

Acts Chapter 11

This chapter divides itself easily into two parts

1. Verses 1-18 Peter's account regarding the house of Cornelius
2. Verses 19 - end The early days of the church at Antioch

1. Peter's report

One might have thought that Peter would have returned to Jerusalem in triumph after what had taken place in the house of Cornelius. The Lord's commission of Acts chapter 1 was being fulfilled - the beginning at Jerusalem, then Judaea, and Samaria, and out to the uttermost parts of the earth. Peter would report on the beginning of the final stage of this progress. He had been to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast and there he had met a Roman centurion of the Italian band. Here were men who could take the gospel with them back to Rome itself. News of the events at Caesarea had already reached the ears of the apostles and brethren in Jerusalem. The news had got there before Peter, but far from receiving a hero's welcome, he faces a barrage of criticism. "Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and did eat with them". It was all very well to preach to the Gentiles but not to eat with them. Philip had met the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert, saw him saved and baptized: but then Philip left him, and he headed home to Ethiopia rejoicing. That was OK with the Jews, as long as they could keep their distance. The Gentiles were still second-class citizens even when the gospel had been preached and believed. It is noticeable how Peter's critics are referred to in verse 2. They are not called "Jews" but "they of the circumcision". Here were men still entrenched in Judaism, still retaining their pride in being Jewish and their contempt of all things Gentile. Yet almost at the beginning of the Lord's ministry, He not only spoke to the woman of Samaria by the well, but spent two days in her city, perhaps to the discomfort of the disciples who would hold the Samaritans in even less esteem than they did the Gentiles. This prejudice in the early days of the church took a long while to disappear, and with some, perhaps never. Everything was going well at Antioch until we read of certain Jews who arrived and taught the church, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved". Paul and Barnabus took up the challenge of this doctrine, and they went back to Jerusalem to discuss the matter. They all had their say, but the meeting was summed up by James who stated, "That we trouble not them which from among the Gentiles are turned to God". No such burden as circumcision was to be imposed on the Gentiles. So there, it seemed, the matter would rest. But when we come to Galatians chapter 2, we find both Peter and Paul have come from Jerusalem and now in Antioch the saints, both Jews and Gentiles, are getting on so well that they are all sitting together having a meal. Peter is happy to be sitting at a table with the Gentiles, but then the door opens and certain brethren "from James" join them. Peter's fear of man comes back to haunt him, and he rises up from his table where he has been eating with the Gentiles and moves across the room to sit at a table with the Jews. The move however doesn't go un-noticed and soon Barnabus also does the same. Barnabus, like Peter, had just come from Jerusalem - indeed he contended with Paul against those who had demanded circumcision upon the Gentiles. But, writes Paul, "Barnabus also was carried away with their hypocrisy". Paul takes the matter in hand and gives a public rebuke to Peter. He writes in Galatians 2, "I withstood him to the face for he was to be blamed". Paul could see the roots of division, not just at Antioch, but also throughout the whole church. It is against this background of prejudice that Peter has to contend in Acts chapter 11. It would seem that Peter was expecting trouble. He rehearsed the matter from the

