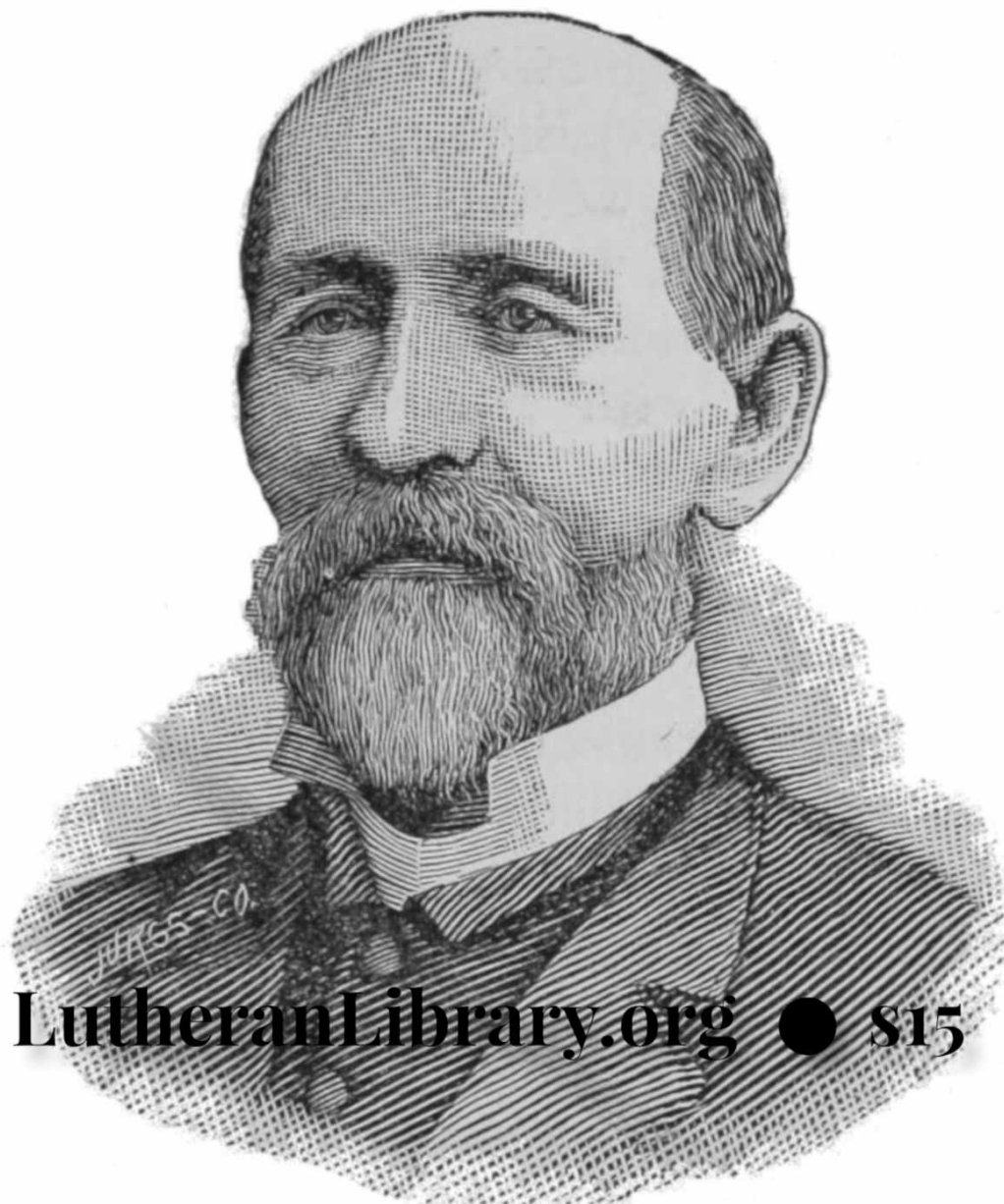


**Charles W. Schaeffer**

**When Gentiles Were  
Added To The Church**



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# When Gentiles First Entered The Church

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# When Gentiles First Entered The Church

By Charles W. Schaeffer, D.D.

