

## Gospel Triumph: The Outward Focused Church – Acts 11:1-30

I have no doubt that we have a mixture of introverts and extroverts among us this morning. I would ask the extroverts to identify themselves, but you all would shout out and make noise and as an introvert that makes me uncomfortable. Introverts process through life internally, by looking inward, and extroverts process through life by talking it out. There's nothing morally superior to either, it's simply the way God has designed us as humans.

Did you know that churches can take on the qualities of being introverted or extroverted? But this is entirely different than an individual human. It becomes a major problem if a church turns inward and begins to focus on itself to the exclusion of those outside. The church only worries about its own programs, facilities, get-togethers and people. It fails to account for life outside the church walls. I have a book called *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, which is a great title. Here's a quote from that book:

*"Like persons, local churches are sometimes introvertive. Following the introvertive pattern in human personality, these churches turn their interests and their energies inwardly upon themselves. They are concerned primarily with their own affairs. Sometimes they devote most of their attention to spiritual introspection which results in a neglect of spiritual expression in their communities."* - W. Curry Mavis

Notice that line, *"They are concerned primarily with their own affairs."* It's easy to slide into introversion as a church because we are trying to equip the body and teach the body and shepherd the body and encourage one another. But as we do those things we must constantly push ourselves out on mission and focus our attention outward. The book of Acts consistently shows us the outward push of the gospel and in our text for today we see the church maintain its outward focus.

So, can I be frank with you? We here at WBC can tend toward introversion. We need to be aware of this and intentionally turn outward. This text today can help us to see what an outward focused church does to maintain its mission in the world. We'll see **3 Traits of the Outward Focused Church.**

### **1. The Church Conforms to God's Way for God's Glory (vv. 1-18)**

Look at Acts 11:1. Of course, chapter 10 recounts the story of the conversion of Cornelius and a group of Gentiles as Peter preached the gospel to them. After it was obvious they had received the Spirit, they were baptized. Look at 10:47-48.

This was a significant moment in the church and quite a change. And word spread quickly as 11:1 shows us. Peter had remained with Cornelius and the other Gentiles in Caesarea and had taught them the Word of God. Eventually he must head back to Jerusalem and a bit of conflict awaits him when he arrives. Look at 11:2-3. The concern here is that Peter went into a Gentiles house and had table fellowship with Gentiles and become ritually unclean and didn't see this as a problem.

The OT food laws maintained a distinction between Jews and Gentiles so that Jews could be the holy and set apart people of God. Peter appears to these people to be throwing all of that aside to eat with these Gentiles. Peter appears to be downplaying the importance of the Old Covenant law here. Eventually this concern will grow into something much more pronounced and significant. Listen to Acts 15:1-2. Is keeping the OT law required of believers in Christ? But for now the issue is one of Jewish identity and purity.

Peter recounts the events of chapter 10 from his own perspective in an orderly fashion to make a point. Now, I'm going to read a large section of verses, and I want you to notice how Peter tells these things from his perspective and how there are some slight additions to what we learned in chapter 10. See if you can pick up on those additions. We'll start in verse 4 and read to verse 17.

Here are the additions. In verse 12 we learn that there were 6 brothers from Joppa who become important witnesses to what happens. In verse 14 we learn that God told Cornelius that Peter would declare the message of salvation to him. And in verse 16 we learn that Peter connected the arrival of the Spirit to the promise of Jesus in Acts 1:5.

All of this makes it quite clear that God was at work fulfilling His purposes through these events. And this is the point Peter makes in verse 17. God's will was moving

forward and Peter needed to align with God's will, which was based on a right understanding of God's Word. God had promised the salvation of the Gentiles and the baptism of the Spirit. They were seeing it happen and so they must adjust their expectations and practices to match God's Way. To the credit of those bringing the initial criticism of Peter, they do adjust. Look at verse 18.

What we see in this section from both Peter and his critics is a willingness to align with God's purposes and this is necessary for a church to be outward focused. Mission to those outside the church forces us to give up cultural preferences and church traditions at times. It forces us to move into uncomfortable spots. Let me give you an example of how churches can remain ingrown and inward focused rather than turning outward in mission.

Churches create programs to help ministry happen and meet needs. For example, we have Bible Institute, Women's Bible Study, Small Groups, Wednesday Night Children's Ministry, etc. Those programs are not God ordained ministries and there are times when a church may need to end one program and start a different one to maintain outward focus and do ministry. Sometimes ending a program can be hard for those involved, and I understand that. But sometimes people tend to identify God's work with a particular program and churches maintain a program beyond its effectiveness in the mission. Or churches multiply more and more inward focused programs and there's a burst of activity but it's all ingrown.

It's vital that we constantly assess our ministries and our purpose as a church and seek to equip the saints for the work of ministry while turning outward with the Gospel and in love. Let's move to our second trait.

## **2. The Church Cultivates with God's Word for God's Mission (vv. 19-26)**

One of the great realities that we see in Acts is that the church expands and spreads outward while also going deeper in instruction and knowledge. You see this quite clearly in the birth of the Gentile church in Antioch. Look at 11:19.

