
Ministry of the Holy Spirit
Acts 11:1-18
Lesson 20 – Mission Vs. Method

Acts 11:1-18 (NIV)

¹ The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.

² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴ Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: ⁵ "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' ⁸ "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' ⁹ "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'

¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. ¹¹ "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

¹⁵ "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" ¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Discussion Questions

1. Peter was criticized for eating with Gentiles rather than celebrated for their salvation. What "secondary issues" can churches become consumed with today that distract them from God's primary mission of making disciples?
2. The sermon distinguishes between God's mission and God's methods. How would you define each in your own words, and what are some examples where churches mistakenly elevate methods to the level of the mission?
3. The sermon states, "Sometimes God gives us a method for one season, but we mistake the method for the mission." Can you identify a tradition in a church or personal life that has been helpful but could become an obstacle if treated as unchangeable?
4. Peter based his defense on what God had done—not on his own opinion or personal preference. Why is it important that our convictions be grounded in Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit rather than culture, emotions, or personal preferences?
5. The message emphasizes God's providence in bringing Peter and Cornelius together. How does trusting God's sovereignty help us obey Him even when we cannot see His entire plan? Share an example from your own life if appropriate.

6. Near the end of the sermon, the church moves from criticism to celebration. What attitudes or assumptions must believers surrender in order to celebrate what God is doing through people who may be different from them?
7. Why did Peter begin his defense by telling the entire story instead of simply defending himself? What does this teach us about giving testimony?
8. Why was the coming of the Holy Spirit the decisive evidence that convinced the Jerusalem believers?
9. How can a church know the difference between abandoning biblical truth and changing ministry methods?
10. Why do people naturally cling to familiar traditions even when they are no longer effective?
11. Why is repentance described in the sermon as something God grants rather than something humans simply produce? What does that teach us about grace?
12. What does it mean that the Holy Spirit is God's "seal" upon believers? How should that affect our confidence in our salvation?
13. Share your major takeaways from the Lesson/Sermon this week.

A World-Wide Ministry—In Caesarea (Part IV): Gaining a World-Wide Vision, 11:1-18

(11:1-18) Introduction: what happened in this passage is of critical importance to church history. The event needs to be carefully studied by every church and body of believers.

1. (11:1-3) Church: the church's early vision was narrow and traditional. Note two points.

1. The apostles and brothers, that is, the whole church, heard about Peter's preaching mission to the Gentiles and about their having received "the Word of God." The news was bound to travel fast, for it was unheard of that a Jew would fellowship and eat with an idolatrous Gentile. And to top it off, Peter had baptized the Gentiles without first requiring them to be circumcised.

Remember: most if not all the believers at Jerusalem were Jews. They were circumcised as small children and had been committed to the law of Moses since childhood. When they accepted Christ, they did not forsake their Judaistic religion. They saw Christianity as an extension of Judaism. In their minds Christ had only added new teachings to their existing law and religion. Therefore, if a person wished to accept Christ, he had to become a Jew first...

- to be circumcised
- to commit himself to the law of Moses
- to observe all the ceremonies and rituals of Judaism

Once a person had done these things, that is, become a Jew, then and only then could he receive Christ and be baptized. Then and only then could he be accepted into the church. Peter had gone contrary to these beliefs and practices. He had...

- allowed Gentiles to receive the Word of God without circumcising them (Acts 11:1).
- broken the law of Moses by "going in to the uncircumcised [Gentiles] and eating" with them (Acts 11:3).

The news was bound to travel fast. The early believers, who were still loyal to their Judaistic religion, were shocked. The Jerusalem church was being shaken to its foundation. The basic belief of so many of the early believers—that Jesus had come only to enlarge and extend Judaism—was being challenged. Peter had to give an answer, and it had to be clearly explained and understood.

2. The circumcision *segment* of the church was especially aroused. Note that only "they of the circumcision contended with Peter." (See Deeper Study #1, The Circumcision—Acts 11:2.) The apostles and most of the Christian *brothers* felt no contention or divisiveness. They trusted Peter's walk with the Lord and felt sure that he would have an adequate explanation when he had the opportunity to share the experience.

The word "contended" (*diekrinonto*^{PWS: 749}) means to stand against, to take an opposite position, to take sides against, to oppose, to create a cleavage, a division. It is creating strife, struggle, and discord. They readily and willingly opposed Peter, and the idea is that it was repeated; it went on and on; the issue was prolonged.

Again keep in mind the issue: Peter had carried the Word of God to the Gentiles and...

- ⇒ allowed the non-Jews to receive the Word of God without circumcising them (Acts 11:1).
- ⇒ had broken the law of Moses by "going to the uncircumcised [non-Jews] and eating" with them (Acts 11:3).

Thought 1. Note three striking lessons.

- 1) Some hang on to their religious form, ceremony, rituals, rules, and regulations. These are placed before the lives and salvation of men.
- 2) Note the true spirit of these legalists. Their spirits should have been rejoicing that some people were now saved and brought to the knowledge of Christ. Instead their spirits were full of contention and divisiveness because some religious practices were violated.
- 3) Prejudice, discrimination, rituals, and rules can blind us to God's purpose to reach out to *all* men in salvation. All men are to be reached no matter who they are. No church should exclude anyone. The church's mission is to reach both the dirty and the clean, both the lower and the upper class.

"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

Thought 2. The disciple is called to do the Lord's will, to reach and evangelize the world. He often has to break tradition and buck the tide of doing things the way they have always been done. When he does, he can expect criticism and contention from the legalist and the traditionalist. Nevertheless, the true disciple of Christ remains faithful even as Peter did. He does what God says. He does all he can to reach out and share Christ with a world filled with desperate needs.

