

Gentile Conversions

- 1) Helping the Jews in Jerusalem Understand What Had Happened
- 2) The Antioch Church Becomes a Gentile Powerhouse

A Study in Acts Chapter 11



**By Dr. John C. Whitcomb
and
George Zeller**

Published by:

Whitcomb Ministries

(317-250-5469)

www.whitcombministries.org

and

The Middletown Bible Church

349 East Street

Middletown, CT 06457

(860-346-0907)

www.middletownbiblechurch.org

Acts Chapter 11

Peter Defends His Outreach to Gentiles and God Works Mightily at Antioch

Acts 11:1

Word had quickly spread about the remarkable event that had taken place in the home of Cornelius in Caesarea. The gospel message had gone to uncircumcised Gentiles and they gladly received the Word of God that was preached to them.

Acts 11:2

When Peter came to Jerusalem he was immediately confronted by Jewish believers who strongly contended and argued that if Gentiles were to be saved, they had to first become Jews. That is, they must be circumcised and submit to the law of Moses. They also believed that Peter was wrong to eat with these Gentiles, an action which they considered taboo and totally contrary to the established custom. If you had asked Peter a month earlier, he would have agreed that eating with Gentiles was a terrible thing to do. It was unthinkable that a Jew should eat with a Gentile. Even though the early Jews had believed on Christ, they still held to their previous views regarding Gentiles. Even after Gentile salvation by grace was recognized by the Church, Peter compromised these principles at Antioch. He reverted back to his old ways as he refused to eat with Gentiles when Jewish brethren were present (Gal. 2:12). Paul rebuked him sharply for this clear violation of gospel principles (Gal. 2:11). In order not to offend certain Jewish brethren, Peter acted in a manner unworthy of the gospel of grace.

Acts 11:3

We can imagine this confrontation: “Peter, we are shocked by your apostasy! You have been disobedient to hundreds of years of God’s guidelines and instructions. How could you have table fellowship with unclean, non-kosher humans? How shameful!”

What was Peter’s response? Some think he could have said, “Well, since I’m the Pope, that settles it! What I do is obviously from God because I am the vicar or representative of Christ here on earth!” No, Peter did not appeal to any papal authority!

Peter needed to give an explanation to these people, step by step, in a gracious and careful manner. In a God-honoring way Peter needed to share with them exactly what happened and why. He simply related what God had done. On this particular occasion, Peter was a marvelous communicator in the midst of a highly controversial situation. Peter would later give a similar masterful presentation in Acts chapter 15 when the Jerusalem Council had to deal with similar issues.

Acts 11:4

Peter gave a very orderly presentation and recital of all that had taken place. He did not argue with those who accused him of wrong conduct; he merely reported the facts. Remember, it was not Peter's idea to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. It was all prearranged and worked out by the Lord, including every little detail. Peter was merely God's instrument and mouthpiece. He was simply following God's leading.

Acts 11:5

Peter simply rehearsed all that had taken place in Joppa and in Caesarea. Thus, here in Acts 11 we have a retelling of the same events we learned about in Acts 10. Peter was explaining to these Jews exactly what had happened and how the Lord led him all the way. This was wise on Peter's part. If they were going to argue against what Peter did, then they would have to argue against what God did! The very first thing Peter mentioned was that he was praying. That was when all these remarkable visions and events started to happen. A great work of God often commences when we are on our knees.

Acts 11:6

Peter described the four categories of animals in the Old Testament: 1) domesticated beasts; 2) wild beasts; 3) creeping things; 4) birds. In the book of Genesis the term "creeping things" even included dinosaurs, many of which have become extinct and have vanished forever. Yet many still remain on the earth. I (Dr. Whitcomb) was once in a restaurant in Florida which specialized in serving a "creeping thing" to the customers. I was served toasted alligator! I had no convictions about the matter, no compunctions, no fears, other than the possible gastronomic aftereffects! I can say with the Apostle Paul regarding dietary restrictions that "all things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient (helpful, appropriate, or wise)" (1 Cor. 6:12).

Acts 11:7-8

Peter never forgot the astounding experience he had and his negative reaction to the will and Word of God. It took him a while before he understood the significance of the divine object lesson. Peter did not go to the Gentiles on his own initiative. It was clearly the Lord who revealed this vision to him and directed him to the house of Cornelius. It was the Lord's doing from beginning to end. If Jewish Christians from Judea had a problem with this, they would have to take it up with God.

In verse 8 Peter showed his critics that he was very reluctant to do what God had told him to do, and by implication he was also very reluctant to associate with Gentiles. But God had other plans.

Peter was telling his critics he had been as much of a spiritual isolationist as they were with regard to the Gentiles. But the deciding factor was not his own will or opinion in the matter, but the command of God based upon a clear revelation of the

divine will.¹

Acts 11:9

If God has cleansed it, then do not call it common or unclean. What a blessing it is to be cleansed and washed (1 Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; Tit. 3:5)! The Lord Jesus told His regenerated disciples (Judas excepted) that they were “clean” (John 13:10). How clean? The verse says clean “every whit” (KJV), meaning wholly, completely, entirely clean.

Acts 11:10

The genuineness of Peter’s vision and the decisiveness of its command were accentuated by the fact that the sheet was lowered three times. To have been lowered once would have been sufficient to impress the fact of the finality of the divine directive. But being lowered three times gave an added emphasis to the whole proceeding.²

“A threefold cord is not easily broken” (Eccl. 4:12).

