

Study 16: Acts chapter 11

Introduction

After dealing with the conversion of the first Gentiles in Chapter 10, Luke revisits the events in Chapter 11, and then tracks down Saul again.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Why does Luke recount the story of Cornelius again?

What accusation is made against Peter, and Why?

How did Peter anticipate the questions?

What does 11:15 tell us about the baptism with the Holy Spirit?

Note 11:19 – a key verse in the book of Acts!

What do we know about Antioch?

The Jerusalem church's reaction to a "Greek church" in Antioch?

Why did Barnabas go and look for Saul?

The disciples are called christians

The great famine predicted

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *The disciples are called christians. What are some other names for God's people? (Acts 6:3, 9:1, 9:13, 1Cor 7:12, Rom 9:26, Gal 3:26.)*
- *How was the money sent from Antioch to Judea? Did Barnabas and Saul have a special role?*
- *If it was a world-wide famine, how did the brethren in Antioch manage to raise the money to buy food? Wouldn't they need it themselves?*

Read chapter 12 in preparation for next week.

Notes for study 16: Acts chapter 11

Introduction

After dealing with the conversion of the first Gentiles in Chapter 10, Luke revisits the events in Chapter 11, and Saul is tracked down again.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

These events follow directly after the end of Chapters 9 & 10, and are therefore dated at AD 37. (Compare 9:43, 10:6; and 11:12). However at the end of the chapter, we see the return of Saul as he comes to the church in Antioch. The date of this return is usually recognised as around AD 42. Saul and Barnabas laboured for a whole year with the church in Antioch (11:26), and this occurred before Herod's death (recorded in chapter 12) in AD 44. There may have been a change of date (that we have not noted) in 9:32 – perhaps of a year or more. This would still leave another change of date at 11:19 that could have been another 2 or 3 years.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Peter recounts the events of Cornelius' conversion to the Apostles in Jerusalem. The church is established at Antioch. Barnabas is sent to Antioch, and then goes to find Saul and brings him back to Antioch. Disciples are first called christians. A great drought in Judea is prophesied.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Peter, (Cornelius) Barnabas, Saul, Agabus.

Body of the Study

Why does Luke recount the story of Cornelius again?

As we have noticed a few times before, Luke gives us “pictures” and “glimpses” of what is happening in the church at the time, and not a complete history. If such a history had been written, it may resemble something like Josephus rather than the narrative of Luke.

The news of the conversion of the Gentiles had spread like wildfire. The apostles had “heard” the news, but did not quite know what to make of it. Either they called for Peter, or Peter came back and was fronted by them. Luke presents a “picture” of how the apostles dealt with new issues and hearsay and established the facts of the matter.

As Peter presents his case, we can look into the situation, observe the events, and as if to see the *first hand experience*, be instructed in the certainty of the events (c/f Lk 1:1-3). It is also possible that Luke received the information for the two accounts from two different sources – the account in Chapter 10 from Peter and Cornelius, and the account in Chapter 11 from the brethren in Jerusalem. Such differing sources may account for the minor differences (but not contradictions) in the accounts, and also their strong agreement. Both of these things together establish them as true records, as the absence of minor differences in testimonies leads to the conclusion of contrived evidence.

What accusation is made against Peter, and Why?

Peter is accused of going into the houses of Gentiles, and eating with them. This is certainly what he did do – because he stayed in the house of Cornelius (10:48). The Jewish brethren did not appear to be as concerned with the fact that Peter had *taught* the Gentiles, nor that he had baptised them. They seemed more concerned with the breaking of the Jewish law by *eating* with them.

This is exactly consistent with the view that the new religion was just another Jewish sect. To this end, even the apostles themselves did not understand that the Jewish religion had ended at the cross. These truths were progressively revealed to them. It took the dramatic revelation of the unclean animals to Peter, and the full and complete imparting of the Holy Spirit to the

household of Cornelius to make Peter realise that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Whilst Peter had said on the day of Pentecost that the gospel was for *all men* (both Jews and Gentiles), the full import of that statement had not reached home!

How did Peter anticipate the questions?

Peter fully anticipated the line of questioning, and retells the story from the beginning. He also brought with him the six brethren from Joppa who went to Caesarea with him. The bush telegraph had spread very well from Caesarea to Jerusalem, and we can glean from Peter's preparation that it also worked very well in the opposite direction! The six brethren gave absolute and total credence to what Peter had to say, and there was no doubt about what happened, nor about Peter's version of it.

What does 11:15 tell us about the baptism with the Holy Spirit?

Peter's discussion with the apostles shows that baptism with the Holy Spirit was an event that was given only to the apostles, and (at least up to this time) the household of Cornelius.

