

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts

What If I Became Known As A Christian?

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If I Became Known As A Christian?

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@chicagofirstnaz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text: Acts 11:1-30

Introduction

The events in Caesarea, as seen in last week's study, sent shockwaves through the Jesus community in Judea. With Cornelius' conversion, the growth of the movement took a new turn, and Gentiles assumed a prominent place "at the table." When Jesus sent his apostles "to the ends of the earth," that included the cultural distance between Jew and Gentile, and not only the geographical expanse of the Roman Empire. But the rejoicing in the camp was not unanimous. Considering the difficulty Peter experienced in accepting the vision of the clean and unclean, we should not be surprised that those who *had not seen* that vision had serious questions.

In previous studies we noted the "markers" laid down by Second Temple Judaism which set Jews apart from their pagan surroundings. As the Shammaite Pharisees insisted, Temple, Sabbath, kosher, table fellowship and circumcision were non-negotiable indicators of the observant life. Certainly Jesus disagreed with the manner his contemporaries applied these to exclude persons from fellowship in Israel. He allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath, and on the Sabbath he healed the sick. At table he sat with publicans and other "sinners." He questioned traditional interpretations of kosher, declaring all foods clean. As to the Temple, he invited people to receive from him the sorts of things they would ordinarily have gotten from it: healing, forgiveness of sins, and the presence of God. While he did not debate the merits of circumcision, his saying in John 7:22-23 makes a curious connection between Sabbath and that ritual, leading us to believe that even in that case he had other plans in mind for the future of his community.

This disagreement by Jesus notwithstanding, his followers (until Caesarea) were largely Jewish and continued many of their Jewish practices. The rite of circumcision traced its origins to Abraham, at the very least, and was considered by Jewish people to be "the sign of the covenant" with Yahweh. Until Jesus came, any Gentile male who wished to become a Jew needed to undergo, among other things, this rite. Persons like Cornelius who had not done so might be "God-fearers" and reverent adherents of Israel's ethical life, but they could not be true Jews without circumcision. They were, by all accounts, a second-class within Israel.

What the followers of Jesus needed to sort out was what to do about these long-standing markers. It would seem, based on what happened in Caesarea, that God had already made that decision for them by declaring the Gentile household of Cornelius entirely "clean," giving them both the Holy Spirit and water baptism as clear indications. Peter's initial quibble collapsed in the face of God's initiative. "Who can withhold water...?" is the apostle's submissive response to the gift of the Spirit by God. Here is a Gentile centurion who receives complete acceptance in the Christ community on the basis of the Spirit and baptism but not on the basis of the ancient Jewish ritual.

But then is this so unexpected? God has, in Jesus of Nazareth, ratified a new covenant with the restored people of God. Its basis is in his "blood," and its sign is baptism. His new gift to them is not Torah but the Holy Spirit, who becomes the law written on hearts not on stone tablets. Still, these are new ideas and they will require reflection and time to soak into the pores of the Jesus community. With the arrival of Gentiles into that community, the press is on, and many in Judea have huge questions about how this can be.

Our study this week considers Acts 11, a genuinely transitional chapter within Luke's narrative of the early church. The following outline captures the main themes:

1. Peter criticized by the Judean believers (11:1-3).
2. Peter offers his defence in the matter of Caesarea (11:4-17).
3. The Judean believers agree that Peter was right (11:18).
4. New Developments: Antioch (11:19-30).
 - a. First Gentile "Christian" community (11:19-26).
 - b. Famine relief for Judea (11:27-30)

From this outline we observe that more than half of the material pertains to resolving the Caesarean problem, while the balance concerns the emergence of a distinctly Gentile church in the city of Antioch. These two themes are closely connected, however, since Caesarea paved the way for what happened in Antioch and gave it significant impetus. Moreover, the formation of the "Christian" presence *outside Judea* anchored the movement for its further thrust into the Roman Empire to the west — largely spearheaded by Paul, starting in Acts 13, as commissioned by Jesus in Acts 9. Luke's report about famine relief for Judea also illustrates how the Gentile community reached out to its Jewish counterpart, reinforcing the mutual nature of Jew-Gentile relationships at an early stage of the church's development. The community of common possessions which was such a hallmark of the early Christian movement (Acts 2 and 4) now encompasses the Jew-Gentile alliance and validates it.

With these themes firmly in hand, we turn to this week's material from Acts 11.

Peter Criticized by the Judean Believers (11:1-3)

Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them."

Peter has his critics in Judea according to 11:1-3. They belong to the Jesus community, as suggested by the expression "apostles and the brothers" (11:1) and also by the phrase "the circumcised believers" (11:2). The inclusion of the word "apostles" suggests that Peter had critics among the Twelve. Imagine, for example, Thomas questioning Peter's actions in Caesarea, or Andrew wondering why Peter shared table fellowship with the house of Cornelius! The congregation in Jerusalem had been sizable, but it had been scattered after the persecution resulting from Stephen's ministry and death. The recently converted Saul would not have been among this group since he had returned to Tarsus (9:30) where he presumably remained until summoned later in this chapter (11:25ff).

What was their complaint? The charge is concise: "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." (11:3). Curiously, this non-kosher conduct of Peter seemed to eclipse the more momentous achievement mentioned in 11:1, namely: "...the Gentiles also had received the word of God." The idea of "receiving" the *logos*, "word," implied that the Caesarean Gentiles embraced the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a decisive way. The Greek word is *dechomai* used in the aorist tense. Unlike the hearers in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:13) who "receive the word with joy" (present tense, that is, "for the present"), but then "fell away," the Gentile audience at Caesarea embraced the word "for the long-term" (see Acts 2:41; 8:14; 17:11 for other instances of the verb with this meaning. Also, 1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2:13; James 1:21).

Some ancient manuscripts of *Acts* also add the words, in Greek, *kai edoxazon ton theon*, that is, "and they praised God," referring to those who heard ("the apostles and the brothers"). However, even if this variant was original, that rejoicing turned to questioning. Luke uses the Greek term *diakrinō* which means "to judge that there is a difference or distinction; to make a distinction, to judge that there is a difference" (Louw and Nida, 30.113). Such criticism can, in classical usage, lead to a "parting of the ways" and the "formation of parties." What the circumcised believers wanted Peter to do was still "make a distinction" between himself and the

Gentiles. In their view, it was fine and good for the Gentiles to "receive the word of God" but that didn't give Peter the right to ignore the distinctions long-held by the Jewish people.

Are we to think that *all Jewish believers* felt the same way and questioned Peter? Some scholars propose that the use of the word "circumcised" before "believers" was not simply another way of talking about "Jewish believers" but referred to "Jewish Christians who were specially zealous for the law and sticklers for circumcision" — persons we would also meet in 15:5, 21:20 and Galatians 2:12.¹ Yet, if we read 11:18 at face value, "when they heard this they had no further objection," this explanation seems unlikely. Would a staunchly entrenched "party-for-circumcision" roll over that quickly? Whatever Peter tells them in 11:4-17 settles the matter for this particular group, whereas the critics in the later chapters of *Acts* persist in their opposition.

"...went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them..." The objection is not to Gentile conversion or baptism. Certainly baptism was well-known as part of the process of conversion to Judaism before the Jesus movement appeared on the scene. Rather, the matter of "piety and practice" as an observant covenant Jew was the issue.² Anyone reading Leviticus 20:24-26 would discover this basic axiom of traditional Judaism, and avoid blurring the distinction between clean and unclean. Of course, Peter's critics had not yet heard about his vision where that distinction was not merely blurred but radically altered. Jesus the Lord of the new covenant had the legal right to modify the terms of the original covenant, since he had completely fulfilled the old one. What Peter was about to tell them would clarify his actions.

Once more we see a common pattern in the New Testament: Jesus and his followers often engage in provocative actions and then go on to explain why they acted in this way. "Signs" were followed by a statement of their significance. Symbolic prophetic actions, like casting out the money changers, were followed by warnings of things to come. In this case, Peter entered the house of Cornelius and ate with him, but would then need to explain to others why he had done so. His situation is not unique, even today. Occasionally we might be led to act in ways which are easily misconstrued by others and which require patient explanation. This is especially true in our work within the pagan world where cultural differences with the church world are dramatic. Pious church-going folk might take issue with our associations in the wider culture and even accuse us of flirting with worldliness because we befriend a non-Christian or eat ribs at his barbecue while he gulps down a cold one. "What might people think?" Peter ran the risk in the greater interest of the kingdom. Nobody suggests he ate pork chops in the house of Cornelius. But he wouldn't allow a pig roast to intrude on the sweet table fellowship he now celebrated with his new-found "brother in Christ."

"Peter, you have (as my father used to say) some 'splainin' to do," the critics are challenging Peter.

Peter Offers His Defence in the Matter of Caesarea (11:4-17)

4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' 10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

¹ Bruce, p. 229.

² Dunn, p. 149.

As we approach the next section of Acts 11, I am reminded of one of the most remarkable characters of the 19th century, John Henry Newman (1801-1890). Originally an Anglican, he converted to Roman Catholicism in 1845, and later became a cardinal. His critics were many, including the famous Charles Kingsley whose ascorbic remarks led Newman to write *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, that is, *An Explanation for His Own Life*. He left no stone unturned in offering reasons for his dramatic change, and though people still disagreed with his decision, they accepted his explanation as sincere.³ His hymn, "Lead Kindly Light," appears in both Catholic and Protestant hymnbooks.

Peter had his own conversion, thanks to the vision recorded by Luke in Acts 10 (last week's study). What his critics needed was not a good grilling but an honest and sincere explanation. Luke characterizes Peter's response using a verb and an adverb.

