

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 13th December 2009 - 11:00am
Acts 11:1-18 – ‘Peter Justifies His Actions’

Introduction

Over our last couple of studies in the Acts of the Apostles we have been looking at ch.10, where God brings a sincere Gentile seeker, Cornelius, into contact with a prejudiced Jewish preacher, Peter, for the very first time.

It was a remarkable account of two hearts that were completely changed by God – both the preacher’s and the hearer’s hearts were changed that day.

And that’s how it should be. God wants to work in our hearts (those of us who already know the Gospel) as much as he wants to work in the hearts of those who are still lost, and who still need to be saved. So in Acts ch.10 we saw:

- 1. A Sincere Seeker who was heard by God (vs.1-8)**
- 2. A Prejudiced Preacher who was changed by God (vs.9-33)**
- 3. A Splendid Sermon which was interrupted by God (vs.34-44), and**
- 4. A Group of Gentiles who were saved by God (vs.44-48)**

That was a truly momentous day in the life of the early church. For the first time, the church had people from a Jewish background, a Samaritan background and a Gentile background – all united in Christ! Or were they?

Well, no sooner do we come into the next chapter, Acts ch.11, than we discover that Peter is being hauled over the coals for what he has just done, by others in the church. He is being called to account for his actions. But he handles it very well indeed. So let’s see his argument this morning for uniting us all together in Christ – and for maintaining unity in the Christian Church.

The word has got back to Jerusalem, back to the other Apostles and the believers in general, that *‘the gentiles also had received the Word of God.’* (v.1). This should have been cause for great celebration within the church. Another major people group, with branches right across the world, had just fallen to the onward march of the Gospel! Surely there should have been rejoicing! But instead, we read in v.2 that when Peter gets back to Jerusalem *‘the circumcised believers criticised him!’* And what was their problem? What was their accusation? *‘You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!’* (v.3)

So here we have it. Peter is being criticised by the circumcised believers (i.e. believers from a Jewish background.) He is being criticised by God’s people, for doing God’s work – for doing God’s will and seeing people saved!

Seeing Gentile sinners saved by God’s grace! It sounds absurd, and yet it is sadly so often the case. It’s when a church is going forward and is seeing blessing, and seeing people saved, that criticism starts. God’s people find something to complain about. You’d think that other believers would rejoice when they heard of more people getting saved – but instead they’re annoyed – just because these people who were getting saved, were not like them. They were different from them – in this case they were Gentiles – people they wouldn’t have touched with a barge pole before!

Believers don’t always see eye to eye about everything, you know? Sometimes there are all kinds of disagreements.

The question is, how do we handle our often deeply held differences?

Well, how was it dealt with on this occasion?

In vs. 4-17 Peter defends his actions before his fellow believers.

How does he do this?

1. He Presents the Facts exactly as they had happened:

He tells them of...

(i) God’s Lesson (v.9)

‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’

This truth had been taught to Peter by the vision which God gave him of a sheet filled with all kinds of animals coming down from heaven from God (v.6) God had told Peter to *‘Get up, kill and eat!’* (v.7)

But at first Peter objected (v.8)

And then God had taught him this lesson (v.9)

‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’

Now as we saw, this cut right across everything that Peter had been brought up to believe in the Jewish faith, and that had been taught to him from the Old Testament Scriptures (esp Leviticus 11:4-8).

So in a sense it is understandable that the other Jewish believers found this difficult to accept. It had been ingrained in them from birth!

But the fact remained that God had taught this lesson to Peter and now he was using Peter to teach it to these believers back in Jerusalem and Judea.

(ii) The Spirit’s Leading (v.12)

Three of Cornelius’ servants had come to Peter’s front door at that very moment – asking him to come with them to visit a Gentile house (v.11)

Peter then testifies that it was the Holy Spirit who convinced him to go with them: *‘Do not hesitate to go with these men.’* (v.12)

So God had taught Peter the lesson, and the Holy Spirit had prompted Peter to go with the servants, but wisely Peter still took **6 companions** along with him, as witnesses to all that was going to happen.

(iii) Cornelius' Longing (vs.13-14)

We're told a bit more in this chapter of what exactly the angel had said to Cornelius in v.14:

'He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

What was Cornelius longing for?

He was longing for the day when he and his household would be saved.

Cornelius, just like any other godly father or mother, was concerned about 'household salvation'. He was concerned that he and his wife, and his sons and daughters, perhaps his own brothers and sisters, would get saved.

Maybe even his parents too, if they were still alive?

He was so concerned for them all, that in the 4 days that passed until Peter arrived, he had done all in his power to gather them all together and to invite them to his home to make sure they would hear the way of salvation from Peter himself (Acts 10:24,33).

When did you last go out of your way to bring your relatives under the sound of the Gospel? Are you really concerned that the members of your family would be saved? Perhaps this Christmas – our Carol Service or Christmas Day Family Service would be good opportunities to try to get them all here?

But let me say something else to you: If you are really concerned about seeing your loved ones saved, then don't go out of your way to create extra obstacles for them that might hinder them or put them off from coming to faith in Christ.

What do I mean by that?

Well, in a very real sense, Peter and the other Jewish background believers had been making it very difficult for Gentiles to come to faith in Christ.

They thought they would have to accept all their petty rules and regulation as well if God was going to accept them into the church.

But God had to teach Peter, and now he was using Peter to teach the rest of them, that salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

It's not faith in Jesus PLUS the keeping of a list of evangelical rules and regulations as well that saves—it's faith alone in Christ ALONE!

So let's not be guilty of making it more difficult for people to believe.

So Peter had presented the facts exactly as they had happened, and then, just in case they had missed the point...

