

HOW TO BE A BLESSING TO THE CHURCH ACTS 11:1-30

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

As many of you have noticed, we have a fair number of kids who show up here on Sunday mornings. Dan and Eva and their helpers often bring a full load of kids from Henderson and Las Vegas in our church van. Occasionally they have had to turn some kids away. Many of them come from broken families. Many of them come from less than ideal economic circumstances. Sometimes they are a little noisy in our church service.

There is one set of kids who have not been to school in several years. Dan and Eva have been involved in getting them enrolled in a good school. Our youth leaders are also collecting backpacks and school supplies for our kids for the fall. We occasionally help with groceries.

Besides the time and energy that is committed, there is a financial cost to all of this. We spend a fair amount of money on gas for the van. We spend money on food for them when they are here. From a strictly business perspective there is not an expectation of a financial dividend for this commitment.

So why do we do it? What is the point of this? Would it be better just to focus on the kids here in Boulder City? I suspect that the Christians in Jerusalem were asking questions like this in the first century. These Jewish believers got reports that Gentiles up in Antioch were trying to connect with Jesus. Antioch had a pretty scuzzy reputation, perhaps a bit like Las Vegas. These Gentiles didn't know the first thing about the Bible or Jewish law. At least this Cornelius guy in Caesarea was an upstanding citizen. Word was that he had been attending a synagogue and that he was generous in giving alms to Jewish causes. But now the Jerusalem church was being called upon to buy a plane ticket for Barnabas and funding a trip for him to visit these low-lives in Antioch. Wasn't there enough need and opportunity right here in Jerusalem to keep us Christians busy?

Such is something of the situation facing Christians in our story today. Such is something of the challenge that Christians face down through history in trying to figure out how to do church. What priorities should we have in the use of our time and energy and talents and finances?

In the passage that we are going to look at this morning we shall see a situation develop that proves to be something of a pain to the leadership of the early church. It creates some discomfort and tension. It necessitates the expenditure of time and energy on the part of the leaders. But in the end the situation proves to be a blessing--- a tremendous blessing. We are going to examine this situation and find out how matters that may seem to be problems, that challenge us to change, that involve difficulties can, in the end, be blessings. They can be blessings to us and to the church of Christ at large.

The theme of the Book of Acts that we have been studying was expressed in v. 8 of the first chapter. Jesus told His disciples, **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”** Thus far in our study we have seen this witness go out to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. Last time we saw it begin to go out to the Gentiles. Peter, who had been given the keys of the kingdom by Jesus, preached the gospel to the Jews on the Day of Pentecost. In #8 we saw him lay hands on Samaritans with the result that they received the Holy Spirit. Last time we saw him preach to the family of a Gentile centurion which responded in faith and also received the Holy Spirit. Now we are going to see how the gospel makes further inroads among the Gentiles. In the process we will learn something about how to please God and about how to be a blessing to the church--- the local church and the church universal.

I.

One way to be a blessing, according to vv. 1-18 of #11, is to ACCEPT CHRISTIANS FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS. (OVERHEAD ON--- FIRST BLESSING: ACCEPT CHRISTIANS...) Peter probably stayed in Caesarea for a while after preaching the gospel to the household of Cornelius. A few early manuscripts of the New Testament add a statement in v. 2 that Peter stayed in Caesarea for “a considerable time.” Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea. (CAESAREA MAP)

News about the conversion there of Gentiles to Christ quickly spread, and it caused a big stir in Jerusalem. According to vv. 2 & 3, **“So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’”** Literally the text says **“those of the circumcision took issue with him.”** All of the Christian men in Jerusalem were circumcised. So the author Luke seems to be referring to those Christians in leadership who were more strongly committed to Jewish traditions. (PROJECTOR OFF)

There was nothing in the Bible that prohibited Jews from eating with Gentiles. But there were certain kinds of animals that were labeled as unclean, and there was danger of being rendered ceremonially unclean from hanging out in a Gentile’s house. So the rabbis had come to teach that Jews should not go to Gentile homes and should not eat with them period. A Jewish document of the times called *Jubilees* (22.16) warned Jews: **“...separate yourself from the nations, and eat not with them: and do not according to their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness.”** That is the way that religious Jews were taught about how to think about Gentiles.

