

THE APOSTLE PETER and CHARISMATIC EVIDENCES IN ACTS 9 and 10

'Expect a miracle today!' 'The early church was full of miracles!' Millions of books and billions of dollars have gone towards promoting, discussing and refuting the modern Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (which I combine more conveniently under the title 'Pentematic Movement') since this movement had its beginnings in 1901. It has to a large extent now become domesticated and at least accepted if not entirely integrated into mainstream Western Christianity, but do its central claims have any more truth now than they had in 1901 when they were widely seen as socially scandalous and outrageous, and seen theologically as absurd and just plain wrong? Just how 'charismatic' and 'miraculous' was the early Christianity which the Pentematic Movement claims as their 'Blueprint'?

Acts 9 and 10 give us a rather unique largely self-contained laboratory which will allow us to examine the evidence in a real-life situation, as the historian Luke, with his usual care and intelligence, takes us through one of the Apostle Peter's most astonishing adventures. Luke of course does not set out to answer our particular question but as he tells his story we can collect the little hints and bits of evidence he leaves lying around and see how they fit together. We will be Bible detectives, and that, believe it or not, can also be a very exciting adventure!

We pick up the story of the spread of the message of Jesus Christ at Acts 9:31. The savage persecutor Saul of Tarsus has been converted (we would dearly love to know the year this happened) and has visited Jerusalem where Barnabas has introduced him to the Apostles. Whilst among them in Jerusalem Saul has been speaking and arguing with some Greeks, who presumably were overseas-born, Greek-speaking Jewish members of a synagogue, just like Saul himself. The 'other brothers' got rid of Saul as soon as possible, sending him home to Tarsus. Luke's next note is that the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria had a period of peace but again he does not give any indication of date. Many scholars however think that this peace in the whole country coincides with the death of the emperor Caligula (AD 41) who had been stirring up intense Jewish opposition, and this was at least 8 years after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The importance of this number 8 will soon become clear.

Peter takes advantage of this period of peace and exerts himself throughout this scattered church (9:32), and his pastoral activity proves him to be a worthy shepherd in spite of his early problems and denial of the Lord. Peter clearly sets up a pattern of 'circuit' ministry, going out from headquarters in Jerusalem, visiting a number of towns and then returning to give a report of what the lord has been doing among His people. Luke gives us a great deal of detail, and greatly repeated detail, of the most important single one of these many journeys – the one with world-changing

outcomes. Peter's final itinerary for this journey must be noted: Jerusalem – Lydda – Joppa – Caesarea – Jerusalem. Luke will be our tour guide through each place in turn:

Episode 1 – Lydda Peter travels from Jerusalem down towards the sea coast at Joppa (modern day Jaffa) and in the small town of Lydda he meets and heals Aeneas who has been crippled for 8 years. So now the practical question arises: 'Aeneas has been crippled for 8 years and Christians have been going up and down this track to Jerusalem for at least 8 years, so if there were so many healers and so many miracles among them how is it that they have neglected this man?' Luke says that all the residents of Lydda and the surrounding area of Sharon saw what was done for Aeneas and turned to the Lord. It is obvious that this healing was something new and impressive, not something old which these people were well used to, and Peter must have remained there preaching and teaching for a while at least. While he does so the story itself moves down to the larger town of Joppa.

Episode 2 – Joppa In Joppa there was a *woman disciple* – this is the only time this word is used in the whole of the original Greek of the NT – whose name was Tabitha or Dorcas or Gazelle, a woman full of good works and acts of mercy. Sadly, she died, as we all must. The Christians there loved her and would not give her up, would not let her go. But what could they do? Could anyone do anything in the face of death? Well, they had heard about Peter and Aeneas and knew that Peter was staying just up the road at Lydda, so they sent for him. Why? Surely they had healers and miracle workers of their own – let these be called first – there is no need to call in an outside expert even if it is Peter. But no – the fact that they go to the trouble of sending two men off to beg Peter to come down immediately and help them is a very strong suggestion that they knew in advance that they did not have anyone else to call on – there was no one locally who could do the job, whatever they imagined that job to be.

Acts 9:37 says Dorcas got sick. Surely this was the time to call the local Christian healers or miracle workers, but all we know is that she got worse and died and then only Peter the Apostle, with the proven track record, could do anything at all. The rest could only weep. This impression is strengthened by the outcome of the matter, because Luke tells us that the story of the raising of Dorcas went through the whole town and many people came to believe in the Lord, just as they had done just up the track in Lydda. All this evidence from Luke, indirect though it is, strongly suggests that such miracles were not common in Joppa even though there was a sizeable Christian presence there which supported a number of widows.

