

Overcoming Internal Barriers: The “Conversion” of Ananias and Peter in Acts 9-10

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Abstract: While the external barriers such as language, culture and worldview are often recognized by the church in its mission, the invisible, but very real internal barriers which exist in the hearts of the members, are often overlooked. The story in Acts 10 which has often been called "The conversion of Cornelius" could just as well be known as "The conversion of Peter." The paper will use this pericope and the parallel narrative of Saul and Ananias in Acts 9 in order to uncover these hidden internal barriers and make recommendations for the present witness of the church.

Introduction of Acts 1:8

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

While some commentators have seen this verse primarily as forecasting the geographical¹ expansion of the church which will occur in Acts, others have attempted to show the ethnic² barriers that must be overcome in each of these important steps in the spread of the gospel message in the first century. While the very general headings of “geographical” and “ethnic” are perhaps sufficient to cover the external and internal barriers encountered by the Church as it expanded its mission, they are by no means entirely descriptive of the challenges awaiting the disciples. Paul’s own extensive catalogue of distress in overcoming the various barriers in his cross-country and cultural ministry are listed in 2Cor 11:24:

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night

¹ In his commentary on *Acts*, Joseph Fitzmyer gives a succinct summary of the options scholars have argued here ranging from the land of Palestine, Ethiopia, Spain and Rome. He maintains that Rome is the “preferable interpretation” because the book of Acts ends with Paul’s testimony in the Roman capital. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 31 (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1998), 206-207. For a more detailed overview of the various geographical arguments set forth by scholars see Thomas S. Moore, “To the End of the Earth”: The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism in Acts 1:8 in light of Isaianic Influences on Luke,” *JETS* 40 3 (1997): 389-391.

² Moore, “To the Ends of the Earth,” 391-399. In the rest of his article, Moore gives a good overview of scholarly work based on Luke’s interest in and use of Isaiah, the LXX background of various key phrases for the loci of the commissioning in the gospels, and the position Acts 1:8 has in the overall narrative of Luke-Acts. He maintains that because of the Isaianic influence regarding the salvation of the nations along with the specific reference “to all nations” in Luke 24:47, “to the ends of the earth” carries both a geographical (the expansion from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond) and ethnic significance (the expansion from the Jews to the Gentiles).

and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.

In its fuller sense then, Acts 1:8 should not only be seen as merely the future itinerary of the infant church (much like we receive from a travel agent today), but encapsulates the enormity of the challenges which awaited the parochial band of followers, who were still focused on the restoration of their own people (Acts 1:7). It is no wonder that the Risen Lord solidly linked the promise of the power of the Holy Spirit with the expansion of their witness in Acts 1:8. The young church would need all the help it could get in order to overcome the barriers it would soon face in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth.

Witnessing in Jerusalem and all Judea

It might be said that one of the main purposes of the gift of the Spirit in the book of Acts was to both lead and empower the believers in the overcoming of barriers. The first outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2 clearly signaled the Risen Lord's intent to overcome both the external and internal barriers which separated the Diaspora Jews from their Judean brethren (through the gift of tongues, Acts 2:4, 8) and the promised Messiah (by the gift of repentance, Acts 2:38).³

According to Fitzmyer, "this miracle conveys the idea that the gift of the Spirit transcends all bounds: the Christian message is to be borne to people of all languages and cultures."⁴ Echoing that thought is the Pentecostal scholar Craig S. Keener, "The focus of Luke's prophetic pneumatology in Acts is how this mission comes about, the Spirit repeatedly leading God's agents across cultural, ethnic and geographical barriers to bring the gospel to everyone."⁵

The Spirit was also present in the growing gospel work in Judea when the very real sociological and cultural challenge of the daily distribution of food to the Hebrew and Greek widows arose (Acts 6:1-6). Many primarily Greek speaking Jews had come to settle in Jerusalem from the time of the Maccabees and were held in suspicion by their Hebraic Jews

³ The theme of repentance is an early and ongoing theme of Luke-Acts and incorporates the need for both the Jews (Luke 3:3,8; 5:32, Acts 5:31; 13:24; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20) and the Gentiles to receive this reconciliation through the proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Spirit (24:47; 11:18; 20:21; 26:20).

