

“I WILL POUR OUT MY SPIRIT ON ALL FLESH”: ARE ACTS 2 AND 10 PROOF-TEXTS FOR INCLUSIVISM?

by
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INTRODUCTION

Acts 2:17 is often cited as a proof-text supporting inclusivism—the view that explicit faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ Jesus is not necessary for salvation.² The context for Acts 2 is the day of Pentecost. Previously in Acts 1, Jesus, before ascending to the right hand of the Father, promised his disciples that they would receive power with the advent of the Holy Spirit so that they might be witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8). In Acts 2 we see the fulfillment of this promise as “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4).³ When Peter explains to onlookers what had taken place, he does so by quoting Joel 2:28–32, “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17–18). According to the inclusivist, the Spirit poured out on all flesh demonstrates that there is a saving, universal work of the Spirit even apart from the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Amos Yong, for example, argues that this text “should caution us against reading the ‘all’ of Acts 2:17 in an exclusively ecclesiological sense.”⁴

The most important passage, says the inclusivist, that exemplifies Acts 2:17, is Acts 10, where we learn that Cornelius was “a devout man who feared God” and “prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:2).

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²I recognize that not all inclusivists agree as to how exactly those who have never heard the gospel are saved. Nonetheless, all inclusivists agree that salvation is available and attainable for those who never hear the gospel.

³Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the *English Standard Version* (ESV).

⁴Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 40.

As Clark Pinnock explains, many like Cornelius have faith in God, wherever they live in the world, and therefore are accepted by God even though they have not yet heard the gospel of Jesus. Pinnock believes Cornelius is “the pagan saint par excellence of the New Testament, a believer in God before he became a Christian.”⁵ Likewise, John Sanders agrees, “Cornelius was already a saved believer before Peter arrived but he was not a Christian believer.”⁶

This paper, however, argues that such an inclusivist reading of Acts 2 and Acts 10 is misguided. To the contrary, I will argue that not only do these two passages fail to support the inclusivist position, but, when read in the context of redemptive-history, they actually support the exclusivist view—the belief that explicit and conscious faith in the atoning death and resurrection of Christ is necessary for salvation.⁷

THE INCLUSIVIST APPEAL TO ACTS 2 AND ACTS 10

Amos Yong believes the Day of Pentecost is central to correctly understanding “the divine plan to extend the boundaries of those who could be the people of God.”⁸ It is at Pentecost where we witness the outpouring of the Spirit on the people of God from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5, 8–11). For Peter the promise of God in Joel 2:28–32 has been fulfilled, namely, that God would pour out his Spirit “upon all flesh.”⁹ At first glance, it would appear that Yong interprets Acts

⁵Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 96.

⁶John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), 254.

⁷I have chosen to limit this article to Acts 2 and Acts 10. I do recognize, however, that inclusivists appeal to other texts in Acts, such as Acts 17 and 19, though the argumentation is similar to that used in regards to Acts 10. For a critique of the inclusivist use of Acts 17, see Darrell L. Bock, “Athenians Who Have Never Heard,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard*, ed. William V. Crockett and James G. Sigountos (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 117–24.

⁸Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 38. Also see idem, “Discerning the Spirit(s) in the World Religions: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions,” in *No Other Gods before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 41–43.

⁹I recognize that some who hold a dispensational view argue that Joel 2:28–32 is not literally fulfilled in Acts 2:15–21, but that Peter's citation of Joel is analogical in nature. For example, see Roy E. Beacham, “The Analogical Use of Joel 2:28–32 in Acts 2:15–21; A Literal Approach,” Presented to the Bible Faculty Leadership Summit, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, August 7, 1998. However, I do not accept this view for several reasons: (1) Such a view does not do justice to the already-not-yet fulfillment of Joel 2, namely, that while there are end time aspects to Joel 2 (i.e., “not yet”), nevertheless, Peter's quotation of Joel 2 demonstrates that the “end time” nature of Joel 2 has broken into the present, specifically at Pentecost (i.e., “already”). (2) It seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that Peter is quoting Joel 2 in order to demonstrate to those who have witnessed Pentecost that what Joel promised has indeed come to fruition. Peter's language is direct in nature, “For these people are not drunk.... But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:15, 16). In other words, Peter is interpreting Pentecost through the lens of Joel 2. (3)

2:17 in traditional, exclusivist categories. He says, “Apart from that presence and activity of the Spirit of God, people would never be convicted about their sin or their need to repent and turn to God.” Therefore, one would think that Yong is affirming the inseparable connection between the work of the Spirit and the conviction of sin, repentance, and faith in Christ. However, Yong quickly qualifies himself. On one level, he says, this Pentecost experience is an “ecclesiological one,” meaning that the Spirit’s work is to bring about the new birth and the sanctification of saints of various nations. But there is more to the text than an ecclesiological meaning.

On another level, however, Pentecost anticipates, as Peter clearly proclaims, the day of the Lord (Acts 2:17–21). This, along with the references to the many peoples present in Jerusalem, should caution us against reading the “all” of Acts 2:17 in an exclusively ecclesiological sense. The Spirit’s activity across the dimensions of both space—the Spirit’s being poured out upon all people—and time—“in the last days,” stretching from the Day of Pentecost to the coming of the kingdom of God—begs to be understood in a universal sense that transcends (at least the institutional boundaries of) the church.¹⁰

I take it that when Yong refers to the Spirit working universally, transcending and going beyond the “institutional boundaries” of the church, he means that where the church has not preached the gospel, the Spirit is free to go. Terrance Tiessen makes the same argument. In regard to peoples of the world (i.e., those in non-Christian religions), he believes we need to pay attention to “the work of the Holy Spirit, who was poured out ‘upon all flesh’ (Acts 2:17), and who operates in a special way in and through those whom he indwells in new covenant blessings, but whose work is not restricted to the church.”¹¹ Like Yong, for Tiessen the Spirit’s advent at Pentecost shows that salvation in the new covenant is not restricted by the church, but the Spirit can and does work among nations and even non-Christian religions where the church and its gospel message have never been. The Spirit is poured out not only upon those who hear a preacher but also upon those who never hear a preacher at all. For Tiessen in particular, it is the Spirit’s use of general revelation which brings this reality into fruition.¹²

Returning to Yong, he believes his point is exemplified in Acts

The events of Acts 2 parallel the prophecy of Joel 2, demonstrating that a fulfillment, even if it be partial, is in view. (4) Peter’s purpose in quoting Joel 2 is not merely to show that what has taken place is an amazing event, the miraculous work of God, but the long-awaited outpouring of the Spirit promised by the prophets, fulfilled subsequent to the redeeming work of Christ in the cross and resurrection.