1. **Explained.** From the Greek verb *ektithemai*, "to explain something, presumably by putting forward additional or different information; to explain, to make clear" (Louw-Nida, 33.151). The classical usage adds the nuance of "public exhibition" to the definition. Peter holds back nothing, nor does he try to conceal anything when he explains his dealings with Cornelius in Caesarea.
2. **In order.** From the Greek adverb *kathexēs*, "a sequence of one after another in time, space, or logic; in order, in sequence, one after another" (Louw-Nida, 61.1). This is the same adverb Luke used in Luke 1:3 to describe the manner in which he wrote his historical account of Jesus. Also, it appears in Luke 8:1 to describe how Jesus traveled from town to town ("in order") (the same meaning applies to Paul as he travels, Acts 18:23). In Acts 3:24 Peter tells his audience that the prophets, "one after the other," predicts the coming of Messiah Jesus. Telling events in the proper order ensures accuracy, especially when questions of "cause and effect" are raised by the critics. Peter didn't enter the house of Cornelius *until he had received a direct vision from God* — a detail of incredible importance in answering the charges of the Judean believers. This wasn't Peter's idea: it was God's.

What we have in 11:5-14 is the re-telling of the Caesarean story about Cornelius, told with Peter as the frame of reference and in bolder colors. He gets right to the point when he relates how the vision came to him in the city of Joppa *while he was praying* and that the vision involved *falling into a trance*. His enumeration of the animal types is most exacting, distinguishing wild animals (Greek: *thēria*; Hebrew: *ḥayyāh*) from domestic ones (*tetrapoda* or *ktēnē*; Hebrew: *behēmāh*). Compare once more the distinction found in Genesis 1:24f. Following the Genesis nomenclature, Peter's report of his vision, coupled with his reference to the "four corners" of the sheet, conveys a universal sense of the created order. Of additional interest is that the word for "corners" comes from the Greek *archai* which elsewhere also refers to the beginnings, origins, elementary principles and authorities behind things. Through this imagery Peter draws his skeptical audience into the very origin of all things as they "come down from heaven." Whatever is *in the four cornered sheet* is there by the will of the Creator God. Moreover, the image of the four cornered sheet bears resemblance to the language of God's canopy pitched like a tent in which His people might meet with Him.

"Then I heard a voice telling me..." This is strong prophetic language not unlike what we find in Ezekiel 1:28, 3:12 and Daniel 8:16 within an Old Testament setting, and then in Revelation 1:10; 6:6, 7; 9:13; 10:4, 8; 12:10; 14:2, 13; 16:1; 18:4; 21:3. "Kill and eat" is a call to table fellowship, and in effect calls Peter to sit at table with the Gentiles. He honestly admits his resistance, and, in that sense, identifies his hesitation with the protest of the circumcised believers. In effect he tells the, "You have reservations? So did I! Don't think I rushed into hospitality with this Gentile household — I had my deep concerns as well." Peter phrases his protest in much the same form as his earlier contradiction of Jesus' announcement that he was going to the cross: "Surely not, Lord!" (Matthew 16:22). He bears witness to his past faithfulness to the kosher command, presumably in line with Leviticus 11 in the Torah. By spotlighting this previous observance, Peter casts in bold relief the contrast of his past with his present acceptance of Gentiles.

³ Cited by Anglican Bishop, N.T. Wright, in his *Everyman's* commentary on *Acts*, p.171-172.

"The voice spoke from heaven a second time..." (11:9). Again, as in John 21 where Jesus engages Peter more than once with his crucial question, "Do you love me?", so the voice from heaven detains him yet again with a strong prohibition: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." Stressing the importance of this vision, Peter tells his audience that the vision had three iterations before "the whole thing" (Greek: *hapanta*) was drawn back to heaven. Repetition is a form of confirmation. In Jewish thinking, matters require two or three witnesses to be established before the law (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:19; Hebrews 10:28). Should the audience suspect Peter misread what he saw in the vision, he makes it eminently clear that the event was thrice enacted before taken back to heaven. Another interesting parallel to a previous occurrence in Peter's life has to do with "the voice speaking a *second* time." During the earthly ministry of Jesus, the Gospels document "a voice from heaven" at Jesus' baptism by John (Luke 3:22) and on the mount of transfiguration (Luke 9:35-36; also, 2 Peter 1:17-18). "This is my beloved Son..." are the common words between the two incidents. John's Gospel records a third in 12:28 in response to Jesus' prayer that God glorify His name. The second occurrence in the Gospels also includes the command to the disciples, "Hear him," that is, "listen and obey Jesus." The dramatic similarity of this "voice from heaven" language leads us to think that Peter was consciously drawing the comparison in order to emphasize *that God had spoken authoritatively when he told Peter "Kill and eat," and that this voice carried the same authority as the words of God about Jesus: "This is My Son; hear him."* Were we to transport that earlier "voice" and overlay it with the one in Acts 10-11, the net effect would be, "These Gentiles are my children, too; listen to me when I tell you this!"

Scarcely taking a breath, Peter relates that "right then" (Greek: *exautēs*) the three messengers sent to Peter from Caesarea show up at the house where Peter was staying. This Greek word not only indicates a very short passage of time from one event to another, it also implies the second event happens unexpectedly and without warning (Louw-Nida, 67:113). In classical usage it meant "at that very point in time," based on the compound form of *ex + autēs* "out of, from this." The unexpected immediacy of the "three" men, coming so quickly as it did after Peter saw "three" repetitions of his vision, points to the sovereign oversight of God in guiding the whole process. This cannot be, Peter implies, a coincidence. And if the immediacy aspect was not powerful enough, Peter informs the audience that "The Spirit told me" to go with the messengers back to Caesarea.

An important word reappears in the text of Acts 11:12, one which we saw in 11:2. Recall that Luke described the circumcised believers as "criticizing" Peter when he used the Greek word *diakrinō*, meaning "to judge that there is a difference or distinction; to make a distinction, to judge that there is a difference." That is, his critics expected him to make the same distinction between Jews and Gentiles that they did, and that is why they objected to what Peter did when he entered the house of Cornelius and ate with him. This term *diakrinō* **reappears in 11:12** when the Spirit tells Peter to go back with the emissaries. Luke uses the aorist participle in this case (Greek: *diakrinanta*) with the adverb *mēden*, "not at all, in no way": that is, "Stop making distinctions based on Jew-Gentile differences as you accompany these three men back to Caesarea!" Peter was under covenant commandment issued by the Holy Spirit when he made his trip to see Cornelius, and the Holy Spirit's words simply reinforce the import of the vision, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (11:9). By using this word twice — once for the attitude of Peter's critics and now as part of the Spirit's prohibition — Luke is underscoring the transformation taking place in Peter, but also leveling a harsh criticism of Peter's critics by none other than the Holy Spirit himself! "It wasn't I who came up with this decision," Peter is telling his listeners. "It was the Holy Spirit!"

Additional witnesses are mentioned this time, as Peter enumerates "six" who went with him, bringing the total in his own company to "Seven" (a nice round, usually significant, number of "completeness!"), in addition to the three from Cornelius. Quite matter-of-factly at this point, Peter says, "...and we entered the man's house." For some reason, Peter omits Cornelius' name, only referring to "the man's house" (Greek: *ton oikon tou andros*). While the identity of "the man" mattered in Acts 10, in Peter's retelling it matters more that *any Gentile* be treated as Cornelius was by Peter. "The man" in question was *not a special case* but the beginning of a *whole new class of cases*, namely, uncircumcised Gentiles who would now be treated with equal acceptance alongside their circumcised Jewish siblings-in-Christ. By leaving out the name of "this man," Peter generalizes

and universalizes his case before his challengers who might well have conceded that "Cornelius was an exceptional God-fearing Gentile, but there weren't many folks like him and so we shouldn't generalize."

Yet one more bit of confirmatory evidence gets transmitted to the audience as Peter summarizes "the man's story" by telling of the angelic visitation which directed Cornelius to "Simon called Peter" (11:13). However, unlike the first telling of the story in Acts 10, Peter adds some additional information about the angel's message. That message included these words: "...through which you and all your household will be saved" (11:14). Peter makes quite clear that *prior to the Holy Spirit's coming on Cornelius and his household, none of them were saved*. Though all of them were "God-fearing" persons, none of their "good deeds" saved them. It is true that God rewarded their actions in 10:4-5 by extended an invitation through Peter's arrival, but until then they were outside the covenant community of Israel. This is a strategic rhetorical move on Peter's part, letting his skeptical audience know that these Gentiles *needed to be saved*, even though circumcision and conversion to traditional Judaism was not the path God prescribed for them.

How would Cornelius have heard the words "will be saved"? "Salvation" in the Hebrew sense shares the same root as "Joshua," "Jesus=Yeshua," and "Hosanna." The fundamental idea is "deliverance," and this is consistent with Peter's opening sermon on the day of Pentecost when he quote Joel: "whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). Here a fresh meaning emerges: "whoever" comes to mean Jew *and Gentile*. This new belief, held by Peter, assumes an even bolder form when he addresses the first church council in Acts 15:11 with the word, "We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, *just as they are*," where "they" applies to the Gentiles. Paul will affirm this in Ephesians 2:8-9.⁴ As Gentiles, the household of Cornelius would be saved from their isolation from God's covenant people, as well as from sin and death. They would undergo an "exodus" of their own, "delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear son" (Colossians 1:13). A new citizenship shared with the "commonwealth of Israel" would be theirs (Ephesians 2:12ff). Some years later, Paul and Silas would utter similar words to the Philippian jailor, another Roman-in-charge. He asked, "What must I do to be saved?" He heard the Good News: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved *and your household*" (Acts 16:30-31).

