

# Early Church Growth and Change

(Acts 11)

## Pre-Session Warm Up

[Teacher, as the student find their seats, to prepare for the Bible lesson, make some seat changes. For students who only sit by their close friends, this change may be disappointing. That is the point of this activity! Make another change by saying we are not going to use chairs and will sit on the floor. Mix it up!]

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.

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.]

As believers we can always trust God when we face whatever changes come our way. He uses change for our good.

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.

In today's lesson we will learn how to respond to the changes that can sometimes disrupt our lives.

## 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. The book tells us what the first followers of Jesus accomplished as they went into the world telling people about what Jesus did on the cross for them.

Last week we learned that God had broken the barriers between Jews and Gentiles when Cornelius and his household believed in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit. This exciting event fulfilled God's promise to include Gentiles in His family of believers. His plan all along had been for all people to be saved. But including Gentiles in the church brought change to what the Jewish believers had always thought to be God's plan. Today we are going to see how this change affected the church.

What is the *church*? The *church* is not just a building; it is all people who have believed in Jesus. Up until this point the only people in the "church" were Jewish believers. Now the church included Cornelius and his household, who were Gentiles. This was a big change, a change that was going to make some people 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.*

What happened in these verses? [Teacher, allow students to summarize in their own words.] They were criticizing Peter because he went into the home of a Gentile and ate with him. These Jewish believers still believed that Gentiles were unclean and unworthy of God's love.

How do you feel when you are criticized? [Let class respond.]

Peter gives us a great example of how to respond to people when they criticize us. Because Peter was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, he didn't try to defend himself or argue with anyone, he simply explained God's plan to these people.

He told the people that Cornelius and his whole household received the power of the Holy Spirit just like they had.

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?"*

Peter knew God at work in the hearts of the Gentiles. But these Jewish believers had just been given a big change in their way of thinking. They had been brought up to believe that Gentiles were inferior—subhuman!

The Jews wanted to please God and had made up extra rules to help keep themselves pure and holy. They were the ones that had made up the rule to not associate with Gentiles. God never told the Jews not to eat with the Gentiles or go into their homes. Now, these Jewish believers were faced with a major change in their way of thinking. They could either accept Peter's message as from God or they could reject it as something Peter made up on his own.

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 understood and were in agreement with him and they stopped objecting and began praising God.

They accepted Peter's explanation and gave God praise because He was allowing the Gentiles to be saved and to become part of the family of God.

Let's see what kind of results came about when the Jewish believers accepted the Gentiles as brothers and sisters in God's family.

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 the Good News was being spread into many different places. More and more people were being saved because now even the Gentiles were believing in Jesus and receiving the Holy Spirit.

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. What do you remember about Barnabas? (He was an encourager.) Barnabas encouraged these 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.

Acts 11:25

*Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul.*

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

## Acts 11:26

*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 a large number of people.

Notice what the believers were called at the Antioch church; Christians! This was meant to be an insulting term at first. But in time, the believers accepted it as an honor.

The Church was about to experience some more change.

## 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.)*

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. Famine would definitely bring change to the lives of all who were affected.

What do you think you would feel like if you found out that there was going to be a famine?

This change that was coming gave the believers living in Antioch an opportunity to trust God and be used by Him to help other believers.

## 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.*

In this lesson today we were given some very good examples of how we can respond when change occurs in our lives.

If we are believers, we can trust God to use the change for good. We don't have to be afraid of change, but we can see it as an opportunity to grow deeper in our walk with Jesus. As we trust Him more, we learn to live our lives to please God.

If you are not a believer, the change you need to make in your life is to turn from your sins and believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, was buried and raised from the dead three days later. When you place your faith in Jesus, God changes you and makes you a new creation. You will have the Holy Spirit living in your heart and He will enable you to follow the examples we learned about in today's lesson.

**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**

Use the following questions in a 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.)