

Lesson 11

Acts 11:1-30

MAKING ROOM FOR THE GENTILES

Memory Verse: “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:21 NIV).

The events Luke recorded in 9:32—10:48 prepared Peter for the Lord’s further expansion of His church to include Gentiles. Peter had unlocked the door of the church to Jews on Pentecost (Matt. 16:19; cf. Eph. 2:14). What happened in Cornelius’ house was “the Pentecost of the Gentile world.” By pouring out His Spirit on these Gentiles, God showed that – in His sight - Jews and Gentiles were equal. The Jew had no essential advantage over the Gentile in entering the church. God observes no distinction in race when it comes to becoming a Christian (cf. Eph. 2:11-3:12).

The Ethiopian eunuch was probably a descendant of Ham, Saul was a descendant of Shem, and Cornelius was a descendant of Japheth (cf. Gen. 10). Thus, with the record of their conversions in chapters 8—10, Luke told us that the church is equally accessible to all branches of the human family.

Why was the conversion of Cornelius, rather than the earlier conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, the opening of the church’s door to the Gentiles? The conversion of the Gentile eunuch was a case of individual private salvation. The conversion of Cornelius, on the other hand, involved several Gentiles, and it was public. God had saved individual Gentiles by faith throughout history (e.g., Rahab, Ruth, Naaman, et al.). With the conversion of Cornelius, He now, for the first time, publicly brought Gentiles into the church, the new creation of God, by Spirit baptism. The eunuch had become a Christian and a member of the church, but that was not evident to anyone at the time of his conversion.

With Cornelius’s conversion, God made a public statement, as He had at Pentecost, that He was doing something new, namely, forming a new body of believers in Jesus. In chapter 2, He had shown that it would include Jews, and here in chapter 10, He now clarified that it would also include Gentiles. The sole prerequisite for entrance into this group (the church) was faith in Jesus Christ, regardless of ethnicity, which had separated Jews from Gentiles for centuries. The distinctive difference between becoming a Christian and becoming a Jew (religiously), was that God gave the Holy Spirit to every Christian. The sign of this, for the benefit of the Jews, was that He enabled those to whom He gave the Spirit to speak in tongues. In the rest of Acts, Luke proceeded to narrate the conversion of various kinds of Gentiles in various parts of the Mediterranean world.

Acts 11 describes how the church in Jerusalem related to “the saints below,” the Gentiles in Caesarea and Antioch who had trusted Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Having fellowship with the Gentiles was a new experience for these Jewish Christians who all their lives had looked on the Gentiles as pagans and outsiders. Tradition said that a Gentile had to “become a Jew” in order to be accepted, but now Jews and Gentiles were united in the church through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:26–28).

Acts 11 describes three responses of the Jewish believers to the Gentile Christians. As you study these responses, you will better understand how Christians today ought to relate to one another.

Scriptural Reading: Acts 11:1-30

Things to learn: 1) Acceptance of different background 2) Encouragement to grow 3) Reciprocate blessings

Question:

Q1. How did the Jewish Christians respond to the news of the growth of Gentile Christians (vs. 1 -18)?

Q2 What initiatives were taken further by the Jerusalem church after accepting the Gentile and Jewish believers alike who were scattered as far as Syria (vs. 19 - 26)?

Q3 How did the Gentile church reciprocate the spiritual aids from the Jerusalem church especially in times of crisis (vs. 27 -30)?