Some scholars are troubled by Luke's characterization of Peter's sermon in 11:15. Having studied Acts 10, we know that before the Holy Spirit came Peter offered a rather lengthy substantial treatment of the Gospel, set firmly in its historical framework. Yet, in 11:15, Peter says "As I *began* to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them..." The problem has to do with the word "began," since Acts 10 records a fair bit of the sermon *before the Holy Spirit actually arrives*. Part of the problem stems from translating the Greek word *archō*. Its common meaning is "to lead or rule," based on the root idea, "to begin." Grammarians comment that the word is often redundant, adding little meaning to the main verb to which it is attached. In this case, the main verb is *lalein*, "to speak." We could translate the sentence, "When I was speaking, the Holy Spirit came on them..." This agrees with the sense of 10:44 where Luke originally told us, *eti lalountos tou petrou ta rēmata*: "Yet [or still, further] speaking [was] Peter these words." Further, since Peter likely spoke in Hebrew or Aramaic, the underlying expression from which *archō* was a Greek translation was *wayhî*, meaning "And it was the case that..." Putting this together, we have "And it was the case while I was speaking..." which completely removes the difficulty created by treating *archō* as "begin."

For Peter the notable aspect of the Holy Spirit's coming on Cornelius' household was its identity with the same "coming" at Pentecost: "...on us at the beginning." This is the same Holy Spirit, but this time filling a *Gentile* audience not a Jewish one. Recognizing this identity, Peter recalls the words of Jesus in Acts 1:5 in which he contrasted the *water* baptism of John with the *Spirit* baptism which would come later. The contrast suggests that the Holy Spirit's baptism is, in some sense, superior to water baptism. Perhaps that is why Peter, in reviewing his experience in Caesarea, does not tell his audience in Jerusalem that he baptized the household of Cornelius *after* the Holy Spirit had already baptized them. This is consistent with the tenor of Acts 10:47 where

⁴ See Wall, p. 169.

Peter seems to be playing "catch up" when he says, "Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water," seeing that God has already baptized them with the Spirit!" Failure to grant water baptism would be, in Peter's estimation, to "oppose God" (11:17). Water baptism, in this instance, as applied to the Gentile converts, *confirmed* the previous initiative of God in giving them the Holy Spirit. Peter's "order" in 10:48 follows suit with God's giving of "the same gift" as to the Jews at Pentecost. The Greek of this passage places "them" and "us" in parallel as the implied subjects of the verb *pisteusasín*, "having believed" (an aorist participle).⁵

The phrase "same gift" is from *isēn dōrean*. The word for "same" actually means "equal, same, in agreement with." Our English word "isometric" is based on this term. By implication, God treats Jews and Gentiles in an equal way, without "discrimination," by giving the Spirit to both. It would not be an exaggeration to speak about "the democracy of the Holy Spirit" in the redemptive purposes of God. Jesus is an "equal opportunity Savior." The Holy Spirit marks out clearly that Gentiles are the recipients of God's *grace*, in the same way Jews are under the covenant of Abraham. Though the Mosaic Law code would exclude Gentiles, unless they were circumcised, the new covenant of the Spirit grants salvation apart from that ritual. Peter and his associates may find that wholly unexpected and hard to accept, but God gave unmistakable signs, as described in Peter's defence, that this new reality of Jew and Gentile community has His supreme endorsement.

"Who was I..." Peter concedes, "to oppose God," literally, "to stop, hinder, or cause not to happen," from the Greek verb *kōluō*. The aorist tense here may imply, "not even begin to hinder..." This language reminds us of what Gamaliel said to the hostile Sanhedrin who was bent on punishing the apostles, when in 5:39, he warned them about "fighting against God," using the compound form *theomachos*. Peter's situation is even more crucial: he *knows* that he cannot stop God whose powerful signs have already filled the life of the early Christ community. The admission of Gentiles is but one more *sign* that God is at work in new ways.

The Judean Believers Agree that Peter was Right (11:18)

The Greek verbiage in 11:18 has "...they were silent..." from *hēsuchazō*. What could Peter's critics say in the face of his overwhelming testimony about God's acceptance of Gentiles? Could they overturn the providence which brought together the circumstances Peter described? Could they contradict the initiative of God's gift of the Spirit to Gentiles? Could they discount Peter's vision and the voice from heaven? These and countless other signs pointed to the inevitable result: the people of God just became considerable broader in its ethnic base. What can the believing Jewish community in Jerusalem do except "praise God"? We are reminded of the words in the *Psalms* where David says, "I will praise you *among the nations* [that is, the Gentiles]" (see *Psalms* 18:49). But also, we hear that "nations [Gentiles] will praise you..." (*Psalm* 45:17; 117:1;). Paul cites such texts as he marvels concerning God's salvation of the Gentiles in *Romans* 15:9-11. Here, then, is the *celebrating* community where the nations join in the worship of the one true God, and the words of the prophets reach yet another fulfillment. Abraham has become a light to the nations through the work of Peter in the house of Cornelius. Very shortly, yet another Jewish convert will embark on a worldwide mission to extend the covenant blessings of Abraham to the whole Empire. We are referring, of course, to Saul of Tarsus.

What form did this "praise of God" take? Luke records their words: "Then to the Gentiles also God gave repentance unto life." The underlying Hebrew might well have been a poem which they sang. Are there any reservations in 11:18? Some scholars see the *silence* as a continuing uncertainty. Nothing in the text implies that, and the outburst of celebration would seem to rule out any further debate for *this group of critics*. Praise trumps perplexity. A similar spirit characterized the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, as he reached a climactic conclusion about God's mercy on both Jew and Gentile:

32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. 33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (*Romans* 11:32-36).

⁵ Bruce connects the two pronouns in this way: p.233.

New Developments: Antioch (11:19-30)

Nearly simultaneous with the episodic events of Acts 10-11:18 are fresh missionary achievements north of Jerusalem in the Syrian capital of Antioch, and also westward along the Phoenician coast and to the isles of the sea, namely, Cyprus. This summary of new developments appears in 11:19. However, the primary evangelists of this new thrust are Jewish believers targeting *only* Jewish audiences: "only to Jews" (Greek: *ei mē monon Ioudaiois*). Luke reminds the reader that this outward thrust was the result of the persecution, as he previously related in 8:1-4. Such a limited scope of evangelism is not long-lived, for a novel development takes place: persons from Cyprus and Cyrene⁶ send Gospel emissaries, seemingly without prior apostolic approval, to the city of Antioch where they "speak to Greeks also" (11:20). The content of their preaching is described as "telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus." Luke's choice of words here is completely fitting for a Greek audience who would immediately understand the relevance of "Good News" and of the announcement that Jesus is "Lord" (Greek: *kurios*). Hint of such a ministry to "Greeks" come during the latter days of Jesus public ministry when he received a delegation of Greeks who "wanted to see" him (see John 12:20ff).

A few comments about Cyprus, Cyrene and Antioch are in order.

Cyprus. Located some 100 miles off the Syrian coast, it is the third largest island in the Mediterranean Sea. Thoroughly Hellenized following Alexander, it came under Roman rule in 58 B.C.E. The famous orator Cicero served as governor for a period of time. Four districts divided the island: Amathus, Lapithos, Paphos (Acts 13:6, 13) and Salamis (Acts 13:5). Political power centered in Paphos while commercial activities occupied Salamis. This latter city was leveled by an earthquake in 15 B.C.E., but rebuilt by Caesar Augustus. Roman control produced roads, harbors, and public buildings. A team of archeologists from the University of Sidney excavated an ancient theater in Paphos during the 1995 season. More recently (2009), an ancient Syriac Bible dating close to the time of Christ was found on Cyprus. The first Jews settled during the last period of Greek occupation. They had close relationships with other religious groups and had Rome's favor. During the war over the city of Ptolemais between Alexander Jannæus and Ptolemy Lathyrus, King of Cyprus, many Jews were killed. During the war the Jewish citizens remained committed in their allegiance to King Lathyrus. According to Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas had a significant ministry on the islands at the beginning of their Gentile mission. This week's study finds a group of Hellenistic believers who travel from Cyprus to preach the Gospel in Antioch.

Cyrene. This was an ancient Greek colony in present-day Libya, the oldest and most important of the five Greek cities in the region. It gave eastern Libya the classical name Cyrenaica that it has retained to modern times. The city was named after a spring, *Kyre*, which the Greeks consecrated to Apollo. It was also the seat of Cyrenaics, a famous school of philosophy in the 3rd century B.C.E., founded by Aristippus, a disciple of Socrates. The similarity of *Kyre* to *Kurios*, "Lord," might have attracted the attention of the Greek population to the message, "Jesus is Lord," preached by the apostles. In 74 B.C.E. the territory was formally declared a Roman province. Those in Cyrene at the time of Sulla (c. 85 B.C.E.) were divided into four classes: citizens, farmers, resident aliens, and a minority population of Jews. The ruler of the town, Apion gave it to the Romans, but it remained self-governing. Although the Ptolemies granted the Jews equal rights, they were gradually oppressed by the larger Greek population. Of even greater significance was that Cyrene was in Africa, making the Cyrenes of African descent. Recall that the one who carried the cross for Jesus was "Simon from Cyrene" (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26). According to Acts 13:1, the church in Antioch (see below) had one leader called "Lucius of Cyrene."