⁴ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 240.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, "Why Does Luke Use Tongues as a Sign of the Spirit's Empowerment," *JPT* 15 2007: 180. While I am not in agreement over his treatment of tongues in the rest of the article, Pentecostal scholars have been in the forefront of emphasizing the importance of Spirit as an aid to mission and service. See especially the influential book by Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 1984).

because it was felt they were “diluting the Hebrew core belief system.”⁶

Despite the language and cultural barriers that had been erected between these two groups, the complaints of the Grecian Jews regarding the feeding of their widows was not overlooked by their Hebraic counterparts which no doubt held the majority in both numbers and authority. The appointment of both Stephen and Philip as culturally sensitive deacons not only solved the immediate problem but would also result in both theological and cultural barriers being broken in Acts 7 and 8.

Stephen expanded his influence by preaching in the Hellenized “synagogue of the Freedmen” in Jerusalem where, “Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia” were gathered (Acts 6:9). He is brought before the Sanhedrin by his own Hellenized brethren who falsely testify that “this fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us” (Acts 6:13-14).

Stephen’s long apologetic regarding the covenant relationship of God with His people is blended with an overview of both the Patriarchs and the history of the sanctuary under Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon. In the story of Abraham, the “God of glory” (Acts 7:2), calls him to come out of Mesopotamia so that his yet unborn descendents might worship “in this place” (Acts 7:7). “So Abraham becomes a wanderer, and the reader learns that the worship of God is not tied to any individual place.”⁷

Acts 7:9 tells us that although the patriarchs sold Joseph into Egypt, “God was with him” thus continuing the thought that even outside the promised land the Lord can act on behalf of His people. Stephen also brings up the prophecy God had given to Abraham that his descendents would one day be “resident aliens” (*paroikos*),⁸ enslaved, mistreated, but not forgotten. Moses in the land of Median is also called a “resident alien” (7:29) and it was in this Gentile land where Moses met God at the burning bush (Acts 7:33).

When the people and tabernacle finally find rest in the land of promise, David desires to build a “dwelling place” for the God of Jacob (Acts 7:46). God’s response to David reverses the king’s desire in two key aspects. First of all it would be Solomon (not David) who would build

⁶ Paul Hertig, “Dynamics in Hellenism and the Immigrant Congregation,” in *Mission in Acts*, (eds., Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 62, 66.

⁷ Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 366. This profound theological insight which contrasts the continual wandering of Abraham with the stability of God’s presence and promise is not only at the beginning of Stephen’s discourse but perhaps serves as one of its key themes.

⁸ Hertig, “Dynamics,” 81.

the temple (Acts 7:47) and more importantly, the Most High dwells in heaven (not in houses made with human hands, cf. Isa. 66:1).

The rejection of both Joseph by his brothers and Moses by the Israelites is now repeated by the rejection of the Righteous One. Stephen's vision of the open heaven and the eschatological figure of the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God is the climax of his argument and his life.

Stephen's discourse is an obvious turning point in the life of the young church as it provided both the historical and theological axis for the expansion of the gospel to the Samaritans and the uttermost parts of the earth as envisioned by Jesus in Acts 1:8. Historically it provides a climax to God's special covenant relationship with His people as prophesied by Daniel 9:24. Theologically it shifts the focus away from the localized earthly tabernacle which was situated in Jerusalem to the sanctuary in heaven which carries with it a universal perspective. Just as God was with the Patriarchs outside of the land of Promise, so the Risen Lord would be with His people outside of the land of Judea as the Spirit would lead them to the ends of the earth.⁹

Witnessing in Samaria

As a result of the persecution, Luke presents the going forth of Philip and Saul as two contrasting forces in the life of the early church. Philip, who himself was a Hellenized Jew, seemed to be at home among the ethnically mixed people of Samaria who had resided in the middle part of Palestine for over seven hundred years.

While it might be said that the Grecian widows felt "neglected" in contrast to their Hebraic counterparts, the Samaritans had been singularly "rejected" by the Jews. "Since they were of mixed ethnic origin, Luke portrays the Samaritans as people midway between Jews and Gentiles. This midway point is no mere transition but a giant leap."¹⁰ The Jews not only considered them half-breeds "unholy stepchildren of Abraham"¹¹ and thus ethnically impure, but morally condemned because of their false worship and exclusive acceptance of the Pentateuch as their

⁹ This dramatic shift had already been alluded to in John 4:21 when Jesus stated to the Samaritan woman that "a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem." The martyrdom of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the church brings about the timeframe Jesus was alluding to as the disciples are scattered from Jerusalem to Samaria and the regions beyond.

¹⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹¹ Keith H. Reeves, "The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission," in *Mission in Acts*, (eds., Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 120.

sacred Scripture.¹²

Philip's ministry for the Samaritans to the north of Jerusalem compares and contrasts with his one-on-one ministry for the Ethiopian Eunuch to the south. These two episodes, which occur in opposite geographical poles, not only point to the territorial expansion of the gospel, but perhaps more importantly, to the incorporation of peoples who were not pure ethnic Jews.

