

18. Peter Reports and the Gospel Goes to Greeks in Antioch: Acts 11

The last lesson, covering the conversion of Cornelius' house and the taking of the gospel to the Gentiles, closed with Peter baptizing Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:46b-48a:

Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." 48 So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Following the conversions, Peter stayed on a few days (Acts 10:48b). Chapter 11 begins with the response of the church at Jerusalem to this violation of Jewish custom and law; i.e., eating with the Gentiles.

Peter Criticized for Eating with Gentiles

Acts 11:1-3

11 The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him 3 and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

One might say that the news of the gospel going to the Gentiles, spread, even before Peter could get back to Jerusalem. The message that had spread so rapidly was not that these Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit, but it was the message that the Gentiles had received the word of God. The focus of the passage is on the power of the word of God.

What happened to the Gentiles is exactly what happened to the Jews on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:41:

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Salvation's power is in the word of God and in the believers' belief and obedience to the word. Paul described how the power is in the word of truth, the gospel in Eph 1:13, "13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation." Paul also applied this power of the gospel to Jew and Gentile alike in Rom 1:16: "16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

Evidently, the Jewish Christians had more of a problem with Paul's eating with the Gentiles than he had with the Gentiles hearing and obeying the gospel.

Acts 11:4-18

4 Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. 6 I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. 7 Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.'

8 "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

9 "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' 10 This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

11 "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. 12 The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. 13 He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. 14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

15 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. 16 Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

18 When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

The story told in these verses is essentially the same as the story in Acts 10. However, this account, as told by Peter, shows very clearly the role of the word in their conversion and the role of the Holy Spirit in their conversion. Verse 14 states directly the role of the word of the gospel in their conversion: "14 He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved."

Peter also explained in precise words the role of the Holy Spirit in verse 17: "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

The response of the Christians in Jerusalem confirms this understanding of how the word of the gospel is the instrument of power in conversion. This episode ends with the Christians in Jerusalem saying that God had "granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

The Gospel Goes to Greeks in Antioch

Acts 11:19-21

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

In Acts 8:2-4, Luke described how the Christians were scattered abroad at the persecution following Stephen's stoning:

2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.



The map shows that while some of the scattered Christians went to Antioch. It was those who went first to Cyprus and Cyrene who then went to Antioch and preached to Greeks who would have been Gentiles. The message to these Greeks was the same—the good news about the Lord Jesus. The response of the people was also the same—they believed and turned to the Lord.

This event is just one of many events, which fulfill the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8: “. . .you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Acts 11:22-24

22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Luke introduced Barnabas, a strong worker in the church, in Acts 4:36-37, where Barnabas’ demonstrated charity by his gift to help those less fortunate:

36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

Barnabas had also paved the way for Saul to meet with the apostles when he returned to Jerusalem after his conversion in Acts 9:27:

27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus.

Here, Luke describes Barnabas as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” He encouraged the church to remain true to the Lord and he brought many people to the Lord.

The Disciples Called Christians First at Antioch

Acts 11:25-26

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Perhaps the most important accomplishment for Barnabas was that he went to Tarsus and brought Saul back. From Antioch, Paul will launch many great efforts to preach the gospel.

Most importantly in this passage is the fact that the “disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” Jesus charged his apostles to make disciples when he commissioned them in Matt 28:19-20:

19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Christian is the new name prophesied for the New Jerusalem in Isa 62:2:

2 The nations will see your righteousness,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.

This entire chapter describes the New Jerusalem and parallels the following references in the Revelation. Isaiah forecasts what is to come and the Revelation teaches what has happened when the revelation is complete.

In Antioch and from Antioch, the Gentiles became disciples and the nations saw the glory of the righteousness of God. The name, *Christian*, has lost its specific meaning and finds only general use; i.e., a *Christian* nation. Religious individuals go by denominational names and not by the once specific name, but now made general name, *Christian*. Receiving the name, *Christian*, means that we are uncompromising slaves of Christ. Only members of the Lord's church so faithfully go by this name, *Christian*. The idea that the name was given as a derogatory name is inconsistent with the facts, since neither Jews nor Gentiles would have so elevated Jesus as the Christ and master [See Notes on the Revelation, www.gospellessons.info].

Only New Testament Christians of the first century and those New Testament Christians of today, who insist on that name and that name alone, know the full implications of that name. Rev 2:17 teaches, "To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." The name of Christ (Christian) is the name of those disciples who follow only Jesus. The name of Jesus is the name of the only church made up of Christians (the church of Christ). Rev 3:12-13 draws together all these names in one single statement:

I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.

Mount Zion, the New Jerusalem, and the church of Christ are the same according to Heb 12:22-24:

22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, 23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, 24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The church of the firstborn is the church of Christ. John described Jesus as the firstborn in Rev 1:5: ". . . Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Paul also identifies Jesus as the firstborn in Col 1:18: "And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy."

Peter teaches us that this name is to the praise of God in 1 Peter 4:16: "16 However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

The new name Christian of Antioch of old is the new name Christian used only in a specific way by members of the body of Christ, the church of Christ, today. Only those who use the name Christian in this New Testament way know its meaning.

The Worldwide Famine

Acts 11:27-30

27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his

ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

The famine predicted by Agabus was to be worldwide. The decision to send help to the brothers in Judea was a decision by a church of Gentile Christians to help churches of Jewish Christians. Thus, the Gentile Christians continued to manifest the benevolent spirit first shown among the Christians throughout Acts, but beginning in Jerusalem in Acts 2:44-45: "44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Appropriately, the Antioch church sent their help to the elders of the churches of Judea. They chose Barnabas and Saul to carry out this task.

Agabus will appear and prophesy one more time when Paul is returning to Jerusalem. In Caesarea, they stayed in the house of Philip the evangelist when Agabus came down from Jerusalem. He came over to Paul and took his belt, tied his hands and feet with it and said: "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"