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# The First Admission of Gentiles Into The Church

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES not only record the practice of the first preachers of the Gospel, it also develops various principles, which both belong to the foundation of the church, and mark its progress in all subsequent times. The agency of the Holy Spirit, the power of prayer, the nature and efficacy of entire consecration, on the part of the Lord's people, are ruling features of that interesting history.

The conversion of the Gentiles and their admission to the privileges of the Church of God, peculiarly connected, as it is, with the interests of the church in all ages and amongst all people, might be considered as deserving special attention. The prophecies of the Old Testament, concerning the Gentiles, had been so numerous and diversified, that nothing but the partial blindness of Israel, we suppose, could have prevented them from entertaining a general expectation of the speedy accession of all nations to the kingdom of God.

The directions given by our Lord to his Apostles, appear to us to be so plain and simple, that we might have expected to see the Apostles, without any further communications from above, going forth to the lands of the Heathen, and in the exercise of their ministry adding men and women every where to the Lord. Yet, the remarkable events, so full of Divine agency, that opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, show how slow the Apostles were to understand, and how backward to execute the will of God respecting the Heathen.

In the series of events thus referred to, the first is the conversion of a man who, possessed of a cultivated intellect, yet marked by bigotry and strong passions, had rendered himself notorious by the malignant persecutions with which he followed up the disciples of Jesus. The connection of his conversion with the purposes of God respecting the Gentiles, is distinctly presented in the communication made to Ananias of

Damascus, Acts 9, and in the commission given to Saul himself. Acts 26. “He is a chosen vessel to bear my name before the Gentiles and Kings,” “to whom I now send thee, to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light,” etc.

In this event two things are manifest. It was brought about, not by the ordinary operations of Grace, but by an extraordinary interposition of Divine Power; and its avowed object was the accomplishment of certain specific purposes in the Gentile world. By this event then, the chief agent for commencing and carrying on the work of gathering in the nations was secured.

Two other circumstances yet remained, the proper disposal of which, on the part of the Head of the Church, seems to have been necessary, in order to turn the zeal of the laborer, thus secured, to good account in the conversion of the Gentile world. The first was, that the spirit of inquiry should be awakened in the breasts, at least of some of the Heathen themselves — the other, that the Apostles should be set free from their exclusive Jewish prejudices, and become willing to admit the Gentiles to the Church, upon the ground of faith alone.

As the necessity for a laborer was met in the person of Saul, so the circumstances just referred to were disposed of, in the persons of Cornelius and Peter respectively.

That there were other Gentiles whose minds were as open for the reception of the truth as was that of Cornelius, need not be questioned. The Holy Spirit saw proper to bring him forward as the first fruits of the Gentile world.

Cornelius is introduced to us as a Roman centurion; it may be, a Roman, at least an Italian by birth. His profession as a soldier, and his official dignity as the commander of a considerable body of Italian troops, might be considered as inconsistent with the possession of a devout and humble spirit. Accordingly his evangelical inclination, which under any circumstances would have been interesting, must be regarded, on this account, as the more illustrious. The Spirit of the Lord had a work to accomplish for his own glory in the Church; and before that Spirit the crooked is made straight, and the rough places become smooth. In spite of all the hindrances to piety, by which he must have been surrounded, Cornelius was nevertheless a man of deep and long-tried devotion.



As we believe, that God, in drawing men towards the truth, generally operates upon their minds by the use of means, it would be interesting to know the agency by which the mind of Cornelius was at length led into his state of anxious inquiry. What these means were we do not pretend to determine. But it is remarkable, from what various quarters, the Providence of God had long been operating so as to prepare the Gentile world for the reception of the Gospel. From all of these possibly, from some of them certainly, the mind of Cornelius was reached.

