Study of Acts – Discussion Notes Chapter 11

Introduction

Christianity began as a sect of Judaism. In other words, it was a group of Jews who believed in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and chose to follow His teaching. While they embraced the teaching of Christ, they also considered themselves good Jews. Initially, this was not a new religion to replace Judaism but rather an enlightened sect within the Jewish community.

As we soon learn in Acts 11, God had much bigger plans for the gospel. God was still full of surprises and amazement for the church. Chapter 11 is packed with irony to be observed and from which we can learn a great deal.

1. Good news travels fast but gossip travels faster (vs. 1-2).

How was the news of Cornelius and his family gossip?

Until now, the gift of God through Jesus Christ was considered more of God’s favoritism toward the Jews, more specifically, Abraham and his descendants. Now news was traveling quickly that Gentiles were receiving the message and believing.

Gossip is one of those things where people talk about it with one another and wait to observe each other’s response. Everyone who talks about it has their thoughts and opinions but usually wait to hear what others have to say before speaking their opinion. Often we seek out others who have a similar position on the matter as we do. Gossip is something we repeat but no one ever claims ownership to it. “Some of them have been talking and they say…”

How do you think the brethren in Jerusalem received the news initially?

Verse 2 lends itself to the idea that they didn’t approach Peter with a warm spirit about the matter. The King James translation says they “contended with him” while other translations say they “argued with him.” Suffice to say there was some tension in the beginning of the discussions.

This was big news. Something very significant was taking place. The Jewish people were very proud of their heritage and status with Jehovah. Suddenly they had to come to grips with the idea that such a precious gift was not theirs exclusively. This was history making for them. Christianity was about to go from being a sect of Judaism to an inclusive inter-social, inter-racial and international movement.

One can only imagine the thoughts that were going through the minds of the Jewish believers. They had been willing to go against the common thought of the religious leaders and accept Christ as the Messiah. But now their belief was taking them into a world in which they were very uncomfortable; the world of the unclean Gentiles.

2. The work of God is always clearly stamped (vs. 17-18).

What seemed to satisfy the brethren in Jerusalem?

God has a way of making His work something that cannot be questioned. Who has not read the story of Abraham and Isaac and wondered how Abraham could have that much faith and why God would even ask such a thing? When God is in something, there is no mistaking it.

In this case, Peter testified that he saw certain things with his own eyes. He saw the vision God gave him. He saw how God had spoken to Cornelius and had him send for Peter. He saw Cornelius and
those gathered at his home faithfully waiting to hear from God’s messenger. He saw their acceptance of God’s gift, their baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

For Peter, there was no denying what He had seen God do. He could only testify to the truth. This leads Peter to a powerful conclusion, “Therefore, if God gave them the same gift that He also gave to us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, how could I possibly hinder God?”

If God is in something, there will always be indisputable evidence of His presence. In this case, God gave the Gentiles the same anointing of the Holy Spirit He had bestowed upon the disciples at Pentecost. This was a hard pill to swallow but one that must be taken regardless.

What can we learn from this event?

There is a difference between having the Lord on your agenda and being on His agenda. As we said last week, God always has a “next step” in our Christian pilgrimage. The one place God does not want us to be is stuck right where we are in our relationship with Him. But in order to experience what God has for us, we must be willing to be on His agenda and receive His revelations, even when they disrupt our traditions and pre-conceived ideas.

I once had a Pastor friend who would always say, “God said it, I believe it; that settles it!” Then one day he discovered more truth. He soon changed his favorite saying to “God said it; that settles it!”

We need to be willing to be on the Lord’s agenda and allow Him to lead us to new frontiers spiritually and literally. We need to be open to what He is teaching us and be willing to receive it without argument, excuses or prejudice.

3. God begins the great missionary work (vs. 19, 25).

What caused believers to scatter as noted in verse 19?

The death of Stephen caused them to scatter. Also, the threats of Saul forced them to leave Jerusalem and scatter to other cities. God used these tragic events to further the gospel throughout the land. Do you recognize the irony? It was the Hellenistic Jews (Greek speaking) who stoned Stephen that were now receiving the message of life in Jesus Christ.

What had God told Ananias about His will for Saul (9:15-16)?