It might be noted that Philip's cultural background might have precluded him from ministering to eunuchs. Josephus might have reflected the attitude of Greek-speaking Jews towards eunuchs of the first century when he wrote: "Shun eunuchs and flee all dealings with those who have deprived themselves of their virility and of those fruits of generations, which God has given to men for the increase of our race; expel them even as infanticides who withal have destroyed means of procreation. (Ant. 4.290-91)"¹³ Eunuchs were looked upon as neither male or female who had changed their bodies to reflect the effeminacy of their souls. They were considered to be like amphibians, living in two worlds but not belonging to neither and thus unclean and not allowed to enter the Temple (Lev 11, Deut 23:1).¹⁴

While nothing is said regarding the attitude of Philip towards either the Samaritans or the eunuch, we are told how they both responded to his ministry.¹⁵ After centuries of prejudice, the whole Samaritan city felt "great joy" (Acts 8:8) at the proclamation of Christ and the healing ministry of Philip (Acts 8:5-7). And the eunuch, who had no doubt been treated as an outsider,¹⁶ "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39) in his new found faith in the Messiah and acceptance into the New Testament covenant community.

Acts tells us that Philip then settles in Caesarea and apparently stays there for many years (Acts 21:8). It probably would have been an easy task for Philip to be now directed to the household of the devout Cornelius to also preach the saving grace of salvation. However,

¹² Now reaping the earlier work of Jesus, Philip re-enters the Samaritan field in the power of the Spirit and begins to break down the walls of both sociological and theological estrangement. It is here that we meet Simon the Sorcerer, the first of a number of culturally distant people that the apostles would face in their journeys around the Mediterranean.

¹³ Mikeal C. Parsons, "Isaiah 53 in Acts 8" *A Reply to Professor Morna Hooker*, in *Jesus and the Suffering Servant*, (eds. William H. Bellinger Jr. and William R. Farmer, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1998), 109.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁵ Perhaps we can conjecture at this point that Philip's own experience of feeling the prejudice of the Hebraic Jews, the wise judgment of the apostles which "pleased the whole group" (Acts 6:5), the subsequent persecution and blessing of the Spirit upon his ministry to the Samaritans did a great deal in maturing his attitude towards others who shared a similar fate to his.

¹⁶ For a good discussion of the ethnicity of the Ethiopian Eunuch see Keith Reeves, "The Ethiopian Eunuch," 114-122 and Fitzmyer, *Acts*, 411-413.

from the subsequent narratives it is obvious that the Lord not only desired the conversion of Cornelius but also the convincing of the brethren by none other than Peter whom Paul called, “the Apostle to the Jews” (Gal 2:8).

Peter and John enter the Samaritan field not as evangelists but as auditors, sent by the brethren to observe the pioneering work of Philip (Acts 8:14). When the apostles arrive they set their seal on the pioneering work of Philip by praying and placing their hands upon the Samaritans so that they would receive the Spirit (Acts 8:15, 17). According to Hertig: “The outpouring of the Spirit ensured continuity with Pentecost and authenticated the work of God in Samaria. . . . Clearly, Peter and John needed this experience as much as the Samaritans, since they had to overcome their own prejudices by witnessing the Spirit’s work beyond regional boundaries (cf. Lk 9:52-54; Gal 2:11-14).”¹⁷

Peter’s ministry among the Samaritans in some ways compares and contrast with his first miracle of healing at the Temple Gate. In contrast to Peter who has no silver or gold to give to the crippled man (Acts 3:3-6), is Simon the Sorcerer who tries to buy the gift of the Spirit (Acts 8:18-24). In addition, Peter repeats his earlier ministry at the Gate Beautiful by healing another paralytic man in Lydda which results in a great turning to the Lord in that region (Acts 9:32-35). This positive reception by the Samaritans was in direct contrast to the negative reaction by the Temple authorities and short imprisonment in Jerusalem (Acts 4:1-20; 5:17-20).

The Parallel Narratives of Acts 9 and 10

The ground breaking cross-cultural mission of Philip in Samaria and the follow-up ministry by Peter is dramatically interrupted by Luke with the vision and subsequent conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus in (Acts 9:1-30). The conversion of Saul not only lays the groundwork for the ever-widening ministry to the Gentiles in the book of Acts, but also provides a narrative with very important parallels in the conversion of Cornelius and his household.