[a.] Neander, in his *General History of the Church*, has given a clear and interesting account of the influence of the Platonic Philosophy, in turning the attention of reflecting Gentiles to things heavenly and divine. It was one of the principles of this Philosophy, that man was not a transient apparition, but a being destined for a higher development; and, that the present life was but a stage preparatory to a loftier existence. The Platonists were prone to hunt up, in the preceding history of humanity, traces of a commerce between heaven and earth, and the idea of a divine revelation, conveyed to man, under many diversified forms, was one most agreeable to them. As a result of this philosophical system, there was felt everywhere, the necessity of some revelation from above, that would convey to inquiring minds that peace, which the former conflicting systems of Philosophy and Religion had never been able to secure. Even Porphyry, the zealous defender of the old religious systems, as quoted by Neander, has asserted this in his collection of ancient oracles, prepared by him as the basis of a better theology. Referring to this production he remarks: “the utility of such a work will be best understood by those, who with painful anxiety, have longed for some divine revelation, which, by its faithful communications, might give them peace from trouble.”

As a tangible illustration of these mental conflicts, by which reflecting men had their attention directed towards the faith of the Gospel, the history already referred to, has given us a quotation from the *Clementina*. Though a mere romance, the work may be regarded as a fair representation of many scenes of real life; and though belonging to the second or third century, it is equally trustworthy, as an exposition of the mental conflicts of earlier ages.

The author of the *Clementina* has thus related the experience of Clement, a member of a noble family of Rome:—

“From my early youth I was perplexed with doubts and anxieties of mind, of which I understood not the source. Shall I be annihilated in death, and entirely forgotten? When was the world made, and what existed before the Creation? What shall be after the end of the world? Shall there be some state of existence, of which it is now impossible to conceive? — Ceaselessly followed up by such perplexities, I was so tortured, that health and spirit began to fail me. But I knew not then, what I afterwards discovered, that in these anxieties, I had a faithful leader, by whose agency God was conducting me to eternal life. Under these circumstances, I often envied those who seemed to enjoy the bliss of ignorance. Troubled by such anxieties, from my youth, I sought to relieve my mind by attending upon the schools of the Philosophers. — There, however, I saw nothing but the building up and tearing down of principles. One while the immortality of the soul was proved; again its mortality was demonstrated. Thus borne hither and thither by every wind, my confusion was ever increasing, and I sighed deeply in the bitterness of my soul.”

Clement resolved then upon visiting Egypt, the land of mysteries and of spiritual apparitions; but was deterred by the calm suggestions of an intelligent friend. In this state of mind he heard the preaching of the Gospel, and it came home to his heart, in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

This, though we may esteem it as but an imaginary case, may nevertheless be regarded, as upon the whole, a faithful account of many cases in real life; and in this manner the very barrenness and insufficiency of the religious systems of the Gentiles, was used as a means to prepare the way for the entrance in of the Gospel. This was the asking and the seeking that must precede the receiving and the finding.

Of course, in the absence of direct testimony upon the subject, we cannot determine whether Cornelius was or was not exercised in this particular manner. It is sufficient, however, to know that many thoughtful and serious minds among the Gentiles were, during the Apostolic age, directed in this way, towards the reception of the Gospel.

[b.] An influence favorable to Christianity flowed also from the frequent residence of the Jews, and the wide diffusion of Jewish theology, in the lands of the Gentiles. Those who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees were especially active, and with great success, in making proselytes to the Jewish faith. Some learned men have distinguished two kinds of proselytes, which distinction, though not warranted by Scripture history, may yet be found convenient. These are 1) the proselytes of Righteousness or Justice; 2) the proselytes of the Gate.

THE PROSELYTES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS were those Gentiles who, upon embracing the Jewish faith, had been circumcised and adopted the whole ceremonial law of the Jews. In many cases, they gave themselves up

without reserve to Jewish superstitions and fanaticism, and became the blind followers of their own blind guides. These proselytes were often the most malignant enemies of Christianity, and were found, by those Christians who encountered their rage, to be as the Lord described them, twofold more the children of hell than their preceptors themselves.

THE PROSELYTES OF THE GATE, on the contrary, formed, upon the whole, a more promising class. Acquainted with the Sacred writings of the Jews, they adopted many of the most important doctrines of the Scriptures without becoming Jews themselves. Having heard of the promised Messiah, they shared with others in an anxiety to see him; and as they had not been blinded by the prevailing prejudices of the Jews, they were the more open to the approaches of the Gospel. These were the devout men, and the men who feared God, to whom the Scriptures refer, as belonging not to the house of Israel but to the Gentile world.