At the beginning of the church the apostles worshiped at the temple. On the Day of Pentecost Peter argued with the unbelieving Jews that Christianity was part of orthodox Judaism. Stephen was perhaps the first to realize that the death and resurrection of Jesus had rendered the ceremonial part of the Old Testament law obsolete. So when he began to preach about this in the Greek speaking synagogues the Jewish religious leadership reacted strongly, and there was persecution that was directed toward these

Jews who had come from other parts of the Roman Empire and were now following Jesus. They were known as Hellenistic Jews, because they spoke Greek. The native born Jews who followed Jesus and who continued to be observant Jews seemed to escape this persecution.

But now the Jewish Christian leaders of the Jesus movement were faced with a problem. Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus. The Christian leadership had a twofold concern: Theologically, their background and life experience taught them that Gentiles had to become Jews before they could be right with God. Practically, their religious freedom was now threatened by the likelihood that the religious leaders of Israel would no longer be tolerant of the Jewish Christians when they learned that their chief apostle was hanging out with Gentiles. The Jerusalem Christians were likely to take flack for this. It was a problem.

So when Peter showed up in Jerusalem, the Jewish Christian leaders demanded an explanation. Their primary concern was not that he had baptized Gentiles but rather that he was eating with them. Eating with someone in that culture was a mark of acceptance and fellowship. How could Peter eat with Gentiles?

This concern of the Jerusalem Christians sheds additional light on the vision of Peter when the Lord told him to kill and eat unclean animals. Eating was a key issue here. The Lord was seeking to show these Jewish Christians that the ceremonial law concerning cleanliness and uncleanness had been abrogated by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In vv. 4-14, then, Peter repeats the story about how the gospel came to the Gentiles. He stresses the fact that all of these events were the result of God's sovereign work. Peter's involvement was limited to simply obeying the clear and miraculous directions from Christ. This then is the third description of Peter's vision and Cornelius's vision and a second description of how the good news about Jesus was received by the household of Cornelius. The fact that Luke has devoted so much space in his historical account to this conversion of the Gentiles reflects the importance with which he regarded it. This was a very important event in the history of the church.

In vv. 15 & 16 Luke adds this note, **"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'"** Acts #2 does not specifically say that the experience that the disciples of Jesus had on the Day of Pentecost was related to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But here Luke says that it was.

In v. 18 the Jerusalem leaders come to the only logical conclusion that is warranted by Peter's testimony: **"Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."** Notice what this tells us about repentance. A common misperception is that repentance is something that we have to work up within ourselves. "If we are sorry enough, if we discipline ourselves by turning from sin and trying harder to live right, then

God will accept us.” That is contrary to what the Bible teaches. Repentance means turning to Jesus from sin. But this verse says that repentance is something that is granted. The original Greek word simply means “given.” Verse 17 relates this gift to belief in Jesus. So repentance comes from believing in Jesus.

The most important point of this part of the passage is that the Jewish leaders of the church recognized and affirmed that Gentiles could become right with God apart from conversion to Judaism. There are still many issues yet to be worked out. They need to figure out how Gentile Christians should relate to the Old Testament law, how they should live, and how they should relate to Jewish Christians. But the key thing was that the Lord clearly intended that people should be accepted by other Christians on the basis of faith in Jesus alone. This recognition was to be a tremendous blessing to the church.

It is also vital for us to keep in mind that our acceptance of other people must be on the basis of their faith in Jesus alone. Our natural tendency often is to focus on distinctions among Christians and to put up walls. This is detrimental to the well-being of the church. We do it in regard to religious differences. We consciously or unconsciously think, “This person is a Presbyterian; she’s a charismatic; he’s a strict fundamentalist; that one’s a Methodist--- I’m going to keep up my guard with that person.”

Now it is not only permissible, it is actually good to develop viewpoints on secondary issues of the Christian faith. It is perhaps necessary in the long run that we develop different denominations and churches because of our different Biblical interpretations. But if the Lord regards somebody as part of the true family of God, we have an obligation to regard him or her as a brother or sister in Christ.