Thought 3. Some churches commit a *terrible* crime: they monopolize the gospel, seldom if ever sharing it. They take the gospel and keep it to themselves, shutting all others out, never reaching out to bring others in. They build barriers of exclusiveness and prejudice, shutting themselves off from the rest of the world.

"Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons" (Acts 10:34).

"And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; and put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9).

"But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, to the Jew first, and also to the Gentile: for there is no respect of persons with God" (Romans 2:10-11).

2. (11:4-15) Missions— Evangelism— Church, Vision: God's will for the church's vision was a world-wide mission. Peter reached out to the contentious. He explained as clearly and straightforwardly as he could. He simply shared what had happened. The outline is sufficient in reviewing the experience (see outline— Acts 10:1-48 and notes— Acts 10:1-48). But note what Peter stressed: *God's will* is a world-wide mission, the door of salvation is to be thrown open to the whole world (Gentiles). The stress is upon God's intervention: God acting, moving, revealing, and making His will clear. Peter stressed...

- a trance and vision *from God* (Acts 11:5).
- a vessel or platter descending *from heaven* to him (Acts 11:5).
- the *Lord speaking* to him (Acts 11:7-8).
- the *Lord commanding* him three times (Acts 11:10).
- the vessel ascending back *into heaven* (Acts 11:10).
- the *supernatural timing* in the arrival of Cornelius' servants (Acts 11:11).
- the *Holy Spirit's instructing* him to go to the Gentiles (Acts 11:12).
- the *angel's visit* to the Gentile and his instructions to send for Peter (Acts 11:13).
- the *Holy Spirit falling* on the Gentiles even before he had finished (Acts 11:15).
- the *Holy Spirit fell* on the Gentiles just as "on us" (Acts 11:15).
- the *Holy Spirit fell* just as the Lord promised (Acts 11:16).
- *God gave* the Holy Spirit to Gentiles just "as He did to us" (Acts 11:17).

Now note four things.

1. Everything that happened to Peter in opening the door to the Gentiles was of God, initiated and controlled by God. Peter was merely the instrument God used. It was God's will, God's work, God's activity, God's carrying of the gospel to the world (Gentiles), not Peter's.
2. There were six witnesses to what happened, each one verifying that the event was all of God. And note: they were Jewish believers themselves.
3. The words "nothing doubting" (*mēden diakrinanta* ^{PWS: 2711}, Acts 11:12) mean making no distinction. God tells Peter in no uncertain terms, "Go with them [the Gentiles] making no distinctions."

Thought 1. The same command is given to all believers of all generations. Believers are not to make distinctions, not to discriminate in proclaiming the gospel. What an indictment against so many! How many *withdraw* from the poor? How many do not reach out to people of other races and social classes? (For verses, see note above—Acts 11:1-3.)

4. Note the amount of space and detail given by the author (Luke) to this event. He stresses the event more than any other in the book of Acts. Add to it the long discussion and chapter dealing with the same subject in Acts 15 and its importance becomes even more significant. The importance of God's will, that the gospel be preached to the whole world, can never be overstressed.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15).

"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

3. (11:16-18) Missions— Church, Vision: the church's response to God's will was the conviction of a world-wide mission.

1. There was Peter's conviction. He was convinced of three clear *truths*.
 - a. The Lord's promise was fulfilled in the Gentiles; the Gentiles were being baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; John 14:26).

Thought 1. Note a significant point: Peter saw that the most significant of the two baptisms (the baptism of water by John and the baptism of Jesus) was the baptism of Jesus, that is, the baptism of the Spirit. He was clearly saying that this was what he saw and understood.

b. Peter was convinced of another truth: he could not withstand (stand against) God. The Greek is emphasized, "I, who was I that I could withstand God?" Peter had absolutely nothing to do with giving the Holy Spirit to the

Gentiles. The gift of the Holy Spirit is God's doing, and one thing is sure: no man is going to stop God from doing what He purposes to do. It was God's will that the door of salvation be swung open to the Gentiles and God was doing it.

c. It is not circumcision—not some ritual, not some ceremony, not religion—but belief that caused the Holy Spirit to enter a life. "God gave them [the Holy Spirit]...[they] who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 11:17).

2. There was the church's conviction: God grants repentance to all men. Note three significant points.

a. Repentance is the gift of God and of the Holy Spirit. If there should be no God, no Holy Spirit, there would be no opportunity to repent. Since both God and the Spirit do exist and are actively working to save men, there is such a thing as repentance. Men have the privilege of repenting, of actually turning from their sin to God. Note what God expects of men: not religion, not some ritual or ceremony, not social standing or success, not race or knowledge, but repentance

"Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38).

b. Repentance is unto life; that is, it leads to life. Abundant life and eternal life are the end, the consummation, the experience of repentance. The person who repents experiences life immediately, and lives on experiencing life to the fullest—forever. He never has and never will taste death.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

"He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36).

c. God has thrown open the door of salvation to the world (Gentiles). This is the church's first *magna charta of missions*, its first stamp of approval to world-wide evangelism. (Note: the battle is far from over. Selfishness and self-centeredness are difficult to erase from depraved human nature. The battle had to be constantly fought in the early church, and the struggle has continued on down to the present time. How many churches and believers still resist world missions and evangelism either through simple neglect and unconcern or through direct opposition?)

"Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage" (Matthew 22:9).

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world" (Matthew 28:19-20).

