

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
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DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 12 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 11

INTRODUCTION

God pushed forward His eternal plan of salvation to include the Gentiles. The Twelve had confined their preaching of the gospel of salvation to the Jews in Jerusalem. As a result of the persecution and martyrdom of Stephen, who was one of The Seven, many believing Jews were dispersed to the neighbouring regions, notably Samaria, where Philip, another one of The Seven went to preach the gospel of salvation. Peter made pastoral trips to Lydda and Joppa where he healed Aeneas, a paralytic and raised Dorcas from the dead respectively. After that, Peter was sent by God to Caesarea to preach the gospel of salvation to Cornelius, a Roman centurion who was stationed there. Cornelius together with his family and close friends were converted. The Holy Spirit came upon them even before Peter finished his sermon. The conversion of Cornelius was a very significant event in the fulfilment of God's world-wide evangelism plan. Peter was given this special privilege of being directly involved in the first recorded conversion of a Gentile. Shortly after, Paul formerly Saul was chosen by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire.

Chapter 11 and 12 describe the final account of Peter's ministry. Peter faced the criticism of his fellow Jews for associating himself with the Gentiles. Acts concluded the record of Peter with his miraculous release from prison. His imprisonment was an attempt by King Herod to destroy the growth of Christianity. But the inspired record shows that all those who oppose Christianity are opposing God, and would eventually face the wrath and judgement of God.

Chapter 11 can be divided into two main sections: (1) Peter's explanation to his fellow Jews concerning his association with Gentiles (vv.1-18); and (2) The establishment of Antioch as the centre of world-evangelism (vv.19-30).

COMMENTARY

Peter Explained to the Jewish Christians

News of Peter's association with the Gentiles and their receptiveness to the Word of God had reached Jerusalem and caused a stir among the Jewish Christians. The fact that Gentiles also were admitted into the church startled the Jews. Up to this time, the gospel had been preached to the Jews and Jewish proselytes. When Peter returned to Jerusalem from Caesarea, he was confronted by his fellow Jewish believers. Those who criticised him were "of the circumcision" (v.2). They were the Jewish believers who sincerely believed that the Gentiles should not be received into the church without embracing Judaism or the Law of Moses. They believed from their heart that the Gentiles must embrace Judaism and must be circumcised

before they are considered as full-fledged Christians. They charged Peter, not for preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, but for eating with them. Peter was accused of breaking the Mosaic Law. It was true that in the OT, anyone who would be called a people of God must be circumcised. Circumcision was the visible sacrament performed by one who claimed to have the inward faith. Not to eat with Gentiles was one of the ways God gave to His people in the OT to keep them from sinning and breaking their covenant.

Peter patiently related and explained his experience. He argued that His visit to Cornelius was commanded by God in a vision while he was praying in Joppa. He related to them his vision of the great sheet with all kinds of four-footed beasts and the voice asking him to kill and partake of the beasts. When he refused, the voice answered: "What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common" (v.9). By this statement, Peter made it clear that the initial "voice" was the voice of God. Peter added that this was repeated three times before the vision was drawn up to heaven. At precisely that moment, three men were at the house looking for him. They were Gentiles sent from Caesarea for him. Peter explained that the Holy Spirit compelled him to go with them, "nothing doubting". Peter took six brethren with him to Cornelius' house. There, Cornelius explained that he had seen an angel who told him to go to Joppa to fetch Simon Peter who would tell him the words whereby he and his family could be saved (vv.13,14). Peter emphasised to his interrogators that his going to the Gentiles and eating with them was not on his own initiative. It was a clear directive from God

Peter testified that while he shared the gospel with them, the Holy Spirit "fell on them as on us at the beginning" (v.15). Peter's use of the phrase, "at the beginning" reminding his Jewish questioners that the gift of the Holy Spirit who was given to them at Pentecost was also given to his host and family. On the day of Pentecost, the filling of the Holy Spirit was accompanied by visible and audible signs of speaking in tongues. The same phenomenon was experienced by Cornelius and his household. The Gentiles possessed full and complete salvation by this indwelling of the Holy Spirit without circumcision. Peter declared that he was reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus Christ who said: "John indeed baptised with water; but ye shall be baptised with the Holy Ghost" (v.16).