beginning. He is not just going to express his opinion, for that could be challenged. Rather he was going to give a chronological report of what took place – a statement of the facts. It is a statement of what God did, before and during the meeting with Cornelius. From verse 5 to 10, Peter tells of his experience with the thrice repeated vision of the great sheet. This was the starting point so that Peter himself could begin to overturn his own prejudices. From verse 11 to verse 12, Peter then speaks of the arrival at the house in Joppa of the three men from Cornelius. The timing of their arrival is all-important here. Says Peter, "Immediately there were three men already come to the house". As soon the vision passed, the three men arrived. Was it just a coincidence? Surely not – God's timing was perfect, that Peter might join together the arrival of these men with the vision. These were the first two events. In verse 12 Peter adds another fact. "The Spirit bade me go with them". Peter was now moving under the direct guidance of the Spirit of God, and who was Peter to refuse to go. These then were the facts as presented by Peter> But had Peter erred in his presentation. Had he exaggerated some points and omitted others? This is where the six brethren come in. In chapter 10, we read only that certain brethren from Joppa went with Peter. Chapter 11 tells us there were six in all. Under the law, it was a principle that "In the mouth of two or three witnesses let every word be established". Now under grace, not three but six witnesses are here to affirm the words of Peter. So far we have heard of the vision, of the arrival of the three men, of the Spirit, and of the six brethren from Joppa. Now we come to the vision of an angel as seen by Cornelius. The angel was most precise, "Send men to Joppa, and call for Silvanus whose surname is Peter". God is working in His own sovereign way to bring these two men together. What could Cornelius expect from Peter. The angel continues, "Who shall tell thee words whereby thou shalt be saved". This raises a theological question. In Acts chapter 10, we read of Cornelius that he feared God with all his house. Luke goes on to describe his alms and his prayers which have come up for a memorial before God. Might we not assume that Cornelius was already a saved man? He certainly believed God. But there seems to be a quantum leap forward between being a believer, especially under Judaism, and being one who is saved in this dispensation. Judaism had its limitations – even more so for a Gentile proselyte. But a man who is saved is brought in under the same terms as the Jew – no second place now. A man who is saved is the permanent abode of the Spirit of God, is the possessor of eternal life, is a son of God, has eternal security, and is blessed with all kinds of spiritual blessings in the heavenlies. This is what it means to be "saved". Being saved would surely go beyond being born again. Nicodemus knew nothing of these things just mentioned, yet the Lord seemed to expect Nicodemus to know what it meant to be born again. "If I have told you earthly things, how shall ye believe if I tell you heavenly things"? Today we are enjoying these heavenly things. So were these expectations of Cornelius fulfilled? Peter tells of the effect of his preaching. "As I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on us as at the beginning". Peter had hardly begun to speak when the Spirit descended. There was an urgency about the matter. Cornelius and his household were anxious to resolve the issue by believing, and the Spirit was quick to come upon those who had believed. Tongues are not mentioned here as such but Acts 10:46 does tell us that they spoke with tongues. Peter didn't have to elaborate here for those present would know exactly what he meant.

Here was the final seal of divine approval. But Peter isn't finished yet. He remembered also the word of the Lord Jesus, spoken to the disciples in Acts 1:5. "John indeed baptised with water, but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost". It's good to get a word from the Lord – did Peter get the right word for the moment from the Spirit of God. It is said of Him, "He shall bring all things to your remembrance". What happened in the house was just what the Lord had told them.

In the light of this great weight of divine approval, it is hardly surprising that all those present acknowledged the hand of God in Peter's visit. Peter's critics had to admit, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life".

2. The origins of the church at Antioch

Verse 19 marks the start of the second section of our chapter - the beginnings of the church at Antioch. From now on, the influence of Jerusalem will begin to wane, although it had a major role to play in the judgment of Acts chapter 15 regarding circumcision. But in the book of Acts, we will hear more and more about Antioch rather than Jerusalem. Hence it is the place where Paul began his public ministry, it is the place from which he was commended to the work, and it was the often the start and finish point of his missionary journeys. We will come across a lot of "first mentions" in regards to Antioch - the first mention of the word "Christian", the first collection for needy saints, the first commendation to missionary work, the first missionary report. God is going to use this particular church to establish a pattern for the future.

So was it then a "perfect" church - in these pristine days, did they not have any problems such as we have today? We learn on the contrary that Paul alone was involved in conflict at Antioch on no less than three occasions. We read of the first occasion in Acts 15:1 when certain Jews came to Antioch telling the Gentiles that they had to be circumcised to be saved. Paul and Barnabus contended with them to such an extent, they agreed to take the argument back to Jerusalem. Paul was here defending the truth of the gospel. Then we read of Paul's contention with Peter as recorded in Galatians chapter 2. Paul was here defending the truth of the one body in Christ. Historically, this took place somewhere within the period of Acts 15, after the return from Jerusalem. Then towards the end of Acts 15, Paul was still at Antioch when he had a contention with Barnabus about whether or not to take Mark with them. He was defending the progress of his missionary service. It underlines the fact that even when things are going well, there can still arise problems which have to be faced and resolved. Had Paul not intervened on these occasions, the gospel would have been compromised, the church at Antioch and possibly further afield could have been divided into Jew and Gentile, and his next missionary effort could have faltered had they taken Mark and he might have let them down again. Sometimes we allow anything to happen just to keep the peace, but it is not always wise. Sometimes to keep the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4), to have to commit a "breach of the peace", otherwise we become men who "stand for nothing, and fall for anything".