Episode 3 – Caesarea Next we are taken northward along the coast to Caesarea. Herod the Great, who had been ruling this country when Jesus was born, built many impressive palaces and fortresses, including this artificial harbour which he named Caesarea Maritima after his patron Caesar, who was also his close 'Friend' and supporter. This port was the entry point for all the Roman troops and administrators

(and their families of course) who controlled this country for the Romans, who called the whole country 'Palestine.' Caesarea, like its name, was a thoroughly Gentile city and built by a hated half-Jewish king, and was the most important hub of a hated and oppressive occupying army of Gentiles. To the Romans and their local puppet rulers this city, not Jerusalem, was the capital city and seat of government. Any observant Jew, that is a Jew who carefully 'observed' the food laws and ritual purity laws of the Jews, as Peter certainly still did, would have to have a very good reason to enter this particular city and no reason at all to enter a Gentile house in it.

If Luke is following strict chronology here (and he does seem to group a lot of his material by theme rather than by strict chronology) it seems that no Gentile anywhere had yet heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ from the mouth of a Jewish believer – not a single one during the last 8 to 10 years! I must admit that I have never been able to comprehend this but it seems to be so. It was true that Saul of Tarsus had already been converted and had preached quite intensively in Damascus (Acts 9:27) and later in Jerusalem (Acts 9:29) but **only to Jews**. He was the Apostle to the Gentiles 'Designate' but not yet in fact. It seems that the Lord would somehow not allow Saul or anyone else to be the first to preach to Gentiles because that privilege had to fall to Peter. I suspect further that this had something to do with the famous “keys” which Peter had been promised (Matt 16:19) because Acts shows us that the only person who was present at all three of the great evangelistic events, that is when the Jews enter the Kingdom of Heaven at Pentecost (Acts 2), when the first Samaritans enter the Kingdom (Acts 8) and when the first Gentiles enter the Kingdom (Acts 10), is Peter. It is Peter alone who has this enormous privilege of unlocking the door of salvation for each of these three great divisions of the world as they appear in Luke's own programme notes set out in Acts 1:8.

'In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion ... ' says Luke, but before Peter meets up with him we need to see a bit more of how the story has got to this point. In Acts 2 to 5 the focus is on the way the gospel is presented to the huge mixed crowds of Jews in Jerusalem, but chapter 6 introduces the Hellenists or overseas-born Jews, resident in Jerusalem and now become believers in Christ. Their disputes over the support of their widows is resolved by the selection of the Seven Deacons who were led by Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, then came Philip, then five others who are named but take no further part in the history. It is Stephen and Philip who catch Luke's attention.

Stephen belonged to one of the very many synagogues in Jerusalem, where each group of foreign-born Jews would naturally tend to stay together as a sort of club with shared language and customs. Acts 6:8 says Stephen was 'full of grace and power' and he did 'great wonders and signs' among the people. The question that I wish to highlight is this: 'Seeing Stephen was not an Apostle but we see him doing great signs and wonders, does that mean that all or even many other believers were doing great signs and wonders, or just a few who were 'full of grace and power?' We

must read on to find the answer.

Stephen, like the Apostles, was a square peg in a round hole, and his promising brilliant career was cut short when he was murdered by those (including Saul of Tarsus) who 'could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke' (Acts 6:10). After Stephen's death Saul 'laid waste the church ... and committed them to prison,' and the church in Jerusalem, except for the Apostles, were scattered and went about preaching the word' (8:1-4). Among those scattered was Philip, and Luke's spotlight is turned on him next. Philip chose Samaria as a safer place to be and went and proclaimed Christ to them. The Samaritans saw Philip do what Stephen the other Deacon had done in Jerusalem – he gave them signs which included expelling unclean spirits and healing the paralysed, so that 'there was great joy in that city' (8:8).

Among the Samaritans Philip 'preached the message of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and they were baptised' (8:12). At this point Luke's story becomes even more interesting, for he says that when the Apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God (which was after all what Jesus had said to do back in 1:8) they sent to them Peter and John who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for He had not yet fallen on any of them' (8:14-16). Luke then makes his own view very clear when he says 'the Spirit was given through the laying on of the Apostles' hands' (8:18).

