

Friends, don't get me wrong. By no means do I count myself as an expert in all of this, but I've got my eyes on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back.

Philippians 3:13-14 The Message Bible

First Love Ministries, Inc.

Prayer Study #239

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Chapter 11

Peter Defends His Ministry to the Gentiles

1. 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."

Barclay tells us that the importance Luke attached to what happened with Cornelius is shown in the fact that he repeats the story from Chapter 10 in Chapter 11. He was writing on a roll of papyrus. The longest roll that they used was 35 feet long, which was almost precisely the length it would take to write the Book of Acts. For him to repeat this story, therefore, was significant.

As I have stated early, prior to the conversion and baptisms of Cornelius and his household, in both the Spirit and in water, the Christians were Jews and the Church was on its way to being a sect of Judaism. Fortunately for us, the Church was abruptly taken off this path, and the Gospel message was opened to the whole world.

The "beef" here with the Jewish Christians was two-fold: First, they believed that Peter was violating the law by going into visit uncircumcised men and by eating ceremonially unclean food. Peter did not argue but just presented the facts to these believers. It was the Spirit Himself who had overruled Peter's racial prejudice and religious traditions, making no distinction between the Jew and the Gentiles. The Spirit is the One who gave the vision to Peter (verses 4-10), who sent the angel to Cornelius (verse 11), who told Peter that He had sent the men, who fell on these Gentiles as Peter preached the Word (verses 12-13), and who manifested Himself in other tongues, just as He had done on the Day of Pentecost to the Jews. The middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile had been broken down at Calvary, and God was making of both Jew and Gentile, ONE NEW MAN (Ephesians 2:12-20)

The Witness at the Antioch Church

19. 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 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.
27. 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.

What the enemy meant for evil, the Lord turned to good (Genesis 50:20). The very persecution that drove the disciples to scatter all over the Middle East, Africa, Europe and Asia was the very means by which the believers were able to scatter quickly the seed of the Word of God.

Antioch was the place where the believers in Jesus were first called Christians, and Antioch is where Paul really came into the ministry and from where he started establishing the Gentile churches. This is what Barclay tells us about Antioch, *“Antioch was the third greatest city in the world next to Rome and Alexandria. It stood near the mouth of the River Orontes, fifteen miles from the Mediterranean Sea. It was lovely and cosmopolitan, but it was notorious for luxurious immorality. It was famous for chariot-racing and for a kind of deliberate pursuit of pleasure which went on literally night and day; but, most of all, Antioch was famous for the worship of Daphne, whose temple stood five miles out of the town amid laurel groves. The legend was that Daphne was a mortal god with whom Apollo*

fell in love. He pursued her, and for her safety, Daphne was changed into a laurel bush. The priestesses of the Temple of Daphne were sacred prostitutes, and nightly in the laurel groves the pursuit was re-enacted by the worshipers and the priestesses. 'The morals of Daphne' was a phrase that all the world recognized as indicating loose living. It seems incredible, but nonetheless it is true that it was in a city like this that Christianity took the great stride forward to becoming the religion of the world. We need only think of that to be reminded that no situation is hopeless."

The believers were called "disciples"-this is used about 250 times in the Word to describe the early believers; they were called people of "The Way" (Acts 9:2); they, in this chapter, were called "Christians;" and they were called "The Sect of the Nazarene" (Acts 24:5). This term *Christian* initially was a sarcastic and disrespectful nickname. *Christian* literally means *those Christ-folks*. The Christians took the name and changed it to a name of great honor, wonder and awe and known all over the world.

Again we see the actions of one of the biggest hearted men in the Bible, Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement. He had already stood by as a character witness when everyone else was suspicious of Saul of Tarsus. He had already sold what he had and gave it to the Church and those in need. He was sent by the Church to check out the situation in Antioch and quickly sensed the realness of the Gentile's acceptance of the faith. Barnabas knew that only a strong leader in this wicked city, one who was a Jew and well learned in the law but also one who was open to Gentile believers. That man was Paul, whom Barnabas had not seen in 9 years, and who had been in Tarsus, his home town. Barnabas with great wisdom put Paul in charge of the work of discipling the believers at Antioch. They continued this for a year.

Generally speaking, there were three levels of leadership in the early Church. The APOSTLES' authority was not confined to one place but extended to the whole worldwide Church. They were looked upon as being right under Jesus in authority. The ELDERS were local leaders who had authority only at the place where they had been set apart. Finally, the PROPHETS were not attached to any particular church. They foretold both the future and the will of God. There were certain rules about prophets which were instituted, most probably by the apostles, to expose false prophets. For example, a prophet was not to ask for money or a meal in a prophetic word. Also, the prophet was to be given hospitality for one night, but if they asked to stay longer without working they were considered false prophets.

Agabus was a Christian prophet in Jerusalem. In this passage he foretells accurately the coming of a widespread famine. Later he prophesies Paul's imprisonment and shackles (Acts 11:28, Acts 21:10-11). These last verses are important because they show the concern that the believers in Antioch had for other believers in the worldwide church.

On a final note, always remember the passage in Amos 3:7: *Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he reveals His secret unto His servants, the prophets.* Agabus' use of the prophetic ministry to prepare people for what lies ahead is something we will see more and more of in our day.