Antioch. Witherington offers a useful summary of this important metropolis:

⁶ According to Shimon Applebaum, in his *Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene* (Brill, 1979), pp. 257-258, these two towns later became the focus of much violence in the later history of national Judaism between 66 and 73 C.E., at the height of the Jewish revolt against Rome. Jewish insurgents killed large numbers of Gentiles as narrated by both Eusebius and Dio

Without question Antioch, called by Josephus "third among the cities of the Roman world" after Rome and Alexandria (*War* 3.29), was of great strategic importance to early Christianity. It was to be the first major cosmopolitan city outside Israel where Christianity clearly established itself as a force with which to be reckoned. Located on the Orontes, some eighteen miles upstream from its seaport on the Mediterranean (Seleucia Pieria), Antioch was a great commercial center and near an important religious center connected with Artemis and Apollo (Daphne). It was the Roman provincial capital for Syria, and by the middle of the first century had an estimated population of a half-million people. On its coins Antioch called itself "Antioch, metropolis, sacred, and inviolable, and autonomous, and sovereign, and capital of the East" [E.T. Newell, "The Pre-Imperial Coinage of Roman Antioch," *Num. Chron.* 19 (1919): 69-113]. It had come a long way since its founding by Seleucus I about 300 B.C., who named it after his father Antiochus [There were numerous cities bearing the family name, and this Antioch is not to be confused with Pisidian Antioch, which Paul was to visit on his first missionary journey. See pp.405-6 of Witherington, *Acts*]. For our purposes it is crucial to note that Jews had played a part in this city from its earliest days, and there was a considerable and well-established Jewish community in Antioch in the middle of the first century A.D. In a revealing remark Josephus tells us that proselytes to Judaism were especially abundant in this city (*War* 7.45; cf. Acts 6:5 above on Nicolaus). There were close ties between the Herodian family in Israel and this city, as is shown by the fact that Herod the Great paved Antioch's main street and placed colonnades along both sides of it [The city of the Roman period has been excavated. Among excellent resources for further study, cf. Downey, *A History of Antioch in Syria from Seleucus to the Arab Conquest*, which is abridged in his *Ancient Antioch*. On the religious communities in the city, cf. Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians*; Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*; Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*; Tracy, "Syria," pp. 236-39]. This may in part explain how it was that Manean, a (former?) member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, came to be a notable teacher and/or prophet in the Christian community in Antioch (see Acts 13:1). Presumably he had been one of Herod's retainers in Antioch.⁷

First Gentile "Christian" community (11:19-26)

Once more we witness in the book of *Acts* God's careful direction of human uniqueness so that the right persons reach new areas of mission. Jews from the coastlands and from the islands of the sea, thoroughly aware of Hellenistic culture, are led to Antioch where Hellenistic culture thrived and who could best communicate the Gospel through the Greek-tinted lens to "Greeks also" (11:20b). For Jews to be part of the *diaspora* was not a bad thing at all, but equipped them for the next phase of expanding God's kingdom in the world. Nor was this their own idea, for Luke tells us in 11:21, "The Lord's hand was with them..." This is virtually equivalent to saying "the Holy Spirit led them." Nor was it a futile effort, as Luke elaborates with, "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." The Greek phrase for "turned to the Lord" is *epistrephō*, used here in the aorist tense, perhaps in its "inceptive" sense: "Started to turn...", indicating the beginning of a new development in the expansion of the Gospel. The language of "turning" is solid Old Testament terminology, often applied to wayward Israel who had "turned away" (Hebrew: *shūb*) from Yahweh, but then turned back to Him in confession and repentance (Ezekiel 14:6; 18:30; Micah 7:17). Perhaps the best example from the Hebrew Bible is this one: "Turn to me and be saved **all the ends of the earth!** For I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:22). The Greek word supports a similar meaning: "to return to a point or area where one has been before, with probable emphasis on turning about; to return to, to go back to." In the case of the "Greeks" who had no previous connection to the ancient covenants, this is surprising language. They certainly aren't turning back to being good Jews — since they never were. On the other hand, they, the Gentile-Greeks, *are turning back to becoming fully human* once again, the wayward sons and daughters of Adam who are finally returning home to God after a long and dark exile in human history.

Greeks knew a few things about culture — its origin, transmission and preservation. The word "pagan" to a Greek did not mean uncivilized or uncultured. It likely meant "civilian" in contrast to "military," and pertained to the development of civil society and culture (Latin: *paganus*). Of course, the word has acquired a host of connotations, including "non-Christian." However, Jewish people introduced into Greek life a whole new sense of what culture looked like. Living in obedience to the one true God, Creator of the world, they produced a

⁷ Witherington, pp. 366-367.

society often admired by the so-called pagans. That is why God-fearers existed among the Gentiles — persons who bought into some of the distinctives of Jewish life, just short of conversion. With the appearance of Jewish followers of Jesus in Antioch, a new option presented itself, one which did not ask Greeks to abandon their "Greek-ness," while calling on them to be self-critical of certain elements of Greek culture. Proclaiming Jesus as Lord meant that the pagan gods and goddesses — even the Emperor himself — could no longer occupy the supreme place in human life. The Greeks in Antioch needed to "turn to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await His son from heaven," Paul would eventually tell his own Gentile audiences (see 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10). Similar language appears later in Acts: "turn from these vain things to a living God" (14:15); "open their eyes...turn from darkness to light" (26:18). Gentiles are those who "turn to God" (15:19). If anything marked paganism in the eyes of Jews and Christ followers, it was idol worship. Whether this referred to temples of Diana or Apollo frequented by their adherents, or patriotic Romans worshipping the Emperor, or the average person with his portable little gods which they wore around their necks and under their tunics — each instance involved belief in the magical power of *false gods*, "Having eyes, but not seeing; ears but not hearing..." (Psalm 115:5; 135:16; and others). That is why such practices are called "vain," that is, *empty of meaning, power and purpose*. Paul's own diatribe against idolatry is well-known, starting with a thorough thrashing he gives it in Romans 1:18ff!

And so, the Gospel carried by the Cypriotes and Cyrenes to Antioch was the "real deal," marked by the power of God and a widespread acceptance. If Peter's experience in Caesarea had been a watershed moment, Antioch becomes the flood. As in the case of Caesarea, Antioch triggers a response from the believing community in Jerusalem. This time they don't send Peter, nor do they send an inquisition to figure out if the conversions there are kosher! Instead, they consistently follow the track laid down by Peter and call upon another "native of Cyprus," Levite-Barnabas whom we met in Acts 4:36, someone who has already been a source of help to Saul of Tarsus, post-conversion (Acts 9:27ff). Jerusalem sends Barnabas to Antioch (11:22). True to form (and to his name — "son of encouragement", bar-nabas) he immediately witnesses God's grace at work among the Greeks and proceeds to strengthen converts and make them disciples (11:23).

We pause to reflect on the breath-taking sweep of salvation history from Caesarea to Antioch. Much has happened. We might well ask, "Would the Jerusalem believers been as quick to support the Gentile effort in Antioch, a large pagan Metropolis, had they not first been exposed to God's work in the smaller Caesarea?" How marvelous is the providence of God in his preparation of hearts for a fresh undertaking. What happened to Cornelius and Peter — and the later engagement with critics in Jerusalem — was God's way of shifting the missionary paradigm so that when the "big plumb, Antioch" presented itself, Jerusalem would be ready and willing to undergird the effort.

Continuing our discussion of Barnabas' role in Antioch, we note how Luke describe his work there:

1. **He saw [the evidence of] the grace of God.** Other people might have "seen" different things, and these "other things" would have distracted them from the "main thing," namely, that God was *giving His Holy Spirit to a Gentile people* in ways fully consistent with his Old Testament purposes. That is, God was being gracious to the sinner, the undeserving, and the lost. What Barnabas saw was "the grace of God" powerfully at work, changing the lives of those considered "aliens and strangers" to the covenant people of God. He was seeing, in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, those who were once "not a people, being called children of the living God" (see Romans 9:25-26 where Paul quotes from Hosea 2:23 and 1:10). The covenant of grace lies at the heart of New Testament Gospel. Grace is God's unmerited favor given out of His love to lost and dying humanity, whose explicit and unmistakable sign is the cross where justice and mercy met and kissed; where the wrath of God poured out on sin, fell on Jesus instead, so that grace might flow like blood from his hands and feet. When Barnabas saw the Greeks of Antioch turn from idols to serve the living God, he knew that grace had come to town. Luke uses the word "saw," choosing the Greek term *horaō*, in its aorist participial form. The term connotes not only "looking at," but also "perceiving, discerning," which is why the NIV includes the filler words "the evidence of" as part of the translation. It's the distinction between asking someone, "What happened?"

and then pressing on with the query, "What was really going on?" In the case of Barnabas, he knew what was going on: God was clearly at work changing lives by His grace.

2. **He was glad.** Some Jewish observers of this change might have "seen and gloated"! Others might have "seen and gasped"! Still others might have "seen and grunted"! But not Barnabas. He saw and "was glad." Even as Jerusalem finally came around to accepting Peter's mission by "praising God" (11:18), so Barnabas can scarcely contain his joy. The Greek term used here is a form of *chairō*, the most common expression for joy in the New Testament. Luke engages in a word-play between the word for "grace", which is *charis* and the word for "rejoice" which is *chairō*. Barnabas fell into a state of happiness and well-being, filled with the overwhelming delight that the lost had been found. This is a common image in the Gospels when Jesus tells stories about finding lost things. The person who finds them is filled with joy (see Luke 15:7, 10).
3. **He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.** Now comes the hard work: to make disciples out of converts. If the stories Jesus told made the rounds of people like Barnabas, he could hardly ignore the message of the sower and the seed. When people receive the word, they need to have roots in good ground or the planting will not result in fruitfulness (see Mark 4:3ff; Matthew 13:3ff; Luke 8:5ff). The culture of Hellenistic Antioch was not conducive to keeping people "true to" anything. If Gentiles had a flaw, it was their adulterous relationship to false gods and their licentious life-styles. Everything in Antioch would conspire to compromise the faith of these new converts. Barnabas, who lived on Cyprus at one time, knew all about that danger, and he springs into action. To say that he "encouraged" them, meant that he "exhorted" them. The Greek word *parakaleō* is used here in the imperfect tense, implying it was the continuous activity of Barnabas to do this. The meaning of the word, according to Louw-Nida (33.168) is: "to ask for something earnestly and with propriety; to ask for (earnestly), to request, to plead for, to appeal to, earnest request, appeal." Perhaps the operative word is "earnestly." When the Gentiles of Antioch embraced the faith of Jesus, they began a journey which would require due diligence and constant attention.

