

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

More Prejudice Abandoned

Chapter Eleven

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From the very beginning of the Jewish nation it had been God's intention that all the nations would be served by His word.

Gen 22:18 “And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

The Jews were the chosen people to whom God gave His blessings and His teachings but they were not supposed to just sit on it for themselves. But the Jewish people did not understand that they were just the chosen instrument through whom all the nations would be served. They spent about 3000 years becoming more and more spiritually intolerant of the other people. It is true that God taught them not to intermarry with foreigners and to drive out the people from the land God gave them, but those rules were for the establishment of the chosen people as a separate race and were not spiritual rules. Now God was working with them to make it true that the only forgiveness was through Jesus and such forgiveness was available first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Again the Jews were to be established as the first born of the new covenant but they were then to spread the truth to all nations. In this chapter Luke explains how God used His teaching to Peter to be understood by more Jewish Christians.

Acts 11:1 “Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

Acts 11:2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him,

Acts 11:3 saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."”

Note that these Jewish Christians did not complain to Peter about the Gospel being preached to the Gentiles but they took issue with him about his going to them and eating with them. Socializing with an unacceptable people was a great issue with them.

When I was about 10 years old I used to play softball with some other children in a lot next to our house that we owned. It happened that a few of the other children were of a different color than I was, the year was about 1948, and we lived in a small town in Mississippi. Some men came and told my dad that he had to make me quit playing with those black kids or things could get tough. Well Dad told me that I had to tell the black children that they could not play in our lot. I was devastated to have to tell this other young guy that he could not play with us. I did not understand and I was very sad for a long time for I felt sorry for the other children and I saw no reason to act differently toward them than any other children. So I have experienced this prejudice toward other

people. I have seen the unreasonable hate for other people and I even was forced to participate in a separation between races even though it was not my choice. One may say that this experience is not a religious experience but I would say that anything that we do reflects our religious center.

Well, these Jewish Christians had a deep lesson to learn from the big fisherman. In their eyes what Peter did was as bad as what I had done seemed to some hateful men in my home town. I have also experienced hatred toward black people in a “Christian” church. I was an usher in a church in another Mississippi town in about 1974. I was at the back of the church to greet people and to bring them in to a pew. A black family came up the steps of the church and I greeted them just like anyone else and led them to a pew. After I returned to the back of the church a white family came storming out of the church and the husband cursed me out for letting those black people come into “their” church. I was again devastated. The hatred in that man’s eyes was awful and it seemed worse to me than my earlier event because this event occurred in a worship center. I don’t know what happened to that family but we can read what happened to these early Jewish Christians as Peter explained how God taught him that all people are equal in the eyes of God.

Acts 11:4 But Peter began speaking and proceeded to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying,

Acts 11:5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, a certain object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me,

Acts 11:6 and when I had fixed my gaze upon it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air.

Acts 11:7 "And I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Arise, Peter; kill and eat.'

Acts 11:8 "But I said, 'By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.'

Acts 11:9 "But a voice from heaven answered a second time, 'What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.'

Acts 11:10 "And this happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky.

Acts 11:11 "And behold, at that moment three men appeared before the house in which we were staying, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

Acts 11:12 "And the Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. And these six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man's house.

Acts 11:13 "And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, 'Send to Joppa, and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here;

Acts 11:14 and he shall speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

Acts 11:15 "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning.

Acts 11:16 "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

Peter answered an emotional attack with calm orderly telling of the events that God had worked in his life to help him understand God's attitude toward all His people. He explained the basics of the event and then told how he remembered some words of the Lord concerning baptism with the Holy Spirit. Note that this is the third time that Luke told about this event emphasizing its importance in the early spread of Christianity. This last statement is Peter's way to bring to the point that God acted on these people.

Acts 11:17 "If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

Acts 11:18 And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life."

Peter's rhetorical question in verse 17 sums the above verses nicely. Who indeed is there who can stand against God? If they claim to worship God then whatever He tells them they will obey without question. Now I do not think that I am alone in that as I have studied the Word of God over the years there were times when I had to stop reading and start asking to be taught anew because what I had just read was in conflict with my previous understanding. When those times happen I have trained myself to not question God's wisdom and teaching but to pray for God to teach me the meaning of what I read and to help me apply such into my daily life. My chosen direction since the fall of 1970 has been to obey and to serve God regardless of what that means. I have not always been faithful but my direction has been set and I have not deviated from it. Such was also the reaction of these Jewish Christians. They calmed down and began glorifying God as they realized that God had the same new covenant for all people.

But note that they did not make any more comment about socializing with the Gentiles. We will see later that even Peter still had problems with socializing with the Gentiles and Paul had to "dress him down" about such an attitude. How can we not accept into our family the people whom God accepts into His family? It is one thing to allow "different" people to come into our worship services and to worship God but it is an entirely different thing to accept these people into our homes and to eat with them. The Family of God is very special and until we totally accept all Christians into our homes we have not yet removed the prejudices of our hearts.