This lack of acceptance can extend to non-religious areas as well. We can withhold acceptance of fellow believers because they vote Democratic or Republican or they drive a Cadillac or they are on welfare or they are always late to meetings or they have been in prison or they cheer for the New York Yankees. But if God has accepted someone into his family because of their faith in Christ, then we have an obligation to accept that person as well.

II.

In vv. 19 & 20 we are exposed to a second way to be a blessing to the church. (OVERHEAD ON--- SECOND BLESSING: SHARE THE GOSPEL) It is to SHARE THE GOSPEL. Luke tells us, **“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”**

Back in #8 Luke had described how Jewish Christians had fled to Samaria and how the Samaritans had come to believe in Jesus. From there he took up the story of Paul and then Peter. Now he backtracks and describes what happened in another branch of the

kingdom of God. Some of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians went to Antioch. (ANTIOCH 02)

Antioch was to the north of Caesarea and 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea on the Orontes River. It was founded in 300 BC by Seleucid, one of the four generals who had replaced Alexander the Great after his death. Antiochus was the name of this Greek general's father and son. Antioch grew to become the third largest city in the Roman Empire in the time of the Book of Acts. Only Rome and Alexandria were larger.

At this time Antioch was the capital of the Roman province of Syria. (ANTIOCHUS RECONSTRUCTION) It was a very cosmopolitan city. It had Greeks and Romans and Persians and Arabs and Jews. About a seventh of the population is estimated to have been Jewish. It also had a famous religious shrine five miles outside of the city that was dedicated to the gods Apollo and Artemis. Religious prostitution was part of the worship that took place there.

Sociologist Rodney Stark gives us a glimpse of something of what life was like in this city which was going to become the center of Christianity for the next couple of decades: **“Any accurate portrait of Antioch in New Testament times must depict a city filled with misery, danger, fear, despair, and hatred. A city where the average family lived a squalid life in filthy and cramped quarters, where at least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and where most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity. A city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers. A city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence. A city where crime flourished and the streets were dangerous at night. And, perhaps above all, a city repeatedly smashed by cataclysmic catastrophes [earthquakes, fires, epidemics]: where a resident could expect literally to be homeless from time to time, providing that he or she was among the survivors. People living in such circumstances must often have despaired.”** (*The Rise of Christianity*, p. 160-161) Do you suppose a place like this was ripe for the gospel?

The first century Jewish historian Josephus notes that there was a significant number of Gentiles who had either become full converts to Judaism or who had close ties to Jewish worship in Antioch. It was probably among these that the Hellenistic Jews found a warm reception for the gospel. Probably these Gentiles were exposed to preaching about Jesus in the synagogue, and they responded positively. Because of that response some of the Christians began to focus on evangelizing other Gentiles.

The Christians who spearheaded this outreach to the Gentiles are not specifically identified. They were not apparently famous. They didn't have any special titles or positions in the church. They were just ordinary Christians being bold in their witness and speaking to people who would listen. But their listeners were Gentiles. As such they had a different cultural background than the witnesses. But these Christians came to recognize that this should not be a barrier to the spread of the gospel. It should not be

for us either. Thus these witnesses became a blessing to the church. (PROJECTOR OFF)

So can we be a blessing to the local church and to the church universal when we point others to Christ. We have a responsibility to share with those in our sphere of influence and with those who will listen to us who are not of our same cultural background. English archbishop William Temple once observed, **“The church is the only cooperative society in the world which exists for the benefit of its nonmembers.”** (‘Letter from the Archbishop of the West Indies’ in *Theology* [1956], vol. 59) There is a certain truth to that observation. But in seeking to reach unbelievers we also are a blessing to the church.

III.

There is a third way to be a blessing to the church. Verses 21-26 teach us to ENCOURAGE FELLOW CHRISTIANS. (THIRD BLESSING: ENCOURAGE FELLOW CHRISTIANS) Many Gentiles responded to the proclamation of the gospel. When news of this response reached Jerusalem, the leaders decided to send Barnabas to check things out. Since there is no reference to any controversy surrounding the conversion of Gentiles, I suspect that this happened after the Cornelius incident and Peter’s report to the church in Jerusalem. But probably among the Jerusalem church leaders there were still some questions and doubts about these Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus.