So how did this church at Antioch begin? It came about as an indirect result of the persecution that arose in Jerusalem after the death of Stephen. Saul of Tarsus was busy at the time, haling men and women and casting them into prison. As a result many of those who believed were scattered. One can see the hand of God in it all - there was a reluctance, especially on the part of some of the apostles, to move out and take the gospel with them. So God scattered them, and as they went out some went to Phenicia, some to Cyprus, and some to Antioch. There is another Antioch mentioned in Acts chapter 13, but it is clearly identified as Antioch of Pisidia, a region of modern Turkey. But the Antioch of our chapter was a major city about 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was a city on the Mediterranean coast - a melting point of Jew and Gentile, and an excellent launch pad for the spread of the gospel further west.

But notice that the old prejudice still hasn't gone away. Those who came to Antioch were "preaching the gospel to none but the Jews only". This barrier is going to take some time to break down. But it did bit by bit and we read in Galatians chapter 2 of a fair mixture of both Jews and Gentiles in the church.

As well as those who fled to Antioch from Jerusalem, there were those who came to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene. The gospel if you like doubled back on itself. Believers in Cyprus had already made the break physically from Jerusalem and perhaps in a measure spiritually too. Yet even they came and preached to the Grecians. These were still Jews but Greek speaking Jews. God believes not in revolution but evolution so at Antioch we go from Jews, to Hellenists, and finally to the Gentiles. Was the campaign successful? "The hand of the Lord was with them and a great number believed".

Verse 22 suggests that although Antioch was many miles from Jerusalem, Jerusalem soon learned of what was happening in Antioch. Long before our age of instant communications, the church of God knew what was going on in other places. Our verse says, "Soon tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church at Jerusalem". It has probably been said a thousand times before, but if the church is a building, then here is a building which has ears. But as we all know, the church is made not of bricks and mortar but of flesh and blood – people just like you and me.

On receiving the news, Jerusalem sent a man to Antioch to assist in the work, and that man was Barnabus. This is the third time that he has been mentioned in the book of Acts. He is mentioned for the first time in chapter where we learn that he had a piece of ground which he sold and brought to the apostles. The second mention is in Acts chapter 9. Saul of Tarsus, now saved, comes back to Jerusalem and tries to join the church at Jerusalem. But such was Saul's reputation that they "believed not that he was a disciple". It took Barnabus to bring Saul and tell the church of Saul's salvation and of the preaching which he had done in Damascus. Our third occasion is here in Acts chapter 11.

In sending Barnabus to Antioch, the church at Jerusalem has rather broken with the tradition of the past. When Peter preached to the Jews in Acts chapter 2, he stood up with the eleven – ie all 12 apostles were there. When the Samaritans believed in Acts chapter 8, they sent Peter and John to bring the Spirit of God upon them. When Cornelius and his household believed, it was Peter on his own and again the Spirit descended. But here in Acts chapter 11, it is not an apostle who is sent but an apostolic delegate and there is no mention now of tongues. Things are beginning to normalize – to settle into the pattern that we are familiar with today.

Was Barnabus a good choice? We can answer with an emphatic "yes" and for a number of reasons :

1. He was a Levite
2. He had sold his piece of ground
3. He had given this money to the saints
4. He had introduced Saul to the church at Jerusalem
5. He was the "son of consolation"

Other things are said of him but we shall look first of all at these 5 points above:

2.1. He was a Levite

Here was a man who knew and who taught the Lord. The first believers at Antioch were Jews, who perhaps were beginning to feel they were losing something as they saw more and more Gentiles being saved. They would be perhaps consoled somewhat to know that the man who had come to help them was a Levite from Jerusalem – in other words, "He was one of them".

2.2. He sold his piece of land

This fact recorded in Acts 4 tells us something else though about this man. The law

forbade the Levite to sell his ground. In the book of Joshua, the tribe of Levi was not given a portion of the land like the other tribes. Rather each of the tribes gave a portion of their inheritance to the Levites, and these pieces of ground were the inheritance of Levi and were not to be sold.

The fact that here was a Levite who sold his land suggests that here was a man who was already beginning to loose his ties with the Law as he began to embrace the grace of God.