2. He Points out that their Salvation had been God's Work (vs.15-18)

What was the evidence for this?

(i) The Holy Spirit had taken over as Peter was speaking (v.15)

God the Holy Spirit had interrupted Peter's sermon as the Gentiles began to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Even as Peter spoke, they were saved! – It was entirely a work of God; it was an act of God's grace!

(ii) Their Salvation had been God's gift (v.17a)

The gift that Peter refers to in this verse is the gift of the Holy Spirit – the same as the believing Jews had received on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4).

But since the Holy Spirit is given at the point of conversion we can also regard this verse as speaking of the gift of salvation itself – and of course this ties in with the rest of Scripture: e.g. Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:8-9.

Salvation is still God's free gift to every repentant sinner who will receive it simply by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The question is: Have you received this gift yet?

(iii) Because Salvation is seen as God's work and God's gift, then not to accept the conversion of the Gentiles would be to oppose God! (v.17c)

As Peter says: *'Who was I to think that I could oppose God?'*

It had been God's work, so not to accept these Gentiles as fellow-believers would be to fly in the face of God. How could anyone, let alone an Apostle, do that?

(iv) God had granted Repentance, and Life, and Salvation and the Holy Spirit to these Gentiles (v.18)

And to the credit of Peter's opponents on this occasion, they accepted what he had said and glorified God as a result. Salvation is by faith alone, in Christ alone, by God's Grace alone, **to the Glory of God alone**.

And so in all that Peter had said he was pointing out the very important truth that...

3. There is only one Qualification for Salvation (v.17b)

- It's not circumcision (as the Jews may have wanted)
- It's not a Jewish up-bringing (as some thought)
- It's not leading a strict religious life (as some still think)

It's simply by believing in who Jesus is – that He is the Son of God, the Promised Messiah, the Saviour of the World.

And it's by believing that what He did on that cross, he did for you personally. He died to wash your sins away completely.

It's believing in who Jesus is, and trusting in what he has done for you – that's what will save you and make you right with God.

Acts 11:17b *'...the gift he gave us who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ.'*

Acts 4:12 *'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.'*

Acts 16:31 **'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**
- you and your household.'

Conclusion (v.18)

So the Gentiles were accepted as fellow-believers by this particular group of Jewish Christians.

Sadly however, the issue didn't go away; it continued to dog the church for many years to come. (It crops up again and again, many times throughout the rest of the New Testament).

But do you see the great lengths that Peter went to, to help his fellow believers to grasp this important lesson that God was teaching the church?

God accepts: *anybody*, from *any background* whatsoever, whether culturally, racially, religiously or socially different from ours, provided they have done one thing – and that is to believe in Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord.

The Gentiles were accepted; division was avoided.

But the question is, do we accept those who the Lord chooses to save and to bring in among us, so readily?

Do we go to such lengths as Peter did to avoid division in our churches today?

Many years ago, I worked in France with Baptist Missions on a summer placement in the Marne la Vallee area of East Paris (It was summer 1987).

I was amazed to find that in that group of 20 newly planted churches, there was a Black West Indian Church, there was a Vietnamese Church, and there was a predominantly French Church.

The 'in phrase' going around at that time was that it was OK to plant churches on the 'homogeneous principle.' (I was working with Americans at the time!)

In other words some 'expert' in church growth in a seminary in the States had done some research and presented some statistics that 'proved' that it was easier to plant churches from scratch along ethnic lines. That it was harder to get people from different cultures to come together and to commit themselves to the one fellowship, because of all their differences; so it was quicker, or more efficient, to plant churches made up of people from all the same background!

You know, I thought it strange at the time, even though I came from mono culture, monochrome, Northern Ireland, but I'm more and more convinced ever since that it was totally unbiblical! The church of Jesus Christ is not

supposed to be monochrome. It is not supposed to be made up of people from only one background. It is supposed to be made up of people from different backgrounds, different ethnic groupings, different skin colours, different previous religious backgrounds.

Because then it will be a glimpse of what heaven is going to be like when we all gather around that throne from every tribe, and tongue and people and nation. And it will be a picture of God's redeemed Creation. He didn't make us all the same when he created us in the first place. He made us all different.

Part of the purpose of the Gospel is to reconcile:

- To reconcile men to God.
- To reconcile women to God.

But also to reconcile men and women to each other.

- It's to reconcile blacks to God.
- It's to reconcile whites to God.

But it's also to reconcile blacks and whites to each other.

- It's to reconcile Jews to God.
- It's to reconcile Gentiles to God.

But it's also to reconcile Jews and Gentiles to each other.

- It's to reconcile Protestants to God.
- It's to reconcile Catholics to God.

But it's also to reconcile Catholics and Protestants to each other.

And we could go on. Every society on earth knows divisions. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about South Africa or Ireland, or the United States of America, or Palestine or Israel – every society has its own dividing factor. Jesus came to reconcile men and women to Himself; and then to reconcile each of them to the other, united together in Christ, baptised into the same Holy Spirit, and members of the one Church of Jesus Christ.

That's what Peter learned in Acts chs.10. He had to re-learn it a few more times in other parts of the New Testament, because he kept slipping back into the default position of separation and division.

He was right to defend his actions in Acts ch.11, and if we are going to be serious about uniting men and women from every background together in Christ, then from time to time we will have to defend our actions as well against those who will try to accuse us of all sorts of things, but we need to stick to this principle – the doors of the church of Jesus Christ are open to all men and women – all are welcome – they are simply invited to come and put their trust in Christ and his finished work on the cross and leave their past bitterness, hatred and divisions at the door - and in the past!

It might be hard, but if we do, then as a church we can go places with God!

