

## Accepted by God

by Scot Hahn

Many of us derive much value and motivation in life from the feeling of being accepted by others. Whether it is a group of peers, colleagues or even those on an online social media site, the idea that we are welcomed and included gives us a sense of self-worth. Although we experience satisfaction when we have been judged by people to be worthy of their association, it is important to remember that the judgement of other people is based on a very limited understanding of who we really are and is oftentimes subject to any wind of change that blows our way. In contrast, God judges and approves of us based on his unlimited knowledge of what others cannot see, “For man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks upon the heart” 1 Sam. 16:7. Ultimately, it is this acceptance by God to be included among his people and to be part of his great plan for the ages that gives our lives meaning and purpose.

We see the great difference in the significance of God’s acceptance over and against man’s illustrated in one of the most powerful and influential events recorded in the Book of Acts. Beginning in chapter 10 God prepares his representative, Peter, and Peter’s soon-to-be audience, the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, for the great revelation that through the gospel God includes people into his plan based on his knowledge of their heart, not on ritual observance or external factors. He does this through a series of visions and divine visitations that set the stage for Peter’s proclamation to a group of Gentiles of the

message of salvation through Christ which we pick up on in verse 34,

*Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.*

*We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen...He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”*

*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. (Acts 10:34-46 NIV)*

It is important to remember that from the viewpoint of the Jewish people at this time a

Gentile could only be accepted as a part of God's people by undergoing certain external rites, including circumcision and the observance of dietary restrictions, so that any person could clearly see the change take place. But in this groundbreaking instance, God begins to fulfill his age-old promise to Abraham that "in him all nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 18:18) by giving the holy Spirit to Cornelius and his household simply because they believe the message spoken by Peter. There is no prior outward ritual to be observed or formal induction to be performed. God knows their hearts and gives his approval.

This naturally causes astonishment in the Jewish believers present who hear the Gentiles speaking in tongues and praising God because they know without a doubt that God has given them his Spirit. Likewise, there is perplexity among the other circumcised believers back in Jerusalem when they hear the report. In chapter 11 Peter is questioned about his willingness "to go the uncircumcised people and eat with them" so he recounts to them the whole story of how God was at work to open the door for the Gentiles to believe. In verses 15-18 we see Peter explain the inner working of his mind as he tries to make sense of the incident as well as the conclusions which the other Jewish believers draw,

*As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if he gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ,*

*who was I to think I could oppose God?"*

*When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."*

Here for all to see is the incontestable truth that God has opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles based on the faith that is in their hearts.

As the years went by and the number of Gentile believers greatly increased, opposition continued to arise, especially among the Jewish believers, regarding exactly how it is that one is to be accepted as being truly one of God's people. In Acts 15 we observe how the issues were resolved by an appeal back to this first occurrence of the outpouring of God's Spirit on the Gentiles. In verse 5 we pick up,

*Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses."*

*The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try*

*to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe that it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”*

Although the passage of time has rendered irrelevant some of the matters which faced the first-century church concerning the composition of God's people, one great truth continues to shine forth from this account. Being approved by man, while of some value, counts for little when compared with being embraced by God. Through faith in Jesus Christ we have received God's gift of holy Spirit and know of its powerful manifestation and life-changing influence. God has accepted us. At present we find fulfillment in our lives through understanding this truth; moreover, as we look ahead we know that the gift of the Spirit now is but a foretaste of all the glory that is ready to be revealed to us at the return of Christ.