Acts 11:11

God’s timing was perfect. Immediately upon the completion of the threefold object lessons, the men sent by Cornelius arrived at the house. Peter was beginning to understand the analogy between the unclean animals and the unclean Gentiles.

Acts 11:12

Peter was guided by the Holy Spirit each step of the way. The Jews of the circumcision needed to understand that God was totally involved in this new work with the Gentiles. Peter was not to doubt or fear. The word “doubt” [diakrino] means “to doubt, waver, hesitate.” Peter did not hesitate to follow God’s leading.

Peter had six Jewish brethren who served as witnesses and who accompanied him to the house of Cornelius. Moreover, it seems quite clear that these six witnesses were standing with Peter when he gave this defense. He refers to them as if they were standing right there (“these six brethren”). It was very important at this point to have witnesses who could confirm all that Peter was saying. These were astounding things which Peter claimed actually happened, and these six Jews witnessed these same events. Peter’s own word may not have been sufficient. The six men who were with him could back up his account because they were there also. “In the mouth of two or three witnesses the

¹Merril F. Unger, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, published in the *Bible Expositor and Illuminator* (June 11, 1967), p. 153.

²Ibid.

matter shall be established” (Deut. 19:15; 2 Cor. 13:1), and Peter had more than two or three. He had six!

The importance of having witnesses to verify factual information cannot be underestimated. This can help us function properly in the local body of Christ today, especially when difficult matters of church discipline invariably arise. Does the person have witnesses to back up and confirm what he is saying? Happy and healthy is the local assembly of believers that has godly men who can back up the Pastor-teacher in such disciplinary confrontations. Witnesses are very important in disciplinary situations. Otherwise accusations can be just one person’s word against another person’s word.

Acts 11:13

An angel had appeared to Cornelius in a vision (Acts 10:3-5). In order to get these parties together God used a double vision: an angelic vision for Cornelius and a “great sheet” vision for Peter. Each vision had its intended effect and God was able to arrange for Cornelius and Peter to be in the same house, with each man having his heart fully prepared.

God could have sent this angel to preach the good news to Cornelius and those Gentiles with him. However, it is God’s plan to use redeemed people, not angels, to spread the good news, and we need to be faithful in performing this duty. Angelic assistance is not available, but God will totally support and sustain His faithful servants who herald the good news.

Acts 11:14

“[Peter] shall tell thee words.” Words are the key. These are words from heaven above, words inscribed in a book by the Holy Spirit. We are to speak words to all people, words of good news to all men. Words given by God are infinitely important, essential and foundational for salvation and for sanctification.

What was the spiritual state of Cornelius and those Gentiles who were with him in his house? Whatever it was, we learn here that there was a very real sense in which these people needed to hear the **words** of the gospel so that they could be **saved**.³ Peter would serve as God’s mouthpiece.

Acts 11:15

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them.” From Peter’s point of view, the Holy Spirit fell on them at the beginning of his message. That is, he did not get too far into his message before he was interrupted by the Spirit.

³See the previous part of this commentary in Acts chapter 10 (especially verse 4) for Dr. Whitcomb’s understanding of the spiritual state of Cornelius prior to Peter’s coming. After Peter’s preaching Cornelius was saved in a full New Testament sense, having his sins forgiven and having been baptized by the Holy Spirit and made a member of the body of Christ.

The Holy Spirit fell on these Gentiles just as He had fallen on the Jews at the beginning (Acts 2:4). “The beginning” refers to the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit baptized the Jewish believers into the newly-formed body of Christ. This marvelous work of Spirit baptism had been anticipated for months by the Lord Jesus, even though the apostles did not really fathom what that meant. They could not understand the distinctives of the Church during those three and a half years of our Lord’s earthly ministry. Yet, the Lord was dropping hints, here and there, that something new and drastically different was coming. The Lord Jesus Himself predicted that the day was coming when He would build His Church on a Rock (Matt. 16:18).

At the time, the disciples did not really understand all that this meant. Jesus knew what was coming. It was no surprise to Him. The identity and function of the Church was a mystery hidden from men, but not from Him. The apostles had very little understanding of the functions and distinct characteristics of the Church. Peter struggled to understand these things for many years. The early believers had little understanding of the new dispensation which had begun in Acts 2, which had characteristics never before seen in the history of the world. It would be the Apostle Paul’s unique ministry to reveal these Church truths in their fullness.

Even today we have countless numbers of Christians, including pastors, who are in the Church age and do not even understand their distinctive place in the body of Christ. Many are not dispensationalists and they wrongly think that they are still in the program of Israel (a kingdom program rather than a Church program). Many wrongly suppose that the Church consists of all believers from every age, rather than understanding that God inaugurated a new program at Pentecost. Knowing dispensational truth does not determine one’s eternal destiny, but it does determine how one effectively functions in the plan and purpose and program of God. As this Church age comes to an end, we find vast confusion in many places. What program are we in? What is the function, purpose and destiny of the Church? How does the Church differ from Israel? These are key questions. It would be nice to have the Apostle Peter here with us to enlighten us on some of these Church-age truths which he struggled at first to understand. Thankfully we have the epistles of Peter and Paul, as well as the entire New Testament revelation!

