

# Acts

## Part 31 – “The Christians”

### Acts 11:1-30

With this section Luke reminds of what God has been doing to usher the Gentiles into the body of Christ. After the report of Cornelius' conversion Peter had to appear before the brothers in the Jerusalem church to explain his fellowship with Gentiles. Peter recounts his vision of the great sheet and the conversion of Cornelius and his household. It was clear that God had broken down the ceremonial regulations which had been used to alienate Gentiles from the life of God's covenant people. The narrative then turns to the city of Antioch where the gospel mission to the Gentiles was, up to that point, most fully realized with the establishment of a church.

**Main Idea:** The church must continue to press forward into the world with the gospel establishing churches who are being progressively conformed to the character of Jesus.

**Verses 1-18** repeat the account of Peter's vision and what transpired subsequently in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. Repetition is a typical means of emphasis in the Bible. Luke had a primitive word processor and had no way of underlining or making bold a text for the sake of emphasis. Remember how important these events were and what a historic change they signaled. Now the Lord had made clear that, in order to become a Christian, a Gentile did not have to become as well a Jew, especially become a Jew in respect to circumcision, food laws, and the Saturday Sabbath the principal and most sacred features of Jewish culture. The rest of the NT will bear its witness to how wrenching this change was for the Jewish Christians, how unsuccessfully many Jewish Christians navigated this transition, and how much tension was introduced into early Christian congregations over this very issue: Jews insisting that their religious culture continue to be observed in Gentile Christianity.

**v.19** Luke picks up the thread of his interrupted narrative from 8:4.

**v.20** In other words, most of the Jewish Christians who had been scattered by the persecution in Judea preached the gospel only to fellow Jews. It was a particular group of believers who initiated the historic change and began to evangelize the Gentiles.

**v.21** Antioch will play a key role in the developing story of Acts and in the history of early Christianity. It was, at this time, the third largest city in the world (after Rome and Alexandria), with a population of perhaps half a million, and had a large Jewish community. It was a city famous for its sexual immorality, a carry-over from the OT days of fertility worship in that area.

Antioch appears to have been Luke's hometown. Perhaps he was even one of those Gentiles converted at this time and thus makes a special point of mentioning this history in his narrative.

**v.22** It was probably in Antioch, as v. 20 may suggest, that the first large-scale evangelism of Gentiles took place and, thus, the church in Antioch may have been the first Christian church which had among its members a substantial number of Gentiles, perhaps even a majority.

This major development required apostolic inspection and Barnabas was sent as an envoy to Antioch. He was a great choice. We have already met him as a peace-maker, a man who brings other men together. Barnabas immediately recognized the hand of God in what was occurring and by pitching in to the work gave it still greater impetus.

**v.23** Notice, he urges them to remain firm in their faith, but asks nothing of them in matters of conformity to Jewish custom.

**v.25** The work soon became too much for the workers and Barnabas. Having met and befriended Saul a few years before, they went to find him and bring him back into the center of the Holy Spirit's activity in the world.

**v.26** The evangelist's work is not done when a profession of faith is made.

**v.28** This same Agabus, apparently, reappears in 21:10, prophesying that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem where he was heading after his third missionary journey. Roman historians speak of famines

during Claudius' reign; Suetonius says that there were "frequent famines." And there seems to be evidence of a particularly severe famine in Judea in the years from A.D. 46-48. This fits the timetable in Luke's account.

**v.30** This is probably the visit to Jerusalem described by Paul in Gal. 2:1-10. On this visit the question of Gentile freedom from Jewish religious customs was discussed. In any case, the Gentile believers were doing their part, caring for the poor Jewish Christians in Judea, as if the Jewish believers were brethren.

**v.30** The first mention of "elders" in the post-Pentecost Christian church. But the office was well-known in Judaism and was long-established in the life of God's people.

**Vs. 26b** – "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

Virtually all Scholars agree that the name "Christian" was the invention of Gentiles in Antioch. The fact that the Christians **were called** Christians indicates this. The Jews would never have called them Christians because they denied that Jesus was the Christ and so would never have dignified these people as the followers of the Christ. Its only other uses in the NT (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16) suggest that it may have been originally a term of ridicule, as were some of the other terms used for Christians in this early period, such as "Nazarene" which was incontestably a slur. All Antioch soon knew who the Christians were and from there it spread to the rest of the world. What was it about these men and women which so closely identified them with Christ?

**In what ways does the church in Antioch serve as a model for us today?**

**1. They were zealous for and faithful to evangelism.**

Vv. 19-21 – The Lord's hand was upon the evangelistic mission of the church. This is seen in the fact that it bore much fruit. Many were coming to believe. But God, who sovereignly grants faith and repentance, also calls his church to be the means by which the lost hear and believe. Their zeal and faithfulness in evangelism seems to be wholly natural. That is, they evangelized because it was *in them* to do so.

**2. They endured persecution faithfully.**

Vs. 19 – Even though many of the Jewish Christians would struggle to understand the inclusion of the Gentiles they nevertheless continue to evangelize fellow Jews knowing full well that such activity tended to bring about persecution.

**3. They were led by Godly men.**

Vv. 22-26 – Barnabas and Paul were sent to investigate what was happening among these believers in Antioch. The character of these two men reminds us of the importance of godliness for those who lead the church.

**3. They were devoted to the instruction of God's Word.**

Vs. 26 – Paul and Barnabas stayed and taught the church for a year. It is a brief mention but it reminds us of the priority of the teaching of the apostles that characterized the first church (Acts 2:42). The condition of the church is directly related to its preaching and teaching.

**4. They were generous.**

Vv. 27-30 – The church in Antioch responded to relieve the suffering of their brothers in Jerusalem.