

Acts Chapter 11

Chapter 11 begins where chapter 10 ends. Cornelius and his family have been converted and Peter is now defending this to the faithful in Jerusalem. Peter is being compelled to provide testimony to a council of church leaders in Jerusalem. Evidently some believers are upset by reports that Gentiles have accepted the word of God. Peter defends God's actions. God saved an unclean Roman Gentile.

Vvs 1-17

The report of the favorable reception of the word by Gentiles was well received by Peter's colleagues who praised God but not everyone saw it that way.

The apostles and believers and circumcised believers saw life differently.

They are concerned that Peter has rejected Jewish tradition and Peter is beginning to proclaim that they don't understand. Jesus proclaims a new tradition, open to all.

This gathering is seen as the first to debate the issue of gentile believers vs Jewish believers and how to understand this new beginning of the church.

The anxiety of conservative Jews is that they will become as Gentiles by sharing table fellowship with them. Purity laws were a deeply ingrained part of life.

I don't think we can just dismiss them as legalists, or worse. They are trying to come to an understanding of how their traditions fit in Jesus' Way.

I also think they are wondering is there enough Holy Spirit to go around? How do they share grace with formerly unholy Gentiles.

Peter tries to explain how his eating and converting Gentiles happened --- so he explains. Peter claims witnesses, 6 brothers came with him. 6 circumcised believers. And of course what better confirmation than to have an angel deliver a message that all is not right with the world and that nothing God makes (maybe even Gentiles) is unclean. The angel also emphasizes the truth of salvation.

Peter makes the statement that salvation does not depend on heritage or Jewishness but on the Grace of God.

For Peter Spirit baptism is the ultimate connection.

It is interesting that after the baptism we do not hear of Cornelius or his household using their Spirit filled gifts for ministry and Jesus' mission.

Redemption is the key for them not vocation.

They share the gifts of God for the people of God – thanks be to God.

What we get in vs 18 is a concluding silence from the Jewish believers.

God grants even the Gentiles the repentance unto life.

Peter's remarks in vs 17 – If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us... who was I that I could hinder God.

Vvs 19ff

Up to this point the mission to the Gentiles has been minimal.

A new mission has begun in Syrian Antioch. It seems to be the unexpected result of the scattering of the Jewish faithful of Jesus' way following the martyrdom of Stephen.

Upon hearing of the mission Barnabas is sent.

So we first get the unknown fugitives from Jerusalem coming to Antioch. Cyprus is mentioned we think as a precursor to Paul's important visit yet to come. Cyprus has a large colony of diaspora Jews.

Jews first then the Greek. A much used pattern of missionary development.

The Hand of the Lord – recalls the petition of the apostles for God to “stretch out your hand” to perform mighty signs and wonders in fulfillment of Joel's prophecy.

This is being continually answered in fresh ways.

So the Jerusalem community wants this new effort to flourish and send Barnabas.

Barnabas is very successful yet he still goes to get Paul (still Saul). This is interesting for a few reasons, not the least of being, Saul may have been one of the main reasons the initial unnamed group fled Jerusalem after Stephen's death and not Barnabas, goes to bring this man to help lead the new group of believers in Antioch.

It is interesting that this is the place Luke chooses to say this is the first place that the church is called Christians.

One must wonder the reason. Is it to distinguish between the primarily Jewish people of Jesus' Way in Jerusalem, or is it because they have had instruction for a year?

Or maybe it is to separate an order of salvation – Jerusalem believers and all the other Christians.

Next we get the story of Agabus and this sort of sets up two classes of “officers” in the church. Prophets and Elders in Jerusalem.

The Spirit gifts Agabus with the gift of predicting the future. Barnabas and Saul have been gifted with the ability to encourage and instruct.

Gifts in Acts seem to be tied to missionary activity in Acts.

Because of the predicted famine, the church begins to share from their abundance, further instituting the church’s role in communal living. His prediction also provides a spiritual test for the community. Will they participate with those in Jerusalem or only care for themselves _--- sounds like a familiar question to me.

The Antioch congregation’s willingness to share further reinforces their full participation in the community of Jesus.

Luke reports that the famine is throughout the world, yet the Antioch church has enough to share. There was a famine (regional) during the time of Claudius’ reign but hard to tell how widespread. Luke may have been exaggerating slightly, but not sure this is a critical point.

Questions to ponder:

How does our understanding of how the Spirit is bestowed on non-Jews affect our understanding of the way we see outsiders?

How do we criticize those who break tradition?

Antioch was the 3rd largest city in the Roman empire- I wonder if we think of it more as a back water part of the world and don’t realize its importance in the time of Jesus.

Barnabas goes where others fear to tread – where do we fear to go and to whom do we fear to go to?

We are Spirit filled people in Baptism?