

Chapter 28: Remaining Faithful to the Lord

Acts 11:19–30

Now that the Holy Spirit has descended upon Gentiles, a major question arises: what will Gentile churches look like? How will they function? How much of a difference will it make that they lack the foundation of Old Testament and Jewish ceremonial knowledge? In Acts 11:19–30, we read a fascinating story of how this grand new step forward in the history of God’s redemptive work launches out among the Gentiles. In all, we find that the Lord works in the same, ordinary ways among Gentiles as he does among the Jews. Namely, *Christ converts and transforms his people through the ministry of his church.*

Evangelism (Acts 11:19–21)

After the conclusion of the narratives surrounding Peter’s initial mission to Gentiles in Caesarea, Luke includes a passage that tells us about the general progress of the church into Gentile areas, especially to reconnect us with Saul, who has been in Tarsus since Acts 9:30.¹ In the next chapter in Acts 12, we will return to Jerusalem before we follow Barnabas and Saul on their mission journeys toward the end of the earth in Acts 13. In this passage, however, we see the advance of the gospel in three major areas: evangelism, discipleship, and mercy ministry. These are the core ministries of the church, the “blocking and tackling” of ministry that Christ has commanded his church to occupy themselves with until his return. We have seen each of these elements so far in the Book of Acts, but this story is unique in the way we see these ministries beginning to take hold among Gentiles.

To begin, Luke calls us back to the persecution that arose after Stephen’s execution: “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews” (v. 19). The same word for “scattered” had appeared twice earlier in Acts 8:1, 4, to describe the distribution of believers to wider regions as though they were seed scattered on soil. Acts 8:4 especially drew the connection to the scattering of *believers* and the scattering of *God’s Word*: “Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.” In this way, this imagery echoes Jesus’ parable of the sower (Luke 8:11). That same emphasis appears here, where the scattering of believers leads to “speaking the word” in these new areas. In the beginning, however, that ministry of the word was limited “to no one except Jews.” Further, as we considered back in Acts 8, it is important to note how the Lord worked even through the wickedness of the persecution of his people by bringing the gospel to more people.²

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 447.

² “If so many godly men had not been expelled out of Jerusalem, Cyprus had heard nothing, Phenice had heard nothing of Christ; yea, Italy and Spain, which were farther off, had heard nothing. But the Lord brought to pass, that of many torn members did arise more bodies. For how came it to pass that there were Churches gathered at Rome and at Puteoli, save only because a few exiled men, and such as fled away, had brought the

If v. 19 traces the *geographic* reach of the gospel into many areas (including Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch), the next verse focuses on a broader *ethnic* reach in one specific area, Antioch: “But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus” (v. 20). Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with half a million people or more, located in modern-day southeastern Turkey.³ Notably, Antioch was a city “proverbial for its lax sexual morals” due to extensive ritual prostitution in pagan worship at nearby Daphne.⁴ In the Lord’s providence, he chose a city overflowing not only with *ceremonial* uncleanness, but *moral* uncleanness, as the first major location for establishing his church among the Gentiles. To illustrate this idea with American cities, the Lord did not establish the first outpost of his Gentile church in the Bible Belt, but in the middle of downtown Las Vegas.

Although the term “Hellenists” had appeared earlier in Acts to describe Greek-speaking *Jews* (e.g., Acts 6:1), the context makes clear that the first stage of evangelism in these areas had been to “Jews” (v. 19), but now, as some began to speak “to the Hellenists also,” their evangelism had expanded their attention to include (Greek) Gentiles.⁵ We do not give much thought to this today, but Lenski is right to call this change to the evangelism of the early church “revolutionary for the Jewish ideas that were still prevalent in the church, and vastly important for all future history.”⁶ To these pagan Gentiles, the church began “preaching the Lord Jesus”—that is, preaching that Jesus *is* Lord, rather than any of the gods that these Gentiles had previously worshiped.⁷ To confirm that this was right, Luke informs us that “the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (v. 21).⁸ Lenski wisely comments that the Lord’s hand remains essential for all our evangelistic and missionary work:

The Lord’s hand is his power which worked in a providential way in making everything favorable for these disciples to bring the gospel to these Greeks. He opened many doors to them. This is essential in all missionary work. The work is God’s and not ours, and he either opens the doors or leaves them closed. So many have the idea that they themselves may decide where to work; but it is futile to beat against closed doors.⁹

gospel thither with them? And as God did at that time make the endeavors of Satan frustrate after a wonderful sort, so we need not doubt but that even at this day he will make to himself triumphs of the cross and persecution, that the Church may better grow together, though it be scattered abroad.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:466.)

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 448; Bock, *Acts*, 413.

⁴ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 238.

⁵ Bock, *Acts*, 414.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 449.

⁷ Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 238–39.

⁸ “Luke proveth by the success that the gospel was offered unto the Gentiles also by the brethren of Cyprus and Cyrene not rashly nor unadvisedly, because their labor was fruitful and profitable. But such increase should never have followed, unless God had commanded and favored.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:467.)