In fact, it could well be that Luke not only meant that the dual visions and stories of the conversion of Paul and Cornelius are parallel but also the visions to Ananias and Peter also appear in both of these narratives. These parallel narratives and visions bring to view the central thesis of this study which is the following. The significant external barriers which exist in people to the reception of the gospel such as language, culture and worldview are often dwarfed by the

¹⁷ Hertig, “Dynamics,” 110-111.

internal barriers of ignorance and unbelief which exist in the church.¹⁸ A table will help summarize the two narratives found in Acts 9 and 10 which will then be explained in detail in order to illustrate the thesis.

TABLE 1
THE DUAL VISIONS OF ACTS 9 AND 10¹⁹

	Acts 9	Acts 10
Initial Vision	Saul—Jewish Pharisee	Cornelius—Roman God fearer
Question	Who are you Lord?	What is it Lord?
Judgment	Persecuting	Generous
Lord's Command	Go to the city—Told what to do	Send for Peter—House by the sea
Secondary Vision	Ananias—Church leader	Peter—Church leader
Reaction	Wondering—About Saul	Wondering—about the vision
Lord's Command	Go to Saul	Go to Cornelius
Ministry	Sermon Holy Spirit—Healing, Baptism	Sermon Holy Spirit—Tongues, Baptism
Purpose	Ananias was sent to Saul in order to commission him to: “Carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).	Peter was sent to Cornelius' house in order to teach: “God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

The Initial Visions of Saul and Cornelius

In the two narratives of Acts 9:1-30 and Acts 10:1-48 there is an initial vision given to Saul and Cornelius whom the Lord desires to convert and a secondary vision given to Ananias and Peter who are the instruments through which God will speak His message. These two pericopes not only lie close to one another in the narrative of Acts but have many similarities and

¹⁸ The seed of thought for this article was generated years ago during a class lecture of my major professor Chuck Van Engen who emphasized the conversion of Peter along with that of Cornelius. For his article on the subject see, Charles E. Van Engen, “A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission,” in *Mission in Acts*, (eds., Robert L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 133-143.

¹⁹ An earlier form and discussion of this table appeared in my unpublished Master's Thesis, *Lord or LA: A Framework for Urban Church Planning*, Fuller Theological Library, Pasadena, CA 1996. Also the use of parallelism in Luke-Acts in order to underline Luke's theological understanding is documented in my unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, *The Incorporation and Release of Disciples for Mission in Contemporary North America*, (Fuller Theological Library, Pasadena, CA, 2001).

contrasts with one another.

As noted in the above table, the initial vision is given to a Jewish Pharisee and a Roman God-fearer. Saul, “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (Phil 3:5), incensed by the teachings of Stephen and the activities of the young church, breathed “out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples” (Acts 9:1). His reputation for maliciousness against the church was widely known and feared even outside the province of Judea (Acts 9:13-14).

On the other hand, the devout Cornelius had a sterling reputation among the Jews which is attested by the introduction of the vision (Acts 10:2), the angel (Acts 10:4), and the men who are commissioned to bring Peter back to the household (Acts 10:22). Acts 10:2 tells us that “He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly.” The angel relates that his prayers and gifts for the poor have been remembered by God and His servants call him a “righteous and God-fearing man who is respected by all the Jewish people” (Acts 10:22).²⁰

The visions given to the two men also compare and contrast well. Both visions happen unexpectedly during the day. Whereas Saul suddenly sees a flash of light from heaven (Acts 9:3), Cornelius “distinctly” sees an angel from God (Acts 10:3). The salutation given to each man are distinct. Whereas Cornelius is greeted by his name (Acts 10:3), the stricken Pharisee is asked the penetrating question, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me” (Acts 9:4).

Both men respond by nearly the same phrase “Who are you Lord?” (τίς εἶ, κύριε;, Acts 9:5) and “What is it, Lord?” (τί ἐστίν, κύριε;, Acts 10:4).²¹ Jesus responds to Saul’s question by revealing that the zealous Pharisee has been persecuting Him in the person of the saints. In contrast to Saul’s misdeeds, the angel commends Cornelius for his prayers and gifts to the poor.

The final act in these initial visions is the commands given by Jesus to go into the city and the angel to send men to Joppa to get Peter.²² While it is true that one is sent while the other sends, in both cases, the next step in the drama is to be born by earthen and not heavenly vessels.

²⁰ There is a good section on just who the God fearers were in, Chris A. Miller, “Did Peter’s vision in Acts 10 pertain to men or the menu?” *Bsac* 159 2002): 304-306.