Peter refers to the events in Caesarea as the same thing that happened "*...to us at the beginning...*", referring to Pentecost when the apostles were baptised with the Holy Spirit. Had baptism with the Holy Spirit been a common occurrence that happened to all Christians signifying their state with God (or even if it was given to just some of them as a "second blessing"), then Peter would not have had to refer back to the events "at the beginning". He would only needed to refer to that which was common amongst all (or many) others.

The compelling statement by McGarvey on the action of the Holy Spirit is worth noting, particularly in light of our previous study on the role that the Holy Spirit plays in conversion:

We have, in this incident, an exhibition of the actual method by which the minds of Christians were enlightened, and their hearts enlarged. We see that Peter was first enlightened by a combination of facts, visions, and words, so as to understand the will of God in the matter, and that through this enlightened understanding he was made to feel the weight of divine authority. Although the Spirit of God dwelt in him continually, and imparted ideas to his understanding directly, yet, when his heart was to be relieved from an injurious prejudice, the end was accomplished by means of ideas communicated to his understanding. Thus the case stands with Peter, who occupies the position of an original recipient of truth.

With the brethren in Jerusalem, who occupied the exact position toward this particular subject which we do to all revealed truth, there is this difference, that *all* the influence, both upon the understanding and the emotional nature, exerted in their case, reached them *through* Peter's words. Still, the influence was not inherent in the *words*, but in the *facts* of which the words were the medium of communication. Moreover, the facts had such an influence only because they indicated the will of God. It was then, at last, the moral power of God, embodied in the facts reported by Peter, but brought to bear through the *words* of Peter, which so changed their hearts. They had only to believe what Peter reported, in order to feel this power. If they had retained their prejudice after this, they would have felt that they were resisting God.

In precisely this way the converting and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit reaches the hearts of men now. We do not have direct communication with heavenly beings, as Peter had, but, like the brethren in Jerusalem, we hear from his lips, and the lips and pens of other original recipients, the same truth which affected their minds and hearts, and we find ours affected by it in the same way. When we resist, we are resisting not Peter and Paul, but the Holy Spirit, by whom they spoke and wrote. The fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in us is no proof that his action upon our moral sentiments is direct or immediate; for he dwelt in Peter, and in the apostles who arraigned Peter; yet his action upon even their hearts was mediate, through ideas communicated. He who asserts for us a species of spiritual influence which was not

exerted even upon the apostles and other inspired men is, to say the least, a daring speculator.¹

Note 11:19 – a key verse in the book of Acts!

Until the conversion of Cornelius, the preaching and conversions were *to Jews only*. There were some believers of Greek background, who were either Proselytes or Jews who had left Palestine and were now living abroad (they may have even been born abroad) *but they were still Jews*.

It was only with Cornelius' conversion that the Gentiles entered the church. Even those who were present on the day of Pentecost were "...**Jews**, devout men from every nation under heaven..." (2:5)

It is worth noting at this point, that in 11:20 Luke turns to those Gentiles who were converted in Antioch *after* the conversion of Cornelius. The brethren had left Jerusalem at the dispersion, and went preaching only to the Jews. However when they heard (by the bush telegraph) about Cornelius they then started teaching and converting the Gentiles.

What do we know about Antioch?

There were several (at least 5 and possibly as many as 16) cities by the name of Antioch in the world at that time, and two of them are recorded for us in scripture. In this case it is Syrian Antioch, and the other is Antioch in Pisidia (in the region of Galatia). All of these cities were built by the Seleucids and named in honour of Antiochus the Great.

Syrian Antioch was founded around 300 BC, and was a planned city. At the time of Paul it would have been the third largest city in the Roman Empire² (after Rome and Alexandria). The city survives today (Antakya) and has a population of around 40,000. It was built approx 30 km upstream from the mouth of the Orontes River, where the seaport for Antioch was the city of Seleucia. It had a strong fresh water supply from springs at Daphne about 8 km away, and was said to have plumbing, sewers, central heating, and a lighting system.³

Antioch features very strongly in the Acts narrative as one of the first strongholds of the Gentile Christians. It was the church that sent Paul out on his three missionary journeys, and it was also the home of Nicolas the Proselyte who was one of the seven deacons (6:5). It may have been Luke's home, with some evidence of this being his mention of the city (and that city alone) in the selection of the seven deacons in chapter 6; and Luke's use of the first person pronoun "we" (in some manuscripts) at 11:28. This suggests that Luke was there in Antioch at the time, and that was where he became acquainted with Paul.

The Jerusalem church's reaction to a "Greek church" in Antioch?

