

The Gospel's Widening Circle

Acts 11:1-30

Introduction:

In chapter ten we read how the Holy Spirit taught Peter that the Gospel was for all people, not just the Jews. Revival was happening in the cities far beyond Jerusalem. Pastor Randal Denny starts his chapter on chapter eleven of the Book of Acts with this comment:

“The news travelled quickly: “Gentiles join the Church!” Expecting a victory rally upon his return to Jerusalem from Caesarea, Peter was surprised to find a protest rally. Hard-line legalists criticized him: “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (v. 3). More concerned for Peter’s defilement than the Lord’s work through him, they forgot Jesus had eaten with sinners and social rejects.” (Randal Denny, Wind in the Rigging, p. 78)

It is too easy to think our form of worship, our structures, our traditions are what are the heart of the faith. For the early church the lesson of distinguishing between the voice of the Holy Spirit and the voice of the spirit of religion was not learned overnight. Some held onto their religion despite the obvious work the Holy Spirit was doing. May we learn what is of God and what is of religion for our day as well.

Divided Opinions – Acts 11:1-4

1. What good news had spread through the land of Judea? (v. 1) What should have been the response to this news?

2. What was the reaction of the “circumcised party” to the news about the Gentiles coming to faith? (v. 2) What was their concern? (v.3) Why?

3. Verse 4 begins with the word “but” (in the Greek original and most modern translations). What is significant about this word here?

4. What is Peter’s response to their criticism? (v. 4) Why is this a good response to people who might question or criticize our faith in Jesus?

Peter's Report to the Church – Acts 11:5-18

5. In verses 5-10 Peter recounts the vision that prepared him for the encounter with Cornelius and his household. He does not embellish and he does not add commentary. He tells of the sheet full of animals of all sorts and his refusal to eat any of them. How might the “circumcised party” be responding to Peter to this point? What part of the story might they feel uncomfortable with?
6. In verse 11-12 Peter tells of his unexpected visitors. How do we know they are Gentiles? And what message does Peter get from the Holy Spirit? What did Peter already notice at this point?
7. In verse 12 Peter also tells about the witnesses who came with him from Joppa. How many were there? (first time we hear how many). Is there significance in how many can verify the story?
8. Verse 12 ends with the reference to entering Cornelius' house. What does Peter NOT mention about “this man” that we learned earlier? Why not mention these details?
9. In verses 13-14 Peter recounts the message Cornelius (“the man”) received. What agrees with our first account of the event? What added information do we receive?
10. Compare verse 14 with Acts 16:31. What does this tell us about the importance of family in God's plans?
11. Verse 15 very briefly outlines the Holy Spirit coming upon Cornelius' household. Note Peter does not recount what he was saying. Why? He also does not recount the signs of the Holy Spirit's coming (speaking in tongues and extolling God). Why might these be left out?
12. Verse 16 adds another detail to the story we did not have at first. What was it? What might this be pointing to (cf. Acts 10:47)?

13. Verse 17 is the conclusion Peter had come to, and the true message of the whole incident. What is the message?
14. What response did the “circumcised party” have to Peter’s story? (v. 18)
15. What, according to Peter, leads to life? (v. 18) What does that mean?

The Church in Antioch – Acts 11:19-26

Antioch was one of the major cities in the first century Roman Empire, third largest city behind Rome and Alexandria. 483 KM north of Jerusalem it was a safe haven for Jews and Christians fleeing persecution. It had long established synagogues and freedom to practice whatever religion one liked. It was on a crossroad for trade, and acquired great wealth. Early church tradition says the Gospel of Matthew may have been written from Antioch.



16. What brought the Gospel to Antioch according to verse 19? Who was the main audience?

17. According to verse 20 there were some believers who were preaching the Gospel outside the Jewish confines (to the Hellenists or Greeks). Where did these believers come from? Could this have influenced their decision to reach non-Jews?
18. What was the message of these early Christians (vs. 20)?
19. What was the outcome of their ministry? (v. 21) Who was responsible for their success?
20. The report of what is happening comes to the Jerusalem Church. They send a representative. Who is he? (v. 22) What do we know about him?
21. Verse 23 says that Barnabas came and saw the grace of God. What does this mean? How does he respond to the revival happening? What message does he give to the believers?
22. In verse 24 we read that a great number of people come to the Lord in Antioch. What does Barnabas do to respond to this growth? (v. 25)
23. For a full year Saul and Barnabas disciple the Christians in Antioch (v. 26). Why make such an investment in this group? What name gets attached to the believers in Antioch? What does it mean?

A Giving Congregation – Acts 11:27-30

24. Verse 27 betrays a typical Jewish perspective on the world that even Luke seems to hold. What is it?
25. What message does the prophet Agabus bring to the church of Antioch? (v. 28) Why does Luke record that “this took place in the days of Claudius”?

26. How does the church of Antioch respond to this prophecy according to verses 29-30? What does this tell you about their faith? What message does this send throughout the Christian church?

Conclusion:

Here in our passage we find a most important phrase: “And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.” (v. 26) Though this likely started as a jest towards to the “Christ followers” or “little Christs,” the name stuck. Though used only three times in our New Testaments, within a few generations it was the badge of honour carried by the followers of Jesus. “Before conversion, people might be Jews or Gentiles, Greeks or Romans – but after conversion, they were called by one name: “I am Christian!”¹

God was destroying the barriers people had put up to divide and isolate people. God was creating one new people, which included people from all four corners of the world. These people would be called Christians. There is no greater honour than to be associated with the Risen Christ, to be identified as his people. As the Apostle Paul would write, “For to me to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.” (Philippians 1:21) This is the life of the Christian.

¹ Randal Denny, “Wind in the Rigging” (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1985), p. 89.