²¹ In this first of three conversion narratives in Acts, these are the only three words Saul speaks. For a socio-rhetorical analysis of the three conversion stories see, Czachesz, István, “Socio-Rhetorical Exegesis of Acts 9:1-30.” *Communio viatorum* 37 (1995): 5-32. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 18, 2008). For a study on the function of redundancy in the three conversion stories see, Witherup, Ronald D, “Functional Redundancy in the Acts of the Apostles : A Case Study.” *JSNT* 48 (1992): 67-86. For an older but very good analysis of the three conversion stories see, Hedrick, Charles W., “Paul’s conversion/call : a comparative analysis of the three reports in Acts.” *JBL* 100 (1981): 415-432.

²² What a reversal of fortunes for Saul who was bent on taking prisoners back to Jerusalem is now imprisoned is led into the city (Acts 9:2, 8).

What is important to underline for the current discussion is the willingness of both Saul and Cornelius in their response to the heavenly encounter. Neither of the men exhibit any hesitancy or reluctance to obey the heavenly vision. This is in contrast to the difficulty the Lord would have in convincing Ananias and Peter to overcome their fears and prejudices which are clearly shown in the secondary visions of Acts 9-10.

The Secondary Visions of Ananias and Peter

The secondary visions involve the unknown “disciple” Ananias from Damascus (Acts 9:10) and the very well known Apostle Peter. Paul himself gives us the clearest account of just who Ananias was in the second account of his conversion story before the angry crowd in Jerusalem. Paul tells us that, “He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (Acts 22:12). It would not be hard to say that Ananias himself would have been a target for the wrath of Saul to bring him back as a prisoner to Jerusalem (Acts 9:1-2).

In contrast to the relative anonymity of Ananias of Damascus is the Apostle Peter who is already well known. The name Peter appears 24 times in Matthew, 20 times in Mark and 33 times in the gospel of John. The Apostle is mentioned 19 times in Luke but 71 times in Acts which clearly shows his leading role in the narrative of the early church until the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. After the Council Peter’s name is not mentioned again in the Lucan account.

When the “angel of the Lord” first appears to Ananias and calls out his name, the disciple responds by saying, “Yes, Here I am Lord” (ἰδοὺ ἐγώ, κύριε, Acts 9:10). The angel follows up the willing response of Ananias by instructing him to, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight” (Acts 9:10-11).

The fact that it was the Lord speaking to him, that it was revealed that Saul was now praying to God instead of arresting the disciples and that Ananias himself would go and perform a miracle should have been enough to calm the his fears. Despite these assurances, Ananias “balks”²³ and answers the Lord by saying, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name” (Acts 9:13-14). The Lord does not attempt to argue with Ananias but in more forceful language tells him to “Go” for Saul would become His instrument. Instead of bringing suffering on all those who called on His name in Damascus, Paul

²³ Charles W. Hedrick, “Paul’s conversion/call : a comparative analysis of the three reports in Acts.” *JBL* 100 (1981): 420.

himself would suffer as he carried the name “before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

The initial reluctance of Ananias to obey the Lord’s command to visit Saul is amplified further in the well known story of Peter and the vision of the unclean animals in Acts 10:9-16. It is apparent that the Lord had to carefully arrange the timing of the vision with the arrival of the envoys from Cornelius (Acts 10:17) and the Spirit’s insistence that he go meet with them (Acts 10:18-19) in order to convince Peter that he needed to comply with the request.²⁴ Although Peter testifies before Cornelius that “when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection” (Acts 10:29), it is clear that the Apostle to the Jews was clearly out of his contextual comfort zone.²⁵

The two distinct commissions given by Jesus to the disciples in Matt 10:6 to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel and Matt 28:19 to go to the nations are particularly instructive of the Greek word “πορεύου” which is the root of the word “go” used in the Lucan passages and elsewhere. While Ananias is instructed to “go” to the lost sheep of Israel represented by Saul, Peter is commissioned to “go” make disciples of the nations represented by Cornelius.²⁶

Although the basic outline of proclamation, being filled with the Spirit, miracle and baptism are followed in the dual narratives, they contrast in both scope and detail. Whereas Ananias’ ministry towards Saul is conveyed in just two verses (Acts 9:17-18), Peter’s visit to Cornelius is twenty-five verses long (Acts 10:24-48). When Ananias finds Saul he greets him and relates how the Lord has sent him to heal his eyes and be filled with the Spirit. Immediately Saul’s eyesight is restored and he is baptized.