Such also was the character of Cornelius as described by the historian. His faith in God and in the Providence of God, had ripened into fervent and importunate prayer; whilst the truth he had already embraced served only to increase his hungering for a fuller revelation.

Thus the Spirit of the Lord had been operating, through the ministry of the ancient prophets, to break up the fallow-ground of the Gentiles, and prepare them for receiving the good seed of the Kingdom of Heaven. Those holy and venerable men who, by their living ministry, had so often sought alas, so often in vain, to restore the wanderings of Israel, and to lead them in the way of truth, though now dead were yet speaking. Their words were at length, in the very spirit of the Gospel, going out into all the world, and every one of them was still echoing among the nations, the cry that had but lately arrested the attention of Israel, "prepare ye the way of the Lord make his paths straight."

[c.] An additional channel of approach to the Gentiles was opened by the direct preaching of the Gospel to the Jews, in their own land. That same Providence which had led many of the house of Israel beyond the limits of their own land, and so used them as bearers of an awakening light to benighted nations, also conducted many strangers and foreigners to take up their abode within the inheritance of the holy people.

Established in Judea, mainly, for civil or military purposes, they were, of course, cognizant of all events, the general importance of which was such as to arrest public attention or to influence the public mind. The Gentiles

were there, and shared largely in the scenes of the Crucifixion. There, it is said, Pilate and Herod made friends. It was true, also, in a larger sense, viz. of the nations they represented. Jews and Gentiles were one in the indignities they heaped upon the head of the Son of God. They were one in the tardy acknowledgment of his worth. Jews decently disposed of his remains, and Gentiles, in the moment in which he breathed his last, pronounced him the Son of God (Mark 15:39). Why, then, should they not be one, at least, as hearers of the Gospel which was afterwards preached in his name?

Simultaneously, therefore, with the annunciation of the doctrines of the Gospel by the Apostles of our Lord, to the house of Israel, many of the Gentiles also heard the strange tidings; and as they possessed human sympathies, and shared with the Jews in human interests, they would be likely to feel, as did the Jews, the entrance of the word into their hearts.

We have undoubtedly evidence that such was particularly the case with Cornelius. The Apostle Peter, whilst preaching to him, speaks of the Gospel as a matter that had already been published throughout all Judea and Galilee, and as a matter, with which Cornelius himself was, in a measure, acquainted. (Acts 10:37.) He enjoyed, at least, some of the crumbs that fell from the Master's table; and in a mind capable of relishing these, the taste of them must only have begotten a desire for more.

Thus, then, by a remarkable variety of agencies, proceeding from the schools of Philosophy, the writings of the Prophets, the frequent intercourse between Jews and Gentiles, both at home and abroad, the Providence of God was preparing the nations for the reception of the Word, and opening the door for its entrance in among them.

'Tis looked upon as a wonderful illustration of Divine Providence, that the wants and necessities of society have, of late years, brought to light and developed means and materials of human comfort and happiness, which, unless these necessities had existed, might still have remained embedded in their original darkness. The distant and remote operations of that Providence, harmonize perfectly with its later developments; and what was done in secret, in former generations, is now revealed, as having been wisely ordered, because necessary to its present purposes. Were we to say, it is no less an evidence of Divine Providence, that means and agencies were put to work, at remote points, and at early periods, among the Gentiles, the effect of which was to incline many to receive the truth of God, as soon as it

should be ready to be revealed to them, we should thus suggest an analogy that might be fairly insisted upon as the very expression of truth and soberness.

As we have seen, the chief agent for operating among the Gentiles was already secured. In this manner also, and by these various causes, the minds of many were so affected as to be willing to give heed to the things he might have to say. Another circumstance, however, remained yet to be provided for. It was all important that the Church should open its doors, and be willing to admit the Gentiles upon the ground of faith in Christ alone.