2.3. He gave the money to the apostles.

This gives us a picture of a man who was unselfish regarding his possessions. He puts the needs of the saints first before those of his own. This is an excellent quality to see in a man sent to care for the church at Antioch.

2.4. His introduction of Saul

We have already mentioned the fact that the church at Jerusalem was afraid to receive Saul when he first made an approach towards them. They would not have received him had it not been for Barnabus who gave them Saul's testimony and spoke of what he had done at Damascus in preaching Christ. Barnabus not only had a generous spirit in giving his possessions to others but he was quick to see the potential in others, and he obviously saw the potential in Saul.

Sometimes we see men who are willing to encourage the young believer, but as soon as that young believer begins to progress, envy and jealousy begin to take over and the encouragement fades away. It is interesting to see how from Acts 11 onwards, we read of "Barnabus and Saul", but before long we also begin to read about "Saul and Barnabus" – the young convert is beginning to make his impact.

2.5. The son of consolation

In Acts chapter 4, this Levite was called Joses at first. It was the apostles who called him "Barnabus" ie the "son of consolation". Perhaps the apostles with their special insight in divine matters could see this trait in the life of this man. And Barnabus lived up to his name at Antioch. He was an exhorter, one who had the ability to encourage others. We still need the exhorters today to lift our spirits up.

But all this is from the past. What about Barnabus now? Acts chapter 11:24 tell us three more things about him:

"For he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith"

2.6. A good man

This is a description given to only one other man in the bible.

Ahimaaz who brought news of the battle to David (2nd Samuel 18)

And the watchman said, Me thinketh the running of the foremost is like the running of Ahimaaz the son of Zadok. And the king said, He is a good man, and cometh with good tidings.

Psalm 37:23 gives us the character of a good man

The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD: and he delighteth in his way.

2.7. Full of the Holy Ghost

This is what marked the Lord Himself in Luke 4:1

1 And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness,

It was also what marked Stephen in Acts 7:55 before he died.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God,

2.8. Full of faith

This is not what we might call "saving faith" ie the faith we put in Christ the day that we were saved. Rather it is the practical faith that we have day by day – our daily trust in God. Barnabus had already put that faith to the test in Acts chapter 4 when he sold his piece of ground and gave the money to the apostles. The Lord would support him now.

After the arrival of Barnabus, the blessing of the gospel continued at Antioch. Verse 24 says, "And much people was added unto the Lord". Souls were being saved, saints were being encouraged, so what else was needed? The answer is sound doctrine to build up the saints. Barnabus realized that he was not the man for this task – he could only lead the saints so far. We have seen his unselfishness before now he knows a man who can do what he cannot do and he goes off to Tarsus to fetch Saul back to Antioch. I am sure it happens often, perhaps quite often in the mission field that men persist in a work that God has not fitted them for. Christ has given us evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph 4) and few would have all three of these gifts.

So what had Saul been doing since his departure from Jerusalem

Acts chapter 9 tells us :

29 And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him.

30 Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

Again according to Paul himself in Galatians chapter 1, he spent three years in Arabia before his re-appearance

17 Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. {went up: or, returned}

He spent three years in Arabia. I believe the Lord used these three years to prepare Paul for his later ministry. Perhaps it was during these three years that he received many of the mysteries that he taught later. The Lord revealed to him the gospel, the breaking of bread, the truth of resurrection, the Rapture, the truth of the mystery - and it may all have happened then.

For a whole year Barnabus and Saul continued teaching the people. What was the result of this teaching? "The disciples were called "Christians" first at Antioch. The Greek word for Christ is Christos – the Greek word for Christian is Christianos ie those who belong to Christ. It was not a name that the disciples called themselves but it was given them by those from without. These meetings that Paul had, what were they all about? What were they speaking about? The answer was Christ, Christ and more Christ. Paul gave them a ministry of Christ and so the word Christianos stuck.

Finally from verses 27 – 30, we have the arrival at Antioch of a prophet called Agabus who prophesied of a great dearth or famine that would come upon the whole world. The proof a man being a true prophet was that his words would come to pass. We read about the prophecy of Agabus "which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar".

This is the first example in the New Testament of one church giving aid to another at some distance. They so trusted the word of Agabus that they collected the money before the famine began. They sent it to Jerusalem by the hands of Barnabus and Saul. They sent their two best men. It takes spiritual men to wisely undertake what some might see as a purely material matter.