¹⁰Yong, *Beyond the Impasse*, 40. Yong cites in his support exclusivist Pentecostal Stanley M. Horton who also says “all” refers to “all mankind” (*The Books of Acts* [Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1981], 38).

¹¹Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 151.

¹²*Ibid.*, 155–57.

10:34–35 with Cornelius. Yong cites Acts 10:34b–35 in his favor, where Peter says, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” According to Yong, what Peter means is that people all around the world, including those in non-Christian religions, are included among God’s people regardless of whether or not they have heard the gospel precisely because they, whether they know it or not, fear God and do what is right. And Cornelius is the perfect example of just such a person.

Behind all of this lies an entire theology of the Spirit. Yong has made strides emphasizing the universal work of the Spirit, even outside of Christianity. But Yong is really dependent upon Clark Pinnock. Reacting strongly against (what he calls) the “widespread error” of restrictivism, Pinnock argues that while Christ, as the only mediator, sustains particularity, the Spirit is present everywhere and therefore “safeguards universality.”¹³ No one is beyond the Spirit’s saving operation. “Spirit is not confined to the church,” argues Pinnock, “but is present everywhere, giving life and creating community.... He spreads his gifts generously, even to people outside the church and in the wider world.”¹⁴ Therefore, we can be “hopeful about people who have not yet acknowledged Jesus as Lord.”¹⁵

In an effort to make his case, Pinnock appeals to the book of Acts as well, particularly Acts 10:35, where we see “Peter’s openness to pagans.” Setting Paul over against Luke, Pinnock writes, “If the book of Romans sounds a pessimistic note, St. Luke sounds a hopeful one.”¹⁶ Like other inclusivists, Pinnock’s favorite example is Cornelius in Acts 10. “Cornelius is depicted as a devout man in whose religious life God was already at work and to whose prayers God attended before he heard the gospel (Acts 1:1–8). Such people are in effect believers of other dispensations who await messianic salvation. They are servants destined to become sons and daughters, as Wesley put it.”¹⁷ In other words, before someone hears the gospel message, he can already be a believer. Such was the case with Cornelius. “Evidently the Spirit had

¹³Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 192. For Pinnock’s inclusivist case as a whole, see *A Wideness in God’s Mercy*; idem, “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 93–141; idem, “Acts 4:12—No Other Name Under Heaven,” in *Through No Fault of Their Own?* 107–15; idem, “‘Misgivings’ and ‘Openness’: A Dialogue on Inclusivism Between R. Douglas Geivett and Clark Pinnock,” in *Who Will Be Saved? Defending the Biblical Understanding of God, Salvation, & Evangelism*, ed. Paul R. House and Gregory A. Thornbury (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 111–28.

¹⁴Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, 192, 194.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., 202.

¹⁷Ibid., 203.

been at work in his life and faith prior to his conversion.”¹⁸ Notice, Cornelius actually had genuine faith, even though he was not officially converted by the gospel message. Therefore, says Pinnock, people “search for God in religions; are we to say that they never encounter God in religion, in spite of the inadequacies and distortions that are to be found in every religious worldview?”¹⁹ It is evident then that for Pinnock general revelation accompanied by the work of the Spirit is sufficient to save and convert unbelievers in other religions both before they hear the gospel and in the event that they never hear the gospel.

John Sanders also believes the story of Cornelius is an excellent proof-text for inclusivism. For Sanders, Cornelius was a believer and it is when he receives the Spirit that he then becomes a Christian. Sanders writes, “Cornelius was a saved believer before Peter arrived, and he received the blessings that come with a relationship with Jesus.”²⁰ Sanders believes that Peter’s struggle with Gentiles being saved is resolved in Acts 10:34–35, but notice how Sanders interprets what Peter says. “Peter now sees that God opens his arms to embrace all those who trust God and seek to follow him as best they know.”²¹ Sanders then quotes G. Campbell Morgan, arguing that man is not saved because he understands the atonement of Christ, but is saved because he fears God and “works righteousness.”²² Therefore, Sanders argues that texts like Acts 10:35 demonstrate that knowledge of Christ is not necessary for salvation.²³ Sanders writes, “Cornelius was already a saved believer before Peter arrived but he was not a Christian believer.”²⁴

READING ACTS THROUGH THE LENS OF REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

While the arguments above by inclusivists may sound appealing, they pay little attention to the context in which these passages sit, let alone the location of the book of Acts in redemptive-history. Therefore, in what follows I will argue that when we read these passages in Acts both in light of the immediate context of the book itself as well as the larger storyline of redemptive-history, these passages do not in any way support the inclusivist position but actually lend favor to the exclusivist view.

¹⁸Ibid., 201.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 40. For a more extensive treatment, see idem, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

²¹Sanders, “Inclusivism,” 39.

²²Ibid., 49.

²³Sanders, *No Other Name*, 254.

²⁴Ibid.

