

Early Church Grows and Changes

(Acts 11)

Introduction

Ask: Do you know what one of the hardest things for people to do? [Write the word “C H A N G E” on the board.]

Some people really enjoy changes. But most of us do not like change in our lives. When we are used to things being a certain way, we find change uncomfortable. When we have sudden change, we may even feel insecure or fearful.

Ask: What are some things that are hard to change? (Going from being right-handed to left-handed, changing languages or schools.)

Ask: What are some changes that you have faced in your life? (Moving, divorce, sickness, death, different school, etc.) [Teacher, share an experience from your own life, if possible.]

These kinds of changes can sometimes disrupt our lives. The only way we can handle the twists and turns of change that happen in our lives is to walk closely with Jesus every day. As believers we can always trust God when we face whatever changes come our way. He uses change for our good.

Ask: Have you ever had to change your attitude or opinion about something?

In today’s lesson we will learn how one group of people had to change their opinion about another group of people.

Opening Prayer

Father, in Your word You say, *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.* Your word will never change. We can always trust You. We know that when change happens in our lives, You can be trusted because You always bring good from it. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Memory Verse

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom 8:28)

Lesson

We have been taking a journey through the book of Acts and learning about the beginnings of the Christian church.

One of the last things Jesus told His followers before He ascended back into heaven, was to go into all the world and “*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” (Matt 28:19) It was God’s plan for all people to come into the family of God.

Up until this point the only people who were part of the family of God were Jewish believers.

Even though His disciples had heard Jesus tell them to go into all the world to make disciples, these Jewish believers still did not understand that God actually wanted non-Jewish people to be part of His family. They had been brought up following the Jewish laws and traditions and had always believed that Gentiles; that is, non-Jewish people were bad. Peter and the other Apostles were taught never to go into a Gentile’s home or to eat with Gentiles.

In our last lesson, we learned that God had broken the barrier between Jews and Gentiles when Cornelius and his household became believers in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. But including Gentiles in the church brought change to what the Jewish believers had always thought to be God’s plan. They had to have an attitude adjustment.

Now the church included Cornelius and his household, who were Gentiles. This was a big change, a change that was going to make the Jewish believers very uncomfortable.

Acts 11:1-3

Soon the news reached the apostles and other believers in Judea that the Gentiles had received the word of God. (2) But when Peter arrived

back in Jerusalem, the Jewish believers criticized him. (3) "You entered the home of Gentiles and even ate with them!" they said.

When Peter got back to Jerusalem and told the other Jewish believers about what had happened in Caesarea, they criticized Peter because he had gone into the home of a Gentile and ate with him. These Jewish believers still thought that Gentiles were unclean and that God only loved the Jewish people.

Peter explained that Cornelius and his whole household had received the power of the Holy Spirit just like they had. Let's read what Peter told them in verse 17:

Acts 11:17

And since God gave these Gentiles the same gift he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to stand in God's way?"

The Jewish believers wanted to please God. Now, they were faced with a major change in their way of thinking. They could either believe Peter was right and trust this really was God's plan, or they could reject what Peter was telling them and stick with believing what they had always thought—that Gentiles were unworthy of God's love.

Acts 11:18

When the others heard this, they stopped objecting and began praising God. They said, "We can see that God has also given the Gentiles the privilege of repenting of their sins and receiving eternal life."

When the people heard Peter explain God's plan to save the Gentiles, they accepted what Peter said and gave God praise because He was allowing the Gentiles to be saved and to become part of the family of God.

The Church in Antioch

The next thing we learn in Acts 11 is that many other Gentiles were putting their trust in Jesus. When the persecution began in Jerusalem, many believers moved away from Jerusalem. When these believers

met their new neighbors, they told them about Jesus and many Gentiles in Antioch became believers.

Acts 11:21

The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

God was at work and when the news that many Gentiles were becoming believers in Antioch reached the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to visit the new believers.

Acts 11:22-24

When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. (23) When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. (24) Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

We were first introduced to Barnabas in chapter 4 and in chapter 9. Barnabas was well known for encouraging new believers to remain faithful to the Lord with all their hearts.

Because so many people were coming into the church, Barnabas decided to go to Tarsus to get Saul, a man that God had greatly changed.

Ask: What do you remember about Saul? [Let the students respond.]

Saul had been a persecutor of Christians, but God changed his heart. He was now a powerful preacher of "the way."

Acts 11:25-26

Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. (26) When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

Barnabas and Saul stayed in Antioch for a year, teaching many new believers how to live their lives in a way that pleases God.

Ask: What were the believers called in Antioch? (Christians!)

This was meant to be an insulting term at first. But in time, the believers accepted it as an honor.

Agabus Predicts a Famine

The next thing we learn in Acts 11 is that a famine was about to come upon the entire Roman world.

Ask: What is a famine? [Let the students respond.]

Acts 11:27-28

During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. (28) One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.)

Ask: What is a prophet? (Someone who tells the future.)

A prophet named Agabus came from Jerusalem to Antioch. The Holy Spirit spoke through him and told the believers that a severe famine was going to spread over the entire Roman world.

Acts 11:29-30

So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. (30) This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

The believers in Antioch decided to put together a large care package for the believers in Jerusalem.

It had been a hard change for the Jewish believers to accept the Gentile believers into the family of God. But the generosity of the Gentile believers in Antioch proved to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem that they were all brothers and sisters in the same family.

Change can be tough. But when you place your faith in Jesus, the Holy Spirit living in your heart will enable you to trust the Lord has a good plan for any changes that He allows to come into your life.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father, we want to handle change in our lives with grace, knowing that you allow us to go through trials in our lives to bring about change in our way of thinking. You always have the best in mind for us. Forgive us when we kick against the changes you bring about. Help us to embrace them as part of your will for our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

GAME CENTER

Spin the Wheel

Make a spinner with numbers. Upon a correctly answered question, the student spins the wheel to determine points for his/her team.

Or, use the following questions in another game or discussion:

1. Who criticized Peter? (The Jewish believers)
2. How did Peter respond when he was criticized? (He explained in detail what God had done.)
3. How did the Jewish believers respond to Peter? (They had no further objections and praised God.)
4. What happened as the Good News was shared in Antioch? (Many Gentiles were saved.)
5. Who visited the believers in Antioch? (Barnabas)

6. Describe Barnabas. (Good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and faith)
7. Where did Barnabas go to get Saul? (Tarsus)
8. How long did Barnabas and Saul teach in Antioch (1 full year)
9. What were the disciples called in Antioch? (Christians)
10. How did the believers respond to Agabus' message of a coming famine? (Provided help for believers living in Judea)
11. How have you learned to respond to changes that happen in your life? (Trust that God will make all things work together for good.)

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