This same basic pattern is followed in a much more expanded way in Acts 10:24-48. After instructing Cornelius not to worship him, they go into the house where a large number of relatives and close friends have been called together. Peter reminds them that although it is not lawful for Jews “associate with a Gentile or visit him” he is there because God has shown him

²⁴ It is of interest to note that the Spirit tells Peter that He, (not Cornelius) has sent the three men (Acts 10:20). In addition, the city of Caesarea because of its Roman influence and presence was held in ill repute by the Jews of Judea. “Many Jews refused to acknowledge Caesarea as a part of Judea” where the Jews were a minority. Scott, J Julius Scott Jr., “The Cornelius incident in the light of its Jewish setting,” *JETS* 34 (1991): 478.

²⁵ Ellen White tells us that when the Spirit asked Peter to go downstairs and meet the envoys it “was a trying command, and it was with reluctance at every step that he undertook the duty laid upon him; but he dared not disobey.” Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1911), 137.

²⁶ H. Seebass, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, Vol. 2, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 1979). This verb is mentioned about 150 times in the New Testament.

that he should not call any man unclean. (Acts 10:28).²⁷

After Cornelius relates his vision about the sending for Peter, the apostle begins by telling about his own realization that “that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right (Acts 10:34-35). He further explains that through the people of Israel, God sent the message of peace through Jesus Christ “who is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).²⁸ In marked contrast to the deliberate laying on of hands and the filling of the Spirit in the previous chapter, the Spirit comes spontaneously upon all who heard the message while Peter was still speaking (Acts 10:44). Having received the witness and affirmation of the Spirit, Cornelius and his household are baptized and incorporated into the church.

The word of the apostle’s visit to the Gentile home spread and he was criticized by the “circumcised believers” in Jerusalem who charged Peter that he had gone “into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:2-3). Miller has an excellent section in his article on Acts 10 relating to houses and crossing thresholds. He clearly shows that the barriers presented to Peter not only pertained to food and people but both the entering of the envoys of Cornelius into the home of Simon the Tanner and Peter’s crossing the threshold of Cornelius’ house. He comments, “It might be further noted that Luke's literary use of houses and crossing thresholds emphasizes the mixing and acceptance of people who were previously unaccepted.”²⁹

In the defense of his actions before the brethren, Peter testifies that “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning” (Acts 11:15). Thus Peter links the falling of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost upon a group of Jewish believers with this filling of the Spirit on this Second Pentecost upon a group of Gentile believers.³⁰ In fact it could

²⁷ Scott, “Cornelius,” 483. “The verb *katalambanomai* is in the present tense, middle voice, showing action in progress for the benefit of the speaker. A better rendering would be: “I am just now coming to perceive for myself that God is not partial.” At that very moment Peter was in the process of coming to a personal realization of this truth about God.”

²⁸ There is an excellent discussion of the word *kurios* in Luke-Acts in conjunction with imperial cult worship. Rowe, C. Kavin Rowe, “Luke-Acts and the imperial cult: a way through the conundrum?” *JETS* 27 (2005): 294-297. This important term is mentioned about 200 times, about 100 times in each book.

²⁹ Miller, “Peter’s Vision,” 313.

³⁰ This extensive quotation shows how the Spirit was providentially leading Peter and unfolding to him the mystery of His grace towards the Gentiles. “While Peter wondered about the meaning of the vision, *men* appeared at the gate (10:17). While Peter was reflecting on the meaning of the vision, the *Spirit* said to him that three divinely sent *men* were looking for him (v. 19). When Peter entered the house, he uttered his first and only verbal interpretation of the vision in the words, “*God* has shown me that I should not call any man unholy or unclean” (v. 28). Of course the most significant miracle was the work of the Holy Spirit in this “Gentile Pentecost.” In the final stages of Peter’s defense before the Jerusalem group the references to divine initiative more frequently populate his speech. The *Spirit* told him to go “without misgivings” (*μηδέν διακρίναντα*, 11:12), an *angel of God* was already in the house (v. 13), the *Holy Spirit* fell on them (v. 15), Peter “remembered the word of the *Lord*” (v. 16), “*God* therefore gave to them the same *gift*,” and “who was I that I could stand in *God’s* way?” (v. 17). In short, Luke skillfully used the unfolding

be said that the falling of the Spirit on the Gentile house of Cornelius is an echo of the falling of the Spirit in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost.

