

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY

THE JEWS CONVINCED THAT THE GOSPEL IS FOR THE GENTILES

(Acts 11:1-30)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 18

GENERAL DIVISIONS OF CHAPTER

1. Peter convincing the apostolic church that the Gentiles were to be received on equal terms with the Jews (1-18).
2. The church at Jerusalem promoting mission work among the Gentiles (19:26).
3. The newly-formed church at Antioch sending aid to the home church in Judaea (27-30).

LESSONS OF PERMANENT VALUE

1. The manner in which true Christians make an investigation (1-18).
2. The effort which a good man will make to explain his actions (4-17).
3. Evidence that men of all nations should be received into the church (15-17).
4. When we learn God's will, though that should be contrary to our former bias, we should glorify him (18).
5. When the church has a clear understanding of God's purpose it spreads into new fields (19-22).
6. When the home church is awake it sends assistance into new fields where work has been opened (22-26).
7. Christ is the center of Christian teaching, preaching, worship and life (26). The people at Antioch noticed this and called the disciples Christians.
8. True Christians are sympathetic with others in trouble (27-30).

Peter had been convinced that the Gentiles were to be received into the church on the same terms as the Jews. The apostles and disciples who were in Judea heard what had taken place at Caesarea. When Peter returned to Jerusalem he was called to account. They said: "**Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them**" (11:3). Peter explained to them the reason for his actions. He showed them that he was following God's direction and leading. They then were convinced that Peter had acted rightly.

They were satisfied and glorified God for what had taken place, saying: "**Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life**" (11:18).

There were some who had been convinced that the Gospel was intended for the Gentiles before this time. After the martyrdom of Stephen and the bitter persecution which followed, there were two groups of disciples who went out preaching. There was a group which preached to the Jews only. Some of these had gone to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. There were others of Cyprus and Cyrene who went to Antioch and preached to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. As a result of their preaching there were a great number who believed and turned to the Lord. When the church at Jerusalem heard of this they sent Barnabas to lend assistance to the new movement. Barnabas rejoiced in the manifestation of the grace of God and the growth of the work. He saw that the work was so large in that great city that he would need more assistance and he went to Tarsus to bring back Saul. Thus the church at Jerusalem, which was not convinced that the Gospel was to be taken to the Gentiles, began at once to send out missionaries.

The church at Jerusalem was blessed in return by the infant church which she had fostered. When a prophetic message came through Agabus that a great famine was to come upon the world the newly-formed church at Antioch sent as much aid as they were able to the brethren in Judaea. We therefore have in this chapter three general divisions: first we have the account of Peter convincing the apostolic church that the Gentiles were to be received on equal terms with the Jews; then beginning with the nineteenth verse to the twenty-seventh we have the account of the church at Jerusalem beginning mission work among the Gentiles at Antioch; and in the closing verses of the chapter we have the account of the appreciation of the Christians at Antioch in sending financial relief to the home church in time of famine. There are in addition to these general divisions a number of lessons which are of permanent value.

A CHRISTIAN INVESTIGATION

There is a difference in the manner in which true Christians hear a man who is charged with heresy from that in which hypocrites hear him. The apostles and disciples who were at Jerusalem listened to Peter attentively and earnestly. They were anxious to learn the will of God. Those who heard Stephen's defense had determined to punish him. They were not seeking to know the will of God. Their prejudices and their anger guided them. We are not surprised that they mobbed him when they were actuated by such motives. True godly men are judicious. In church courts, the men who are impatient and who quickly lose their temper and not the earnest devout men. The man who is summoned by a church court is not always wrong. He should be given a respectful and honest hearing. It is possible that the court may be enlightened by his testimony.

A CHRISTIAN EXPLANATION

There is that which is notable in the manner in which a good man explains his actions. He does not try to avoid making an explanation to his fellow Christians but he exerts himself in attempting to show them that he acted in good faith and, as it seemed to him, according to the will of God.

When Peter was charged with eating with men who were uncircumcised, he “**from the beginning, . . . expounded it by order**” (11:4). He told them fully and accurately what had taken place. He told them of the angel’s appearance to Cornelius, of the vision which he had seen and of the direct command of the Spirit to go with them, making no distinction. He told them of how he remembered that Jesus had foretold the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He told them that the Holy Spirit had fallen on the Gentiles as He did upon those at Jerusalem at Pentecost. The vision which he had received had repeatedly emphasized the fact that no man was to be considered common or unclean. He was acting in harmony with the revelation which he had thus received when he went into the company of Gentiles at Caesarea and ate with them. There were six witnesses with Peter who confirmed his report of the out-pouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles and the fact that they spoke with tongues and magnified God. His effort to vindicate his actions was not in vain. Those who heard him were convinced that he had been guided of God and their objections were silenced.