To "remain true to the Lord" meant to "continue in" their "purpose" to follow the Lord. The Greek text here is especially important for our understanding:

<i>Tē prothesei tēs kardias prosmenein tō kuriō</i>	"In the purpose of the heart to remain for the Lord."
<i>Prothesis</i> <i>Prosmenō</i>	"plan, purpose, will. "to: remain, stay with, stay on, remain faithful to, continue in."

What happens to "the heart" determines whether these new believers remain faithful to the Lord. Barnabas lives under no illusions about the tendencies of human nature. Unless, subsequent to their conversion, they commit to heart-driven purpose to remain faithful, they will surely slip back into their former paganism. This is why Luke proceeds to describe the character of Barnabas himself:

- a. **He was a good man.** That is, his life was a living, tangible proof of God-driven, heart-felt transformation. To be "good" in this sense doesn't mean to be just a casual performer of good works. It means to "be good, through and through" and to "be" this way consistently. Luke's choice of the imperfect tense of the verb "to be" (*ēn*) reinforces this idea. Barnabas *was good, is good and will be good*. When Paul later wrote about the "fruit of the Spirit," he included "goodness" in his list (Galatians 5:22-23). Goodness is about fundamental character and essential nature. Barnabas himself had been completely changed by his faith in Jesus Christ the Lord. Goodness was not merely something he *did*; goodness was what he *was*. Luke seems to be suggesting that what Barnabas *was* mattered a great deal as he sought to "exhort" others to "continue" in faithfulness to the Lord. He could hardly expect in others what was not true in himself. Goodness in the teacher beget goodness in the disciple.

- b. **He was full of the Holy Spirit.** This is the first mention of the Holy Spirit in the Antioch narrative. Luke does not tell us that the Holy Spirit fell on those who "believed and turned to the Lord." It is likely that Barnabas' own life radiated the presence of the Holy Spirit, and now Luke informs the reader that he was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Greek: *plērēs pneumatos hagiou*). Can he then fail to tell the new converts about the importance of the Holy Spirit in *their lives*? Instruction in being filled with the Holy Spirit belongs to the pattern of early discipleship. The active ministry of the Spirit *encourages faithfulness to the Lord*. Paul later called the Spirit "the seal," which assures our safe arrival in God's kingdom (see 1 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; Ephesians 4:30). Those who receive instruction from one who is filled with the Holy Spirit are thereby placed in an environment where the Holy Spirit can fill them as well. Young followers of Jesus require time with Spirit-filled men and women of God in order to strengthen their faith and grow in the life of Jesus.
- c. **...and of faith.** As if to round out his character study of Barnabas, Luke adds the second half of "fullness" in the life of Barnabas: faith, *pistis*. In previous studies we have defined faith in terms of "trust" and not only in terms of intellectual agreement. To say "I believe" means more than, "I hold the following opinions about something," or, "I subscribe to these ideas." Faith is, by and large in Scripture, the commitment of heart and life to God, such that, we put the full weight of our lives in His hands. To "believe in" Jesus, commonly means to "believe on" him, that is, to rely on him implicitly and without mental reservation. The biblical sense of "faith" is that we are willing to "live and die" for what we believe. Faith tells others what is a matter of ultimate importance and concern to us. Nor is faith merely private belief, as in, "Well, that's what *I believe*." Faith is always a matter of public record for followers of Jesus who are called upon to "acknowledge him before" others (Matthew 10:32; Luke 12:8). Those whom Barnabas taught *knew what mattered to him* — he was "full of it"! And he wanted these same things to *matter to them*.

Barnabas was just such a person, and his ministry to the new Antioch believers was intended to lead them to become just such persons themselves. That is how discipleship works. As our own mission statement affirms: "...to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ" is the goal of our ministry. Luke doesn't extol the virtues of Barnabas because he wants people to admire the man. He tells us what sort of person Barnabas is so that we understand what sort of disciples in Antioch will come from his ministry. And further, to let us know how important such efforts are *in every community which names the name of Christ*.

The growth of the Christ community in Antioch is mentioned *twice*: 11:21b and 11:24b. We can only imagine the enormous challenge faced by the Jewish believers as they began to disciple these wholly Gentile converts. Unlike their work with other Jewish people, nothing could be taken for granted. These "Greeks" probably knew nothing about the grand story of the Hebrew Bible: Creation, Fall, Flood, Abraham, Moses, Exodus, etc. Put simply, they knew nothing about the Bible and needed to be instructed. Although the message of the Gospel created faith in their hearts, they still needed grounding in the *basis and reason* for that faith, and they surely needed teaching about how to live the life of Jesus in practical terms. Consider the implications for our own time. We live in a largely post-Christian, post-modern culture, where we can take nothing for granted about people's knowledge of the Bible or even their understanding of who is *God*. Once the Gospel is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit creates faith in the heart of the seekers and people are drawn to salvation in Jesus Christ. But a whole new world opens up for the converts — one which the Christ community must explain to them. That is why Bible study, prayer, worship, fellowship and service are essential elements in any effective discipleship process. We must not leave new-born Christ-babies on the doorstep. They require nurture and guidance.

What Barnabas did was begin the steps toward **sanctification** in the lives of the new Antioch converts. As a sanctified leader in the early Christ community (note once again his character traits), he taught the newborns about "remaining true to the Lord *with all their heart*," a rather concise definition of what sanctification implies! To devote ourselves to God and love Him with all our hearts — that is with "perfect love" — lies at the center of our confession. This work requires the Holy Spirit, as it did in the case of Barnabas. It results in "goodness" and gives the assurance of "faith." We sometimes call it **spiritual formation**.

Can Barnabas undertake this task alone? Apparently he sees the implications of the work ahead of him and then thinks of an old friend living up in Tarsus. Antioch was the largest city nearest Tarsus, a distance of some 100 miles, following the Roman coastal road which linked the two sites. As a brief summary:

Tarsus was the capital of the Roman Province of Cilicia, situated between the Taurus Mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. The Province of Cilicia varied between 30 to 60 miles wide and was about 300 miles long. The city of Tarsus was about 10 miles inland of the Mediterranean on the alluvial plain, watered by the Cydnus and may have had as many as one half million inhabitants in the time of Paul. Ramsey described the city as about 70 feet above sea level on a level plain. The lower Cydnus was made navigable and a port had been built to carry goods to and from the sea. A major road led to the north where the famous mountain pass known as the "Cilician Gates" lay less than 29 miles inland. Sir William Ramsey described the pass as "one of the most famous and important passes in history".⁸

According to 11:25 Barnabas went "to look for Saul" in Tarsus, the latter's hometown (see *Background Notes* for June 6/7, 2009 for additional information). "He evidently knew that Saul was just the man required for this work at Antioch."⁹ Here is additional evidence that Barnabas was "led by the Spirit," being sensitive to the full range of acquaintances God had brought across his path in recent years (again, see his role in Saul's life, Acts 9:27ff). No doubt Barnabas looked back, remembered the special calling Jesus had on Saul's life: he was being sent, one day, to the Gentiles. Perhaps, Barnabas intuitively felt, the time has come for that fresh mission to begin.

Back in Antioch, where Barnabas brings Saul, one full year of ministry ensues. What did this ministry involve? How did it unfold? What were its results? Luke is concise in his narration of the answers to these questions.

1. **Barnabas and Saul met with the church.** The Greek is vital to understanding the relationship these two men had with their disciples. The word translated "met with" is *sunagō*, used in aorist passive form (*sunachthēnai*). It's hard not to see the word "synagogue" growing out of this basic root. That latter word was, of course, the way Jewish people lived *together in community*, and throughout the Roman Empire — inside and outside Israel — such Jewish social units existed, not only for worship and study, but also for social benefit, transacting business, settling disputes, and just generally meeting together for other reasons. The synagogue was (and is) an identifiable community of Jewish persons. Therefore, when Luke writes about Barnabas and Saul "sunago-gizing," it sounds suspiciously like the Christ followers in Antioch were forming themselves into just such a community.

This perception is strengthened by the additional words *en tē ekklēsia* ("in (or with) the church"). Once more we have a word which allows for differing translations: *ekklēsia*. It's the usual word rendered as "church," but that English word has become overgrown with a host of meanings, including buildings, denominations, factions, and the whole Christ movement viewed universally (as in "the Church"). The word parallels the ancient Hebrew *qāhāl* which means "to call." It was applied to Israel (Deuteronomy 23:2; Judges 20:2; 1 Kings 8:55; 1 Chronicles 29:10), especially when referring to an assembly for religious purposes.¹⁰ Combined with a verb like *sunagō*, *ekklēsia* suggests the emergence of a new identity group, called *out from* the nations (whether Jew or Gentile) and called *together* to become the restored people of God. Throughout *Acts*, Luke develops this idea and also uses the word in the plural form: *ekklēsiai*, suggesting multiple bodies or local "churches" (see 15:41; 16:5; also, 14:23; 13:1; 8:3; 11:26 (here), 14:27; 15:3, 4; 18:22; 20:17; 12:1, 5; 5:11; 15:22).

The teaching ministry of Barnabas and Saul impacted the Christ followers assembled in this fashion and gathered in this group.

⁸ W.M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen*, London, 1908, pp.29-39; *Cities of St Paul* (1907), pp . 85ff, and "Cilicia, Tarsus and the Great Taurus Pass," in *Geographical Journal* (1903), pp . 357–410; Richard A. Spencer, "Tarsus," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, pp.1276-77; E. A. Livingstone, "Tarsus," *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2000.

⁹ Bruce, p. 237.

¹⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *To Advance the Gospel*, Eerdmans, 1998, p.322ff.

