

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The present chapter we divide into four parts:

- I. Peter's defence in Jerusalem and its result** (Verses 1-18).
- II. The Foundation of the Church in Antioch** (Verses 19-21).
- III. Barnabas sent to Antioch** (Verses 22-26).
- IV. The Prophecy of Agabus** (Verses 27-30).

I. Peter's defence in Jerusalem and its results.

“And the apostles and brethren that were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them. But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying, I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me: Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw four-footed beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat. But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth. But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven. And behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me. And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house: And he showed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved. And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning.

“Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life” (Verses 1-18).

Peter had tarried certain days with the happy company in Caesarea, no doubt, telling them more of the Lord, of His life and miracles, His death and resurrection. How blessed this fellowship must have been! It fully demonstrated that the middle wall of partition had been broken down and that the believing Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ Jesus.

But the report of his action and that the Gentiles had received the Word of God reached the apostles and brethren in Judea. Instead of creating rejoicing over what God had done, contention arose and the danger of a division was imminent. Failure is seen once more.

Murmurings had arisen before (Chapter 6); but here party spirit showed itself for the first time. This subtle work of the flesh (Galatians 5:20) * was ready to make a rend among the brethren.

* The words translated in Galatians 5:20 by “**seditions, heresies,**” means “*disputes, schools of opinion.*”

We must bear in mind that two classes of Jews composed the assemblies in Jerusalem and in Judea. The Hellenists and the more strict Palestinian Jews. To the latter class belonged many Pharisees and the large number of priests, who had believed. These were all zealous for the law (Acts 21:20).

These still looked upon the Gentiles as unclean.

Their belief was that a Gentile in order to be saved had to submit to circumcision and become a Jew.

Years later we find them very outspoken about this in the record of the first church council held in Jerusalem. Publicly they stated “**that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses**” (Acts 15:5).

Here the party spirit asserts itself and the dissenters are called “**they of the circumcision,**” which means that some of them pressed circumcision and the law unduly, for all the Jewish believers were of the circumcision. Gradually they became a strong party in the church. Striking it is, too, that Peter is called later “**the apostle of the circumcision,**” and later his action in Antioch, so inconsistent with the events in Caesarea, brought forth the divine rebuke through the apostle of the Gentiles (Galatians 1:14). The eating with the Gentiles was the one point of accusation here. “They seemed to have heard the fact, without any circumstantial detail from some reporter, who gave the objectionable part of it, as it is not uncommon in such cases, all prominence.” *

* Dean Alford in Greek Testament.

Peter's answer is most instructive. He does not refer to his apostolic authority. He might have reminded them of the fact that the Lord at another Caesarea had committed unto him "**the Keys of the kingdom of heaven**," and that in virtue of this commission he had acted. But no reference to that is made at all by him. Nor does he go to his fellow apostles to lay the matter before them.

His defence consists in a rehearsal of what had taken place. We do not need to follow this again, as we have already done so in the previous chapter. The statements given proved irresistible. Here were facts which were unanswerable. They heard these things, they held their peace. But more than that, they began to praise instead of strife; they glorified God.

Gratefully they acknowledged that God had granted to the Gentiles repentance unto life. In the course of time this wonderful opening of the door to the Gentiles was forgotten and "**they of the circumcision**" became a strong party. Peter but briefly refers in Acts 15 to that, which he so fully describes here.

II. The Foundation of the Church in Antioch.

"Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phoenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (Verses 19-21).

The nineteenth verse connects with Chapter 8:4.

The great persecution had scattered the believers. Philip had been the chosen instrument to bring the gospel to Samaria. That had to be reported first. And now we are to learn what others did and where they proclaimed the blessed Gospel. They went to Phoenice. This was a strip of coast land some 120 miles long. Tyre and Sidon were cities of Phoenice. There the Gospel was preached and with blessed results, which appear later in this book (21:4-7; 27:3). Cyprus was closely connected with Phoenice. Many ships sailed constantly from the Phoenician ports to that island.

Barnabas and Mnason (21:16) were from Cyprus. Then others must have gone along the coast and reached Antioch. They all preached to the Jews only. But some of these evangelists were men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, when they came to Antioch, preached the Lord Jesus to the Greeks, that is to the Gentiles. A great number of these turned unto the Lord and believed. Antioch comes into prominence as the other great center of Christianity, second only to Jerusalem. Here the preaching to the Gentiles was begun and fully recognized by the church in Jerusalem.

From here the great missionary movement of the apostolic age started.

Here Saul appears again to take from now on, as the apostle of the Gentiles, a leading part. In Antioch, furthermore, the disciples were called "**Christians**" for the first time. In Jerusalem, this name was unknown; they were termed "**the sect of the Nazarenes**."

All this brings out the great importance as the center of Christianity on Gentile ground. This importance has led some to see in Antioch the place where the church began to come into existence. It is denied that the day of Pentecost was the day that the church was empowered for service, but the claim is made that the church began in Antioch. This is a far-fetched theory, which lacks scriptural support.