Luke takes us back to Acts 8:1 where the persecution began after Stephen's death. The initial wave of Jewish Christians spread out to Phoenicia, which was north of Israel, and Cyprus, which was an island in the Mediterranean Sea, and to Antioch,

which was on the coast way north of Caesarea and near Tarsus. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind only Rome and Alexandria. Initially these Jews preached Jesus only to Jews, but in Antioch things began to change. Look at verse 20.

Now, it says Hellenists here and in other places this word meant Greek speaking Jews. But this word has a wide range of possible meanings. Think of the word Hispanic. It could mean someone from a number of different countries and cultural background. In this verse Hellenist means Gentile Greek speaker and we know that because of how it's contrasted with Jews in verse 19. These anonymous believers preach Christ and look what happens. Verse 21.

Word of the conversion of these Gentiles in Antioch gets back to the church in Jerusalem and notice what they do. Verse 22. Barnabas was introduced in Acts 4 as he sold a field and gave the proceeds to the church. He also helped Saul get introduced to the Apostles in Acts 9. He's clearly a devoted Christian who is wise with discernment and very capable in leadership. Notice what Barnabas does. Verses 23-26.

He encourages them and then makes sure that he has help in teaching and instructing them in the faith. And notice in verse 24 that a great many people were added to the Lord. The relationship between encouragement and teaching within the body and mission out of the body is symbiotic. As believers are built up to be faithful, they turn their attention outward, and God's grace goes to more people. I'll say this, an ingrown, introverted church is an immature church.

The instruction in God's Word and the outward focus in Antioch makes such an impact in the city that they earn a new name. They are called Christians, followers of Christ, to set them apart from Judaism and the pagan cults that were prevalent in the city. This was a new thing and a growing thing and so it rightfully earned this descriptive name, and this name stuck. Those who follow Christ and speak about Christ and are defined by Christ are Christians. And Christians don't turn inward, they turn outward in mission to help other believers.

### **3. The Church Contributes with God's Wealth for the Needs of Others (vv. 27-30)**

One of the beauties of preaching through the Bible verse by verse and section by section is that you get to a passage like Acts 11:27-30 and when you read it on context it makes total sense. But if you just open your Bible here and read these verses on their own, you are left wondering what is going on. Let's read them.

We just saw the church in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch in verse 22. An important NT church is born in Antioch and Barnabas and Saul spend a year teaching and seeing the people grow in maturity. At some point the church in Jerusalem again decides to send spiritual help to the church in Antioch, this time by sending prophets. Prophets in the OT spoke the Word of God to the people of God but occasionally they were predict the future as well. That is what happens here during this unique time period in Acts with Agabus.

Historical documents outside of the Bible attest to a famine in the Roman Empire in the mid 40's, which would have been about this time frame. Egypt had a lot of trouble growing food because of a drought and this impacted the entire region since Egypt was the breadbasket of the world. The famine impacted different regions at different times and the disciples in Antioch decided to send financial help to Judea to help the church there. They sent it with Barnabas and Saul.

Notice the reciprocal help between the Jewish church in Jerusalem and Judea and the Gentile church in Antioch. Spiritual help in the form of teachers and instruction and financial help to meet physical needs. The outward looking church is concerned about other churches and the work they are doing.

Listen, we are not the only church in Metro Detroit faithfully preaching the gospel. We have churches all around us who are doing this work in the right way. We are one of many. We are not competitors, we are partners. The ingrown church puts up walls and talks badly about other churches, and never partners with other churches, and looks with suspicion on what they are doing over there. The outward focused church sees the goal as the glory of Christ and the spread of the gospel and so they invest in that mission together with others.

I think this text is calling us to do some careful evaluation. Are we aligned with God's purposes rather than our own? Are we faithfully encouraging each other with God's Word and are we sacrificially giving to meet the needs of others and ensure God's mission moves forward? Let's pray.

### Sermon Reflection Questions – 3/16/25

- Are you an introvert or an extrovert? Explain why you think this.
- What are the problems with a church becoming introverted?
- In what ways could our church be tempted to focus “primarily on our own affairs”?
- Why does Peter recount his experience from chapter 10 again in Acts 11:4-17?
- What are the major differences in this account of Peter’s vision and his message to Cornelius?
- Cornelius isn’t mentioned by name in Acts 11. Why do you think this is the case? (This wasn’t mentioned in the sermon, so you are on your own!)
- What is the heart of the criticism of Peter in Acts 11?
- Explain why sometimes it may be necessary for a church to end a program that people have invested in and spent time supporting for many years. Have you ever experienced this with a program you loved? How did you respond?

- Barnabas exhorts and encourages the people in Antioch as soon as he arrives. What specific steps can you take to be more of an encourager in the lives of others in the church?
- How does Acts 11:27-30 fit into the context of what is happening in Acts 11?
- What other local churches can you pray for in your small group?