We now begin a different section of this chapter as Luke addresses the actions of the scattered Christians. Persecution caused the Christians to scatter but that was not destructive to the spreading of the Gospel. Actually the persecution afforded new avenues for the Gospel to spread.

Initiation of the New Movement

Acts 11:19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.

Acts 11:20 But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Acts 11:21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

We read that the initial spread of the Gospel was only to the Jews as was befitting their prejudice. But then we see a word that many of us have learned to love in the Scripture: “But”. God placed some seeds of the new movement into the group of evangelicals by means of some men from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to Antioch to preach the new comprehensive message. Note at this point that Christianity is inclusive to all races and genders but not to all people. Christianity is inclusive to only those foreknown before the foundation of the world by God. But we do not know who the chosen people are so we are to evangelize to all people of all races and sexes so that the chosen people will hear the Word of God.

Antioch was one of the top three magnificent cities in the world at this time. The others were Rome and Alexander. The main street down the center of Antioch was four miles long. This was also a totally pagan city and the capital city of the Greeks. We have seen the progression of the spread of the Gospel from Jews to Gentiles who were God-fearers and then to Gentiles who were pagans. We then see evangelism happening on the same scale and to the same types of people as reached today. Antioch was a political city, a commercial center, and a morally corrupt area. Outside of the city was a park called “the Grove of Apollo” where people would come to indulge in their sexual promiscuity. It was at this city that a great church was established. Luke tells us how this spread of Christianity came to such a sinful city.

Confirmation of the New Movement

Acts 11:22 And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

Acts 11:23 Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

Acts 11:24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

Hearing the news of the new movement, the central church sent a trusted investigator to see if indeed this movement was of God. They sent a man of great Godly qualifications and when he saw that indeed this new movement was of God he rejoiced and began encouraging them to accept this work of God. It seems that the church at Jerusalem needed to know if indeed these people who began socializing with Gentiles were now associating with the sinners at Antioch. They found that not only were the Christians mixing in with such sinners but their purpose was to preach the Gospel message and then God was bringing the sinners into His family. We do not know how many people were being saved but the number was large as the Good News spread into the world. We know that Barnabas was a Jew whose given name was Joseph, who came from Cyprus, who was very generous, and who was an encourager. Perhaps the church sent Barnabas rather than Peter because they wanted a fresh look at the situation from someone who had not been involved with the spread of the Gospel from the Jewish center. They sent a man who was full of the Holy Spirit and thus capable of being a judge of the correctness of what was happening in this city.

Consolidation of the New Movement

Acts 11:25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;

Acts 11:26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

After Barnabas had seen that the work in Antioch was indeed a mighty work of God he now knew that to build up the church properly the people would have to be taught the proper theology. Barnabas knew that he was not a teacher. His spiritual gifts involved encouraging and faith. So Barnabas went to seek a man full of the gifts of knowledge and teaching. Tarsus was about one hundred miles from Antioch but Barnabas knew that Saul was needed for this mission field. In our study of the gifts of the Holy Spirit we discussed the various gifts and the importance of each person using those gifts for the purpose of building up the body of Christ. This event is very important for us today in that we need to know the gifts of other Christians and we have to be willing to put down our own importance and seek to organize those people with gifts that are needed for specific purposes.

So now Saul began his ministry as he taught in this church for one year. We are not told of the details of how Barnabas persuaded Saul to come to Antioch but we know that Saul was dedicated to the Lord and that Barnabas was a trusted man of God. It seems that no persuasion was necessary but Saul knew were he was needed and he went to teach. Modern church members need to understand this arrangement of duties so that not just one person is entrusted to all the details. It is very important to have the proper people as the church leaders so that the proper spiritual gifts are being used. Prior to this time Christians had been called disciples, saints, believers, brothers, and witnesses. Now for the first time we see that these people with all of those characteristics are now called Christians. So a Christian is a disciple, a saint, a believer, a brother, and a witness. These people were called “Christ-ones”. We are trying to be like our Lord Jesus the Messiah and hence we have this wonderful name.

Cooperation of the New and the Old

Acts 11:27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Acts 11:28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.

Acts 11:29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

Acts 11:30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

It seems so appropriate to end this chapter with this wonderful story about how the Christians helped each other in time of need. They were given advanced warning of an impending disaster and they reacted to send help to the people who would be in need. As far as we know this is the first recorded event in history where one group of people

collected aid and sent it to another group of people. This help was sent from Christians to Christians for we are to take care of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Matt 25:31 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.

Matt 25:32 "And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats;

Matt 25:33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Matt 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Matt 25:35 'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in;

Matt 25:36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

Matt 25:37 "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink?

Matt 25:38 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?

Matt 25:39 'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

Matt 25:40 "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.'"

We will read of other selfless behavior of Christians helping other Christians in our study of the writing of Luke. When we become Christians we are bound together with fellow Christians of all races and genders throughout the world. We love these other brothers and sisters because we are all loved by Jesus.

Eph 4:4 "There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling;

Eph 4:5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

Eph 4:6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

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