This verse helps us to pinpoint the exact time when the Church of Jesus Christ had its beginning. Many believers are confused regarding this important question. Many Reformed men believe that the Church consists of all the saints of all the ages (that is, the Church is made up of all the elect from every age). There are many Baptist groups who believe that the Church began prior to the cross, at the time of John the Baptist or at some other point in our Lord’s pre-cross ministry. Both of these views are contrary to what God’s Word clearly teaches as to the exact time when the Church came into existence.

The key passage on Spirit baptism is found in 1 Corinthians 12:13—“For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” The “one body” spoken of in this verse refers to the Church (see 1 Cor. 12:27-28; Eph. 1:22-23; 5:30-32; Col. 1:18), and Christ is the Head of this body. Spirit baptism is defined in 1 Corinthians 12:13 as that work of God whereby believers are baptized (immersed, placed) into Christ’s body, the Church. How then does a believer become a member of the body of Christ? It is by Spirit baptism.

The key to when the Church began is this: If we can determine when Spirit baptism first began, then we will know when the Church began. When did God first baptize believers into His body? When were believers first placed into the body of Christ? To answer this is to determine the day on which

the Church began.

Spirit baptism was first predicted by John the Baptist in Matthew 3:11 (and in the parallel passages: Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33):

I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but He that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost (Spirit), and with fire (Matt. 3:11).

John's baptism was a water baptism ("I baptize you with water"); Christ's baptism would be a spiritual baptism ("He shall baptize you with the Holy Spirit"). The "fire baptism" is for the unsaved and this is yet future (see Matthew 3:12). Notice the phrase, "He shall baptize you with (Greek-**en**) the Holy Spirit." The verb "shall baptize" is in the future tense, indicating that Spirit baptism had not yet taken place when John the Baptist spoke these words. John was predicting that it would happen in the future, but he did not predict exactly when it would happen. Notice also that Christ is the Baptizer. He is the One who would place believers into the body of Christ. He is the One who would build His Church.

In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus said, "I will build My Church." The future tense of the verb indicates that the building of the Church had not yet begun when Jesus said these words. He did not say, "I have built My Church." He did not say, "I am building My Church." No, the building project had not yet begun and thus the Church was yet future. At the time Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 16:18 the Church had not yet begun.

Today Christ is building His Church. He is adding to the Church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:47). But the question is, when did this building program first begin?

In Acts 1:5 the Lord Jesus predicted that Spirit baptism was still future:

For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence (Acts 1:5).

According to our Lord's prediction, Spirit baptism had not yet taken place, though it would take place very soon (in a matter of days). No one had yet been immersed into the body of Christ. Thus, the Church could not have begun prior to Acts 1:5. When Jesus spoke the words of Acts 1:5 His death and His resurrection had already taken place; yet Spirit baptism had not yet taken place and the Church had not yet been formed. But the announcement of Acts 1:5 was very significant because Jesus said that Spirit baptism would take place "**not many days hence**" (not many days from then). This meant that it would happen soon, in a matter of days. Indeed, as we shall learn, it happened just ten days later on the day of Pentecost.

The day of Pentecost and the unique events that took place on that day are described in Acts chapter 2. In this chapter Spirit baptism is not specifically mentioned. It is not until Acts chapter 11 that we are specifically told that Spirit baptism took place on the Day of Pentecost: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning [on the day of Pentecost]. 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" (Acts 11:15-16). Based on the clear statement of this passage we know that Spirit baptism first took place on the Day of Pentecost. It was then that believers were first placed

into the body of Christ. It was then that the Church began. Pentecost was the birthday of the Church.

Acts 11:17

These Gentiles believed on the Lord Jesus Christ (compare Acts 10:43). Notice that the gift of the Holy Spirit (including Spirit-baptism and His indwelling) was given to them when they believed, and not at some point after they had believed. This is the norm for today. There is not some “baptism of the Spirit” subsequent to saving faith.

The word “withstand” (KJV) means to hinder. Peter was saying, “Who am I to try to hinder or stop God? How can I interfere with or hinder what God is doing in the hearts of these Gentiles? How can I forbid them from coming to Christ when God has opened up the door of faith to these people?” It was a solid argument against the viewpoint of these Jews who felt it wrong for Gentiles to be saved apart from becoming Jews and being circumcised. Peter was not the one reaching out to these Gentiles; he was just God’s instrument. God was doing it, and Peter was not going to stand in the way. If the Jerusalem Jews had a problem with what Peter did, then they would have to argue with God Himself!

Acts 11:18

These Jews “held their peace.” There was nothing they could say against what was an obvious movement of God which Peter accurately related. They saw the hand of God in what had transpired. They also glorified God, by giving God full credit for the amazing work He was doing with these Gentiles. “To God be the glory, great things He hath done!”

It was absolutely astounding to these Jews that God had now granted salvation unto the Gentiles. It appears from this verse that they were beginning to understand that God was reaching out to the Gentiles and opening the door of faith to them. The middle wall between Jews and Gentiles had been broken down, and Jews and Gentiles were now in an equal standing with each other, in one body in Christ (Eph. 2:13-18). However, before we fully celebrate their gracious attitude, we need to remember that these same issues would surface again. In later chapters, especially Acts chapter 15, we see the same problem: “And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). The Jerusalem Council had to decisively counteract this serious error. This same problem also arises in the book of Galatians.

