



Acts 11

An OCF Bible Study

Acts 11

News of what had happened in Cornelius' house spread quickly throughout Judea. What was the news (v. 1)? The Gentiles had received the Word of God. It was now theirs. It belonged to them as well to the Jews.

And as a confirmation of that fact, what had they also received? They received the Holy Spirit (10:47). Gentiles were now included in this new entity called the church which is not a building but rather a body of believers.

Why were the Jewish Christians critical of Peter (v. 2)? For eating with the Gentiles. Sharing a meal together was a special sign of fellowship in that culture, so to be sharing meals with uncircumcised Gentiles was considered to be a significant compromise. The charges by these Jewish Christians against Peter were simple: "You, supposedly a faithful Jew, associated with Gentiles—and even ate with them!"

What does that tell you about these Jewish Christians? They didn't "get it" yet. They were still hung up on the Mosaic law. Those whom God accepted by faith in Christ were now under a new covenant, not the old Mosaic Covenant, so they did not need to continue to observe the Mosaic Law. Here we see the potential for divisiveness between Jewish believers.

This reaction of the Christian Jews shows how historically significant the change was that God initiated in Acts 10. The change said, to the Gentiles, "You don't have to become Jews first and put yourself under the Law of Moses. Repent and believe, and you can come to Jesus." But the change also said to the Jewish followers of Jesus, "Receive your Gentile brothers and sisters as full members of the family of God. They aren't inferior to you in any way."

Who else was also accused of eating with and/or associating with the wrong kind of people? Jesus.

How did Peter respond to his critics (vv. 4- 17)? He didn't get testy or defensive. He received this questioning without any indignation or resistance. Peter did not flaunt his apostolic authority. He didn't say, "Who do you think you are? I'm the great apostle Peter. I know better than you!" He actually legitimized the questions by explaining the vision.

What was the most important point Peter made in defense of himself (v. 17)? God's stamp of approval was on this ministry of inclusion of the Gentiles.

How did these Jewish Christians, who had been so critical, respond to Peter's explanation (v. 18)? They were reassured by his explanation. They accepted the Gentiles and gave glory to God. The potential for "us vs. them" was defused. The unity of the church was preserved. They could see that God's stamp of approval was on this ministry to the Gentiles. How could they withhold their approval when God had obviously given His?

What does that say about them? Their hearts were right before God—which is a function of the Holy Spirit. The hearts of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were soft enough to be guided and corrected by God.

Peter's Jewish brethren agreed that God was saving Gentiles simply by faith in Jesus Christ just as He was saving Jews and that they should no longer regard Gentiles as "unclean." They recognized and yielded to God's initiative in this event. As a result, the bonds between Jewish and Gentile Christians became stronger, and the bonds between unbelieving Jews and believing Jews became weaker.

What is the main theme of the book of Acts (v. 19)? The spread of the Church into all the known Gentile world. This is Stephen's legacy—the Gospel expanding/going out to distant lands carried by Jews. The church was growing in response to persecution. A principle that remains true today.

What was going on in Antioch (v. 21)? The harvest was rich! We see revival among the Gentiles! When people believe and turn to the Lord, it speaks to the power of the gospel: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). The gospel, being the very power of God, cannot and will not be contained. The truth of the Gospel drew each one of us to God.

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What do we know about Antioch? It was located approximately 300 miles to the north of Jerusalem and, after Rome and Alexandria, it was the next largest city of the Roman Empire. It served as the home base of operations for Paul's missionary journeys. And it was infamous as a sanctuary for decadent sensuality. Today it is a Turkish city with a population of about 3,500.

Now Barnabas appeared on the scene (v. 22). Where have we seen Barnabas before? Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet. (4:36-37). Barnabas had earlier vouched for Saul in Jerusalem following his conversion experience (9:27). Why did the Jerusalem church send Barnabas to Antioch? As the apostles had done previously, when they heard of the Samaritans' salvation (8:14-15), they once again investigated when news of the salvation of another Gentile group reached Jerusalem. They chose a representative to visit Antioch to evaluate what was happening.

Barnabas was an excellent man for this mission since he, like some of the evangelists in Antioch, was from Cyprus. He was also a more broad-minded Hellenist. Furthermore, he was a positive, encouraging person (4:36), and he was full of the Holy Spirit, faith, and goodness.

What was Barnabas' conclusion (v. 23)? He saw the evidence of the grace of God. He was glad, and encouraged the new converts to remain faithful to the Lord. He confirmed that the Gentile experience was valid.

Can people see evidence of the grace of God at our church? What would that look like? Excitement about what God is doing. Growth by conversions. Love for one another. Importance of scriptures. Or do they see a legalistic relationship with God? Meaningless ritual. Empty tradition. People going through the motions.

As the church in Antioch continued to grow, Barnabas sensed the need for help. Consequently he set out to track Saul down in Tarsus, where he had gone (9:30). Together they spent a year teaching and ministering to the church in Antioch. **Why did Barnabas specifically go after Saul (v. 25)?** He knew about Saul and his potential from their earlier encounters (9:27).

Saul had spent some twelve years in Tarsus since we last met him; these years were not "wasted" or "lost," but spent in quiet ministry and preparation for future service. God had been equipping him to do the unique job he had called him to do which was to be the apostle to the Gentiles (9:15; 22:21; Galatians 2:8). **Do you sense God equipping you for a specific calling?** The followers of Jesus in Antioch decided to provide monetary support for their brothers in Judea which was a practical demonstration of love and unity (vv. 29-30). When one church (or one Christian) gives money to another, what does that create? A bond, unity, an affection within the community.

Antioch was where they were first called Christians (v. 26). What was the significance of that? Christians were being recognized as a separate group distinct from religious Jews as well as from pagan Gentiles (1 Corinthians 10:32). This is a title we still have today. Christians must be willing to take the title "Jesus People," and must live lives that are worthy of the name. Instead of claiming any other title—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Baptist, Pentecostal, whatever—we should be first called Christians.

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