2. **...taught great numbers of people.** A familiar phrase reoccurs in this context, *ochlon hichanon*. We might use words like "a sizable crowd, a healthy number, a worthy turnout." The term *hichanos* functions as a term of "adequacy" or "ability" in other settings, and carries the connotation of "considerable" or "many" when applied to numbers of things, including persons — as it does here. The model of the synagogue would have been well-suited for this purpose, and both men undoubtedly divided the task into manageable units. Only ten men are required for form a synagogue, and in a city like Antioch, smaller subgroups would have been familiar sights without attracting alarm that a rebel movement had taken shape in the city. Recall how Jesus fed the 5,000: by dividing the group in "companies" of smaller numbers (Mark 6:40). Similar "large numbers" were efficiently managed in the days of Moses by such subdivisions (see the early chapters of *Numbers*). As time passed, the two men would have trained others and had additional help. The missionaries from Cyprus and Cyrene likely remained to assist. Discipleship remains a shared ministry of the local congregation. Small groups (ABF's, for example) are constructive ways of doing this.
3. **The disciples were called "Christians" first at Antioch.** This statement, found in 11:26, has been the source of much debate among Bible students. Were we to confine our reasoning to the text before us, the meaning flows from what preceded in the passage. Antioch was the place where a new identity emerged among the followers of Jesus, one which emphasized the deep-seated belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. The word "disciple" (*mathētēs*) is joined with the word "Christian." That is, as the process of discipleship unfolded throughout the year Barnabas and Saul spent with the Antioch believers, assembled "synagogue-style," they ever-increasingly self-identified as "Christians." In essence, the Greek words *Christianos* (singular) and *Christianoī* (plural) generally mean "belonging to the Messiah, the one anointed by God."

The idea of "Christian" requires additional explanation, and for that I have elected to reproduce a portion of my *Background Notes*, "We Are Christian" from the *NazaWhat* series, September 15/16, 2007, pp.2-6, which follows.

Excursus on the word "Christian": The Early Followers of Jesus, The Christ Community¹¹

The followers of Jesus, from the very beginning, saw themselves as a community of God gathered around the person of Jesus. From previous studies, we have already made the point that Jesus, a real historical Jewish figure, saw himself as God's Son, come to renew the covenant with Israel, in fulfillment of ancient promises reaching backward to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In his own time, Jesus, by his life, death and resurrection, raised up the fallen rule of David, and initiated the long-awaited kingdom when God would be King once again. By his work, sin and death had met their match, and the New Creation was coming into existence, displacing the old one, and quenching the darkness with the light of God. Within the first one hundred years after Jesus' return to his Father, the community of Jesus had spread outward into the whole of the Roman Empire. In Jewish synagogues, where the message of Jesus was received, little "communities of the Messiah" sprang into being. Beyond these were the integrated communities of Jews and Gentiles who also embraced the Good News as one people, no longer isolated by ethnicity, where there was neither "Jew nor Gentile", but all were "one in Christ".

How did the early community of Jesus self-designate? A variety of terminology appears in the New Testament books which tell the story of the early followers of Jesus. A brief listing of "names" or descriptions appears here, taken from the pages of the book of *Acts*, which records numerous episodes in the early life of the Jesus community.

1. "the apostles" Jesus chose (of the original "12")
2. "men of Galilee" (1:11)
3. "all joined together constantly in prayer" (1:14)
4. "the believers", originally numbering "about a hundred and twenty" (1:15="a group numbering about 120"; 2:44="all the believers"; 4:32="all the believers"; 5:12="all the believers"; 9:41="Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia"; 10:45; 11:2; 15:2, 5, 23; 16:1="a Jewess and a believer", 15; 21:25="Gentile believers")
5. sharers in "this ministry" (1:17)

¹¹ Robert Ismon Brown, "We Are Christian," *NazaWhat*, September 15/16, 2007, pp.2-6.

6. witnesses of Jesus' resurrection (1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39-41; 13:31)
7. "those who had been with Jesus" (4:13)
8. "their own people", referring to how the apostles saw the other believers (4:23)
9. "the church (Greek: *ekklesia*)" (5:11="the whole church"; 8:1="the church at Jerusalem", 3; 9:31="the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria; 11:22="at Jerusalem", 26; 12:1="at Antioch", 5; 13:1; 14:23="each church", 27="gather the church together"; 15:3-4="the church, the apostles and the elders", 22="the whole church", 30="gather the church together"; 18:22; 20:17="elders of the church", 28="the church of God"). The use of the word "church", in English (from Old English "cirice"; Old German "kirika"; Medieval Greek, "kuriakon"="Lord's House"), is an attempt to translate the Greek word which has its own unique meaning in both Greek and Jewish settings. Among Greeks, it was a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place. For Jewish people, it referred to the *kahal* or assembly of Israel, known through its Greek designation, "synagogue", the "coming together".
10. "disciples" (6:1, 2="the Twelve gathered all the disciples together", 7="disciples in Jerusalem"; 9:1="the Lord's disciples"; 9:19="the disciples in Damascus", 26, 36="a disciple called Tabitha=Dorcas"; 38; 11:26="The **disciples were called Christians** first at Antioch", 29; 13:52; 14:20-22, 28; 15:10; 18:23, 27; 19:1, 9, 30; 20:1, 30; 21:4-5, 16="disciples from Caesarea")
11. "the brothers" (6:3; 9:30; 10:23="the brothers from Joppa"; 11:1="the brothers throughout Judea", 12, 29="living in Judea"; 12:17; 13:15, 38; 14:2; 15:1, 3, 7, 22-23, 32-33, 36="in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord", 40; 16:2="at Lystra and Iconium"; 40; 17:6, 10, 14; 18:18, 27; 21:7, 17; 28:15)
12. "those who had been scattered" (8:4; 11:19)
13. "any who belonged to the Way" (9:2)
14. "the saints" (Greek: *hagios*="holy one"; early followers of Jesus were all called "saints") (9:13="in Jerusalem"; 9:32="in Lydia"; 26:10="in prison")
15. "Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5, used by the foes of the Christians to designate them as a "sect" with Judaism).
16. "Christian" (Greek: *Christos* + *ianos*, meaning "one who belongs to Christ", or, "a little one of Christ", as a diminutive form) (11:26; 26:28; also, 1 Peter 4:16; the only occurrences)

From this sampling of texts we can see the variety of language used by the early followers of Jesus to describe themselves. Predominating in this list are terms like "disciples", "church=*ekklesia* or assembly", "believers" and "the brothers". Only in two places do we find the more familiar "Christian" used, with one additional reference in 1 Peter. Only later, during the 2nd through 4th centuries, does this term gain greater traction as a self-designation for the followers of Jesus. When Acts 11:26 identifies the first instance of the term, the connection is between "disciples" and "Christians" in conjunction with the city of Antioch. We are not to suppose that the identity of Jesus' disciples *began* at Antioch, but only *the use* of this particular term. The other designations were clearly in use by the time this historical development in language took place. Each one of them emphasized a particular characteristic of the Jesus movement.

1. As "disciples" they continued being **taught** by Jesus through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sent as their teacher.
2. As "believers" they placed their **trust** in the God who sent Jesus to bring them salvation and restore His people once more.
3. As "brothers" they **belonged to the new family of God**, His "new creation", having been born from above.
4. As "the church" they were **assembled together** as worshipping communities, **sharing** the new life of Jesus **together** and working together to bring this message to the **whole** world. We probably do the word "church (*ekklesia*)" the best justice when we think of it in terms of "**community**" rather than an organizational or institutional entity. My own preference has been to speak of the "Jesus Community". The uses in *Acts*, noted above, illustrate both its "local", geographical indications, and its "world-wide", universal or catholic meaning. We may speak of the Jesus community **at a particular location** (Jerusalem, Caesarea, Antioch, etc.), but we may also talk about the Jesus community **throughout the whole world** and in all generations (this is the truest meaning of the word "catholic", without its adjective "Roman"). For the first disciples of Jesus, the principal unit was the "city" where there were already Jewish synagogues (same idea as "church"=assembly=community=*ekklesia*=*qahal*) established. Initially, that unit was Jerusalem, where the community would return from time to time in order to assess its belief and its mission (see Acts 15 as a case in point).
5. As "Christian" they **belonged to the Messiah**, the one anointed by God.
 - a. The root idea is the Greek word *Christos*, meaning "anointed one", following the Hebrew word *hamasiah*. The Old Testament meaning was connected to both being chosen as king and being appointed as priest. Both offices in Israel involved a ceremony of anointing with oil, marking out the individual for his office.

Such oil rituals usually implied an endowment with power and giftedness for the work being undertaken. God was not only pointing out His choice of a person for the work, he was also giving the person the needed ability to carry it out.