The elders of the church sent Barnabas out to investigate what was happening in Antioch. What he observed there was the grace of God being poured out on the very people who had previously rejected Christ. Luke tells us a great many people were being added to the Lord.

How cool is it that the very person who started much of the chaos and scattering of Christians was now being fetched to help build the church there? Is that not God at work? What a change in events.

Who else could be a better choice? Paul had the intellectual training, he was a Roman citizen, he had the spiritual insight and most of all, and he had the testimony of “new creation in Christ”. Who else to become God’s great servant than the one God had chosen long ago, Saul of Tarsus; the man under the control of the indwelling Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Remember it was the Hellenistic Jews who first rejected Paul when he returned to Jerusalem a saved man. They sought to kill him and forced him to escape the city. Now, he was their pastor.

Even when things seem impossible, God has a way to do the miraculous. God can change hearts and circumstances, particularly when we are walking in His agenda and serving Him. He will make a way. When we respond to God’s guidance and move forward faithfully, the Lord pours out His blessings.
Under Paul and his extended leadership, the preaching of life “in Christ” spread to non-Jews, Greeks, Romans, rich, poor, prominent citizens and converted prostitutes. That’s what we call the church; the body of believers, sinners forgiven by the grace of God.

4. The greatest nickname one can have (vs. 26).

Verse 26 tells us that it was at Antioch that believers in Christ were first called Christians. The suffix “ian” meant “belonging to” or more literally, “little Christ’s”. The term was most likely coined by the Romans and meant as an insult but proved to be a badge of honor. To be “like Christ” is a believer’s ultimate desire.

5. The power of an offering (vs. 27-30).

Illus: This week I was in a restaurant eating. I was sitting at a table right near the cashier’s counter. A friend came up and spoke to me for a moment and then turned to the cashier to pay for his meal. While he was standing there, I stuck my fingers slightly in his pocket and said, “I'm looking for my lunch money.” His joking response was, “That’s just like a preacher, always looking for money.” I responded by saying, “Yes and we preach one sermon a year on tithing and everyone says that’s all we talk about is money.”

People often criticize the church for seeking donations. But those who criticize are always the non-givers and often non-believers. They are the ones who do not listen to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. A true spirit filled believer is just the opposite. They look forward to opportunities to give and long to have more to give.

In our text, the Christians at Antioch were led by the Spirit to raise money to help their brothers and sisters in Christ. Notice what the gimmick was for the offering. What were the givers offered in return for their gift? Was it a bake sale, a rummage sale, a donut sale of a raffle? There was nothing offered in return.

True giving to the Lord’s work is inspired by the Holy Spirit and entrusted to the Holy Spirit. The motivation for giving is “it is what God would have me do.” The reward for giving is “it is what God would have me do.”
Conclusion

Consider the irony found in chapter 11 of Acts.

Irony #1

The early Jewish believers came to a saving faith and understanding that Jesus was the Son of God, sent for their salvation. They knew He was the perfect Lamb of God sacrificed for their sins. But they also had to accept that the perfect Lamb of God was so perfect, that He was good enough for anyone who believed, even the unclean Gentiles.

Irony #2

The anger and threats of Saul caused believers to scatter to many different areas including Antioch. In their new locations, believers shared the good news of Jesus Christ and Gentiles and Hellenistic Jews believed and accepted God’s gift of salvation. But they needed teaching and encouragement. Meanwhile, God had converted Saul and he was now sent to be the one who would provide them the spiritual teaching. The very one who caused them to scatter, caused the gospel to spread and became their pastor.

Irony #3

Paul and Barnabas embarked on the first missionary journey officially sanctioned by the church of Christians. Paul dedicated his entire life to serving God as a missionary of the gospel. Modern believers are an indirect result of the missionary work of Paul. Today, 10% of our receipts go to mission work. This is in addition to all that is raised to send missionaries from our church to spread the gospel.

Irony #4

The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were reluctant to accept the idea that Gentiles could be saved and be clean through Christ. However, the power of the Holy Spirit and the testimony of the work of the Holy Spirit left them no choice but to accept. That same Holy Spirit led the people of Antioch to receive an offering to help the church in Jerusalem during their time of famine.

Irony #5

They called the followers of Christ Christians (little Christ’s) as a term of tease. But today we proudly where the title and consider ourselves honored and blessed to be called a Christian. May we be deserving of the title; Christian.