Many of these Jewish believers did not understand the magnitude of what God told them through Peter until after A.D. 70. At that time Jerusalem was smashed, the temple was destroyed, the sacrifices ended, and it was becoming obvious that God’s new program no longer centered in Jerusalem or the Jews. It would become evident that the Jews were the natural branches broken off from the tree of divine blessing. God had been grafting in other branches (Rom. 11:17-24). He also had other sheep which were not of this fold (John 10:16). This Jewish opposition to Gentile conversion by faith had to be combated by Peter and later by Paul.

God granted repentance to these Gentiles, resulting in the reception of eternal life: “repentance unto

life.”⁴ Repentance is not just a requirement for Jews. The Bible clearly teaches that God has commanded all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). In fact, everywhere Paul went he preached to both Jews and Gentiles the message of “repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance [have room, space of time for repentance] (2 Pet. 3:9), and there is rejoicing in heaven over even one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7,10).⁵

From this point forward, the gospel would be preached “to the Jew first, but also to the Greek (Gentile)” (Rom. 1:16). “Hereafter the ‘Gentile dog’ would no longer have to beg for crumbs. He would share in the gospel banquet of the King.”⁶

Acts 11:19

The first part of Acts chapter 11 rehearses the great work God did in Caesarea with Cornelius and those with him. The second part of Acts 11 (beginning with this verse) speaks of the great work God did in Antioch, the first great Gentile church.⁷

Stephen was a Greek-speaking Jew, one of the seven deacons of Acts 6. He spoke boldly and powerfully for His Lord, especially challenging and confronting Hellenistic Jews (unbelieving Greek-speaking Jews). The Hellenistic Jews hated Stephen and ultimately succeeded in murdering him. Rome was supposed to administer capital punishment, but these Hellenistic Jews did not even wait to go through the official Roman channels to have Stephen executed. They took matters into their own hands which resulted in a mob scene with Stephen being stoned to death. They were enraged by Stephen’s Spirit-filled preaching and his Christ-centered message. The result of his martyrdom was far-reaching. God used persecution to get the Greek-speaking Christian Jews expelled from Jerusalem and scattered far and wide, carrying with them the precious seed of the gospel, the Word of the Lord. As they went they preached to the Jews only. It was persecution that sent them, not a missionary society.

⁴Note that it is “repentance unto life,” not life unto repentance. The new birth does not precede repentance. They occur simultaneously, though repentance logically (not temporally) precedes life. Also notice that there is no mention of faith, just as there are numerous cases where faith is mentioned but not repentance. Faith and repentance are two sides of the same coin, and you cannot have one without the other. When one is mentioned, the other is assumed. Real repentance always accompanies real faith; and real faith always accompanies real repentance. See also George Zeller’s study, *Does Regeneration Precede Faith*: <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/reformed/regenera.pdf>

⁵For a full discussion of the Biblical meaning of repentance, see <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/termsrep.htm>

⁶Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises*, p. 72.

⁷In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile in their standing before God. Technically, there is no such thing as a Jewish church or a Gentile church. Antioch was the first city where the local church was composed predominately of those called from among the Gentiles.

These Jewish Christians were very reluctant to reach Gentiles with the message of good news, but this would soon change. The Lord scattered these Christians all over the Mediterranean regions. Phoenicia is modern Lebanon, north of Israel on the Mediterranean coast. Tyre and Sidon were located in this region. Cyprus is a large island on the eastern part of the Mediterranean, the original home of Barnabas, the Levite (Acts 4:36). Antioch was a large city, the estimated population being between 100,000 and 500,000 people. It was a pagan, idolatrous center. It might be called the Las Vegas of the Orontes River. It was such a prominent city on the east of the Mediterranean that it was surpassed only by Alexandria and Rome in population and in significance. It was thus the third largest and most important city in the Roman Empire. It was a commercial center and a very strategic place for a significant church to be established. It was also a city known for its immorality and ritual prostitution (similar in depravity to the cities of Corinth and Thessalonica). Such depravity and fornication were rampant, especially in the pagan temple of Daphne.⁸ Idolatry and immorality are always found together.

One problem remained. These Jewish believers were preaching the Word only to Jews and not to Gentiles. They had not yet been enlightened regarding the worldwide scope of the Great Commission. Our Lord had commanded His followers to “make disciples of **all nations**” (Matt. 28:19), to “preach the gospel **to every creature**” (Mark 16:15), and that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name **among all nations**” (Luke 24:47). Of course, Peter himself had just recently been enlightened with respect to reaching all men with the gospel.

Acts 11:20

Thankfully some believers who were more enlightened came along, men from Cyprus (where Barnabas was from) and Cyrene (located in North Africa, in what today would be Libya). A man from Cyrene once carried the cross of Jesus (Mark 15:21). The word “Grecians” in this verse refers to Greeks or Gentiles. It does not refer to Greek-speaking Jews. Instead of continuing the practice of evangelizing only the Jews, these believers reached out to lost Gentiles. “Peter had unlocked the door in Caesarea; they [these believers from Cyprus and Cyrene] pushed it open wide.”⁹ We are not even given the names of these devoted evangelists, but God will faithfully reward His servants.

Here we have a truly amazing thing. The Church has taken the most epoch-making of all steps; and we do not even know the names of the people who took that step. All we know is that they came from Cyprus and Cyrene. They go down to history as nameless pioneers of Christ. It has always been one of the tragedies of the Church that men have wished to be noticed and named when they did something worth while. What the Church has always needed, perhaps more than anything else, is people who never care who gains the credit for it so long as the work is done. These men may not have written their names in men’s books of history; but they have written them

⁸According to mythology, Daphne was a mortal maid and Apollo (son of Zeus) fell in love with her and pursued her.