Then, Peter delivered his *coup de grace* which silenced his Jewish critics completely, saying, "Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" (v.17). Basically, Peter explained that it was God's plan and directive that he should fellowship and eat with the Gentiles. On this note, his critics "held their peace and glorified God" and accepted that God also granted the Gentiles "repentance unto life".

A few significant truths can be drawn from these events. Firstly, the gift of the Holy Spirit and salvation is granted to everyone who repents of his sins and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, irrespective of his race and culture. Secondly, the barrier between Jews and Gentiles is removed. In Christ Jesus, all believers are one in Him. Thirdly, whenever there is any argument and disagreement, the better way to

resolve the problem is to patiently tell the whole truth.

The Church at Antioch

At this point, Acts looked back to the dispersion of the believers as a result of the persecution against Stephen in Acts 8:1. Those, who were scattered, travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. They preached the word to the Jews only, not the Gentiles. In other words, they would go to the Jewish synagogues and preach the word of God to them.

But some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch to speak to “the Grecians” preaching the Lord Jesus Christ (v.20). In the present context, these Grecians were Greeks, not Greek-speaking Jews. Greek-speaking Jews would have heard the gospel from their fellow believing Jews in the synagogues. These Grecians were Gentiles – Greeks. The amazing thing is that believers from Cyprus and Cyrene and not from Jerusalem came to spread the gospel to the Gentiles. The “hand of the Lord was with them” indicating that God was pleased with what they were doing (v.21). The Lord Himself was with them in the evangelising work – initiating, controlling, directing and granting success. A great number of people believed. This news reached the church in Jerusalem and it quickly sent Barnabas, who was originally from Cyprus, to investigate the happenings in Antioch.

Antioch was the most appropriate place for the world-wide Christian mission. The city was founded in 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nicanor, a general under Alexander the Great. He named the city ‘Antioch’ after his father Antiochus, and he named the port (which was 15 miles west along the

navigable river Orontes) ‘Seleucia’ after himself. Over the years, the city became known as Antioch the Beautiful because of its fine buildings and in the time of the New Testament, the city boasted of its long paved boulevard, which ran from north to south, flanked by a double colonnade with trees and fountains. Although it was a Greek city by origin, its population, estimated at 500,000, was cosmopolitan. It had a large colony of Jews, attracted by Seleucus’ offer of equal citizenship, and Orientals from Persia, India and even China, earning it the name “the Queen of the East”. Since it was absorbed into the Roman Empire by Pompey in 64 B.C., and became the capital of the imperial province of Syria, its inhabitants included Latin as well. Thus Greeks, Jews, Orientals and Romans formed the mixed multitude of what Josephus called ‘the third city of the empire’ after Rome and Alexandria (J.R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.203).

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw “the grace of God” (11:21) and recognised the hand of God working. He encouraged the believers to cleave to the Lord with oneness of heart. Antioch was a city full of sinful temptations. It was necessary for the new converts to “cleave” to the Lord in order to overcome these temptations. The church in Jerusalem sent the right person to Antioch. Acts testified that Barnabas was “a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith.” (v.24). It was no wonder that Barnabas earned the title “son of encouragement”.

Barnabas Seeks Saul

On seeing the work of God in Antioch, the need of the believers and the potential evangelical work of the church, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look

for Saul. He found Saul and brought him to Antioch. Barnabas and Saul stayed in Antioch for one whole year. They joined the church and taught the disciples. The work in Antioch flourished. Barnabas did not manipulate the situation in order to claim any glory for himself. He did not ignore the work and efforts of visiting foreign missionaries to Antioch. He was neither self-seeking nor jealous, nor suspicious of them.

The disciples were called “Christians” first in Antioch. The word comprises two parts: the Greek word “Christos” to mean “Christ” and the Latin ending “ian” to mean “a person of”. A Christian is actually a person who follows Christ; who and what Christ is, he is. The name was used in two other places in the New Testament: (1) by King Agrippa II in mockery – “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian” (Acts 26:28); and (2) by Peter in reproach – “Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed” (1 Peter 4:16). Before the use of this name, believers were called “disciples”, “saints”, “believers”, “brethren”, or as Christ called them “My witnesses.”

