

Further Expansion of the Church to the Gentiles

Acts 11

Acts 11:1-18: *“Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the Word of God. ² And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, ³ saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!” ⁴ But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. ⁶ When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. ⁷ And I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter; kill and eat.’ ⁸ But I said, ‘Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.’ ⁹ But the voice answered me again from heaven, ‘What God has cleansed you must not call common.’ ¹⁰ Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.*

¹¹ At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. ¹² Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, ‘Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, ¹⁴ who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.’ ¹⁵ And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” ¹⁸ When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”

Background Notes

In Acts 10 the door of the expanding Christian Church opened to the Gentiles. The Lord sent the apostle Peter to Caesarea, to the home of Cornelius, a Roman centurion. This godly soldier and his friends and relatives responded to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Peter then stayed on for a few days with Cornelius in Caesarea. *“Then they asked him to stay a few days” (10:48).* For the few days he spent with these newly converted Gentiles, Peter’s ministry topics were probably basic lessons for Christian living - and maybe some of the Old Testament prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In the meantime, word had gotten back to Jerusalem that **Gentiles** had received the Word of God and had been converted in Caesarea - and Peter was having fellowship with them! Maybe some of the brethren who went from Joppa to

Caesarea with Peter brought that good news back to Jerusalem. However, some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were not pleased with this new situation.

So when Peter got back to Jerusalem, these men took issue with him: *“And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him” (v2)*. The phrase, *“those of the circumcision”* refers to men who belonged to the strongly Jewish, so-called “circumcision group.” They didn’t have a problem with Gentiles responding to the gospel. Their problem was that Gentiles had been brought into the Church without being circumcised! They were of the opinion that Gentiles must first become full proselytes of Judaism through the ritual of circumcision before they were added to the Church. They apparently believed that the Church was a *Jewish* entity.

The Samaritans believers were at least part Jewish - and they practiced circumcision. But *“those of the circumcision”* thought that God would certainly never intend to bring Gentiles into the Church unless they were first circumcised. It was at this point that Peter gave his account of the facts, and refuted their incorrect thinking.

Doctrinal Points

1. Peter played a major role in God’s expansion of the church to the Gentiles.

If you were to ask the average Christian the name of the apostle whom God used to expand the early Church from being primarily a “Jewish Church” to being primarily a “Gentile Church,” most Christians would say the apostle Paul - and rightly so. But the apostle Peter also played a major role. Peter, who was given of keys to the kingdom of Heaven by the Lord Himself (Matthew 16), opened the door of the Church for the Samaritans (Acts 8) and for the Gentiles (Acts 10). Not only that, but in Acts 11 God used Peter to keep the early Church from a split between Jews and Gentiles.

Notice that all Peter did was to recount the facts of the case. He emphasized that this was not his idea, but **God’s!** If anything, Peter’s own thinking was more in line with the thinking of the “circumcision party” - until God spoke to him through the vision of the sheet filled with all kinds of animals.

Then notice how Peter compared what had happened to Gentile believers to what had happened to Jewish believers at Pentecost. In **both cases**, the Holy Spirit was given. Verse 15: *“And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning.”* So who was Peter to argue with God?

By the way, notice that when Peter said *“at the beginning” (v15)*, he meant the beginning of the **Church**. Peter believed the Church began at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the believers. It’s valuable to notice those words *“at the beginning,”* because some Christians teach that the Church began in the Old Testament.

“Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” (v16). Peter showed them that what had happened at the house of Cornelius was part of the fulfillment of the Lord’s promise in Acts 1:5: “For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” And also Acts 1:8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

What more could be said? Peter rested his case! So – *“when they heard these things, they became silent, and they glorified God saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’” (v18).* What a great result! It’s too bad that all church disputes can’t be settled this easily. This harmony allowed the Church to continue its expansion according to God’s plan. Peter played a major role in God’s expansion of the Church to the Gentiles.

2. Barnabas played a major role in God’s expansion of the Church to the Gentiles.

Acts 11:19-26: “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ²³ When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

Barnabas was first mentioned back in Acts 4. The name “Barnabas” means “son of encouragement.” Barnabas was a generous man, and he sold some land and gave the money to the Church. Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith (11:24). So when the “mother church” at Jerusalem heard that large numbers of Gentiles were turning to the Lord, who was sent to Antioch of Syria to check up on the situation? You guessed it! They sent Barnabas.

The gospel had come to the Gentiles at Antioch by means of Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene (v19-20). Antioch of Syria was about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. “Antioch of Syria” is today “Antakya of Turkey.” I remember when I was in Antakya, our guide told us that if we didn’t have to cross the international borders of today, we could have breakfast in Antakya and dinner in Jerusalem! Of course it took Barnabas several days to go from Jerusalem to Antioch.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw that there was definitely a work of God there. True to his name, he encouraged the believers to remain faithful. But more than that, Barnabas realized that these new Christians needed to be taught the Word of God. These Gentiles had never had the benefit of knowing the Old Testament Scriptures, as the Jewish believers had. And, thought Barnabas, who better to teach the Word than Saul of Tarsus, who would become the great apostle Paul? Saul had returned to Tarsus (Acts 9:30), and at least nine years had gone by. So Barnabas set off for Tarsus to find Saul.

When Barnabas found Saul, he brought him to Antioch. There they set up a Bible school for a whole year, and “*great numbers of people*” were taught the Word of God (v26). How would you have liked to have attended that school? ABC – Antioch Bible College.

Believers were first called “Christians” at Antioch. The label “Christian,” used by the Gentile pagans, was not a compliment then – and it’s not a compliment when used by the ungodly world today. The cosmopolitan city of Antioch would become the base of Paul’s future missionary outreaches to the Gentiles, and Barnabas was a key factor. Barnabas played a major role in God’s expansion of the Church to the Gentiles.

Practical Application

Let’s give like the Christians of Antioch!

Acts 11:27-30: “*And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch.*”²⁸ *Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.*”²⁹ *Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.*”³⁰ *This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”*

Through the Holy Spirit, a man named Agabus prophesied of a coming famine - and the famine took place just as he predicted. The churches in Judea were hard hit, so the local church in Antioch sent money to Jerusalem with Paul and Barnabas to help provide for this coming need.

Notice how these early Christians gave:

They gave early. They didn’t wait - they gave when they heard there would be a need.

They gave spontaneously. They did not have to have their arms twisted!

They gave proportionately. They gave according to each person’s ability to give – and not just a “token” amount.

When we hear of a need, we should ***give to the Lord*** with the same spirit and fervor. The Christians of Antioch are great models for us!