

## SCRIPTURE STUDIES

**SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS****ACTS CHAPTER 11****“GROWING PAINS IN THE EARLY CHURCH”**

From its birth on the Day of Pentecost, the new movement called the Church of Jesus Christ, struggled to take root in soil that was antagonistic to its existence. We have heard it said by some modern-day Christians, “We need to get back to the days of the early Church.” Usually those who say that are thinking that the early church had no problems such as the present-day church faces. The truth is there have been no easy days for the church in any era, especially in the First Century.

The young church struggled with a myriad of problems as it sought to establish itself in a culture that was bent on its annihilation. Not only was there opposition from without the church but there was also opposition from within the church. Peter’s ministry among the Gentiles in Cornelius’ home, recorded in chapter 10, triggered repercussions by the church leaders in Jerusalem, the solution to which changed the history of the early church. Let us take a bird’s-eye view of the entire chapter:

**I. PETER IS CALLED ON THE CARPET.** Acts 11:1-18

*“Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, “You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!” (11:1-3)*

The report disturbed the leaders of the mother Church in Jerusalem and they called Peter to appear before them and demanded an explanation. The first 18 verses of the chapter deal almost exclusively with a review of the events in chapter 10.

We cannot fully realized the revolutionary change it must have been for the Jewish Christians to learn that the gospel had been extended to the Gentiles and that Gentiles had been included in the church. Therefore they contended with Peter debating and arguing the issue. As verse 3 indicates, the contention was that Peter and others had kept company with Gentiles and had even eaten with them! Under the old Jewish system, this was taboo!

It is quite evident that the men in Jerusalem were struggling as Peter had struggled before he yielded to the will of God revealed to him in the vision that he had in Joppa on the roof of the house of Simon the Tanner. They were making distinctions between themselves and the Gentiles. In a word, they were doing what the Lord had instructed Peter not to do.

Peter explained the “sheet vision” and God’s instructions to him and summed up his defense before the Council by asking, *“Who was I, that I could withstand God?”* (v.17) The wisdom of the apostles was manifested in the fact that when Peter had completed his defense before them, *“they held their peace.”* (v.18) The confrontation was over. They could not deny the

evident activity of God and therefore, they could no longer argue for difference or distinction or discrimination between God's salvation for Jews and Gentiles. So, from this point on there is increasing evangelistic activity among the Gentiles. The gospel message had to be recognized as interracial before it could go international.

Everything is now in place for the next move in the history of the early church. For all practical purposes, from this point on, Jerusalem, the center and seat of Judaism, the birthplace and headquarters of the church, begins to fade out as the center of Christian activity and the focus shifts to the city of Antioch.

Jerusalem has had its day in the history of the Church of Jesus Christ. Never again will it enjoy the prestige and glory that it once enjoyed, until the Lord Jesus Christ once again graces it with His presence in the coming Kingdom of God on the earth. This brings us to the second division of chapter 11.

## II. BARNABAS CONFIRMS THE ANTIOCH CHURCH. Acts 11:19-25

*"Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch."* (v.22)

Before we concentrate upon the church at Antioch, let us acquaint ourselves with the city of Antioch. Antioch was over 300 miles from Jerusalem. Antioch was not an obscure village, but an even greater city in size than Jerusalem. It was the capital of Syria; the third largest city of the world at that time (Rome was first and Alexandria was second); it had a population of half a million at this time; It was of such magnificence that its main street ran for 4 miles through the length of the city; it was a most strategically geographical city from which the purposes of God could be carried out. So much for the city. Now, let us turn our attention to the church in Antioch.

Christianity as a movement, moved its base from Jerusalem to Antioch with the developments in this chapter. I mention this because in the remainder of this 11th chapter we have the account of the establishment of the church in Antioch. And as we will see later on in this book, the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul began at Antioch and after their journey they came back and reported to the church at Antioch, not the church at Jerusalem. This is the chapter of change. As far as the infant Church of Jesus Christ and the world, things would never be the same again.