The Christians in Antioch Helped Their Brethren

Prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. The Christian activities in that city attracted many prophets and preachers. The word “prophet” means one who foretells the future, preaches and teaches the word of God. Among the prophets who visited Antioch at this time was one named Agabus. He was mentioned again when he came from Jerusalem twenty years later to warn Paul not to go there. In this instance, Agabus predicted that there would be a famine throughout the Roman Empire

during the reign of Claudius Caesar. There were frequent outbreaks of famine during his reign. There was famine between the year A.D. 41 to A.D. 50, in particular A.D. 44 and A.D. 45 which affected Judaea.

The response of the Christians in Antioch was exemplary. Every man including Jews and Gentiles (who mingled freely together) was determined to send relief to their brethren in Judaea. They voluntarily passed the hat around. It was a display of Christian concern and care for their poorer Jewish counterparts in Jerusalem. The relief would help the Jewish believers to purchase food in preparation for the coming famine. Having collected the relief fund, they sent it to the “elders” through Barnabas and Paul. It is the first mention of the office of “elders” in the church. The word comes from the Greek, *presbuteros*, which means one who was an elderly or senior man or one who was an office-bearer in the church.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Office bearers in the church should realise that there will always be those who are not happy or satisfied with their work. Peter was criticised for associating himself with the Gentiles. According to Jewish traditions, he was supposed to separate himself from them. Peter’s handling of the problem teaches us that with patience and proper explanation, the problem can be resolved. He gave a full detailed account of his action pointing out that he was doing the will of God. This complete account of his action is noteworthy. Many a time, misunderstanding results from not knowing the whole issue and problem at hand. We can learn from

Peter that with patience, prayer, wisdom and courage, many of the problems in the church can be solved.

It is highlighted that the work of the Lord must be done in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord. The increase in the number of believers in Antioch was solely due to the fact that the hand of the Lord was with them. It is a true saying that God’s work must be done in God’s way. It is therefore imperative that every Christian and church knows the will of God.

Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Every Christian should aspire to have these same qualities. He lived up to his name of “son of encouragement”. A good person is one who builds up another. A person who is full of the Holy Spirit displays the fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, and whose thoughts and actions are constantly under the influence of the Holy Spirit. A person who is full of faith is one who believes and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ. How wonderful it will be if a church is made up of such Christians only. The Lord will give the increase, strengthen the church and advance His kingdom.

Finally, the fact that the Christians in Antioch, both Jews and Gentiles, were sensitive to the needs of their fellow Christians in Jerusalem is a wonderful picture.

From this passage, we can discern at least five characteristics of the church in Antioch: (1) it is an evangelising church (vv. 19-21); (2) it is a believing church (vv.22-24), (3) it is a doctrinal church (vv, 25-26); (4) it is a Christ-centred church (v.26b); and (5) it is a giving and caring church (vv.27-30).

These are characteristics that are pleasing to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. AMEN.

DAILY READINGS& DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 11:1-2; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 1 Peter 5:9.

Tuesday: Acts 11:3-18; Ephesians 3:1-12

Wednesday: Acts 11:19-21; 1 Corinthians 3:5-9.

Thursday: Acts 11:22-26; 2 Timothy 3:12-17.

Friday: Acts 11:27-30; 2 Corinthians 8:9-15.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Peter learn from his interaction with Cornelius? How can we apply what Peter has learned in our dealings and relationships with other people who may not share the same social and cultural inclinations?

2. What is the distinctive feature marking effective preaching that resulted in “a great number believed”

(v.21)? Can we attain this same distinctive feature?

3. Using Barnabas as an example, how can we encourage and strengthen our Christian brethren in the church?

4. The young church in Antioch helped the older church in Jerusalem (vv.29, 30). Should we be helping other churches too? Should there be any conditions in helping other churches? What are some of the ways in which we can help other churches?

5. We use the word "Christian" quite freely. What are the implications and significance of applying such a title to a person?