- b. In Jewish history, there had been a growing expectation, leading up to Jesus' arrival, that such a Messiah would appear, endowed by Yahweh to once more establish His righteous rule in Israel.
- c. When Jesus finally came, he was, indeed, "anointed by God", but did not undertake the sort of kingdom imagined by the Jewish community. Instead, he proclaimed the Good News for the poor, the sick, the sinful and the dying. He then went on to implement that message through his own death and resurrection. What his followers quickly discovered, some fifty days later, was that the "anointing" of Jesus would also become their anointing, as the Holy Spirit was "poured out" on them.
- d. Perhaps the clearest explanation of Jesus as "anointed one"=Messiah can be seen in this Acts passage: "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through **Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all**. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- 38 how **God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit** and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. 39 "**We are witnesses** of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by **witnesses whom God had already chosen-- by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead**. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through **his name**" (Acts 10:36-43). Peter spoke these words to the Gentile household of a Roman centurion named Cornelius who ultimately embraced the Jesus message and received the Holy Spirit (read Acts 10:44-48).
- e. To be "Christian" in its purest sense, means to belong to this Jesus who was "anointed by God" (that is, was Christ the Messiah), and to bear witness to his words and deeds, climaxing with his death and resurrection. It is to proclaim the Jesus message "that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name". It means being part of the community who "eats and drinks" with him in sacred fellowship and worship. "**Christian" translates the Hebrew idea "Messianic"**.
- f. Once the early Jesus followers began to proclaim this message outside the Jewish community, they found a welcome hearing there.
 - i. "A great number", we are told, "believed and turned to the Lord" among the "Greeks"=Gentiles (Acts 11:21), particularly in the northern city of Gentile Antioch. Once the Jerusalem, and largely Jewish, Jesus community heard this, they sent Barnabas to confirm the reports.
 - ii. Heartened by what he found, Barnabas joined with Saul of Tarsus for a year-long teaching ministry in Antioch, and it is at this point in Acts 11:26, we are told "the disciples were called **Christians** first at Antioch". Having broadened their identity beyond the ethnic borders of Israel, and having embraced the world as their mission field, these followers of Jesus saw themselves in a new light. As both Jew and Gentile, they "belonged together" under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
 - iii. The word "Christian" served them well in this self-designation. It was not the only term they used to describe themselves, and appears sparsely in the New Testament, as we have seen. But it explains its increasing use throughout church history, as the Jesus community broke out of its narrow ethnic identity and became the world-movement envisioned by Jesus when he gave his followers "the great commission" (Matthew 28:19-20)
- g. Yet to be a Christian was controversial. In the second recorded use of the word "Christian" (Acts 26:28), Paul is making his defense before the Roman prefect and the Jewish King, Agrippa. Earlier Paul's rights under Roman law (he was a citizen, thanks to his father) had been violated and he had appealed to Caesar in Rome for redress. Before his departure, he was given a hearing in Caesarea where he told the story of his conversion, and where he appeals to the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah ("Christ"). In the heat of his argument, the Roman ruler declares him "mad", but the Jewish king is more subtle: "Do you think that in such a short time you can **persuade me to be a Christian**?" (Acts 26:28). For Paul had in a brief dissertation summed up the message of the gospel, climaxing with the central belief: "...that **the Christ would suffer** and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:23). Was Agrippa simply being sarcastic or did he grasp the

point Paul was making, and thought it was a hard thing to accept a suffering Messiah as part of the "Christian" story. After all, to "be a Christian" meant embracing the whole message, not just part of it. If Jesus was indeed the Messiah of God, it would be a hard pill for Agrippa to swallow, one who claimed to be *king* himself.

- h. Reflecting on the deeper controversies of following Jesus, Peter wrote some decades later, "Yet if anyone **suffers as a Christian**, let him not be ashamed, but **let him glorify God in that name**" (1 Peter 4:16). The "name" was, of course, "Christ" (Messiah). The pagans had taken it up as a kind of nickname with which to taunt the Jesus followers. Peter is merely pointing out that "the name" is a worthy name, one that brings honor to God, and of this name, the "Christ-followers" should not be ashamed. To be associated with this name would bring a person into contact with Gentiles, the poor, the sick and the needy--the very people sought to save ("I have not come to call righteous people, but sinners...", Jesus had told his critics. "Sick people need a doctor, not well ones", he added). A kind of scandal hung over "the name" since Jesus had suffered the ignominious death of crucifixion, and it looked to the world as if he were a failed Messiah, a convicted criminal. The name "Messiah" had fallen on hard times, as one resistance leader after another succumbed to the Roman torture stake. Does one really want to be associated with a criminal, a revolutionary, a brigand who was beaten by the Romans and hung on a cross? Since most people had not embraced the idea of Jesus' resurrection, all they knew of Jesus the Christ was what the Roman inscription said about him: "Criminal's name: Jesus of Nazareth; Crime: King of the Jews". As Peter's letter suggests, to take up that name as one's own, to be called a "Christian", one who belongs to Christ, carried high risk and the likelihood of suffering or death.

From this brief study, we observe how the early Jesus movement saw itself in relationship to Jesus. Simply reading the *Acts* passages reveals a variety of terminology through which Jesus' followers identified themselves, with the word "Christian" being a rather minor player in the listing. Still, a great deal hangs on the word, grounded, as Peter says, in "that name" which brings honor to God. To be called "Christian" in the biblical sense means to "belong to Christ". Paul's letters support this interpretation in several important places:

And you also are among those who are called to **belong to Jesus Christ** (Romans 1:6).

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might **belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead**, in order that we might bear fruit to God (Romans 7:4).

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not **belong to Christ** (Romans 8:9).

But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those **who belong to him** (1 Corinthians 15:23).

You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we **belong to Christ** just as much as he (2 Corinthians 10:7)

If you **belong to Christ**, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3:29).

Those who **belong to Christ** Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24).

Normally, Paul uses the genitive form of "Christ" to express this special "belong to" relationship, literally: "You are **of Christ**". This is, after all, what "Christian" means. Our "source" is Christ, for we owe our very existence to him. Sometimes Paul prefers the more intimate expression "in Christ" to describe our connection to Jesus. Here are a few examples:

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for **those who are in Christ Jesus**" (Romans 8:1).

"..so **in Christ we who are many form one body**, and each member belongs to all the others" (Romans 12:5).

"Therefore, if anyone is **in Christ, he is a new creation**; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17)

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for **you are all one in Christ Jesus**" (Galatians 3:28).

"...in order that we, who were the first to hope **in Christ**, might be for the praise of his glory. 13 And you also were **included in Christ** when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked **in him** with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit..." (Ephesians 1:12-13).

A full list of "in Christ" texts is worthy of further study, and is included here (Acts 24:24; Rom. 6:11, 23; 8:1, 39; 9:1; 12:5; 15:17; 16:3, 7, 9f; 1 Co. 1:2, 4, 30; 3:1; 4:10, 15, 17; 15:18f, 22, 31; 16:24; 2 Co. 1:20f; 2:14, 17; 3:14; 5:17, 19;

12:2, 19; Gal. 1:22; 2:4, 16f; 3:26, 28; 5:6; Eph. 1:1, 3, 9, 12f, 20; 2:6f, 10, 13; 3:6, 11, 21; 4:32; Phil. 1:1, 26; 3:3, 9, 14; 4:7, 19, 21; Col. 1:2, 4, 28; 2:5, 9f, 17; 1 Thess. 2:14; 4:16; 5:18; 1 Tim. 1:14; 3:13; 2 Tim. 1:1, 9, 13; 2:1, 10; 3:12, 15; Phlm. 1:6, 8, 20, 23; Heb. 3:14; 1 Pet. 3:16; 5:10, 14). Of special interest is Paul's use of the phrase in his letter to the Ephesians, where he shows how we are connected to Christ in the "body of Christ", his *ekklesia* ("church", "assembly").

To be called a Christian is to "bear the name", to represent the Jesus whose name it is. He is Lord, Savior, Messiah, and King. Bearing his name is no small responsibility, but a solemn and sacred trust. Whenever others see "the Christian", they can only assume, "that is what Christ is like, or that is what Christ would do." We go into the world "in his name". "Christian" is no mere adjective applied to an otherwise indifferent noun. Far from it. The name is the solemn declaration to the world "I belong to Christ", along with all that this entails. To be a Christian is not to be a member of some new religion that Jesus started, as if we belonged to a political party. Nor do we control the agenda of this Jesus by using his name in this fashion. It's not a question of Christ being on our side, as one of so many other allies. He forever holds the authority and the Lordship in this relationship we have with him.

And so when we invite someone to become a Christian, it is not as if we are saying, "Come join our little Jesus group". Rather, we issue the summons as Jesus instructed, announcing the Good News about the coming kingdom of God, and about the wonderful story that Jesus, God's Son, is Messiah and Lord of the world. We serve this Christ at his bidding, and not at our own. Together with others we join the band of pilgrims on the way to the city of God, or in the words of the old Gospel song, "I am bound for the promised land. O, won't you come and go with me?", much in the spirit of Bunyan's character, "Christian, for that was his name". We are Christians because the Lord Jesus Christ has called us to follow him, and we have responded with our whole lives and said "Yes, we will."

Famine relief for Judea (11:27-30)

The special claim to distinctiveness, to which the word "Christian" points, might well raise questions about the relationship Antioch would have to Jerusalem. What happens when a distinctively Gentile Christian church takes form in a highly Hellenized city like Antioch? Will it remain committed to its Jewish family in Jerusalem? Or will this new development drive a wedge between the two? Will there turn out to be two "denominations" within the Christ community: one Gentile and the other Jewish? There is no doubt that such tensions would exist, and the New Testament itself bears ample witness to how painfully leaders like Paul tried to keep the stress fractures from devouring the whole movement. Just read *Galatians* or *Romans 9-11*, for example, to feel the pulse of the conflict. Or, better, as we will do in the rest of our *Acts* series, follow the opposition out into the Roman Empire as new communities are planted and try to posture their relationship with the surrounding Jewish synagogues. Some of these issues will reach a head after Paul and Barnabas return from their first mission westward, and must hammer out an agreement with Jerusalem believers at the first great church council documented in Acts 15.

But before that takes place, a very practical test of the unity between Gentile and Jew within the Christian church appears in 11:27-30. There's not a great deal of theology here, nor hugely relevant word studies. Put simply, a Holy Spirit inspired prophet, named Agabus, arrives in Antioch and predicts a wide-spread famine in the Roman Empire. Luke dates this during the reign of Emperor Claudius (41-54 C.E.). Any knowledge of the exact details were left to the audience, and since we weren't there, relying on sources outside the Bible is necessary. Witherington offers a coherent explanation of this famine,¹² which, he judges to have affected the poor more severely than others. Egypt was the "breadbasket for the whole region." Anything amiss in Egypt affecting its agriculture had dire consequences for places like Israel. Witherington argues "A.D. 46 was going to be a very bad year for those depending on buying grain to make bread. Indeed, the effects of the famine were likely to stretch well into 47 because of grain hoarding once the severe grain shortage in Egypt became widely known."¹³ According to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 20.51-53) the famine fell during the procuratorship of Tiberius Alexander (46-48). If the Jewish sabbatical year fell in 47-48, that would have deepened the effect of a famine which began in 46.