⁹John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 217.

forever in God's Book of Life.¹⁰

Notice that they preached the "Lord Jesus." The title "Christ" or "Messiah" would have had little significance for Gentiles who were not familiar with the promise of the Messiah as the Jews were. However, they were told of One who was "Lord" (sovereign over all) and "Jesus" (Savior). All men are in need of a sovereign God who can save!

These Gentiles in Antioch were different from the Gentiles in Caesarea (represented by Cornelius). Cornelius knew certain things about Jesus Christ (Acts 11:37-38) and he was a God-seeking man who continued in prayers and practiced good deeds. The Gentiles in Antioch were idolatrous, immoral pagans, and yet God's grace reached them in a wonderful way.

Acts 11:21

The results of preaching the gospel to Gentiles was very positive. A great number of them believed and turned to the Lord.¹¹ There was a foretaste of this in the strangely prophetic words of the unbelieving Pharisees in John 12:35: "Will He (Jesus) go unto the dispersed among the Gentiles (the diaspora, the Jews who were spread all over the Mediterranean world, also known as the Hellenistic Jews), and teach the Gentiles?" Would Jesus someday teach the Gentiles? The Lord gave further light in John 12:20-21: "There were certain Greeks (Gentiles) among them that came up to worship at the feast. The same came therefore to Philip, which was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and desired him, saying, Sir, we would see Jesus." We might think this would have been a wonderful opportunity for the Lord Jesus to announce His worldwide ministry of reaching out with the gospel to the Gentiles. However, this was not God's purpose at that time.

Jesus was a minister of the circumcision exclusively, and His message was not directed to outsiders beyond Israel. We remember the time a Canaanite woman came to Jesus (Matt. 15:21-28), asking for her daughter to be healed. Jesus said, "It is not fitting to take the children's bread, and to cast it to dogs" (Matt. 15:26). Her answer was precious, "Even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table" (Matt. 15:27). Jesus then commended her faith and healed her daughter. The Lord was extremely reluctant to minister to non-Jews, and yet He gave a little hint of what was coming for all people who place their faith in Him.

In John 12:23 Jesus said, "The hour is come, that the Son of man should be glorified." In other words, "Until I have died for the sins of the world and have come back from the dead and have sent the Spirit of God to create the Church, I have no official message yet for Greek Gentiles. But the time is coming when *all men* will be drawn to that center cross where they must decide for or against the crucified One (see John 12:31-32; Acts 4:12). The phrase "all men" includes Greeks, Romans, barbarians and even Americans! Drawing all men to Himself did not mean that all will be saved,

¹⁰William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 88. The only correction to this excellent quote is that we do not write our names in the Book of Life. This was done by the Lord before the foundation of the world. However, we certainly understand Barclay's point. God will reward His servants even if their work is unheralded here on earth.

¹¹Better translated "in believing turned to the Lord." This verse shows that the believing and the turning are simultaneous and not two separated actions.

but it did mean that the message would be available to all men, based on the finished crosswork of Christ. An unlimited atonement resulted in an unlimited message which is for an unlimited outreach to the ends of the earth as God's people are faithful to obey the Great Commission. God had a plan right from the beginning and He is unfolding it and unveiling it step by step. Each one of us should ask, to what extent am I involved personally in reaching out to the ends of the earth? I (Dr. Whitcomb) am personally burdened about this. How am I helping Christ's cause? I cannot go everywhere, but what can I do to help other people by way of prayer and support and the furtherance of the missionary cause?

This worldwide outreach was made possible when the Lord Jesus crushed the serpent's head on Calvary's cross. At that time Satan was officially and judicially cast out (John 12:31). He was a defeated angel, even though the sentence has not yet been executed. We have unlimited authority, under the Lord Jesus, to carry the message of a crucified and risen Savior to the ends of the earth.

How wonderful that a great number of Gentiles in Antioch believed on the Lord and turned to Him (Acts 11:21)! "Look unto Me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else" (Isaiah 45:22).

The word "turned" is a key Greek word [*epistrepho*] used of conversion (turning from sin and turning toward the Lord). It is used in the following passages:

"Repent therefore, and **be converted**, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).

"And all that dwelt at Lydda and Saron...**turned** to the Lord" (Acts 9:35).

"...that ye **should turn** from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven and earth" (Acts 14:15).

"...declaring the **conversion** of the Gentiles" (Acts 15:3).

"...that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are **turned** to God" (Acts 15:19).

"To open their eyes, and to **turn** them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God" (Acts 26:18).

"...that they (the Gentiles) should repent and **turn** to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:20).

"...how ye **turned** to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).¹²

Acts 11:22

¹²For a study on conversion, see <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/salvatio/termscv.htm>

Word quickly spread as the news about these Gentile conversions traveled the 300 miles from Antioch to Jerusalem. The believers in Jerusalem wanted to send a representative to learn more about what was happening at Antioch. They chose Barnabas, a man of keen spiritual understanding, who years earlier had discerned that Saul the persecutor had become a true believer in Christ. Barnabas was instrumental in convincing the apostles that Saul's faith was genuine (Acts 9:27).