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 451.

Evangelism, then, is the tip of the spear of the growth of the church among Gentiles. The Lord had called many new believers from the rank of the Gentiles to himself to begin his work, but the Lord is not done. In the next sections, we see the engagement of discipleship and mercy ministry activities.

Discipleship (Acts 11:22–26)

Although the church was beginning to spread toward “the end of the earth” (see Acts 1:8), Jerusalem was still the “‘mother church’ for all Christians in those days.” As the Jerusalem church had sent Peter and John to Samaria (Acts 8:14–17), and as they had investigated Peter’s actions with the Gentiles (Acts 11:1–18), now the Jerusalem church “sent Barnabas to Antioch.”¹⁰ As we have already seen in Barnabas’s actions to advocate for Saul’s reception in Jerusalem (Acts 9:27), so here we see that “his ability to discern the grace of God at work in others gave him a generous and encouraging spirit.”¹¹ Here, perhaps, the stakes were even higher, as he needed to mediate pastorally between “the more adventurous Hellenists of Antioch and allay the concerns of the more conservative ‘circumcision’ group in Jerusalem (cf. 11:2),” but we read that Barnabas “‘was a good man’ (v. 24), a phrase Luke used elsewhere only of Joseph of Arimathea (Luke 23:50). He was ‘full of the Holy Spirit and faith,’ just like Stephen (Acts 6:5).”¹² Barnabas was the right man for this job, and he was an exemplary man for people in every age of the church to imitate.

So, when he arrived, Barnabas first “saw the grace of God, he was glad” (v. 23a). He does not treat these new converts to Christianity with suspicion because they were Gentiles, but he rejoices in *God’s* work (“the grace of God”). Nevertheless, Barnabas also recognizes that conversion alone was not enough. So, Luke records next that Barnabas “exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23b). Evangelism is the non-negotiable lifeblood of the church; however, discipleship trains believers in the fullness of what their conversion to Christ requires of them: “A good start is excellent, but we must endure to the end.”¹³ We do not aim at mere “conversions” to (and, much less, mere “decisions” for) Christ. We aim for disciples who have been made “like” the one to whom they have been discipled to follow (Matt. 10:25). This discipleship, however, does not turn the church inward-focused and insular. Rather, through Barnabas’s discipleship work among this fledgling church, we read that “a great many people were added to the Lord” (v. 24b).

Leadership development is a natural extension of normal discipleship in the church. Not all disciples are called to be leaders, but no one can lead the church who has not first been discipled within the church. Accordingly, Barnabas seeks to expand the leadership by calling upon Saul, a man whom he had known much earlier after his dramatic conversion. As the Lord Jesus had made very clear that he had chosen Saul specifically as “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15), it is likely that Barnabas thought to call Saul for the work needed in this

¹⁰ “Although this could certainly be seen as a sort of ‘supervision’ by Jerusalem, in each instance the Christians of Jerusalem enthusiastically endorsed the new work and gave it their stamp of approval. In this instance, when Jerusalem heard of the Gentile mission in Antioch, the church did not send apostles, as it did when Philip preached to Samaritans. Instead, they sent a nonapostolic delegate but a wise choice indeed—Barnabas, ‘the son of encouragement’ (4:36).” (Polhill, *Acts*, 271.)

¹¹ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 355.

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 272.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 454.

first Gentile mission work.¹⁴ So, after finding Saul still in Tarsus, Barnabas “brought him to Antioch” (v. 26a). Then, over the next year, Barnabas and Saul labored together to build up this church: “For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people” (v. 26b). This labor of discipleship in the church created such a distinct impression among those surrounding the believers that they came to receive a new name: “And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians” (v. 26c). Polhill makes these observations about this name:

The term (*Christianoi*) consists of the Greek word for Christ/Messiah (*Christos*) with the *Latin* ending *ianus*, meaning *belonging to, identified by*. Examples of similar formations are *Herodianoi*, partisans of Herod, and *Augustianoi*, the zealous followers of Nero. The term was often used by Roman writers to designate followers of Christ. The early usage in Antioch is perhaps indicative of two things. For one, it is the sort of term Gentiles would have used and perhaps reflects the success of Antioch’s Gentile mission. Gentiles were dubbing their fellow Gentiles who became followers of Christ “Christians.” Second, it reflects that Christianity was beginning to have an identity of its own and no longer was viewed as a totally Jewish entity. Again, the success of Gentiles would have hastened this process in Antioch.¹⁵

Even here, though, the work of the church is not finished. When a need arises among Judea, these new Gentile believers mobilize to extend mercy relief to them.