Acts 2: “I Will Pour Out My Spirit on All Flesh”

First, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is always meant to bear witness to the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus says in Acts 1:8, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Why does Jesus say that the disciples will be “witnesses” when they receive the Spirit? What will they be giving witness to? The answer is evident in the text: “you will be *my* witnesses.” In other words, not only are they followers of Christ but they are witnesses to who Christ is and what Christ has done. As David Peterson writes, “Peter speaks as a prophet himself—as one who has been filled with the Spirit—insisting that what has happened to the disciples must be related to what happened to Jesus.”²⁵

To paint the context, Jesus has just been resurrected from the dead after being crucified on the cross. After his resurrection he appeared to his disciples, not only putting his resurrected body on display (Luke 24:39: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see.”), but explaining to them that all of this had to take place according to everything written about him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, that what was promised might be fulfilled (Luke 24:44). Jesus says, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:46–49). Jesus is very clear. The disciples receive the Spirit so that they will be witnesses of “these things.” What things is Jesus referring to? “These things” refers to everything promised in the Old Testament: that Christ should suffer, rise on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. The purpose of the Spirit is to testify, through the disciples, to Jesus the Christ. The purpose of the Spirit coming upon his disciples is that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached to all nations, and it should be done in the name of Christ for it is through Christ alone that salvation comes. Therefore, when we come to Acts 2, it should not surprise us that after the Spirit descends upon the disciples, Peter quotes from Joel, explaining how the promise of the Spirit for all nations is now being fulfilled in their very midst and that those who call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21).

To read into these passages a work of the Spirit in the nations apart from the proclamation of the gospel, the repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ, and the salvation of those who call

²⁵David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 129.

upon that same Christ, is to bypass the meaning of Jesus' words in Luke 24:46–49 and Peter's interpretation of Pentecost in Acts 2. Peter (and Joel for that matter) are not providing fodder for a work of the Spirit in the nations apart from the gospel, but rather are doing the exact opposite, arguing that now that the Spirit has been poured out, salvation has come to everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord, repenting of their sin, that they may find forgiveness in Christ.

Therefore, Peter's message is not only Pneumatologically but Christologically driven.²⁶ He makes this evident after he quotes Joel 2. Peter's next move, in light of Joel's prophecy being fulfilled, is to point the hearers to the person and work of Christ. He testifies that Jesus of Nazareth was a man attested to you by God with mighty works, wonders, and signs that God did through him in their very midst (Acts 2:22). This same Jesus was delivered up to be crucified not by accident but according to God's definite plan (Acts 2:23). Though killed by lawless men, God raised him up, "loosing the pangs of death" (Acts 2:24). And then Peter brings to account not only his testimony to the resurrected Christ but that of all who were present. "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses" (Acts 2:32). Again, the word "witnesses" is used here. Peter then explains that Christ has been exalted to God's right hand and has received from the Father "the promise of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33). It is this Spirit that those watching saw poured out, seeing and hearing it for themselves (Acts 2:33).

We must not fail to connect the dots here. In Acts 1 Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will come upon the disciples so that they may be witnesses to Christ in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The same exact promise is made in Luke 24:48 where Jesus says that they will be witnesses to the nations of his death and resurrection, proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins. When we then read in Acts 2 that the Spirit has been poured out, no wonder Peter interprets the event by saying that "we are all witnesses" that this Jesus died and rose again. Therefore, to come to Acts 2 and argue that the Spirit is being poured out in such a way that even those who never hear the gospel will be saved, is to completely

²⁶Miles makes this point as well, "Because of the mutual relationship between the Son and the Spirit, the 'pouring out' of the Spirit at Pentecost is far more than a pneumatological event; it is profoundly Christological. The coming of the Spirit is the fulfillment of Christ's promise that He would be with His disciples always (Matt 28:20), that He would 'abide' or 'remain' (*meinate*) in His disciples (John 15:4; cf. 1:33). The New Testament writers understood this relationship and referred to the Spirit of God as the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11). The coming of the Spirit is the life-giving bond between the physically absent King and His subjects. The Holy Spirit ensures the uninterrupted presence of Christ in the church." Todd L. Miles, *A God of Many Understandings? The Gospel and a Theology of Religions* (Nashville: B&H, 2010), 320. Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 194; K. McDonnell, "A Trinitarian Theology of the Holy Spirit?" *TS* 46 (1985): 206; G. Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 54.

misunderstand why the Spirit is being poured out in the first place, namely, so that many become witnesses, proclaiming not only the death and resurrection of Christ, but that forgiveness is ready for those who repent of their sin and trust in this resurrected Christ. That is why Peter's sermon urges the question, "Brothers, what shall we do?" and Peter's response is, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). The gift of the Spirit here is directly and inseparably connected to repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ. To divorce the gift of the Spirit from repentance and forgiveness upon hearing the message of Christ is to contradict everything Peter says in Acts 2. The hope of the nations is not, therefore, the gift of the Spirit apart from the saving message of Christ. Rather, the gift of the Spirit only comes when the message of Christ has been received with repentance and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Second, "all flesh" (ἐπι πᾶσαν σάρκα) in Acts 2:17 must be interpreted in new covenant categories. Two points need to be made: (1) The "all flesh" in Acts 2:17 is not to be interpreted as all without exception but as all without distinction. As Todd Miles has noted, the text "specifically limits the reception of the Spirit to 'your sons and your daughters,' 'your young men,' 'your old men,' and 'My male and female slaves.'" ²⁷ Therefore, "all flesh" cannot be a reference to all without exception but rather to all without distinction, sons and daughters, young and old, male and female, Jew or Gentile. (2) The "all flesh" in Acts 2:17 should be interpreted as a pouring out of the Spirit on all those in the new covenant who have trusted in Christ. Miles explains that the "remainder of the book of Acts demonstrates that the pouring out of the Spirit extends inclusively outside the boundaries of ethnic Israel, without race, gender, age, or class distinction but exclusively only to those who believe in Jesus Christ."²⁸ In other words, the Spirit is poured out upon all those within the new covenant community who believe in Jesus the Christ. As Stephen Wellum explains,

But both [Yong and Tiessen] fail to acknowledge that the words "all people" in Acts 2:17 are defined in terms of the new covenant, not as a reference to the universal work of the Spirit in people where the gospel has not gone. Under the old covenant, the structure of the covenant community meant that the Spirit was uniquely poured out on leaders. But what the prophets anticipate is a crucial change: the coming of the new covenant era would witness the *universal* distribution of the Spirit, but universal in the sense of *all those within the covenant community*. Thus, all those under the new covenant enjoy the promised gift of the eschatological Holy Spirit, but this can hardly be used as a text to support the universality axiom of inclusivism. In fact, as we go through the book

²⁷Miles, *A God of Many Understandings?* 320. Such an interpretation is within the semantic range of πᾶς. See BDAG, s.v. "πᾶς, πᾶσα, πᾶν," 782–84.