In many cases since Peter’s day after ministers or missionaries have done their best to carry out the will of God they have been criticized because their critics do not know all the facts. The fact that the one who is criticized has a clear conscience is not always enough. He should try to show his brethren just what he has done and how he has tried to carry out the will of God. Among earnest, devout Christians contentions will soon be healed if all are seeking to expound the matter from the beginning and to follow the will of God.

EVIDENCE THAT THE GENTILES SHOULD BE RECEIVED

When they saw that the Lord was guiding by His Spirit and by His providence they yielded to Him. We have here the witness of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. God sent His angel to Cornelius. The Lord Jesus brought to the mind of Peter the word that He had spoken concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit: “**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**” (11:16). The Holy Spirit spoke directly to Peter and He manifested His approval by falling upon the Gentiles in an out-pouring as at Pentecost. The six witnesses with Peter knew that the angel’s appearance to Cornelius and the vision to Peter were true because the one was prepared for the other and the report of one was in perfect harmony with the other.

This was the first time the apostles and whole Christian church had understood that the Gentiles were to be received into the church without coming through the Jewish church. They were convinced that circumcision was no longer necessary. They learned that profession of faith in Christ and Christian baptism were essential, and these only were necessary to the admission of members into the Church of Christ. This was a very important event in the history of the church. It was proper that the apostles should desire indisputable evidence before they gave up the ceremonial law. They had been told that Christ was to fulfill the law before, but they had not grasped all that it meant. Through Peter, at this time, they received specific evidence. They were convinced and satisfied. They were seeking to do the will of God and they knew that the Holy Spirit was guiding them in this. The Holy Spirit, through the revealed Scripture, is the final guide in all matters which are spiritual.

LEARNING GOD'S WILL SHALL GLORIFY HIM

When the Spirit guides us to a new decision we ought to glorify God. They glorified God though the issue was not as they had expected at the first. They were led to change their minds. They saw that the Spirit had guided them into new and greater realms of truth. They saw that they had been withholding God in opposing the work of Peter. They had passed through approximately the same experience as Peter had done. When he saw that the work was of God he said: "**what was I, that I could withstand God?**" (11:17).

He had been just as careful as any of the apostles about eating only that which was clean and with those who were considered clean, but when God showed him that a new dispensation had come and the ceremonies concerning eating and offering had been done away he was ready to glorify God and to lead them to unite with him in so doing.

Sometimes we are shown a more excellent way today. We may find that we have gotten a clearer vision of God's will. God by His Spirit or through His servants may lead us to see truths or ways of service that we had not known before. He may show us that our former views have been wrong. All Christians are learners under the guidance of the Spirit. We ought, like the Christians of old, to glorify God for changing our minds and showing us a better way.

When Adoniram Judson first told the members of his own family that he had decided to be a missionary, we are told: "He laid before them the workings of the Spirit with him, how his life had been saved from ruin by the hand of Providence, how the little book had fallen into his hands, and the lasting impressions made upon him to bear the light to those who sat in darkness, and in the shadow of death. His father saw the wisdom of his choice, and though deeply grieved and disappointed, offered no opposition." When the Assembly of the church met and the petition of the Andover students was read, "it created quite a sensation, and met with considerable opposition." (*The Child of the Ganges*, pp. 133-134).

It had seemed to Adoniram Judson's father that he should accept the position which had been offered to him as assistant pastor of the largest church in Boston. It seemed to many of the ministers of the Assembly that it was throwing away his life to go away to begin a work in Burma. When they saw the work and leading of the Spirit in it, as Mr. Judson pointed out, they ought to have yielded joyfully and to have glorified God as did the early church concerning the first admission of the Gentiles into their fold. We should glorify God, not because we prevail in our own way, but because we learn God's way.

THE CHURCH ENLARGED

With a clearer understanding of God's purpose for the church it spread into new fields:

"Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phenice, 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" (11:19-20).

Many who had been driven out from Jerusalem by the persecution that arose against Stephen preached to no one but the Jew. We may accord honor to the men of Cyprus and Cyrene who preached to the Greeks. These men began the work among the Gentiles even before the home church at Jerusalem was awakened to its duty. This is not the last time that newly found Christians have challenged those who have won them to Christ by their burning zeal.