Barnabas was an ideal choice to serve as a representative of the Jerusalem church and as a teacher of the new Christians in Antioch. When we were introduced to him back in #5 we saw that he had sold a large tract of land and given the proceeds to the apostles. So he was a generous and committed Christian. Also he was originally from Cyprus (CYPRUS ANTIOCH), a large island in the Mediterranean just to the west of Antioch. Verse 19 indicates that the leaders of the outreach to the Gentiles in Antioch included Jews originally from Cyprus. So there was a natural tie that Barnabas would have with them.

We learn in v. 24 that Barnabas was a mature Christian. (PROJECTOR OFF) Luke says that **“he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.”** This is the kind of person that is useful in leading any kind of organization. Furthermore, he was an encourager. The name “Barnabas” literally means “son of encouragement.” Thus we read in v. 23, **“When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted [many translations have ‘encouraged’] them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose...”**

Barnabas could have faced the temptation to stay at Antioch as the star preacher and main leader of the church. But that was not his perspective on ministry. He was an encourager and a discipler. He decided that this was an opportunity for Paul to get plugged into a blossoming Gentile ministry. Years earlier Barnabas had taken Paul under his wing when the former persecutor had come to Jerusalem. Barnabas had learned about Christ’s commission to Paul to preach to the Gentiles. That was no doubt

a factor in his desire now to have Paul join him. So he went and found him and brought him to Antioch.

Verse 26 adds the note that the followers of Jesus were first called “Christians” in Antioch. The term in Greek literally means “one who belongs to the party of Christ.” The followers of Jesus prior to this had called themselves “brethren,” “disciples,” and “those of the way.” There are only two other times in the New Testament where they are called “Christians.” This was because the term was probably used originally by the opponents of the followers of Jesus. Since “Christ” means “messiah,” the Jews would not have used it of the Christians. That name would have implied that these Jesus people were indeed following the Messiah. But the unbelieving Gentiles could have used it.

This negative association with the word “Christian” seems to be reflected by the Apostle Peter in #4 v. 16 of his first epistle. (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 PETER 4:16) There he says, **“Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name.”**

On July 4, 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in Mosul, Iraq, and announced the formation of the caliphate of the Islamic State. Four days later ISIS gangs went through Mosul and painted the Arabic letter N on the houses of every Christian in the city. (PROJECTOR OFF) Several Christians were crucified by ISIS. An estimated 100,000 Christians fled the city.

One of these ISIS members was a man by the name of Medo. He became a Christian a few weeks later. This is what he says: **“The Islamic State spray-painted ‘N’ on Christian homes in Mosul to mark them as ‘of the Nazarene’ with disdain. When I arrived in Erbil, I found the Christian refugees that I helped expel from Mosul living in tents provided by the UN. What shocked me is that many of the refugees spray-painted ‘N’ on their tents! Because of their abiding hope in Jesus, the Islamic State did not defeat the Christians of Mosul. The Arabic ‘N’ is now known around the world as a symbol for Christians who are not afraid to declare their love and loyalty to Jesus the Nazarene. My tent now has ‘N’ on it. I was humbled and had tears in my eyes as I marked my new home.”** (Tom Doyle, *Standing in the Fire*, p. 138) Such is something of what may have happened to the term “Christian” for those early followers of Jesus.

So Barnabas was a blessing to the church. He was a blessing because he had a habit and a way of life of encouraging fellow Christians. It is so easy to be cynical and critical and negative in a world that has much that could be criticized. There are always things to be critical about even among Christians and in churches. We profess to follow a holy God. But by virtue of our sinfulness as humans, we always fall short. Biblically we do have a responsibility at times to correct one another and to maintain accountability. But the way to be a blessing is not by being a critic but by being an encourager.

One of the things that attracted me to my wife was that she has the spiritual gift of encouragement. She had a knack for building up people. That is an attractive quality.