Finally as noted by the table, the purpose of the twin visions is quite instructive. Although Ananias does not commission Paul directly, he is told that, “This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (Acts 9:15-16). Here the Lord directly answers Ananias’ accusation about “this man” (Acts 9:13) by telling him that instead of carrying the arrested saints back to Jerusalem, “this man” (Acts 9:15) will carry His name³¹ to the Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel. The original order given in Acts 1:8, from Jew to Gentile is now reversed and strongly points to the future mission of the church and the defining role Paul would play and the suffering he would face.³²

In contrast to Paul, Cornelius is not heard from again, except through the decisive testimony of Peter in Acts 11 and 15. In fact it could be said, that both conversion stories serve but one purpose. They provided both the political influence (through Peter’s involvement) and the theological praxis (through Paul’s apostleship) in following the providential opening of the gospel to the Gentiles.³³

Missiological Reflections on Overcoming Internal Barriers

In the last few pages we have briefly studied the preliminary mission of the early Church in Acts, the initial visions given to Saul and Cornelius with the secondary visions given to Ananias and Peter. Could it be that these two narratives stand side by side as two witnesses whose voices echo down to our own challenge of entering into cross-cultural mission?

While there is no doubt that the Seventh-day Adventist Church’s historical roots and being was grounded in the worldwide mission brought to view in the three angel’s messages of

mystery of the story to draw the reader along to his conclusion: God had given a riddle, which He alone answered. God is the author of the mystery and the revealer of the mystery, Miller, “Peter’s Vision,” 315-316.

³¹ István Czachesz, “Socio-Rhetorical Exegesis of Acts 9:1-30,” *Communio viatorum* 37 (1995): 18. The word “name” appears nine times in the pericope of Saul’s conversion.

³² Witherup, “Redundancy,” 81.

³³ “Chapter 10 occupies a place of central narrative and theological importance in Acts. Narratively, Saul has just transformed from persecutor to God’s σκευος ἐκλογῆς to the Gentiles (9.15). The story then moves immediately to justify theologically Paul’s mission through Peter’s experience with Cornelius. This narrative-theological justification continues through Acts 11.18, at which time the story returns to Saul to include his ministry (ἡ διακονία, 12.25) in Antioch (11.25-26,30; 12.25). The events in ch. 10 are the pivot upon which the mission to the Gentiles turns.” Rowe, “Imperial Cult,” 289.

Rev. 14:6-12, there are challenges left for the church.³⁴ Some of these issues are set forth in a recent book edited by Bruce Bauer entitled *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, Volumes I and II published in 2007.³⁵

These two volumes are a collection of presentations, recommendations and approval statements given from 1998-2001 and 2002-2005. They cover a wide variety of issues which affect the mission of the church ranging from biblical authority, church structure, the boundaries of contextualization, syncretism, the relation of the 27 fundamental beliefs of Adventism to several world religions and evangelizing resistant peoples with deeply held polygamy.

While the external barriers of presenting the gospel in an increasingly pluralistic world are regularly discussed, the internal barriers which hamper the church in its mission are only mentioned from time to time. In the first volume the church is cautioned not to be condescending,³⁶ and is reported as not showing much interest in receiving sensitivity training in order to dialogue with Islam.³⁷

In volume two the SDA church is encouraged to be more loving to other people given the “examples of tragic discord, strife, bias and violence” that have at times engulfed the church.³⁸ There is also a section on the influence of myths that exist such as it is the pastor’s job to witness, the effects of post-modernism, materialism and other factors which dampen the spiritual and witnessing life of the members.³⁹

These two volumes perhaps demonstrate that it is at times easier for the church to discuss the external barriers that lie in its pathway rather than the internal barriers which lie in its heart. When dealing with external barriers the discussion is often intellectual and theoretical. However, when the internal barriers are brought to view, our own sinful hearts are revealed which show our own shortcomings.

When Peter first greeted Cornelius he reminded all present that it was not lawful for Jews

³⁴ This is the basic thesis of this published dissertation. Gerhard Dansteegt, *Foundations of Seventh-day Adventist Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977).

³⁵ Bruce L. Bauer, ed., *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, Vol. I and 2, ed. Bruce L. Bauer (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Department of World Missions, Andrews University, 2007).

³⁶ William Richardson, *Mission Outreach and Biblical Authority*, Vol. I, in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bauer Bruce L., 13.

³⁷ Jerald Whitehouse, *Developing New Church Structures for More Effective Mission, Nurture, and Growth of New Believers*, Vol. I, in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bauer Bruce L., 47.

³⁸ *Love and Unity*, Vol. II, in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bauer Bruce L., 93.

³⁹ Bruce L. Bauer, *Decentralization to Facilitate Mission*, Vol. II, in *Adventist Responses to Cross-Cultural Mission*, ed. Bauer Bruce L., 162-167.

to “associate” with a Gentile (Acts 10:28). The root Greek word for associate is “κολλᾶω” which has a very descriptive and intimate meaning in the New Testament. In Matthew 19:5 Jesus taught his disciples that in marriage a man leaves his father and mother in order to “unite” with his wife. The Lord counsels his followers in Luke 10:11 to not let the dust of the town “stick” to their feet. While Philip is encouraged by the Spirit in Acts 8:29 to go to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch and “stay near” it, Paul finds it difficult to “join” with the disciples in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26).