²⁸Miles, *A God of Many Understandings?* 320. Cf. J. B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 109.

of Acts, specifically chapters 8 and 10, we see the expansion of the covenant community to include both Jews and Gentiles. But there is never a suggestion that the Spirit is also poured out upon people all over the world apart from gospel proclamation. As many have observed, the Samaritans in Acts 8 and the Gentiles in Acts 10 do not receive the promised Spirit until *after* the gospel is proclaimed to them, thus linking the Spirit's outpouring to Christ and the entire new covenant era.²⁹

Additionally, it is significant to note, as David Peterson does, that "all flesh" is addressed to Israel at this point. In other words, while a universal note is sounded, "a series of defining phrases indicate that the gift of the Spirit is for Israel in the first instance," thereby "indicating that the people in question are specifically servants of God."³⁰ Peterson concludes, "Whereas the Spirit especially designated and empowered the prophets and other leaders of Israel under the Old Covenant, God promises that 'all' his people will be possessed by the Spirit in the last days."³¹ Now we know from the rest of Acts that eventually the Spirit will also be poured out on believing Samaritans and Gentiles also, and there is no doubt, as F. F. Bruce states, that Luke "sees in these words an adumbration of the worldwide Gentile mission, even if Peter could not have realized their full import when he quoted them on the day of Pentecost."³² But the point here is that it is misguided to read into Peter's quotation of Joel a work of the Spirit on Gentiles apart from the gospel, when in reality Peter is quoting Joel to say that the Spirit has now come upon Israel and will then go to the nations to testify to what Christ has done. Moreover, at this point in Luke's story what is so shocking about the word "all" is not that the Gentiles as well as the Jews have believed (that is to come later in Acts), but rather that every single person in the new covenant who believes in Christ is permanently indwelt by the Spirit.

Peterson's emphasis on Israel above is further verified by Peter's language in verse 39 where he says, "For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." Here God's promise to Abraham and the patriarchs of Israel finds its fulfillment. With the coming of the Messiah and then the promised Holy Spirit, the prophecy of Joel 2:28–29 has been consummated. Some may want to take the reference to Isaiah 57:19 as including Gentiles. While it is true that the Gentiles will

²⁹Stephen J. Wellum, "Saving Faith: Implicit or Explicit?" in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 168–69.

³⁰Peterson, *Acts*, 140.

³¹Ibid.

³²"Certainly the outpouring of the Spirit on 120 Jews could not in itself fulfill the prediction of such outpouring 'on all flesh'; but it was the beginning of the fulfillment. Joel's words may have harked back to Moses' exclamation: 'Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!' (Num 11:29)" (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 61).

share the benefits of the new covenant (see Acts 22:21; Eph 2:13, 17, where Isa 57:19 is used to refer to Gentiles), nevertheless, in Acts 2:39 it is more likely that Peter has in mind Jews scattered everywhere. Peterson writes, “Given Luke’s ‘geographical approach to history writing and the telling of the story of the early church’, the most probable reference in this early context is to ‘Jews in distant lands’.”³³ This becomes even more evident when we come to Acts 10 where Peter needs some serious persuading that he can take the gospel into a Gentile house. Peterson goes on to observe that Peter in Acts 3:26 is clear that God sent his Spirit to bless Israel first, demonstrating that Peter did have some awareness that Gentiles would benefit. However, as his hesitancy in Acts 10 shows, Peter may have been unsure “how” and “under” what specific conditions this would take place.³⁴

Third, the response to Peter’s gospel proclamation is repentance. How different this is from the inclusivist position where listeners are already believers but simply need to become Christians. For the inclusivist, it is not biblical repentance but a mere enlightenment that one needs to transition their status from a believer in God in general to a Christian who has faith in Christ specifically. But this is not what we see in Acts 2:38. Instead, we see Jews who did not believe, suddenly repent of their sins and trust in Christ. In other words, Luke’s emphasis on repentance is not an enlightenment from one stage of salvation to the next, as John Sanders seems to imply, but rather a radical shift from darkness to light. We see this in the meaning of the word “repent” (μετανοήσατε) itself. As Peterson states, “In Acts 2:38, repentance means a radical reorientation of life with respect to Jesus, expressing sorrow for having rejected the one accredited by God as Lord and Christ (cf. 2:22–36).”³⁵

Acts 10:35, Cornelius, and the Gentiles

As we have already seen, inclusivists are under the conviction that their interpretation of Acts 2 is exemplified when we come to Acts 10,

³³Peterson, *Acts*, 156. Peterson insightfully notes, “Acts 10 shows that Peter needed some persuading before he could go to the house of a Gentile and preach the gospel to him.”

³⁴*Ibid.*, 156, n. 93.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 154. Similarly Bock writes, “Repentance indicates a turning in direction (in the LXX, see Amos 7:3, 6; Joel 2:13–14; Jer. 4:28; Johnson 1992: 57; also Wis. 11:23; 12:19; Fitzmyer 1998: 265). In this context, it means to make a conscious turn toward God and God’s actions through Jesus. This verb appears five times in Acts (2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 26:20). It is one of Luke’s favorite terms to describe how one should respond to the offer of forgiveness, and he often connects it to forgiveness (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 26:18, 20; Luke 3:3; 24:47). The Greek word can mean ‘change one’s mind.’ The idea in Hebrew, however, is ‘turn,’ indicating a change of direction.... Peter’s declaration here is obedient to Jesus’s commission and call in Luke 24. Peter is telling his audience to change direction from the attitudes that led them to crucify Jesus, and look to God through Jesus for forgiveness” (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007], 141–42; cf. 147).

the story of Cornelius. For many inclusivists Cornelius is the most important person in the New Testament for the inclusivist viewpoint.³⁶ But are inclusivists correct in appealing to Cornelius to make their case? In what remains, I will argue that the story of Cornelius does not support an inclusivist view, but actually fits perfectly within the context of the gospel going to nations so that sinners might repent and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins.

Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian Cohort, “a devout man who feared God with all his household” and one who “gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God” (Acts 10:1–2). The Lord hears the prayers of Cornelius and appears to him, telling Cornelius to send for a man named Peter. The next day Peter is in prayer when suddenly he falls into a trance and sees the heavens open and a sheet full of animals, reptiles, and birds. Peter is instructed to kill and eat to which he responds, “By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common and unclean” (Acts 10:14). The voice responds, “What God has made clean, do not call common.” Peter, though perplexed, obeys the Lord who then tells him that he is to go with the men waiting for him from the house of Cornelius.

Upon arriving Peter says to those gathered there, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10:28). Peter then tells Cornelius the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁷ Peter confesses that now he understands that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35). Peter then explains how Jesus was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and power, and how Jesus performed miracles since God was with him. Peter explains how he and others are witnesses to all these things. This Jesus was put to death on a tree, but God raised him to life (Acts 10:39–40). Peter tells Cornelius that he has been commanded to preach the name of Jesus, as he is one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). After Peter explains that those who believe in Jesus have their sins forgiven, the Holy Spirit fell on all those listening. The Jews watching were shocked, “because the gift of

³⁶Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?* 175; Sanders, *No Other Name*, 224–24, 265–66; idem, *What About Those?* 39–40; Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 95–98. This is a point brought to attention by Robert A. Peterson, “Inclusivism versus Exclusivism on Key Biblical Texts,” in *Faith Comes By Hearing*, 189.

³⁷It is clear that it is the gospel of *salvation* that Peter has in mind for he says God sent the message of the gospel “to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). The word “peace” here indicates that salvation is being spoken of. Peterson explains, “Peace in Luke-Acts is a synonym for salvation, as it is in Isaiah 52:7 (cf. Lk. 2:14, 29–32; 19:42), involving release from the judgment of God through the forgiveness of sins and freedom to serve God in holiness and righteousness (cf. Lk. 1:67–79)” (Peterson, *Acts*, 336).

the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.” Consequently, those who received the Spirit were baptized.

Inclusivists identify Cornelius as someone who is saved as a believer in God, but just not a Christian yet. After all, the text says Cornelius was a devout man who feared God and prayed to God regularly. Also, God shows Peter that he shows no partiality, but accepts anyone in every nation who fears him and does what is right. How else are we to read this, says the inclusivist, other than proof that God accepts those in unreached nations who never hear the gospel, as long as they fear God and do what is right? But this is a faulty interpretation for several reasons.³⁸

1. *Cornelius was not saved prior to hearing the gospel from Peter.*³⁹

Notice what we read in Acts 11:13–14. Peter says that when the angel appeared to Cornelius he said, “Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message *by which you will be saved*, you and all your household” (Acts 11:14). Peter then concludes, “God gave the same gift [the Spirit] to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 17a).

The gospel is front and center as that which is the power of God to save sinners. The text actually says this is the “message by which you will be saved” (Acts 11:14). In other words, the message did not inform Cornelius that he was already saved, but now just needed to know about Christ. Not at all. Rather, the message was proclaimed to Cornelius because he needed to be saved in the first place, hence the future tense (“will be saved”). The situation is clear: Peter is to preach the gospel so that Cornelius will be saved. If Peter fails to preach the gospel, the opposite is true, namely, Cornelius will *not* be saved. The implication for Cornelius prior to being saved is also apparent: fearing God and doing what was right did not mean Cornelius was saved yet.

The same point is evident in Acts 10:43. Peter concludes his sermon by saying, “To him [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” But Peter has no need to say this if all Cornelius needs is to be informed that he already is saved, but simply needs to affirm the reality of Jesus as well. On the other hand, if Cornelius is not saved, then the text makes perfect sense. The prophets bore witness to the Christ so that now everyone who believes in him receives the forgiveness of sins through his name. We cannot separate salvation from the forgiveness of sins either. To be saved is to have one’s sins forgiven. But Peter says this only happens upon believing in Christ. Forgiveness only is effected through “his name.” We are to conclude from Acts 10:43 that Cornelius and his family had not yet believed in Christ and consequently had not yet had their sins forgiven.

³⁸Though I add points in certain places, certain points here are indebted to John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 135–40.

³⁹By “saved” I am referring to the initial conversion experience.

Finally, the Jews who hear what happened to Cornelius and his household respond to Peter by glorifying God and saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). The assumption in such an exclamation is obvious: a person only receives eternal life (which is always associated with salvation) when he repents and believes in Jesus. Or more precise still, it is repentance and trust in Christ that actually results in eternal life.

2. *The gift of the Spirit and the act of baptism demonstrate that salvation is at hand.* The same Spirit given to the Jews is given to the Gentiles. No wonder the Jews conclude that the Gentiles have been saved. After all, they received the Spirit just like the Jews did. How are we to conclude from this that anything less than salvation is at hand? In the New Testament it is when someone believes in Christ that they are first indwelt by the Spirit. This is the case with the Jews in Acts 2 and it is the case with the Gentiles in Acts 10.⁴⁰ The advent of the Spirit upon belief demonstrates that what Cornelius and his household experience is not a fuller enlightenment that moves them from the status of a saved believer to a saved Christian, but rather is the initial, conversion experience that a person has when he or she is saved. In other words, there is not a two-tier salvation experience, but an instantaneous, one-time salvation experience that is accompanied by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Spirit is the sign that one is now a believer, united to Christ.

