



Peter's defence and the rise of the church at Antioch

Acts 11

Jewish objections to receiving gentiles

The first part of this chapter deals with Peter's defense of his association with Cornelius. When the news of what has happened in Caesarea reaches the Jews in Jerusalem they are shocked. Their Jewish background and their present faith are threatened. Are they about to lose their identity? Such questions fill the hearts and minds of those who have been brought up in the Jewish religion and have now come to faith in Christ.

Although their attitude is not one which can be commended, it must not be lost from sight that great changes are taking place and that they fear that these changes will not be for the good. It is noteworthy that they do not first stumble at the fact that Peter has baptized several gentiles, but that *he ate with them!* This went contrary to all they had been taught. Is the whole past history now to be proved wrong? Have our fathers always been in the wrong? These Jews seriously hold their religious beliefs and practices.

Showing God's answer

Peter now reviews all the things which have happened in what is almost a duplication of the account in chapter 10. There are a few differences and even though these differences do not seem to be very important, we should take note of them. In the previous chapter the number of men who accompanied him to the home of Cornelius was not stated. Now we learn that there were six. This number is more than enough to testify to the truth of what Peter tells the Jews. He has plenty of witnesses. In verse 14 there is a more significant difference. The angel had told Cornelius that when Peter came he would *"speak unto thee words, whereby thou shalt be saved, thou and all thy house."* Peter also defends himself by saying *"who was I, that I could withstand God?"* We must also notice that Peter is ready to give a reason for his actions to the church! Peter's readiness to relate all the details concerning the things which have happened in the house of Cornelius satisfies the church. They are now able to rejoice with him that the gentiles have also been included in the salvation which God has made known. Peter is vindicated. Although this problem is not completely solved by means of this episode and will rise again, a giant step has been taken. The church for the time being is satisfied. This will do a great deal for the peace of the church in the coming days.

Further gentile evangelism

The rightness of receiving gentile believers in the church having been shown in the case of the Cornelius family, we learn of the further spread of the faith among the gentiles. Great tribulation came upon the church after the death of Stephen. The believers, no longer safe in Jerusalem, scattered abroad. Satan, through the persecution which arose, scatters the believers, but wherever they go they preach the gospel of Jesus Christ! Some go a long distance from Jerusalem – to the great seaport of Phoenicia, to Cyprus, and to the third most important city in the world at that time, Antioch. This too is a seaport even though it lies inland, because there is a waterway connecting it to the sea. It is the typical city of commerce – wicked and immoral. This city will have a very important place in the rest of the history given us in Acts. It becomes a hub from which the gospel is going to go to many other places.

Those who had been scattered abroad at first spoke to the Jews only. The Jews had been scattered throughout the then known world and new refugees naturally associated with them, as they spoke the same language. However, some of them from Cyprus and from Cyrene, men who have lived in the gentile world for a period of time and for whom the Greek was the common language, speak the gospel also to the Greeks in Antioch. There is no "holy" language and the gospel of Jesus Christ is not to be restricted to the ancient people of God. The walls of partition crumble.

The work of this earliest gentile mission is blest beyond their fondest hopes. Many turn to the Lord. What is happening in the world? Christ Jesus is making disciples of the nations. His rule is being extended. The news of the great success of this mission soon reaches to Jerusalem. This *church* sends out Barnabas to investigate the news and to help them. We do not read of a mandate given this man, but the church is interested in what is going on in Antioch. They do not send one of the Apostles but, instead, a very wise and good man even though he does not have the status of an Apostle.

Helping the new church

Barnabas is happy to see the progress the gospel has made in this important city. He is here face to face with the grace of God! No man would be able to gain such results. He admonishes them to remain faithful to the Lord. To believe when one is overcome by the emotion of the moment is one thing; to continue faithfully in this profession is another matter. Luke tells us that Barnabas was a good man, not enough in itself, but that he was also filled with the Holy Spirit and had genuine faith. Much people were added unto the Lord, apparently also upon the ministry of Barnabas. His qualifications will do much to satisfy the church at Jerusalem when he reports to them.

Apparently he realizes that the work here in Antioch is too much for him and for those who were here before him. More leadership is required. (The leadership given to this particular church will, humanly speaking, have much to do with the further success of the gospel in many other regions.) He thinks of Saul of Tarsus. Barnabas was the first to introduce Saul into the ranks of the believers, as he was the first to believe in the genuineness of Saul's conversion (Acts 9:27). This is the man for Antioch! He finds him in his birthplace, Tarsus. Notice that Barnabas calls him – not the church. Saul is ready. We cannot trace Saul's life since his conversion, nor the places where he has been. But, this is not necessary for our purpose. He is about to embark on the greatest missionary career. Both Saul and Barnabas work in the city of Antioch for a whole year. This is much longer than the missionaries usually remained at one place. But, the work here is important. They had the opportunity to teach many people here during that time and lay a good foundation for the church. This also is the place where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. This name which became so common in the later history of the church, is used only three times in the New Testament. It is derived from the name "*Christ*" or "*anointed one*" and indicates that His followers have received His anointing (of H. Catechism, LD 12, Q.32). They might conceivably have been named after the name "*Jesus*" as an order in the Catholic church has been. However, that name does not fit because we are not saviors! The Lord has, by His providence, seen to it that the proper name would be given His followers.

Barnabas and Saul work well together. Saul will overshadow Barnabas but we observe no indication of jealousy in him. Both of them have one purpose – to build the church of Christ.

Gifts for the need of fellow Christians

Prophets come down from Jerusalem to Antioch. This is an office of which we do not read very much in the New Testament. Yet, there had been a resurgence of prophecy especially with the coming of John the Baptist. The prophets which now come from Jerusalem are proclaimers of the word of God (which is the fundamental meaning of the word prophet), but they also foretell the future. Agabus is named here and is also named in 21:10. He foretells the coming of a great famine which will be upon the whole world. He is speaking by the Spirit of God, for he is a true prophet. Luke tells us that this famine came in the days when Claudius was emperor. The

prophecy must have been made while his predecessor, Caligula was still emperor. In these small ways Luke, the historian, allows us to determine the time of his writing more exactly.

There is no description given of the coming famine. The people are warned by the word of the prophet so that they may be able to make the proper arrangements for that coming difficult time. Each member of the church, according to his ability, stores up (money and food?) so that relief may be sent to the brethren in Judea. These will be among those who will be the hardest hit. They are already being persecuted and this persecution will intensify. From Judea had come the spiritual food to them; is it too much to ask that they will send material goods to the brethren there?

This relief was sent by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. Saul is receiving early instruction in the importance of benevolence to be practiced by the church of Jesus Christ. How he will emphasize the need of this kind of ministry later (2 Corinthians 8:9)! Notice that this relief is not sent to the Apostles, but to the *elders*! Luke has skipped the history of the institution of this office. This is the first time we hear of *elders* in the church. They will assume a very great role in the later history of the church and their office must be found in every church. Thus the progress of the church is shown us.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Why was it difficult for the Jew to welcome gentiles to the faith?
2. Should there have been sufficient confidence in Peter so that he would not have had to make this long defense? Why or why not?
3. Is it safe to say that the evil one is not very wise? Is he foolish?
4. Barnabas was no Apostle. Why send such a man to Antioch?
5. Is there ever room for jealousy among the leaders in the church? Does it occur?
6. Does the failure to foretell the future diminish the present prophetic office? Were Moses and Samuel prophets? Did they foretell the future?