Now Let us look at the first missionary church that came into existence in the city of Antioch. The elders in Jerusalem heard about Peter's ministry among the Gentiles in Cornelius' house and they were disturbed that Peter, a Jew, had associated with Gentiles, preached to them and, of all things, had eaten with them! They sent Barnabas to check up on what was happening in Antioch. Notice Barnabas' ministry in Antioch:

### **What Barnabas saw –**

*"... when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad."* (v.23) Barnabas saw evidence that God had been working among these Gentiles. The grace of God can be seen in the lives of those who know the Lord Jesus as Savior.

**What Barnabas said –**

"... and exhorted them all, that with a purpose of heart they would cleave to the Lord." (v.23)  
Barnabas was convinced that these Gentile believers were genuine converts and he did what any conscientious servant of God would do, he encouraged them to keep true to the Lord.

**What Barnabas showed –**

"he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." (v.23)

He was righteous, Spirit filled, of great faith and a generous man. (v.36-37) Barnabas was a deeply committed disciple of Jesus Christ. His testimony among these new Gentile converts credentialized him for ministry and is a good model for all servants of the Lord.

**What Barnabas did –**

Barnabas needed help to minister to this new church in Antioch. This new work was growing fast, and the work was more than he could do. Who could he get to help him? Who but Saul of Tarsus? *"Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch."* (Acts 11:25,26)

The missionary team of Barnabas and Saul was formed in Antioch. We will be hearing much more about them as we move through the book of Acts. But what a beautiful thing this was that Barnabas did. It was Barnabas who had taken Saul and introduced him to the church at Antioch initially. Together they instructed the new converts: *"And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people."* (v.26)

Only when believers are well instructed will we have stable, orderly and effective churches. Only then will we avoid the pitfalls of heresy, short-sightedness, and fanaticism. Teaching perfects and matures what evangelism brings into existence.

**III. ANTIOCHIANS COMMISSION A NEW NAME.**

*"And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."* (Acts 11:26)

The early believers were known by various designations: they were called "disciples", people of "The Way" (Acts 9:2); "The Sect of The Nazarene" (Acts 24:5); "Saints", "brethren", etc. However, the name that has stuck over the centuries is "Christian." The Companion Bible comments on this name as follows: "Though the name may have been given first by the Gentiles in mockery, the usage of the word by the Holy Spirit indicates that its real origin was divine. The Jews could not have given the name because "Christos" was to them a sacred word." Note also that the name was given at Antioch, not at Jerusalem, by Gentiles, not Jews.

Many would call ourselves "Christian" but are they real Christians in the New Testament sense of the word? Some think that because they are born in a Christian country, or have Christian parents, or have affiliated themselves with a Christian church, that they are a Christian. The plain truth of the matter is that one can experience all of these things and yet not be a Christian in the Bible sense. What, then, is a Christian? A Christian is a person *in* Christ and consequently, one in whom Christ dwells. *"If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature."* (II Cor. 5:17)

#### IV. AGABUS CAUTIONS ABOUT A COMING FAMINE. (Acts 11:27-30)

*“And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”*

A famine hit Judea, and the church in Jerusalem was in desperate straits. It was the church at Antioch that sent an offering. According to Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, this famine was so disastrous many died. During this emergency the believers at Antioch demonstrated true Christian love toward the church in Jerusalem. Their actions indicate that the teaching of Barnabas and Saul had not been in vain.

The first missionary offering was sent from a church on the mission field to the mother church in Jerusalem. What an exciting set of circumstances! No wonder these disciples were called “Christians.”

The church at Antioch was a wonderful church. It was born in adversity; was evangelistic in nature; mighty in influence; missionary in spirit and liberal in giving. All churches would do well to imitate the Antiochian church.

**Illustration:** A missionary walking from village to village came upon an old man plowing with a boy pulling a crude plow. The missionary asked why the boy was pulling the plow? He replied, “We are trying to raise money to build the church. This is my son pulling the plow. My son said, “Father, let’s sell the oxen, give the money to the church, and I will pull the plow.”

We need more families like that father and son in our evangelical churches today who will give of selves and substance to advance the church of the Lord Jesus. The Christians at Antioch practiced sacrificial living and giving. Do we?

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