The Apostles and Christian brethren were entrusted with weighty responsibilities in the church. It was therefore necessary that they should be made to see, and fall in with the designs of God on behalf of the Gentiles. Their feelings, as Jews, in favor of the law and institutes of Moses, were so strong, that they might be fitly described as prejudices. They knew the promises given to the Gentiles; but they looked upon those promises only through the medium of the Mosaic law; and in their opinion, the conversion of the Gentiles to Christianity had, of necessity, to be preceded by their conversion to the Jewish faith. To admit the Gentiles as such to the Church would, they supposed, be practically throwing contempt upon the ordinances and precepts which God himself had given to the Fathers, and they would not endure the thought of increasing their own numbers, by admitting any immunity from the rites and duties of the Mosaic law. Their system, therefore, contemplated the conversion of the Gentiles to the Jewish faith first, and their introduction to the Christian Church afterwards, not as Gentiles but as Jews. So stoutly were some, not a few, inclined to insist upon this, that after the Apostles had long been laboring with success among the Gentiles, they were often hindered in their work by the interference of the so-called Judaizing Christians, who boldly proclaimed to the Gentiles that unless they would adopt the law of Moses, unless they would be circumcised they could not be saved. (Acts 15 : 1.)

The fact of the admission of Cornelius to Christian fellowship by the ministry of Peter, astonished, seems to have shocked the brethren and Apostles in Judea; and when Peter went up to Jerusalem they hesitated not to reprove him for holding fellowship with men who had not been circumcised. Peter, in his defense, acknowledges the apparent reasonableness of their objections. He intimates what they well knew, that he himself had entertained the same opinions once; but he continues to

rehearse how he had been directed by a vision and a voice from heaven to abandon them, — in short, how he was convinced, that to carry out these views in the administration of the Church would be nothing less than fighting against God. (Acts 11: 1-17.)

The Apostles then themselves, in their subjective views of the Gospel, were decided in their disposition to insist upon the observance of the Mosaic law, as a condition, without which the Gentiles could not be admitted to the fellowship of Christ. A divine communication was necessary to relieve them of this error; and Peter was the person to whom that communication was directly given.

The agency of Peter, in this important operation, harmonizes well with the whole development of his character, as discovered in other portions of his history. He stands chief among the three who witnessed the glory of the Transfiguration. He was first among the twelve to answer the question, “Whom do ye say that I am?” He was most prominent among them that planted and watered when the Pentecostal increase was bestowed; and who but he should be expected to go forward under the Divine guidance and take a position among the Gentiles, to which others would be, for a season, afraid even to follow him?

A divine Revelation, however, was necessary to make Peter himself willing to admit the Heathen to the blessings of the Gospel, and such a Revelation was granted to him.

In the prosecution of his ministry, Peter had gone down to Joppa, a city of note, upon the Eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It was there that Dorcas, remembered and lamented in death for her alms-deeds and benevolence, had been restored to life through his agency. After this event, many of the inhabitants believed in the Lord. Such was the demand of inquiring souls for his instructions, and such the success of his efforts that he continued there many days.

During those days of diligent and successful labor, Peter was also much engaged in devotion. He labored as though everything depended upon himself; he prayed, as though nothing could be accomplished without the blessing of God. On a certain occasion, about mid-day, he went up to the housetop, his mind deeply and anxiously agitated about the spiritual interests of all that region, and even of the regions beyond. In the scenes through which his mind was hurried, there were both Jews and Gentiles before him. The conversion and admission of both to the faith and

privileges of the Gospel, could hardly fail to engage his attention. The course to be pursued with converts from the house of Israel was plain, not so the mode of dealing with converts from heathenism. His early, steadfast views, and all his Jewish education, urged him to require of them a complete and cordial submission to the ordinances of the law of Moses. But was this required by the Gospel? Had it been so determined by the Master himself? Was it expedient or proper for him to assume and combine the several distinct, offices of a minister of the Gospel and, literally, a minister of circumcision? Were facts such as to indicate that so-called proselytes of Righteousness would become zealous followers of Jesus? It would be a mournful undertaking to reject a Gentile convert, who, though sincere in his faith in Jesus, should be unwilling to adopt and submit to the law of Moses; but it would be a fearful attempt to admit such a man to the household of faith, in a way that should practically set at nought the Divine and venerable ordinances of the ancient household itself.

