

Action Step

How could you consider your own response to an ordinance without treating it as completing the salvation Christ gives? Examine where you have placed your confidence. What will you change to keep that confidence in Jesus Christ?

CONCLUSION: DIVINE REALITY FIRST, HUMAN UNDERSTANDING FOLLOWED

BACK TO CONTENTS

This Study Guide has traced the movement recorded in Acts as God brought His people beyond the former covenant boundaries and into the New Covenant reality found in Jesus Christ. Jesus had already commanded that the Gospel go from Jerusalem through Judaea and Samaria and ultimately unto the uttermost part of the earth.

The purpose of God was already settled. Human understanding had to come into agreement with it.

God Acted Before Human Understanding Was Complete

Peter provides the clearest example. He had heard the worldwide commission, yet God still had to correct his understanding concerning the Gentiles. Through the events surrounding Cornelius, Peter learned that he should *"not call any man common or unclean."*

Then, while Peter was still preaching Jesus Christ, God acted. The Holy Ghost came upon the Gentiles before they had entered the Mosaic covenant order and before the Jewish believers had decided whether they should be accepted.

God acted first. Human recognition followed.

Peter later said in **Acts 11:15-17**:

> *"And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?"*

Peter's conclusion was unavoidable: *"What was I, that I could withstand God?"* The Church had to recognise what God Himself had already done.

God Put No Difference Between Jew and Gentile

When the question later arose concerning circumcision and the Law of Moses, Peter returned to the same evidence. Peter said in **Acts 15:8-11**:

> *"And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they."*

God had:

- Known their hearts;
- Borne witness concerning them;
- Given them the Holy Ghost;
- Purified their hearts by faith;
- Put no difference between Jewish and Gentile believers.

The former covenant yoke could not be added after God had already performed the inward work. Jew and Gentile were saved through the same grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gentiles were not required to become Jews before coming to God.

The direction was not Gentile → Judaism → Christ. It was Gentile → Christ.

Jesus Christ Himself was the centre. God was not enlarging the Mosaic system to include the nations. He was bringing people from every nation directly into the New Covenant reality found in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do Cornelius's reception and Peter's testimony in Acts 15 show divine reality coming before human recognition?

Personal Reflection

Which part of God putting no difference between Jew and Gentile has most clarified or challenged your understanding? What does this reveal about an assumption you have held?

Action Step

What response do you want to make to the truth that both Jew and Gentile come to God through the same grace of Christ? Identify one attitude or assumption towards other people that you need to correct, and explain how you will treat them differently.

Human Conduct Could Lag Behind Divine Reality

Acts also shows that believers did not immediately understand or consistently walk in everything God had established. Many Jewish believers remained *"zealous of the law."* Peter himself later withdrew from Gentile believers because of fear, even though he already knew that God had put no difference between them.

Paul corrected Peter because his conduct did not agree with *"the truth of the gospel."* This establishes an important principle:

The truth of the Gospel must interpret human conduct. Human conduct must never be allowed to redefine the truth. The same principle applies when we encounter transitional actions throughout Acts.

The Temple also remained standing throughout most of the period recorded in Acts. Jewish customs, purification practices, circumcision and Temple worship therefore remained visible even though Jesus Christ had already fulfilled the former covenant.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 did not create the New Covenant. It removed from sight what Jesus Christ had already fulfilled.

The historical overlap was real, but there were not two equally valid covenants operating side by side. The New Covenant reality had already come in Jesus Christ.

The Final Principle for the Ordinances

This gives us the principle that must govern our later study of water baptism, communion and feet washing. When an outward action appears in Acts, we must not ask only: *"Did believers do this?"*

We must also ask:

- What had God already done inwardly;
- Had the believer already received the Holy Ghost;
- Had the heart already been purified by faith;
- Was the action connected with the transitional setting;
- Does the New Covenant establish the action as permanently binding;

- Does it agree with the believer's completeness in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ Is the Reality

Continued practice does not necessarily mean continued authority, and an outward action cannot be credited with producing a spiritual reality that God had already accomplished. The great truth revealed through the transition is that God was bringing His people fully into Jesus Christ.

The shadows had served their appointed purpose. The former covenant boundaries had served their appointed time. The Temple had served its appointed purpose.

But the reality had come. Jesus Christ is the reality. The book of Acts therefore records a transition in human understanding and conduct, not a transition in divine truth.

The central truth of this Study Guide can be stated simply:

Divine reality came first. Human understanding followed.

As that understanding developed, another truth became increasingly clear. God was not establishing one spiritual arrangement for the Jew and another for the Gentile.

He was making both one. Paul wrote in **Ephesians 2:14-16**:

> *"For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby:"*

God had accomplished more than the removal of an old covenant boundary. He had made both one in Jesus Christ.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do mixed human conduct and the continued Temple system fit with a New Covenant already established in Christ?

Personal Reflection

What has become clearer to you about the difference between continued practice and continuing authority? Which part of your own understanding does it challenge?

Action Step

As you consider water baptism, communion or feet washing, how will you keep the inward reality in Christ as your standard? State what you personally need to accept or correct about Christ's saving work and the new birth.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

What did God establish when He gave Gentile believers the Holy Ghost and purified their hearts by faith? Use Peter's words in Acts 15 to explain what it means that God put no difference between Jew and Gentile.

2. Understanding

The Gospel began in a Jewish world, yet Jesus' commission reached all nations. How do Peter's vision and the events at Cornelius's house show God correcting human understanding rather than changing His purpose? Explain the connection.

3. Personal Reflection

Thousands of Jewish believers remained zealous for the Law after coming to Christ. What does their experience lead you to reconsider about the influence of your own religious background? Explain why sincerity or numbers cannot settle a practice's authority.

4. Response to Truth

The Jerusalem believers first questioned Peter and then glorified God when they heard what He had done. What would accepting God's work before human approval ask of your own attitudes towards believers from another background? Explain your response.

5. Action Step

Consider someone from a different national or religious background who believes in Christ. How could the truth that God purifies hearts by faith guide your own attitude towards that person, without adding former covenant requirements? Explain a response you want to make or are still considering.

6. Early Response

Have you already considered your attitude towards someone from a different national or religious background in the light of God purifying hearts by faith without former covenant requirements? If yes, explain what you did or what became clearer. If not, explain what you are still considering or what has made it difficult to begin.

7. Ongoing Practice

How can the Gospel's movement beyond Jerusalem, Samaria and the former covenant boundaries guide the way you continue to think about worship and belonging? Explain what will help you keep Christ as the centre instead of a place, ancestry or outward system.

8. Doctrinal Clarity

Why could the Temple remain visible after its covenant authority had ended, and why did its destruction in A.D. 70 not begin the New Covenant? Use verses to distinguish Christ's spiritual fulfilment from the later historical removal.

9. Living the Truth

A respected believer excludes Gentile believers while claiming to defend an early Church practice. How would Peter's failure at Antioch and Paul's correction guide your response? Explain how you would respect the person while measuring the conduct by the Gospel.

10. Final Response

Bring together God's reception of Cornelius, Peter's words about withstanding God and the believer's completeness in Christ. What do these truths establish when an outward ordinance is said to complete salvation or determine belonging? Explain what is now clear to you and what needs further thought.