Mercy Ministry (Acts 11:27–30)

As Antioch continues to grow, a new concern arises from prophets who arrive from Jerusalem: “Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius)” (vv. 27–28). This is the first reference in Acts to prophets (but see Acts 2:18). The New Testament speaks of an ongoing role for prophets during the apostolic era (e.g., Acts 13:1; Eph. 2:20; 4:11).¹⁶ During this time, the Scriptures had not yet been written, so that the Lord instructed his church through the Holy Spirit who spoke through apostles and prophets. Ultimately, the content of those prophecies were written down in Scripture, so that those books of the Bible that were not written by *apostles* (Matthew; John; the Letters of Paul, Peter, and John; Revelation) we may rightly understand as having been written by *prophets* (Mark; Luke; Acts; Hebrews (?); James; Jude). We are, therefore, in a better position than the early church. While they had to wait for the inspiration of a prophet to hear from the Lord, we may hear from the Lord by his Spirit every time we open our Bibles.

In this case, Agabus prophesied a famine. Luke notes that this famine happened during the reign of Claudius, a detail that is corroborated by extra-biblical historical records.¹⁷ Through the course of

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 456.

¹⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, 273.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 459.

¹⁷ “As a matter of fact, says Luke, this actually happened in the reign of Claudius; and we know from other sources that this emperor’s reign (A.D. 41–54) was indeed marked by a succession of bad harvests and serious famines in various parts of the empire.” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 243.)

their conversion and discipleship, these Gentile believers knew exactly what to do: “So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (vv. 29–30). This was a freewill donation, of which we have examples in both the Old and New Testaments (see 1 Chron. 29:1–9; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 9:7).¹⁸ Very likely, when Paul writes in the Letter to the Galatians about his trip to Jerusalem (see Gal. 2:2), this is probably the trip that he is describing, especially since Paul adds to that note that, “Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal. 2:10).¹⁹

Polhill comments on the noteworthiness that Barnabas and Saul would send this benevolent relief “to the elders” in Jerusalem, which suggests a “subtle transition in the leadership of the Jerusalem church” away from the “apostles” who previously “had taken responsibility for matters of charity (cf. 4:34–5:11),” perhaps changed at the time the seven deacons were appointed to serve (Acts 6:1–6). Bruce concludes: “More and more responsibility would be assumed by these lay elders, based almost surely on the pattern of the elders in the Jewish synagogue. Paul would organize his own churches along the same pattern.”²⁰ Here we see more layers of the church being built up. Not only are they continuing to meet mercy needs in their midst, but they are able to organize sufficiently to direct relief efforts to churches in other areas. Further, we see a greater development of the roles and functions of officers in the church, including both elders and deacons.

Discussion Questions

1. Where did we see the language of how believers were “scattered” from persecution (Acts 8:1, 4)? How did that language of “scattering” compare both the people and the Word of God to seeds? Why did the initial believers in this area restrict their scattering of God’s Word among the Jews (v. 20)? What was the result when some believers began to share the gospel with Greeks (vv. 20–21)? How do we explain the success of the mission (v. 21)?
2. How does the church at Jerusalem act when they hear about what the Lord is doing in Antioch (v.

¹⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, 526.

¹⁹ “The Jerusalem visit of Barnabas and Saul is probably to be dated about A.D. 46. In or about that year Judaea was hard hit by famine, and Josephus tells us how Helena, the Jewish queen-mother of Adiabene, east of the Tigris, bought corn in Egypt and figs in Cyprus at that time and distributed them in Jerusalem to relieve the hungry population.

“This is probably the visit to Jerusalem which Paul describes in Gal. 2:1ff....If our identification is right, Barnabas and Saul took the opportunity afforded by this famine-relief visit to have an interview with the leaders of the Jerusalem church—Peter, John, and James the Lord’s brother in particular—and satisfied themselves that their status as apostles to the Gentiles was recognized by the Jerusalem apostles. Paul’s statement in Gal. 2:2, that he went up to Jerusalem on that occasion ‘by revelation’, agrees well enough with Luke’s account of the prophecy of Agabus, and there is probably a direct allusion to the primary object of the visit in Gal. 2:10, which may be rendered: ‘Only they asked us to go on remembering their poor, and in fact I had made a special point of doing this very thing.’” (Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 244.)

²⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 275–76.

22)? What do we know of Barnabas from previous passages? How did Barnabas relate to the Gentile church when he arrived (v. 23)? What kind of ministry did he engage among them (v. 23)? What was the result of Barnabas's work of disciple-making in this church (v. 24)? Why did Barnabas search out Saul, and what did the two do when they were reunited (vv. 25–26)?

3. What does the New Testament say about the ministry of prophets in the age of the apostles (v. 27)? What did this prophet declare (v. 28)? How does the discipleship of these Gentile converts to Christianity prepare them to leap into action by meeting the relief needs of those living in Judea (v. 29)? How much did each person in the church give to the relief efforts (v. 29)? What was the means of transferring the benevolent funds (v. 30)?

4. What does this passage tell us about how the “hand of the Lord” (v. 21) works in the ordinary ministries of evangelism, discipleship, and mercy ministry in the church? What makes this ordinary ministry so effective? Why do we struggle to prioritize these ordinary ministries in our own lives? Why does God choose to work so powerfully through such ordinary means? What does this passage teach us about the church today?