In many instances persecution has been a blessing in disguise. Men have often preached in places where they had not intended to go had they not been forced to leave home and native land by reason of persecution. America was settled, to a large extent, because of persecution in France, Holland, Ireland, Scotland and other places in Europe. This served to bring godly men to America and to bring the Gospel to the American Indians. The Boxer uprising in China was a terrible disaster at the time, but it served to help the cause of missions in the end. Both the foreign and native Christians were regarded by the Chinese more highly afterward. Some were won to Christ from the Boxers themselves who later proved to be mighty servants of God. The settlement by treaty, which the United States made with China, united the two nations more closely because the Chinese were given back their indemnity in scholarships to American schools.

We have seen how the Christians driven to Damascus, Samaria and Antioch began their ministrations, and how men were won to Christ and the church was enlarged. God causes Saul, even by his enmity, to be a great factor in the growth of the church.

THE HOME CHURCH ASSISTS

When the word came to the church at Jerusalem they sent Barnabas to Antioch. The apostles were ever ready to assist in the promotion and organization of the work in new centers. They had sent Peter and John to assist Philip in Samaria. They made a wise choice in sending Barnabas to Antioch. "**He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith**" (11:24). He was a man who had given up all his possessions for the sake of Christ. He was a man of Cyprus who would have a close fellowship with the disciples who had already gone to Antioch.

Antioch was a city which needed wise and energetic leadership. It was the third city of the world at this time. Rome was first and Alexandria second. It was a magnificent and wealthy city. It was the center of the worship of Daphne. A magnificent temple and colossal statue were erected there in honor of Apollo. It was famous as a place of pilgrimage and vice. It was a noted center of heathen worship.

Could the Gospel make any progress in this great city? Would Christ's followers ever make any impression in that great center of wealth, vice and idolatrous worship? "**the hand of the Lord was with them**" (11:21). His hand is not shortened that it cannot save. Not even in Antioch! Even before Barnabas had arrived a great number had believed and turned to the Lord. When he reached the city "**and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord**" (11:23). When he began to assist with the work, "**a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord**" (11:21). Men filled with the Spirit and with faith can make an impression upon any city. There is no heathen or wealthy center that is too hard for God.

This is the twelfth time in these first eleven chapters that we are told that many, or multitudes, were added to the church. The march of the church is ever forward when it is made up of men who are filled with the Spirit. Jerusalem was soon to fade from view and Antioch to become the center of the missionary work of the Christian church.

Barnabas as a man of large vision. He was a whole-souled man and not one who wanted to keep the honor of leadership to himself. He saw that the work of leadership was too large for himself alone. He did what he could in exhorting the disciples to cleave to the Lord, but saw that additional workers and men of strong leadership were greatly needed. He knew, better than perhaps any other, the zeal and the capabilities of Saul. So, apparently without consulting the church at Jerusalem, he went to Tarsus to seek for Saul. Saul was probably preaching in and around Tarsus. When Barnabas found him he brought him to Antioch. Together they worked for a whole year preaching and teaching at Antioch. Barnabas and Saul were therefore well acquainted and closely associated in missionary work before they began what is called their first foreign missionary work together.

CHRIST THE CENTER

That Christ was the center of the teaching and the conduct of the Christians at Antioch is apparent from the name which the people gave them there. "**And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch**" (11:26). This is a Greek word with a Latin termination. Such a name would not have been given by Jews. A name that they would have chosen would have included, Messiah. The name Christian, may have been given at first in derision. However, it came to be applied to the disciples, it was evidently used because Christ was the center of their teaching, their preaching, their worship and their life. The disciples can have no more honorable name today than Christian. It would be a great blessing if all they who are called Christian truly made Christ the center of all their thoughts and worship and life.

Christ came into the hearts of Cornelius and his friends without a long sermon or much persuasion by Peter, because they were eagerly waiting for light from on high. When they learned of Christ they accepted him at once and the Spirit was poured out upon them in power. They were believers in God before, but Christ became the center of their life from that moment and they rejoiced in Him.

We are told that a French painter recently made a sensation in Paris by the manner of his work. He fitted up a cab for a studio and drove about the streets, stopping here and there to make sketches of places and things which he saw. People did not see him shut up in his cab looking out upon them through his little window, and taking his pictures of the nooks and corners and byways of Parisian life. He thus caught all manner of scenes and incidents in the city's hidden ways. He then transferred his sketches to canvas, and put Christ everywhere among them. When people saw his work, they were startled, for they saw themselves in their everyday life, in all their follies and frivolities, and always Christ in the midst - every king of actual life on the canvas, and in the heart of it all - Christ. If the painter were to visit your town or city this year and portray you in the events of your home, your church and civic life what kind of pictures would he see? Would your greatest name, Christian, be outstanding in them all?