Often we seek to explain to children, and even adults, that the Church is not a building of brick or wood or stone, but rather it is a redeemed people who are actually *living stones* of a spiritual house built on the Chief Cornerstone, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4-6). They were thus "added to the Lord" (Acts 11:24; see also 5:14). This verse is fascinating in this respect, because it states that the Church in Jerusalem had ears! Here are some other New Testament passages which show that the Church is more than a building:

Acts 12:5	Can a building pray?
Acts 15:4	Can a building receive and welcome people?
Acts 15:22	Can a building be pleased?
Romans 16:16	Can buildings send greetings?
1 Corinthians 15:9	Can a building be persecuted?
1 Corinthians 16:19	Can a building be in a house?
Revelation 2:23	Can a building know anything about God?

Acts 11:23

After his long journey, Barnabas arrived in Antioch and his discovery of what had happened is summed up in these few words: "He saw the grace of God." He saw that these Gentiles had been saved by God's amazing grace (Eph.2:8-9; Acts 15:11; Tit. 3:4-7). He saw that God's undeserved kindness had been poured out on those who were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). Barnabas knew that God's grace was transforming sinners into saints (Tit. 2:12). Jesus Christ is God's grace personified (Tit. 2:11), and He was doing a wonderful work in the hearts of these Gentile believers, to the praise of the glory of His grace (Eph. 1:6)!

When Barnabas saw God's gracious working in the lives of these Gentiles in Antioch he was glad and rejoiced greatly.

How can anybody see the grace of God? Grace is God's undeserved favor granted to poor lost sinners who put their trust in the Lord Jesus. Strictly speaking, we cannot see grace any more than we can see love, or its antithesis, hate. Then what did Barnabas see? We see the effects of hate in the unkind things it does, and we see the grace of God manifested in the changed lives of those who have received and believed the gospel message....Licentious, wicked, unclean people become chaste, holy, and clean; unrighteous people become faithful, honest, and true. This is how the

grace of God is seen.¹³

We too should greatly rejoice over every sinner who repents and turns to God. It thrills the heart to see people passing out of death into life (John 5:24), out of Satan's domain into God's kingdom (Col. 1:13; Acts 26:18), and out of darkness into light (1 Pet. 2:9). Barnabas was thrilled with what he saw in Antioch. God was doing a great work. "The Lord hath done great things for us whereof we are glad" (Psalm 126:3).

Barnabas then ministered to these new believers. He lived up to his name because he exhorted them. The name "Barnabas" means "son of consolation" (Acts 4:36). The term "consolation" is directly related to the word "exhorted." "Son of consolation" means "son of encouragement" or "son of comfort" or "son of exhortation." We also get the term "Comforter" from this Greek word.

Barnabas exhorted and encouraged the Antioch believers "that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord." He "encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with a firm resolve of the heart" (Holman Christian Standard Bible). "Purpose of heart" (KJV) means with a fixed resolve and hearty determination. We remember that Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself (Daniel 1:8). Daniel would not allow Babylonian influences to weaken his resolve to serve the most high God.

The word "cleave" (KJV) means to "continue with, to remain with." It is used in Mark 8:2 of the people continuing with Jesus for three days. In this verse it means to "be steadfastly devoted" to the Lord (Thayer), to remain true to the Lord. Barnabas was exhorting and encouraging these Gentile believers to stay connected to the Lord Jesus Christ by constantly abiding in Him, the true Vine (John 15:1-6). The same verb is used in Acts 13:43 where again we find Barnabas (along with Paul) encouraging the people, and persuading them "to continue in the grace of God." As we find ourselves in what seem to be the last days of the Church, with all the trials and difficulties, how important it is for us to encourage other believers to remain true to the Lord and cleave to Him. There is a simple song that says it this way:

Keep me True, Lord Jesus, keep me true.
Keep me true, Lord Jesus, keep me true.
There's a race that must be run,
There's a victory to be won.
Every hour by Thy power keep me true!

Acts 11:24

In this verse we have a wonderful description of the exemplary character of Barnabas:

1) **He was a good man.** He was a good and faithful servant of Jesus Christ. How would you like to be known at the end of your life? That you were a rich man, a brilliant man, a famous man, a talented man, an eloquent man, a popular man? It is written in Scripture for all to see and for all to know, that Barnabas was a good man.

¹³Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, pages 277-278.

2) **He was full of the Holy Spirit.** He was a spiritual man, not a carnal man. He was a Spirit-filled man, a man controlled by the Holy Spirit. He was a man who walked in the Spirit and thus did not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. And because he was filled with the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit was evident in his life (Gal. 5:22-23).

3) **He was a man who was full of faith.** His life was characterized by faith. He walked by faith and not by sight. He believed God, that whatever God promised, He was able also to fulfill. He depended on the Lord, not on his own strength or his own resources. He was able to say, “I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” He had strong and unwavering confidence in the promises and power of God.

As believers we would do quite well if we would imitate Barnabas in these three ways: to be good, to be Spirit-filled, to be full of faith. This is what the Christian life is all about.

Not only did Barnabas witness the work that God was doing in Antioch, but apparently he also participated in efforts to further evangelize this city, with the result that “many people were added to the Lord.” Many more believers (mostly Gentiles) were added to the body and bride of Christ.