We all need to be built up and encouraged. We may not all have the gift of encouragement, but we can all work on developing the quality of encouraging fellow Christians. We can look for ways to express appreciation. We can be on the lookout for people who are feeling down. We can encourage people who need confidence in the use of their own talents and spiritual gifts. In this way we will be a blessing to the church.

IV.

Finally in vv. 27-30 we learn that we can be a blessing to the church when we HELP OTHERS, ESPECIALLY FELLOW CHRISTIANS, WITH PRACTICAL NEEDS.

(PROJECTOR ON--- FOURTH BLESSING: HELP OTHERS, ESPECIALLY....)

According to vv. 27 & 28, **“Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius)...”**

There was no New Testament yet to guide the church about how it should operate and how Christians should behave. The Hebrew Bible provided a lot of help. But there were many unanswered questions that Christians had about how they should live. Prophets who were gifted by the Lord to provide divine revelation did much to bridge this gap. On one occasion a prophet by the name of Agabus told the Christians in Antioch that a great famine would occur. Luke confirms that it did indeed take place during the reign of Claudius, who was Roman emperor between 41 and 54 AD.

The word for “world” in v. 28 is different than the original word for “world” in John 3:16--- “for God so loved the world...” Probably the term in our text was referring only to the Roman Empire. We know from secular Roman history that there was indeed a string of bad harvests resulting from famine conditions in several parts of the empire during the reign of Claudius. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, says that there was an especially bad famine between 45 and 47 AD. He makes mention of a queen from northern Mesopotamia who converted to Judaism. When she heard about the difficult conditions in Jerusalem, she had a couple of ship loads of food sent to the city.

Christians probably would have been cut off from this food supply, however. The Jewish religious leaders controlled local government. Christians would have been cut off from any practical help from these religious leaders, now that the break with Judaism had become more definite.

So there was a practical need among the Jerusalem Christians, and the fledgeling church in Antioch had an opportunity to help out. According to vv. 29 & 30, **“So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.”**

We are introduced here to the principle of proportional giving. Luke doesn't say that they sent their tithe to Jerusalem. Tithing was an Old Testament principle that had been

rendered obsolete by the death and resurrection of Christ. Believers now had the responsibility to give according to their own choice and wisdom and generosity and financial resources. The expectation was that as believers prospered they would give a greater proportion of their financial resources to Christian causes. (1 CORINTHIANS 16:2) Thus the Apostle Paul later says in #16 v. 2 of 1 Corinthians, **“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.”**

Notice also that it is the elders in Jerusalem who receive the gift rather than the apostles. Apparently the leadership of the church has expanded. The apostles may also have begun to spread out and be involved in itinerant ministries. Thus they may not always been around in Jerusalem. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Another key dynamic at work here is that the Jerusalem church was comprised of Jewish Christians. The new church in Antioch had a lot of Gentiles. The distinction between Jewish and Gentile Christians at times threatened the unity of the early church. But now the Gentile Christians had a very practical opportunity to help out the mother church in Jerusalem. For Gentile Christians to give to their fellow Jewish believers had to have a very positive effect on the unity of the entire church. How could Jewish Christians have a negative attitude toward Gentile believers when they were helping to keep bread on their tables? This act of generosity was a blessing to all the Christians.

When we help other people, especially fellow Christians, with practical needs, we are a blessing to the church as a whole. As most of you know, we have a deacon's fund which is used to help people primarily connected to our church who have financial needs. Our deacons and deaconesses try to be on the lookout for people in our midst who need that kind of help. If you ever want to make a contribution to this fund, just make a note on your check for “deacons' fund,” or attach a note to your cash contribution. (You have also just heard Dan this morning talk about the needs and opportunities with our youth group.)

So if we want to be a blessing to the church, we need to accept people on the basis of faith, share the gospel, encourage the saints, and help people with practical needs. In doing this we are not just helping out some impersonal institution. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:22-23) In Ephesians #1 the Bible says, **“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”** The church has an organic unity with Jesus Christ. When we are functioning as a blessing to the church, we are serving Jesus Christ. We are a blessing to Him.