In classical Greek, the word is a cognate of the noun κολλᾶ, which is the literal word for glue.⁴⁰ Thus what is brought to view here by Peter’s use of this word is not just a casual Bible study given to a foreigner but an intimidation that the Lord desires a much closer union than the Jews could ever imagine with the Gentile world. The vision of Peter which commanded him to eat the animals (as opposed to merely talking to or taking care of them) already showed the intimate relation the Lord desired to exist between the culturally diverse people of the world. It is no wonder that Peter dragged his feet to the house of Cornelius. The Lord was calling him to go far beyond a courtesy call to have an intimate, strong and long lasting relationship with somebody he did not know or cared little about.

The Lord in His mercy gradually and providentially helped the church overcome the ethnic, cultural and geographical barriers it faced in fulfilling the commission of Acts 1:8. From the apostles who were Jews living in Judea, the Lord opens up the way for the Hellenized Jew to serve the church in Jerusalem. He is then sent both to the Samaritans (who are part ethnic Jews living close to Judea) and the Ethiopian Eunuch (who is part ethnic Jew but living far from Jerusalem). The gospel then is sent to Cornelius who is an ethnic Gentile with Jewish cultural traits living close to Judea. Finally, the Romans are Gentiles in both ethnicity and culture who live far from Judea. Thus we see that when the Lord desires His church to go forward in its mission, He takes regard for human weakness and seeks to ally their prejudices step by step.⁴¹

As was alluded to at the beginning of this article, the internal and external barriers which were to be overcome in the first century (and by extension throughout the Christian era to our own day), involved suffering. This theme of suffering brackets the barriers mentioned in Acts 1:8

⁴⁰ Seebass, *NIDT, Vol II*, 348.

⁴¹ Ellen White comments that the walls between people that existed in the early church is still active today. “The same agencies that barred men away from Christ eighteen hundred years ago are at work today. The spirit which built up the partition wall between Jew and Gentile is still active. Pride and prejudice have built strong walls of separation between different classes of men. Christ and His mission have been misrepresented, and multitudes feel that they are virtually shut away from the ministry of the gospel. But let them not feel that they are shut away from Christ. There are no barriers which man or Satan can erect but that faith can penetrate.” Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1898), 402.

through the twin pericopes of the walk to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-27) and Philip's meeting with the eunuch in Acts 8:26-35). Parsons argues that these two texts are linked by the "intertextual echo" of the phrase "beginning from" (ἀρξάμενος ἀπὸ) mentioned in both Acts 8:35 and Luke 24:27.⁴² In the words of Jesus, the Christ would "have to suffer" in order that the Scriptures would be fulfilled (Luke 24:26-27) in order that "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

The story of Philip and the Eunuch illustrates the link between the sufferings of Jesus with the spread of the gospel to the nations. According to Philip, the key to the understanding of the Messiah's mission lie in the revelation that the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 (cf Acts 8:32-33) referred to none other than "the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35).

This theme of suffering as a key component in the ministry of Jesus as brought out in the fulfillment of the Scriptures is also tied strongly to the conversion and call of Paul to be a missionary to the "Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:14). Christ tells Ananias that, "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name" (Acts 9:15).⁴³ It seems clear that mission involves the overcoming of a variety of challenging external and interior barriers which often cause the agent of mission to suffer as His Lord did.⁴⁴

I have discovered in my own pastoral call which continues to this day that an ongoing and growing ministry for people not only demands an informed intellect to wisely deal with the challenges of life but a renewed heart, both within the one being ministered to and myself. Overcoming the internal barriers in others demands that my own internal barriers also be dealt with by the same Spirit that worked within the hearts of Ananias and Peter. May the Lord grant each of us the grace, the courage and the wisdom to respond to His call for a deeper personal conversion that we may then be fitted to go forth and make disciples of all the nations until He comes.

⁴² Parsons, *Suffering Servant*, 116.

⁴³ In his conclusion, Scott J. Hafemann states that "Paul is weak and suffers as an embodiment of the cross of Christ, but he is also a pneumatic through whom the power and Spirit of God are being manifested and poured out." Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit, Paul's Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 227.

⁴⁴ I hope to pursue this theme as outlined in Luke-Acts and the ministry of Paul in a subsequent article.