Furthermore, evidence that salvation is at hand is apparent when the Gentiles are baptized. Notice, when the Jews see that the Spirit fell on the Gentiles they conclude, “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:47–48a). The sign of baptism is not only an indication of reception into the house of God, but is also a sign that one has been cleansed from sin and is forgiven.⁴¹ This is clear in Acts 2:38 where Peter commands, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” While the waters of baptism themselves do not save (see 1 Peter 3:21), they are an external sign that one

⁴⁰It could be objected that in Acts 19 the Spirit comes upon those who do not know of Christ and yet are already believers. However, even if it is agreed that these are believers, nevertheless, these followers of John the Baptist were living in a unique, transitional period in redemptive history like no other (i.e., baptized in the name of John the Baptist, but not Jesus). That said, we can still conclude that they were like other OT believers, trusting in Yahweh, awaiting the Messiah and the coming of the kingdom. It is when they hear of Jesus that they then receive the Spirit. But again, this is unique as the normal pattern in the NT is baptism of the Spirit and indwelling at conversion. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:13, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

⁴¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 183–84; Peterson, *Acts*, 340.

has been internally baptized by the Spirit and has received the forgiveness of sins upon repentance and trust in Christ. As Bock states, “baptism is the representation of the cleansing that belongs to salvation. This washing signifies the forgiveness of sins that Jesus brings and the emergence into a new, clean life with fresh enablement that his work provides (Rom. 6:1–11).”⁴² Therefore, with the reference to baptism in Acts 10, it is difficult not to conclude that Cornelius and the Gentiles have experienced salvation, passing from death to life.

3. *While Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man, his sins were not forgiven until he believed in the name of Jesus.* There are two key elements to the inclusivist argument in Acts 10. (1) The text says Cornelius was a devout, God-fearing man, who even prayed to God (Acts 10:2). How can this not mean that Cornelius was a believer already? (2) Once Peter has his vision and enters the house of Cornelius he confesses that now God has shown him that men from every nation who do what is right and fear God are acceptable to God. How can acceptable not mean that Cornelius was saved? Several clues from the text itself, however, demonstrate otherwise.

First, what does Luke mean when he says Cornelius and his family were devout and God-fearing? To begin with, it is noteworthy to distinguish between “God-fearer” and “proselyte.” Marshall explains that while Cornelius’s allegiance was far from “nominal” (he gave alms to the poor and prayed), nevertheless, Cornelius “had not submitted to circumcision, as 11:3 makes clear.” Therefore, he “was not a proselyte, *i.e.* a Gentile who had fully accepted the Jewish religion by undergoing circumcision, but merely a ‘God fearer’ (cf. 13:16, 26, 43; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7); such people were regarded as still pagans by the Jews in Palestine, but there appears to have been a more liberal attitude in the Dispersion.”⁴³ The point here is simple: we need to be careful not to

⁴²Bock, *Acts*, 143.

⁴³“Possibly, therefore, Cornelius had become a God-fearer before he came to Palestine. The early church in Jerusalem shared the attitude of other Jews to such God-fearers, but Christian attitudes changed, and it is clear that Luke himself recognized the value of this step on the way from paganism to Christian conversion” (Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 183–84). Similarly, see Bock, *Acts*, 386. Peterson also observes, “Fundamentally, fearing God means respecting, honouring, and hence worshipping him (e.g., Mt. 15:9; Mk. 7:7 [both citing Is. 29:13]; Acts 10:35; 18:13; contrast 19:27, the worship of Artemis). In some contexts, the Greek participles are used attributively in the sense of ‘devout’ (e.g., 10:2, 33; 13:43, 50; 17:4). When these participles are used substantively, they have been taken to refer to a specific class of persons who were not Jews and not full proselytes, but Gentiles who were attached to the synagogues and were sympathetic to Jewish theology and ethics (e.g., 13:16, 26; 17:17; cf. 16:14; 18:7). Scholars continue to debate whether ‘God-fearers’ is a technical term for Luke and whether he used the term ‘proselyte’ for the same group. Proselytes embraced Judaism and all its rituals fully, including circumcision (cf. 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). However, inscriptions and other evidence show that there were many Gentiles in the first century who did not become proselytes in the full and technical sense, but who frequented synagogues and sought to live as much as they could by Jewish law” (Peterson, *Acts*, 326–27). Peterson’s point here undercuts those inclusivists who would compare Cornelius to unreached peoples. The two are not parallel. While unreached

view Cornelius as more religious than he was. Yes, he was a God-fearer, but most likely he was not a proselyte. Therefore, we stretch the meaning of the text if we view him as a converted believer.

Also, we must recognize that Acts 10 parallels Acts 2, thereby giving us insight into what it meant for Cornelius to be called a God-fearing, devout man, who was acceptable to God. The term “devout” is used by Luke throughout the book of Acts (2:5; 10:2; 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4). As Darrell Bock observes, when Luke uses the term he is “recognizing that just because people are not Christians or Jews does not mean they are uninterested in God.”⁴⁴ Of course, none of this undermines the doctrine of total depravity. As Romans 3:11 tells us, all are depraved and no one is righteous. No one seeks God. Therefore, any seeking after God is to be credited to the Spirit. The Spirit must work in the sinner’s heart, monergistically creating new life (John 3:3–8), resulting in faith and repentance, as in the case of Cornelius.

But for our purposes, it is crucial to note how the term is used in both Acts 2:5 and 10:2. In Acts 2 the Jews are also called “devout men” (2:5) just as Cornelius is (Acts 10:2). Nevertheless, just as Peter instructed Cornelius, so does he instruct these devout Jews in Acts 2 that they must believe in Christ and repent of their sins if they are to be forgiven. It is only through the name of Christ that the forgiveness of sins is granted. Piper helpfully remarks,

So Luke is not trying to tell us in this book that devout, God-fearing people who practice what is right the best they know how are already saved and do not need the gospel. The gospel got its start among the most devout people in the world, namely, the Jews. They had more advantages in knowing God than any of the other peoples of the earth. Yet they were told again and again that devoutness and works of righteousness and religious sincerity do not solve the problem of sin. The only hope is to believe on Jesus.⁴⁵

In many ways, Cornelius was like many other Jews, though he himself was a Gentile. Like the Jews, Cornelius had access to special revelation and consequently he was devout, a God-fearer, even praying to Yahweh. Nevertheless, as we see time and time again in the gospels, even the most devout Jews were not necessarily saved. The Pharisees are perhaps one of the best examples of Jews who had the law and yet were condemned by Jesus. And even some of the most sympathetic to the ministry of Jesus are still told they must be born again. Nicodemus stands out in this regard. He was a member of the Jewish ruling council and yet Jesus says to him that he must be born again to enter the

peoples have not received special revelation, Cornelius had contact with the Jewish people, their synagogues, and law. See Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2001), 194.