What we see so clearly in this episode is that Luke makes a clear distinction between Philip and Peter and John, that is between Deacon and Apostle. Philip was a great man with a great ministry full of wisdom and power, and he was a very effective preacher and a man who could perform signs and wonders, but he was not an Apostle and could not do what the Apostles could do – he could not give the Holy Spirit to someone else. Luke tells us he could not, and this distinction between Deacon and Apostle again becomes important soon after when an angel of the Lord sends Philip down the coast to Gaza, where he meets the Ethiopian in his chariot, baptises him, then proceeds up the coast preaching the gospel in all the towns until he came to Caesarea (8:40). Note what Luke has done here – he traces the movements of Philip, an impressive, accomplished, wonder-working preacher, and leaves him in the seat of Gentile power in Palestine, the city of Caesarea, so we are left to wonder why Philip was not the one to be sent to Cornelius, or to some other Gentile for that matter, since Philip had all the necessary gifts and accomplishments, except of course he was not an Apostle and could not give the Holy Spirit to someone else.

The case of Ananias and Saul, however, may at first sight contradict this view. Saul of Tarsus goes hunting believers (Saul is always his name until Acts 13:6-12 when he meets the Roman Sergius Paulus who becomes his patron and honours him with the name Paul, a 'patronym' which Luke uses every time from then on – Luke is very clever and very consistent and often very subtle in such details). Saul was hunting 'followers of The Way' and approaches Damascus which was well to the north and

outside Jewish territory, but there were Jews there, as there were throughout most of the Roman Empire. After Saul was blinded on the road he was helped into Damascus where he neither saw nor ate nor drank for three days (9:9).

Among the Jews in Damascus there was a man named Ananias, who was now chosen for a special task for which he was well qualified. Much later Paul (no longer Saul) defends himself before a hostile crowd in Jerusalem and tries to quieten them down by referring to Ananias as 'a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there' (22:12-13). His point is that if Paul had been given the OK by a man like Ananias then he should also be given the OK by the Jews in Jerusalem, so they can all relax and go home. It did not work!

In a vision Ananias was given very precise instructions by the Lord: 'Straight street – house of Judas – find Saul of Tarsus – praying – knows you are coming – lay on hands – restore sight.' Sounds just like a James Bond story. Ananias hesitates – he knows this man is dangerous but the Lord says 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine ...' So Ananias went, entered, and laid his hands on saying: "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you ... has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose up and was baptised and ate and was strengthened' (9:10-19).

How was it that Ananias could cause someone to receive the Holy Spirit when Philip the Deacon so clearly could not? Ananias was the Damascene equivalent to a Deacon in Jerusalem, but he was not an Apostle, so was this a special case, a one-off, or was it the general rule among the disciples of the Lord Jesus – something they could all do? We have very little precise evidence to go on, but it is important to remember that Paul always defended his own apostleship to the Gentiles and his message of 'grace without circumcision,' by insisting that he had not received his authority from the other Apostles. He was in no way inferior to them nor dependent on them nor derived from them – on the contrary they had recognised what he already had from the Lord and they had given him the right hand of equal fellowship and also agreed that while they should minister among the Jews he should obey the Lord's commands as the (only) Apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7-9). He could hardly defend his own independent Apostleship and the Gentile Mission if he had been baptised and given the Holy Spirit by one of the other Apostles, and I think this factor, plus the elaborate vision which Ananias received, points more to this being a special case of the Holy Spirit being given by someone other than an Apostle.

I further believe that Stephen, Philip and Ananias, with their direct visions and communications from God, and the miracles of Stephen and Philip, should be placed by us in their own special category – they were clearly not Apostles but it is also a mistake to see them as typical of all the other 'ordinary' believers. Luke goes out of his way to show that they were **not** ordinary, they were special, that is why they were chosen for their tasks and why Luke chooses to tell us so much about them and not

about others. I call this special category SUB-APOSTLES and further believe they were very few in number.

Which all brings us back to Acts 10 and the Gentile centurion Cornelius in Caesarea, and we must note a number of parallels with the previous story of Ananias and Saul. Cornelius also was a devout man, and a man who feared God with all his household, who gave alms liberally to the Jewish people and prayed constantly to God. He also was given a clear and detailed vision which began with his personal name 'Cornelius,' followed by details of mission: 'Send men – target area Joppa – seaside – house of Simon Tanner – find Simon called Peter – capture and return.' James Bond again. Cornelius, although terror-stricken at first, obeys orders and chooses two trusted servants and a devout soldier as protection, and sends them south to Joppa. The next day Peter went up on the flat roof and prayed (remember Saul too was praying) and being hungry fell into some kind of trance in which he was offered from heaven many kinds of unclean creatures, and which he was three times commanded to eat. He refused, but each time was told 'What God has cleansed you must not call common or unholy.' While he was pondering what this all meant the Spirit said to him: 'Three men are looking for you – go with them without hesitation because I have sent them.'