Acts 11:25

The last time we read about Paul was in Acts chapter 9 where we learned that he returned to his home city of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). Now, about nine or ten years later, Barnabas goes to Tarsus to search for Paul so that he could also witness the amazing work God was doing at Antioch, to the praise of the glory of His grace!¹⁴ The verb “seek” suggests that Barnabas had some difficulty in finding Paul at Tarsus, but ultimately his search was successful.¹⁵

Acts 11:26

Barnabas found Paul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch. The noteworthy team of Paul and Barnabas ministered in the city of Antioch for a whole year. How is their ministry described? They “taught much people” (KJV). It was a ministry of intensive indoctrination as God’s truth was expounded and communicated with power. Solid churches must not only be gospel-preaching churches but they must also be Bible-teaching churches.¹⁶ The amazing team of teachers leading

¹⁴The exact number of years that Paul spent in Tarsus is difficult to determine. Some think it was less than nine or ten years. The *New Testament Chronological Chart* by James Boyer [Moody Press] has the time period at about nine years, in agreement with Whitcomb’s estimate.

¹⁵The same word [*anazēteō*] is used in Luke 2:44-45 of Joseph and Mary searching for the twelve-year-old Jesus among their relatives. They searched high and low for Him, and finally returned to Jerusalem to find Him. Barnabas apparently also conducted a diligent search for Paul.

¹⁶See our paper, “What is the Purpose of the Local Assembly?”
<http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/lochurch/eph412.pdf>

the Antioch assembly was very impressive (Acts 13:1).

The name “Christian” (one belonging to Christ) was first given to the believers in Antioch. This verse says that they were called Christians, but it does not say that they called themselves Christians. Apparently this was a term used by their unsaved acquaintances to describe them (perhaps as a term of reproach), not a name that the disciples gave to themselves. “The enemies of the Lord branded His disciples with His own blessed but despised name.”¹⁷ The disciples were identified with Jesus Christ. May our devotion and passion for Christ be so obvious that when people around us think of us, they immediately think of our blessed Savior!

The word for “called” is *chrēmatisō* and is generally used of a divine communication. For instance, aged Simeon haunted the Temple because “it was revealed [*chrēmatisō*] unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 2:26). So although the name (Christian) may have been given in mockery, it was a wonderful name, and its real origin was divine.¹⁸

Harry Ironside was once studying Cantonese, one of the branches of the Chinese language. He learned that the word used for a Christian was “Yasu-yan.” *Yasu* was the word they used for Jesus and *yan* was their word for man. Whenever his teacher would introduce him, he would say that he was a “Jesus-man.”¹⁹ This is similar to the word “Christian.” What an honor to be known as a “Christ-man.” There was one area of Brazil where Christian believers were called “Bibles” by those in the community. These people were seen with their Bibles so often that they were given this nickname.²⁰

It was in Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. The title began as a nickname. The people of Antioch were famous for their facility in finding jesting nicknames. Later the bearded Emperor Julian came to visit them and they christened him “The Goat.” The termination *-iani* means *belonging to the party of*; for instance *Caesariani* means *belonging to Caesar’s party*. Christian means *These Christ-folk*. It was a contemptuous nickname; but the Christians took it and made it known to all the world.²¹

Jews and Gentiles alike were called by this name, “Christians,” so that it bears testimony to the oneness of Jew and Gentile in Christ.²²

While the term “Christian” is a very popular term today to describe followers of Christ, in the New

¹⁷Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises*, p. 69.

¹⁸John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 222.

¹⁹Harry A. Ironside, *Acts*, p. 284.

²⁰Illustration from Manford George Gutzke, *Plain Talk on Acts*, p. 110.

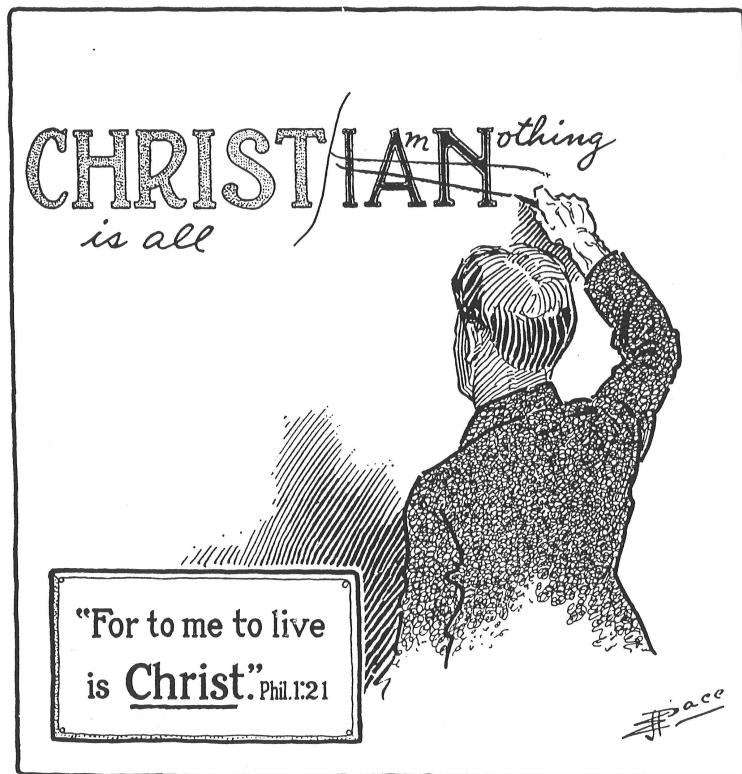
²¹William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 90.

²²Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 216.

Testament it was infrequently used. The more common terms to describe God's people were "brethren," "disciples," "believers," and "saints."