We have already shown that Pentecost was the day on which the church received power. No event like the baptism of the Holy Spirit took place in Antioch, but Antioch shared in that which had happened in Jerusalem.

The Antiochan Gentile believers were simply added by the same Spirit to the church, the foundations of which are the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). Antioch itself was an influential city founded by Seleucus Nicator in 300 B. C. It was a beautiful city situated on the river Orontes, with marvellous scenery. It was a luxurious, voluptuous city, steeped in the greatest immoralities. Here the Gospel was to be manifested as the power of God unto salvation.

It is a very striking contrast with what goes before in this great historical book that the instruments used in preaching the Gospel to the Antiochenes, and in the establishment of the church among them, are not named.

The true character of the church, independent of any human, earthly authority, dependent on Him who is Head over all, is indicated in this fact. And yet, as we shall see directly, the new departure had to be acknowledged and recognized in Jerusalem. It needed, however, not apostles to lay their hands upon them, so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

III. Barnabas sent to Antioch.

“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Verses 22-26).

The wonderful work done in Antioch, the assembling of large numbers of Greeks, who had turned to the Lord, induced the church in Jerusalem to send forth Barnabas.

The church in Jerusalem felt a responsibility towards this new evidence of the power of their risen and glorified Lord. They wanted to know in Jerusalem if the reports were true, and if true the assembly had to be recognized as such.

This shows that the Oneness of the church, though not yet fully made known by revelation, was nevertheless realized through the Holy Spirit.

And that a blessed relationship existed between the assembly in Jerusalem and the one in Antioch, is seen by Peter's visit in that city, when in the liberty wherewith Christ, has made us free, he ate with these believing Gentiles and enjoyed fellowship with them (Galatians 2:11-12).

Barnabas was well fitted for the mission. However, he does not come as an apostolic delegate, to baptize, to confirm or to admit these new believers into some fellowship, but his mission was simply to see if "**the tidings of these things**" were true. And if true the recognition of these Gentile believers had to follow.

Barnabas when he came saw the grace of God. He saw that a genuine work of the Holy Spirit had been accomplished. This filled his heart with joy. His exhortation was that with purpose of heart they should cleave to the Lord. Nothing else was needed. These Gentile believers were the Lord's and as such they were to cleave to the Lord. The unity with the fellow believers in Jerusalem was with this recognized. Barnabas did not remain idle while he was in Antioch. The Holy Spirit used him mightily. The exhortations of the good Barnabas, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, resulted in a great crowd which was added unto the Lord. This latter expression is the same as used in chapter 2:42 and 47.

But here was a great field; a strong man was needed. No angel nor heavenly vision points out that man. Barnabas knew him, and guided by the indwelling Spirit, *the Son of consolation*, for this is the meaning of Barnabas, departs to go to the nearby Tarsus to find Saul.

Saul was his man. Barnabas had introduced him to the apostles and there can be no question at all that Barnabas knew from Saul's lips and experience, that he had been called by the Lord to preach to the Gentiles. He found him in Tarsus. Patiently Saul must have waited for the right moment when his life's work should begin. That time had now come. We see them together in Antioch for a whole year; they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people.

A brief sentence tells us that these Gentiles, who had become believers in the Lord, were first called Christians in Antioch.

The movement had attracted the attention of the outsiders. The Jews, it is certain, did not give this name, but the Gentiles invented it. Antioch was famous for its readiness to jeer and call names; it was known by its witty epigrams. So they coined a new word, "*Christianoi*" - Christians. It is used exclusively by outsiders, as seen in the case of Agrippa, also see I Peter 4:16. Jews and Gentiles alike were called by this name, "Christians," so that it bears testimony to the oneness of Jew and Gentile in Christ.

IV. The Prophecy of Agabus.

"And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Verses 27-30).

An additional proof is found in these verses of the intercourse and fellowship, which existed between the assembly in Jerusalem and the assembly in Antioch.

Prophets came to Antioch from Jerusalem. This is the first time that New Testament prophets are mentioned. They came as a gift of the Lord to His church next to the apostles. Many were prophets in the early days of Christianity. However, their gift must not be limited to predictions.

Anyone who speaks of divine things out of the fullness of a heart, which is in blessed communion with God, prophesies. These spiritual gifts were led from Jerusalem to Antioch to minister there. Prominent amongst them is Agabus. *

* The same Agabus who appears in 21:11.

He made a prediction that a great famine should soon come. It came during the days of Claudius Caesar.

Then follows a precious action, which clearly shows again the blessed fellowship and unity of the church. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judea. The church in Jerusalem was poor, the disciples in Antioch were more blessed with earthly things. And now, according to their ability, it was an individual matter, they gave. They sent temporal gifts to Jerusalem from which they had received so much spiritual blessing. Barnabas and Saul carried the fellowship to the elders of the assembly in Jerusalem.

~ end of chapter 11 ~

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