¹² Witherington, pp.371-373.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 373.

The rich throughout the Empire would not be rushing to help the poor, but instead trying to corner the market on grain and other commodities for themselves. In a large city like Antioch, one could imagine the social conflict such actions would provoke. In Jerusalem, similar stratification would dictate where food came from and where it went. In his article, "Universal Famine under Claudius," K.S. Gapp observed, "In the ancient world...famine was always essentially a class famine."¹⁴ The writer also offers evidence from Egyptian papyri that the price of wheat was abnormally high in 46.

Into this food crisis steps Agabus, acknowledged as a prophet — God's inspired spokesman with the ability to predict the future *with a view to making preparations for the coming famine*. This reveals, of course, that besides the twelve apostles (Peter, John, etc.), evangelists (Stephen, Philip), and teachers (Barnabas and Saul, at least for now), there was also the office of *prophet*. Such a person was gifted by the Holy Spirit to provide a *current word of guidance* for the church. Agabus lived in Jerusalem and made his critical journey to Antioch to not only deliver the message but also allow that message to move the hearts of the newly formed Christian congregation in that city. Here was a test. Would the Gentile converts, thoroughly disciplined by Barnabas and Saul, rise up to meet their ethical obligations to fellow Jewish believers in Jerusalem? Would they honor the commands of their Lord, "When you do it to one of the least of these *my brothers*, you do it to me?" (Matthew 25:40ff), especially in matters of "food and drink" which Jesus explicitly mentions in his instructions? Having taken shape at the heart of power in Syria — the great city of Antioch, marked by influence and reputation — will this seemingly privileged Gentile Christian church rise to assist their weaker brothers in Jerusalem at the time of their greatest need?

One cannot help but make the correlation between this situation and what happened to Israel centuries before when famine swept the land of Canaan and the sons of Jacob made their way to Egypt to find food. Unknown to them, their alienated brother Joseph had assumed a powerful post in the Pharaoh's government, the *vizier* of Egypt, ordering the planning of storehouses and foreseeing by the prophetic wisdom of God how the famine could be survived. Joseph was God's man in a foreign place. Would he feed his brothers when they came to Egypt (see Genesis 41ff for the whole story)? Likewise, when Agabus comes from Jerusalem to Antioch, he comes with the vision of God. Will the "Christians" of Antioch live up to their name?

The answer was a resounding, "Yes!" Barnabas and Saul had taught them well about living in a community of common possessions. "Each according to his ability decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea" (11:29). It's like reading a page from the earliest chapters of *Acts* when the Jewish Christ followers determined to live with open hands to the needs of their wider family. Did the Antioch Christians look like the earliest Jewish community of Christ followers? Absolutely! Barnabas and Saul had the privilege of carrying the "fruit of their labors" to Jerusalem: Gentile Christians sharing with Jewish Christ followers as part of "one body in Christ Jesus." The events of Galatians 2, written by Paul himself, correspond to what Luke tells us here.¹⁵

Closing Comments

A wide circuit runs through Acts 11, tracing its course from Peter's defence of his Gentile mission in Caesarea, and crossing the Mediterranean coastline, passing through Cyprus and on to Antioch. The unified message is clear: God is doing a fresh work among the Gentiles, confirming its authenticity through the work of the Holy Spirit. The signs are not always spectacular, but often take the form of providential plans unfolding in more than coincidental ways. God made sure that the right people were in the right place at the right time so that increasingly more people might be drawn into the kingdom of God. A new *identity* appeared in the world, consisting of Jew and Gentile growing together as the "called out ones" (*ekklēsia*) and the "called together ones" (*sunagō*), collectively reflecting the presence of God's Messiah, His Christ, living as "Christians" in the world.

¹⁴ In *Harvard Theological Review* 28 (1935): p. 261.

¹⁵ See the assessment of Bruce, p. 240-241.

Norman E. Thomas¹⁶ draws an appropriate correlation between the thrust of the early church in Antioch and the "global challenge" faced by the church today. He cites Donald McGavran, "Discipling urban populations is perhaps the most urgent task confronting the Church. Now is precisely the time to learn how it may be done, and to surge forward actually doing it." That statement was made at a time when there were 2,400 cities with populations of more than 100,000. There were 161 metropolitan areas populated by more than one million persons. That was thirty years ago. Today, 4,100 cities count more than 100,000 residents, while the number of mega cities jumped to 410. Thomas argued in his article that the Antioch experience offered an eight-part model of urban ministry. Concisely, he laid it out this way:

1. Evangelism through lay leadership.
2. Every member a minister.
3. Care for new believers.
4. Witness to oneness in Christ.
5. Compassion for the poor.
6. Balanced leadership.
7. Elimination of racial and ethnic barriers.
8. Mission for others.

In sum, Thomas concluded, the Antioch model calls for "radical Christians" which moves beyond being an introverted society composed of "respectable" people and bent on its own preservation, and, embodying instead the caring, the joy, the fellowship, the self-sacrifice and the openness which marked the early Church at its best.

At the outset of his discussion, Thomas paints this moving portrait and Antioch. We'd like to conclude this week's study with his words:

There is a tradition that Alexander the Great desired to build a city at Antioch. In fact, it was founded by his Macedonian general, Seleucus I, about 300 B.C.E. Situated about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem and twenty miles inland from its port, it had an estimated population of about 500,000.⁶ Antioch thrived because of its strategic position. At the crossroads of trade routes south to Palestine and Egypt, west to the Asia Minor peninsula, and east to Persia, Antioch was a cosmopolitan city. A melting pot of Western and Eastern cultures, Greek and Roman traditions mingled with Semitic, Arab, and Persian influences. Antioch was more like today's Singapore or Sydney, London or Los Angeles, than any other city in the Roman world.

Antioch had everything to offer. It had political prestige. Under Roman rule it was the third city of the empire. It was a provincial capital city for Syria.' In Antioch, Roman officials met political leaders from states to the east that acknowledged Rome's political supremacy. Known as Antioch the Beautiful, theaters and sports stadiums had been built there under Augustus and Herod. With such facilities Antioch could have hosted the Olympic games.

But Antioch also had its dark side. It was known for its immorality. Tourists came to see the dancing girls of Antioch. The city rivaled Corinth as a center for vice. Corruption was the game to be played in Antioch politics and business. The Roman poet Juvenal wrote about Antioch at the end of the first century. He charged that Antioch was one of the sources of Rome's corruption.

Yet Luke wrote nothing about Antioch's wickedness. Instead, he told only the news of great spiritual events that took place there, providing a wonderful biblical model of urban mission. At Antioch the gospel was preached for the first time to Gentiles. Furthermore, it was the Antioch church that commissioned and sent out some of the first missionaries to the Gentiles. It became the mother church of the Gentile churches. It was the apostle Paul's home church. Antioch Christians nurtured him and allowed him to experiment with new patterns of urban ministry. Antioch sent him forth to be the great urban apostle of the first century.¹⁷

Glory to God! Amen.

¹⁶ "The Church at Antioch: Crossing Racial, Cultural, and Class Barriers," in *Mission in Acts*, New York, 2007, pp. 144-156.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 146.

Digger Deeper: *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If I Became Known As A Christian?*
(Bob Brown)

To gain a deeper understanding of *What If? Influence Factor: The Book of Acts — What If I Became Known As A Christian?*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website <http://notes.chicagofirstnaz.org>, or pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the **Information** desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Carefully read the text for this week's study: Acts 11:1-30. Then, using the following section breaks, create a simple outline of this material: 11:1-3; 11:4-17; 11:18; 11:19-26; 11:27-30.
2. The background for 11:1-18 is the story told in last week's study of Acts 10. Briefly re-read that chapter as you prepare to study the new material. How does Peter's telling of what happened in Caesarea differ from the account Luke provided in Acts 10? How do you explain the differences in Peter's handling of the story?
3. What major issue faced Peter in Acts 11:1-18? Who raised objections to Peter's ministry in Caesarea, and why? Describe his attitude and approach in dealing with the objections.
4. Outline the main points of Peter's "defence" in 11:4-17. If this had been a court case, what "witnesses" did Peter call to support his actions? In the final analysis, who was Peter ultimate witness?
5. What main conclusion did Peter draw in his speech to his Jerusalem objectors? How did they react to it?
6. Think about a situation in your own life where God led you to do something that other Christians misunderstood. How did you handle their objections? What might you have done differently? What lessons have you learned from Acts 11:1-18 which might help you face similar objections in the future?
7. In Acts 11:19-30, what fresh developments take place "hard on the heels" of Peter's encounter in Jerusalem? Where do these new developments take place? Who are the main players? From where did they come, and why is that significant in the story? Why were they best suited for the roles they played?
8. How does the Jerusalem church react to the new developments in Antioch? Who is sent to "check things out"? Why is this man an especially good choice? See Acts 4:36ff; 9:27ff to review previous information Luke gives us about this person.
9. What did Barnabas observe at Antioch and what did he do with that information?
10. Briefly describe what Luke tells us about Barnabas' character. Why does he include this profile for his readers? How important is "character" in discipling new converts to Jesus?
11. Whom does Barnabas look for to help him in his Antioch discipling work? Considering their past association (Acts 9:27ff), why is this significant? What do these two leaders achieve and how do they go about it?
12. How does the "identity" of the Christ followers undergo a change in Antioch? What word becomes more common in "naming them"?
13. What crisis faces the Empire, according to 11:27-30, and what impact does it have on the Christians? What do the Christians in Antioch do in the face of this crisis? Considering that the Antioch believers are largely *Gentile*, what impact do you think their "famine relief" mission had on the *Jerusalem* believers whom they helped?
14. What crisis facing today's world might become an opportunity for Christians? Can you think of a contemporary example of a "famine relief mission" Christians might undertake to build bridges to an otherwise hostile culture? What might that modern-day mission look like? How might *our church* get involved? How might *you* get involved?