Christ is continuing to do and to teach by His Spirit through His disciples. His disciples should never make the mistake of thinking that they can win men to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit. I remember hearing Dr. R.A. Torrey tell of an evening when he was preaching in the Chicago Avenue Church when the Spirit came in power in the midst of his sermon. It makes one think of the outpouring of the Spirit before Peter had finished his prayer that the Holy Spirit might come in convicting power. Dr. Torrey said: "As I was preaching, I noticed a man in the front seat in the gallery to my left, leaning forward listening most intently. A great diamond flashed upon his shirt front and he had every appearance of a sporting man. In the midst of my sermon, without any intention of drawing the net at the time, but simply to drive a point home and made it definite, I said, 'Who will accept Jesus Christ tonight?' Scarcely had the words left my lips when this man sprang to his feet and cried so that it rang through the church, 'I will!' and sank back into his seat. His action produced a sensation in the audience like a shock of electricity. I saw it was no time to finish the sermon, and I immediately gave the invitation. I said, 'Who else in this building, will accept Jesus Christ here and now as his personal Saviour?' All over the church men and women, young and old, began to rise to their feet and a large company that night accepted Jesus Christ."

At the Pacific Garden Mission one night there were an unusual number of conversions. Those who were there testified that they saw great reason to praise God. There were some among those who received Christ as their Saviour who had been drunkards. When the Superintendent of the mission was asked how it came about, he replied: "It pleased the Holy Spirit to illumine the face of Jesus, and sinners just saw Him and believed." We stand in amazement at the work of the Holy Spirit when Peter preached in Caesarea and when Barnabas and Saul preached in Antioch, and the time will never cease when men will be amazed at the power of the Spirit to transform the hearts of men. He could make a Roman soldier a new man in Caesarea; He could make a devotee of Apollo a new man in Antioch, He could make a sporting man or a drunkard a new man in Chicago, and He can make the Gospel effective in the hearts of ungodly men and make them new men in Christ Jesus everywhere. Christ said He would send the Holy Spirit. He has sent Him and He will send Him to those who honor Him.

CHRISTIANS READY TO HELP

True Christians are sympathetic with others in trouble. When a prophet named Agabus, foretold of a great famine which was coming upon all the world, "**the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul**" (11:29-30). This famine came to pass in the days of Claudius.

Saul was driven out from Jerusalem after he became a Christian. He was driven out because he was a Christian. The first time he came back it was with money to relieve the starving. That is a splendid example of what Christianity is and what it does. The Christian returns good for evil. Christians help one another when in need. They also help others who are not Christians. They do kind deeds in order that others seeing their good works may glorify their Father who is in heaven.

Many a man both in civilized and in heathen lands has been led to lend a sympathetic ear to the saving message of the Gospel because of some kind act which a Christian has done for him. He may have been given food when he was hungry; he may have been given clothing when he was destitute; he may have been given rest when he was weary; he may have been given medical aid when he was sick; he had concluded that the man who showed sympathy with him was a good man and he is ready to listen to his message. As a result he finds a friend in Jesus.

The Christians at Antioch realized that they had received a blessing which money could not repay, but they wanted to show their appreciation by sending what they could to the church which had sent out men to teach them of Christ. All true charity is prompted directly or indirectly by Christ. Where Christ is not known we do not find it, but instead we find greed and oppression and hardness and cruelty. The blessings which flow from Christianity are numberless. We can do nothing better than promote the love of Christ among men and nations. Christ in the heart and life is the solution of enmity and vice and poverty and all forms of sin.

QUESTIONS (Acts 11:1-30)

1. What was Peter charged with when he returned to Jerusalem?
2. Did Peter manifest haste or ill-temper in his answer?
3. In what spirit did his opponents listen?
4. Is there generally a difference in the manner in which Christians hear and weigh evidence when compared with ungodly men?
5. Is a good man careful to explain his actions when men disagree?
6. What fact convinced Peter and the others that he was right in holding fellowship with Gentiles?
7. Why was it important that they should have indisputable evidence concerning this matter?
8. To whom is the glory due when the Spirit guides us to a new decision?
9. How was persecution a blessing in disguise?
10. What new center of mission work begins to become important?
11. How important was Antioch considered among other cities of the world?
12. What indicates that the home church at Jerusalem was awake to its opportunities?
13. Who was sent to Antioch?
14. What was the message of Barnabas?
15. How did his character support his message?
16. Who did Barnabas secure to aid with the work at Antioch?
17. What was evidently the central theme of those at Antioch? What name did the people of Antioch apply to the disciples?
18. What was the result of the mission work at Antioch? May we expect similar results today?
19. What became the subject of the prophets in those days?
20. What did the disciples do to show their sympathy and to help?

~ end of chapter 20 ~

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