⁴⁴Bock, “Athenians Who Have Never Heard,” 118.

⁴⁵Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 136.

kingdom of God (John 3:1–8). Jesus proceeds from the necessity of the new birth (which Nicodemus was ignorant of though he should have known better; cf. John 3:10) to tell Nicodemus how just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert so the Son of Man must be lifted up (John 3:14–15). From there Jesus explains to Nicodemus that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). Jesus is emphatic in John 3:18 that those who do not believe in the Son stand condemned already. So eternal life hangs in the balance even with a teacher in Israel like Nicodemus. Therefore, we should not think any differently when we come to Cornelius. The fact that he is a God-fearer and devout man does not mean that he is saved. Much like Nicodemus and countless other Jewish leaders in Israel, Cornelius needed to hear the gospel in order to experience salvation.

Second, what does Peter mean when he says that people in every nation who fear God and do what is right are acceptable to him? There can be no denying that Cornelius and his household are in view in this text since they are Gentiles. Notice the vision of Peter where he saw unclean animals and was told to kill and eat. In Acts 10:28 Peter enters the house of Cornelius and says, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.” The point here is that no race is disqualified from hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. With the inauguration of the new covenant, no house is too unclean but every house in every nation needs to hear the gospel. Therefore, when Peter says people in every nation are “acceptable,” he does not mean that they are saved, but that in light of the coming of Christ every nation is now to hear the gospel without reservation.⁴⁶ Or as Peterson states, “This does not mean that Cornelius was already saved before he met Peter, but that non-Jews are ‘acceptable’ or welcome to come to Christ on the same basis as Jews.”⁴⁷ What a contrast this is to the old covenant where Israel and Israel alone was God’s

⁴⁶Carson notes how the NIV may have wrongly translated the passage, “It may be that the New International Version is slightly misleading. It holds that God ‘accepts’ people from every nation who fear him and do what is right. If this ‘acceptance’ is taken strongly, it might be taken by some to imply that God accepts them as forgiven people. Strictly speaking, however, the Greek says that everyone who fears God and obeys him ‘is acceptable δεκτός to him,’ or even ‘welcome’ to him (cf. Luke 4:24, ‘no prophet is *accepted* in his home town’). It is never used in reference to whether or not a person is accepted by God in some saving sense” (D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 306–7).

⁴⁷“Anyone like Cornelius, who genuinely fears God and expresses that fear by doing what is right in God’s eyes, must still come to Christ for salvation. There is no ground here for arguing that God will save people apart from an articulate faith in Christ (cf. 4:11–12 note). Indeed, Peter underscores the universal scope of God’s favour in 10:43 by insisting that *‘everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name’*. Forgiveness is available for *everyone who believes in him*, but forgiveness *through his name* implies calling upon the name of Christ for that blessing (cf. 10:43)” (Peterson, *Acts*, 335–36).

chosen people, blessed with the law, the temple, and the prophets. However, with the arrival of Christ and the new covenant through his blood, God has his elect in every nation and the gospel is to go forth without reservation, both to Jew and Gentile alike.

But what are we to make then of the fact that Peter says those who are acceptable are those who *fear God and do what is right*? As we already saw, simply being devout and a God-fearer does not save anyone.⁴⁸ If it did, then there would be no need for Peter to instruct them to trust in Christ and repent that their sins might be forgiven and that they might receive eternal life. This is the case in Acts 2 and Acts 10. Therefore, Bock can say, “The Bible records some sincere people who are devoted to God—and even accords them a certain respect. But it is still considered wrong-headed devotion or ‘worship in ignorance.’ Neither devotion nor fearing God without fearing Jesus is good enough.”⁴⁹ And again, “Ignorance and ‘God-fearing devotion’ in themselves provide no hope that one can enter God’s presence outside of Jesus, as the New Testament shows. Devotion to God must be according to knowledge. In other words, one must believe in the righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus.”⁵⁰

I would argue that when Peter says that those who are acceptable are those who fear God and do what is right, he is referring to those who seek after God, but nonetheless are not saved until they find

⁴⁸Bock elaborates elsewhere, “When one looks at the devout or ‘God-fearers,’ an interesting situation develops. There are various ways in which the New Testament expresses this concept of devotion. The noun *eulabēs* (‘devout’) is uniformly positive (Luke 2:25; Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12), as is its synonym *eulabēs* (‘godly’) (Acts 10:2, 7; 2 Tim. 3:12; Titus 2:12; 2 Pet. 2:90). These terms refer to believers or to those about to become believers. But these positive terms are absent from Acts 17. In Acts 17:17 we find a decidedly mixed term, *sebō* (‘worship’). Negatively, Acts 13:43 uses it of the devout converts to Judaism, while 13:50 uses it to describe the devout women who persecute Paul. We even find the term used in Acts 19:27 of those who worship Artemis, so it can be applied to pagan worship. Positively, Lydia is described with this term (Acts 16:14), as is Titius Justus (Acts 18:7). The point is that the term can be used to describe the religiously zealous, whether or not they are accepted by God.... The use of God-fearers in Acts 13 is crucial. Here Paul addresses the Gentiles in his audience as God-fearers. Does this mean that they are in God’s blessing? The answer is, No, at least, not yet. In the speech Paul presents Jesus and warns his God-fearing audience not to reject the message. To scoff at the message is to perish (Acts 13:40–41). The God-fearer for Luke is interested in the divine, but the God-fearer is not in the kingdom until he or she responds to the message. What is said explicitly in Acts 13 applies as well in Acts 17, or else Paul’s call to repent makes little sense. God-fearers are treated with respect because they are sympathetic to divine matters; but they are not eternally blessed by God simply because they express an interest in God. Entry requires a specific kind of response. In Luke’s terms, it requires turning to God as found in Christ. In Paul’s terms, it requires turning ‘to [the living] God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come’ (1 Thess. 1:9–10 RSV). Note how well Paul’s words fit the conclusion of his speech in Acts 17” (Bock, “Athenians Who Have Never Heard,” 123).