Thus swayed by violent conflicting impulses, the mind of, the Apostle at length composed itself and sought relief in' prayer. Meanwhile he became very hungry, and would have eaten; but the meal not being as yet prepared, he continued for a season under the cravings of appetite. Both body and mind being thus in a state of anxious suspense and longing, he fell into a trance or ecstasy, and so beheld a vision, the character and bearing of which, had a remarkable congruity with the existing condition both of his body and his mind. Hunger had pressed him, and so in his vision he saw a supply of food to satisfy it. But the character of the food was not such as would be likely to be suggested simply by the dreams of a hungry Israelite. His mind, his spirit had been perplexed concerning the admission of the Gentiles, as such, the unclean in connection with the house of Israel, into the privileges of the kingdom of God. Like Isaac he had seen the fire and the wood, and it was this that troubled him about what he did not yet understand, the bringing in of the sacrifice.

Thus, as the peculiar form of the vision was made to correspond with his bodily state, its spirit and character had a similar relation to the condition of his mind. Accordingly he saw a collection of all manner of beasts of the earth, let down in a vessel from heaven. Hereupon a voice was heard saying, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." His answer was just such as might be expected from a strict and conscientious Jew. The voice responding, informed him, that God had cleansed the unclean, and that henceforth he

should no more despise or refrain from that which the law of Moses had taught him to regard as common. And, because the thing was established, this was done thrice, and the vessel was received up again into heaven.

The active mind of Peter began at once to ponder upon the meaning: of the vision. At the same time the messengers from Cornelius arrived at the house, inquiring for him. The Spirit leaving him, afterwards to discover the relation between the vision and the present inquirers, bade him go with the men doubting nothing, because the Lord had sent them. Before his arrival at the house of Cornelius, his mind was made up, and he became satisfied of it as being the will of God, that he should no longer consider any Gentile as common or unclean.

Arrived at the house, he began, without delay or hesitation, to open up to Cornelius and his friends, the unsearchable riches. The Jewish converts, who accompanied him, were astonished as they saw that the Divine Gift of the Holy Ghost was bestowed upon these Gentiles; and all, with one accord agreed, that, Gentiles though they were, they should be at once admitted by the administration of Baptism to the privileges of the kingdom of God.

Thus the way was at length opened. An act which Providence had long been contemplating was now performed; and its blessed influences would continue until the way of the Lord should be known upon earth, his saving health among all nations. Nothing now remained but for the rest of the Apostles and brethren of note to be satisfied with this act of Peter, so as to throw wide the door of faith to the Gentiles.

The account given them by Peter, at Jerusalem, was such as to silence all their objections; and when they heard it they held their peace and glorified God, saying, then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

During the progress of these events Saul had been in comparative retirement at Tarsus. The time having now arrived for the regular prosecution of the work in which he had been chosen to act as a chief agent, we might reasonably expect to see him brought forward into the field of labor. Nor is that expectation disappointed. The interesting events in the church at Antioch occasioned a demand for his presence. There, in connection with Barnabas, he labored a whole year with great success, and from that point he directed his footsteps to the remote cities and regions of the Gentiles.



The truth which the foregoing discussion seems to illustrate is, that though the duty of the Church appears to have been made sufficiently clear by the testimony of the Divine Word, yet it was further necessary that the Head of the Church himself should, by specific developments of his providence, open the way and raise up instruments for the performance of that duty. We have seen that providence displayed; we have seen how individuals and classes of men, how Jews and Gentiles are alike the subjects upon which it operates; we have seen how it makes the learning of the world, and the bounds of men's habitations, and the social commerce of families and kingdoms, all subservient to the execution of its purposes. It is the wide spread, the varied, the universal, the continued superintendence of Him who filleth all in all.

Now it would not be considered fanciful, were we to say that these same elements or circumstances are no less necessary, at all times, to the successful publication of the truth throughout the world. Laborers, who are themselves men of God through sanctification of the Spirit, must be raised up for the word. A certain degree of interest and concern for their own welfare should be realized amongst the heathen themselves. The church, too, that holds the lively oracles, should, be ready to greet with acclamations of joy the children of every clime, who, believing in Christ, shall bow before the living God, and wait for the coming of his Son.

These elements, it may be said, do exist at present; yet, when their proportions shall have become regular and full-grown, then only can men begin to look for a general gathering in.

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# How Can You Find Peace With God?

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Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions](#) by Pastor George Gerberding

## Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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