Barnabas was sent to work with the church in Antioch. This may have been something of a *check it out* mission, but we need to remember that Barnabas was called "*the son of encouragement*" by the apostles. If the mission was aimed at *checking out* the new church, then they probably would have sent someone else on the journey. Look at what happens when Barnabas goes to Antioch:

*"...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. **He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith**, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord..." (11:23-24 NIV)*

Further, the description that he was "*...to go as far as Antioch...*" (11:22) implies that on his journey he was to help as many churches as he could along the way. This does not really sound like a mission of *trying to keep things in check* at all. In any event, that would be in

¹ McGarvey (1) p.143

² Bruce (3) p 20;

Josephus Antiq 12:3:1; Wars 7:3:13.

³ Reese p 414.

conflict with the observation in the New Testament of totally independent congregations (although some have made an attempt to use this specific case as one in which the Jerusalem church was the “mother church” to the other congregations as they developed). In fact Barnabas went further than Antioch (contrary to his instructions) when he went to Tarsus to look for Saul. Such is consistent with the independence of the churches, rather than with the Jerusalem church having “control” or oversight.

Why did Barnabas go and look for Saul?

It is fairly obvious that Saul and Barnabas were “old friends” from the time of Saul’s conversion (about 7 or 8 years earlier). Barnabas had spent many days with him, and he was very aware of the facts of Saul’s conversion since he declared it to the apostles in Jerusalem (9:26-27). This would no doubt include the part that Luke reveals for us, that Saul was “...*chosen to be the apostle to the Gentiles...*” (see notes p 85).

The work amongst the Gentiles was growing, “...*and a great number believed and turned to the Lord...*” (11:21NKJV). They needed strong teaching and leadership, and who better than “*the apostle to the Gentiles*” to provide it. Further, the language of the passage is that Barnabas had to go and “hunt” for Saul. He did not have his address (as Cornelius did for Peter!). Barnabas *knew* Saul. He knew who he was looking for, and he may have had to persuade to him come back to Antioch. Who better to go that Barnabas?

When they came back to Antioch, they laboured together for a whole year, and they assembled with the church. They did not “breeze through for a two week mission”, or just come by for a weekend, but located themselves there for a whole year “...*and taught a great many people...*” (11:26 NKJV).

This was exactly consistent with Jesus’ great commission to “...*make disciples of all men...*” (as had already happened here) and to “...*teach them to observe all things...that I have commanded...*” (Mt 28:19-20).

The disciple are called christians

This is the first use of the term christian in the New Testament, and it is used only two other times (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet 4:16). Before this, they had been called *disciples*, or *believers*. And here we see what a christian is: it is one who is a disciple (learner) of (about) Christ.

The usual rendering of the text is “...*the disciple were called christians first in Antioch...*” (11:26 KJV) which leaves it as a matter of conjecture as to who it was that so named them. Such has been the subject of much speculation. However the language of the Greek text suggests that it could be rendered “...*and (they) called the disciples christians first in Antioch...*”. As such, the naming of the disciples as *christians* belongs to Saul and Barnabas with divine ordination.⁴

The great famine predicted

Some prophets (*inspired spokespersons for God*) came from Jerusalem. One of them was named Agabus, who will appear again in chapter 21. He made a prediction of a major famine that was to come upon the land.

Some of the manuscripts in 11:28 read “...*and when we had gathered around, he began to indicate...*”. This is the first use of the first-person by Luke in the narrative, and indicates that Luke was there at the time. This strengthens the argument that Antioch was Luke’s home.

Luke (writing long after the event he is describing) gives a note that the prediction of Agabus “...*came to pass during the reign of Claudius...*” (11:28). He reigned as Roman Emperor from 41 to 54 AD, and during his reign 4 famines occur⁵. Josephus (Antiq 20:11:5) tells about a famine that affected Judea in 45 AD. Whilst this might appear to be the one that Agabus

⁴ Resse, p 421

⁵ Reese p 424 quoting Eusebius, Tacitus, Dion Cassius, and Josephus.
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was predicting, the problem is, it occurred after the death of Herod in AD 44. In the following verses, Paul and Barnabas arrive with the famine relief whilst Herod is still alive (12:1).

The relief was sent to the elders in Jerusalem. This is the first mention of elders having been appointed in Jerusalem, and the first mention of elders in the New Testament church. It was Saul's second visit to Jerusalem, and a brief one, since he returns back to Antioch in 12:25. It is a visit that he does not recount in the Galatian letter (as he did not see any of the apostles – the important issue that he is discussing in Galatians).

Note the order that Luke uses here of “...*Barnabas and Saul*...” (11:30). The perspective at that time was that Barnabas was the more prominent of the two. This is again indicative of the intricate detail that Luke weaves into his narrative in order to be precisely accurate. The narrative was written many years after Saul had become Paul, and had taken on the much stronger leadership role (as we will see later).

To go to the next study, click here.
[Acts Study 17 - Chapter 12.doc](#)