⁴⁹Ibid., 124.

⁵⁰Ibid.

Christ. Granted, this is an extraordinary case, as people in other nations may never actually seek to find out who God is at all. But in the case of some, such as Cornelius, it must be recognized that there was a genuine seeking after God (i.e., a seeking that is only due to the Spirit working within), which eventually culminated when Peter finally brought the message of salvation through Christ Jesus. God is in approval of this seeking after him, though it falls short of salvation. As Piper states, “Peter is saying that God *accepts* this search as genuine (hence ‘acceptable’ in verse 35) and works wonders to bring that person the gospel of Jesus Christ the way he did through the visions of both Peter on the housetop and Cornelius in the hour of prayer.”⁵¹ This becomes evident when we read Acts 10:31–32 where the angel says, “Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God. Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon who is called Peter.” The word “therefore” in the text shows us that Cornelius was praying that God would show him what he needed to be saved.⁵² Your prayers have been heard, Cornelius, *therefore* send for Peter! Piper’s analysis is correct,

So the fear of God that is acceptable to God in verse 35 is a true sense that there is a holy God, that we have to meet him someday as desperate sinners, that we cannot save ourselves and need to know God’s way of salvation, and that we have to pray for it day and night and seek to act on the light we have. This is what Cornelius was doing. And God accepted his prayer and his groping for truth in his life (Acts 17:27) and worked wonders to bring the saving message of the gospel to him. Cornelius would not have been saved if no one had taken him the gospel.... Therefore, Cornelius does not represent persons who are saved without hearing and believing the gospel; rather, he illustrates God’s intention to take out a people for his name from “every nation” (Acts 10:35) through the sending of gospel messengers across cultural lines, which had once been taboo.⁵³

Furthermore, such an interpretation lines up with the church in Jerusalem as well. Recall that they heard what had happened and concluded that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads

⁵¹Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 138.

⁵²Ibid., 139.

⁵³Ibid. Bock also states, “The point is not that Cornelius earned righteousness as his due (Rom. 4:5) but that his responsiveness leads God to send Peter to reveal more of God’s way to him, as the rest of the speech points the way to what Cornelius now must do.” Bock elaborates, “The case of Cornelius raises an interesting question, given that he was respectful of God but had not yet responded to Jesus. Luke is aware that there are people who show respect for God, and Luke’s account of them is respectful. This does not mean, however, that Luke ignores that their spiritual state still leaves them in need of salvation. Their pursuit of God by itself does not exempt them or inoculate them from needing the forgiveness Jesus has obtained.... There is a difference between seeking and entering into fellowship with God. God directs Peter to complete Cornelius’s journey back to God. Cornelius’s heart has been well prepared for the gospel” (Bock, *Acts*, 396, 402).

to life” (Acts 11:18). How did they come to this conclusion? It was not because they were acceptable to God for fearing God and doing what is right. Rather, they came to this conclusion because they realized that the Gentiles also believed the gospel and received the Spirit for salvation. The purpose of Acts 10 and 11, therefore, is not to convey that unreached people are already saved since they fear God and do what is right.⁵⁴ To the contrary, the purpose is to demonstrate that unreached persons are saved by hearing the gospel message, believing in Jesus, and repenting of their sins. Only then do they receive forgiveness and eternal life.⁵⁵

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper has sought to show that while inclusivists view Acts 2 and 10 as major proof-texts for their viewpoint, these texts fail to support such a view. Furthermore, when we read these passages in light of both their immediate context and in the context of redemptive history these texts actually provide further support to the exclusivist position. I am in agreement with Ronald Nash when he concludes that while inclusivists do not believe hearing the gospel is necessary for a person to be saved, even the “most cursory reading of Acts will reveal

⁵⁴One wonders whether or not an inclusivist can consistently affirm salvation by grace alone if he also insists that devout men like Cornelius were saved before ever hearing the gospel because of their devoutness. Inclusivists are clear that it is because Cornelius is doing what is right that he is acceptable before God, acceptable here meaning saved. But does this not lead us down the road of works-righteousness? Surely this would directly contradict the gospel message whereby we are saved not because of how devout we are or because of our good works but by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. As Ronald Nash states, “The suggestion that living a good life can satisfy God smacks of Pelagianism and again contradicts a major New Testament emphasis” (Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 139; cf. 169–70). Nash is on to something and his point is only furthered by his observation that inclusivists like Pinnock and Sanders “are strangely silent on the matter of the sin problem of unevangelized believers” (ibid., 172). For Peter at Pentecost and then again with Cornelius, sin is at the very center of his message. Hence, Peter always concludes with “Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). Why do Yong, Pinnock, and Sanders rarely emphasize what is so obvious in Peter’s message, namely, that those hearing Christ for the first time need to repent because their sins condemn them before a holy God? Nash insightfully concludes, “Peter’s point here is clearly anti-inclusivist, strongly implying that if his hearers did not get their relationship with Jesus Christ right, their sins would not be forgiven.” Nash goes on, “Had I been Peter in that setting and also an inclusivist, I would have said something like this: ‘Now friends, I don’t want any of you thinking that I’m intolerant or narrow-minded in any way. I know that many of you are already saved because you’ve been faithfully seeking God as best you can. I want those of you in my audience who fit that description to know that I’m not preaching at you. It’s the rest of you—you sinners—who must repent and be baptized if your sins are to be forgiven. For those of you who are already saved, I’m offering you an opportunity for something more fulfilling.’ No, I’m afraid that had I been the speaker that day and also been an inclusivist, I would not have been as specific and restrictive as Peter” (Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 173).

⁵⁵Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 139.

the way in which almost every message in the book emphasizes the death and resurrection of Christ” as that which is absolutely necessary to be saved.⁵⁶

⁵⁶Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* 173–74.