The term "Christian" is found in only two other places in the New Testament: 1) It was used later in the book of Acts when King Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian (Acts 26:28); 2) Peter used the term in 1 Peter 4:16. He taught that when we do evil we deserve to be punished (v. 15), but if we suffer as a Christian (for serving Christ and living for God's glory) then there is no shame in that. If we suffer and are persecuted, then we should make sure it is because we are engaged in Biblical, God-honoring endeavors. Thus the name "Christian" is to be protected from corruption and perversion.²³ What an awesome responsibility is ours to bear the name of Christ! May we never bring shame to that most worthy Name!

As an object lesson for children, or even for adults, we can write out the letters to the word "Christian"—CHRISTIAN. We can then point out that the first part of this word is CHRIST. What happens if we remove "CHRIST" from the word "CHRISTIAN"? When we do that we are left with only three letters: "I A N." These three letters stand for I AM NOTHING. The message is clear: Without Christ, I am nothing! Compare John 15:6.



²³How tragic that in the history of the Christian church we find horrible examples of dastardly deeds done in the name of Christ. We think of the horrors of the Inquisition and of the terrible ways in which "Christians" have treated Jewish people, as illustrated by the Crusades. Numerous other sad examples could be cited.

If a girl's name is Jane Smith, how can she become Mrs. John Brown? There is one simple way and it happens every day. When Jane Smith marries John Brown, she becomes Mrs. John Brown. As Mrs. John Brown, she is the same girl she was as Jane Smith, but now she has a different relationship, with different responsibilities. So with the Christian. The Christian is a man who is related to Christ. That is the whole story. If a man is not related to Christ, he is not a Christian.²⁴

Centuries of church history have passed, and unfortunately the term "Christian" is now used of people who profess Christ but who lack any genuine relationship with the Lord. They are religious but not right with God. They are part of "Christendom" but not a part of the true body of Christ. There are countless numbers of Protestants and Catholics and Greek Orthodox followers who self-identify as Christians and yet they have never been born again.²⁵ Today whenever we speak about a "Christian," we must be careful to clarify what a true Christian is.

A true Christian is a strange creature indeed! Tozer said it this way:

A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks familiarly every day to Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest and happiest when he feels worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible and knows that which passeth knowledge.²⁶

F. F. Bruce suggests the possibility that Luke may have been from Antioch, and may have been one of the Gentiles who was saved as the gospel went to the Gentiles of this great city.²⁷ Eusebius in the fourth century also indicated that Luke was from Antioch.

Acts 11:27-28

Prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of these prophets, Agabus, predicted that a great famine would come. Later in Acts this same prophet predicted that Paul would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and delivered to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10). The famine he predicted would be widespread ("throughout all the [Roman] world"—KJV) and it would be "great." The Greek text indicates it was **about to** happen (would happen soon). It would take place during the days of

²⁴Manford George Gutzke, *Plain Talk on Acts*, p. 110.

²⁵A man self-identifying as a woman does not (and cannot) make him so. **Reality** is what makes a sinner a saint or a professing Christian a true Christian.

²⁶A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous*, p. 156.

²⁷F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 243. His placing of Luke in Antioch is based on a Western text tradition in which Luke uses the pronoun "we" (v. 28) indicating that he was present in Antioch, even though Bruce admits that this reading was probably not part of the original text.

Claudius Caesar who reigned from A.D. 41 to 54. This man was not a false prophet because his message came from the Spirit of God. Josephus, a Jewish historian and Tacitus, a Roman historian, both mention a famine during this time period, probably around 46 A.D. “Josephus tells us how Helena, the Jewish queen-mother of Adiabene, east of the Tigris, bought corn in Egypt and figs in Cyprus at that time and distributed them in Jerusalem to relieve the hungry population.”²⁸

Acts 11:29

How did the Antioch believers respond to this message about a great famine? Their greatest concern was for the believers in the Judean area, especially Jerusalem. These Judean saints were already impoverished due to persecution from unbelieving Jews and the famine would only make matters that much worse. In a wonderful way, the Antioch believers dug deeply into their financial pockets, each one according to his ability, and determined to send a sizeable gift to the brethren in Judea. How amazing that these Gentile believers were giving sacrificially for the sake of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem! Out of loving concern, the new church (Antioch) gave generously to the founding church (Jerusalem). “By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34). Harry Ironside suggests that this was the first instance in history of people putting together their money in order to send relief to men of another nation.²⁹

Acts 11:30

They needed a team to deliver the gift to the elders in Judea, and Barnabas and Paul were chosen. Paul, once a fierce persecutor of believers in this area of the world, was now on a mission to bring them lifesaving relief. This is the first mention of elders in the book of Acts. Titus may have been with Paul and Barnabas (Gal. 2:3). In Acts 15:2 (also 15:23) these Jerusalem elders are mentioned along with the apostles. This great team of Barnabas and Paul would later launch forth in what is now known as Paul’s first missionary journey (Acts 13:2). However, this team, so mightily used by God, would be broken up prior to the second missionary journey due to a strong disagreement on the spiritual fitness of John Mark (Acts 15:36-39). This division resulted in two separate missionary teams going forth, Silas with Paul and John Mark with Barnabas (Acts 15:39-40).

²⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p. 244. See Josephus, *Antiquities* iii. 15.3; xx. 2.5; xx. 5.2.

²⁹H. A. Ironside, *Acts*, p. 286.