The next day they set off northwards, and here Acts 10:23 is particularly important: 'some of the brethren from Joppa accompanied them.' Why did Peter take these Jewish Christians along with him? Surely they would not be needed? Yes they were indeed needed but not until this party at last gets back to Jerusalem (11:2-3; 11:12). Peter could foresee the problems which lay ahead on his return and so he made sure he took these experienced reliable adult Jewish male witnesses with him. He knew he would need these witnesses because he was, for the first time in his life, about to go into a forbidden zone – the house of a Gentile!

When Peter approached the house Cornelius made the mistake of falling down and worshipping him. Not the best of starts. As they talked Peter entered the house and found quite a crowd waiting expectantly. In obedience to the heavenly vision (hardly an everyday event) Cornelius had gathered his whole household, a big and important one with many servants, and his close friends and their families, to hear the words of this divinely appointed visiting speaker. Cornelius was not the sort of man who would ungenerously keep this sort of news to himself – he was a man with a sharing heart. Then it was Peter's turn to make what looks like an awkward start: 'I really shouldn't be here you know. I am a Jew, and you know that it is unlawful for me to associate with or visit any one of another nation ...' Peter may have one eye on the Gentiles who were present and one eye on the inevitable Judaising opposition and critics among the Christians back in Jerusalem. Probably he could already name them individually, and they would continue to oppose the Gentile mission and try to destroy this message of grace to the Gentiles throughout the rest of the first century and beyond. But by the mercy of God they were not physically present at the birth of that mission in this house in Caesarea.

Peter continued: 'Truly I see that God shows no partiality,' then moves along to preach about Jesus Christ and claims that he is one of 'God's chosen witnesses' to all that Jesus Christ did and will do. The word he uses for 'chosen' originally meant something like 'hand-picked beforehand' and Luke uses this expression for both Paul and the other Apostles. Here we also need to go back to the election of Matthias in Acts 1. The death of Judas had left a team of only 11 Apostles and a replacement had to be brought in 'off the bench.' We know from I Cor 15:6 that 500 people had seen the risen Lord Jesus but in Acts 1:22 Peter says: 'One of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.' More than 500 people had seen the event but only 12 were 'witnesses,' according to Peter. This is even more deeply engraved by 1:26 which says that Matthias, when chosen by lot, 'was enrolled with the eleven Apostles.' There was a roll of names and everyone knew what those names were! The NT as a whole shows an acute awareness of the special place and prerogatives of the Apostles – something I call the 'Primacy of the Apostles' – but this is widely ignored or denied in modern Western Christianity – an inconvenient truth which is simply airbrushed or photo-shopped out of the way.

It is an extraordinary thing to be hand-picked beforehand by God, and that is Peter's explanation of why he is the one who has come among them with this message, but in a similar sense it is true of these Gentiles as well because they too have been chosen, that is hand-picked beforehand by God as the very first Gentiles ever to hear about salvation and the forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus Christ. It was while Peter was speaking like this that the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the local Jewish Christians who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles as well, for they heard them 'speaking with tongues and glorifying God.' There is no suggestion that these Jewish observers spoke in tongues – it was not their job to be participants but reliable witnesses of all that happened. Peter then anticipates the objection which will surely be raised: 'Can any one forbid water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we ourselves have?' The answer is 'No!' Peter and the six witnesses remain several days at Caesarea, during which time the news no doubt flew back to Jerusalem, and it would have been big news and potentially very dangerous news: 'LEADER OF JESUS FACTION VISITS GENTILES.' And so Peter and the six returned to Jerusalem to face the music, this most important of his many ministry circuits now complete but the new battle just begun.

Conclusion

What have we made of our original question about how common among the early Christians were various so-called 'charismatic' happenings including tongues, miracles of healing, visions and special revelation, and what light do Acts 9 and 10 throw on this question? We see the Apostles, in the form of Peter, strongly represented of course, and some other gifted notables such as Stephen, Philip and

Ananias playing a somewhat lesser role, but the believers in Joppa, worthy and responsible though they are, show themselves just as powerless in the face of sickness and death as all the many Christians whom I personally have ever known. I believe Luke's evidence leans away from, rather than towards, charismatic claims.

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