

INTRODUCTION

The news that the hated Gentiles were included in the church reached Jerusalem before Peter did as he chose to stay at Caesarea for a few days to minister there (10:48). That news sent shock waves through the whole Jewish community. This event is so significant that Luke with the aid of the Holy Spirit repeats the account of the conversion of the Gentiles in this chapter as well.

This unusual repetition marks this event out as of great significance. So far in the book of Acts we have seen God's commission being fulfilled by the church as the gospel has gone forth from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and now finally in this chapter the gospel goes out to the Gentile world.

What we have here in this chapter is the establishment of the first church in Gentile land that is a church that was filled with Gentile people.

1. GOD AT WORK IN ESTABLISHING HIS CHURCH (vs. 1-21)

While Peter was still ministering in Caesarea, word of the remarkable events that had taken place reached the Jerusalem fellowship. Luke tells us that the rest of the apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God and therefore Peter when he came up to Jerusalem he was criticised because he had entered the home of uncircumcised people (vs. 2-3).

It was the Jewish believers who were criticising Peter, no doubt startled by the obvious social implications of this event. The Jewish believers at this time thought that if the Gentiles were really to live as Christians, they would have to become Jewish. Yet this is not what happened and therefore Peter faces the criticism. Many of the Jewish Christians were still very zealous for the law of God and their many Jewish customs.

The temple was their main meeting place so it is no surprise that they took issue with Peter over eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. Even though they were believers in Jesus Christ, such an obvious breach of Jewish custom angered them. Acknowledging Jesus as their Saviour was one thing but to accept Gentiles was a completely different thing.

It was hard for them to accept that Jesus is the Saviour of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. It was a hard lesson for Peter to learn and now it is a very hard lesson for the Jewish believers to learn.

Now instead of getting into a heated argument over this issue Peter presents the facts that led to the conversion of the Gentiles (vs. 4-16) and wrapped up the account with a very pointed observation (v 17). In effect Peter says who wants to argue with the Lord, look what He has done for the Gentiles? There was no doubt about it God had saved the Gentiles there was no other explanation for what had happened to them.

After all did not God grant the Holy Spirit to those Gentile believers just as he had granted the Holy Spirit to the Jews who believed (v 17)?

In Peter's account it is worth noting that Peter had witnesses to what had happened for he took 6 brothers with him from Joppa (v 12) and they were witnesses that God sent the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles as well. They witnessed the same incident so that the apostles and Jewish believers could know that Peter is not making this up. When Peter's critics heard that the Holy Spirit had come upon the Gentiles and that Peter was a witness to that fact they had no more objections and praised God that he had granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life (v 18). Now it was not

easy for these Jews to admit that fact but that is what the evidence was saying and this admission was important for the future of the church.

There was no way that any Jew would accept a Gentile believer into the church unless they were convinced that God had given them eternal life and they would never even consider evangelism among the Gentiles unless they changed their thinking about the Gentiles. God is at work changing their thinking by saving even Gentiles and giving them the same Holy Spirit that these Jewish believers enjoyed.

You see what God is doing is laying the foundation for the future of the church, He is showing that He is not exclusively the God of the believing Jews but that He also includes the Gentiles in his plan for the church. Notice, that in Peter's account, it is God who gets all the credit for this work. It was God who grants the Gentiles repentance unto life and it is God who sends His Holy Spirit and God who saves the Gentiles.

Therefore whomever God accepts His Jewish church must accept even if that means having to change one's mind about certain people groups. There is no doubt that for us the lessons are clear. It is God who builds his church and whomever he saves and accepts we have no right to reject. We might like God to save a certain type of person, or we might long for God to save that person that we get on with very well.

We might even fear that those people at work or in the family or in our street that we find difficult to get along with might become Christians and then what would we do? No doubt there are people in our own church that we find it hard to get along with, but the reality is that if God gives people repentance unto life He accepts such people into his church.

Therefore we all have an obligation not just to accept one another but also to work with one another and support each other in the work of the church.

God's hand at work in salvation is seen in the next little section as well (vs. 19-21).

The time was now right to see a church planted and established in a Gentile land. It took at least 7 years between Pentecost and the planting of the church at Antioch, seven years of preparing the Jewish church to reach out to their Gentile neighbours and to remove the many prejudices that they had against the Gentiles. God's work takes time, God is never in a hurry and we ought to remember that in these days when everything is instant, God does His work in His way and by His time scale.

The means used to plant the church at Antioch is once again persecution. Verses 19-21 take us back to where 8:4 left off, discussing the effect of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen's death. That persecution led by Saul scattered the Christians at Jerusalem. Some went to Samaria and planted a church there (8:5 & 25) and some to places like Caesarea, Joppa and other places as well.

Some Jews even went to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, and those in Cyprus went on to Antioch, which was a Gentile city. Wherever these scattered believers went they spoke the message of Jesus but they only presented the gospel to the Jews (v 19). They assumed that the gospel was for Jewish people alone.

But it was those who went to Antioch who started to speak the gospel to the Gentiles and through their efforts the first church in a Gentile land was planted. But notice that the reason that the church was planted was not because some Christians went to Antioch although that was an important step but it was God who brought this church into being because his hand was on the believers as they spoke the gospel and as a result a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Now once again believing and turning to the Lord are linked, faith and repentance cannot be

separated. One who believes in Christ for salvation must also turn from their sin and old ways and turn to the Lord.

Repentance is turning from something, sin and turning to someone the Lord. That is only possible when the Lord grants us the Holy Spirit and we are enabled to do so. Left to ourselves we would never repent or believe only God has the power to break our stubborn resistant and enable us to repent.

Those of us who are Christians should pray that God might establish His church here in Wensleydale by granting people repentance unto life. This is why prayer is so important. We can run all the evangelistic events we like. We can witness to as many people as possible but unless the Lord works by His Spirit then sinners will continue in their sin. Ask the Lord to grant repentance unto life to many in our families and in our community.

2. GOD AT WORK GROWING HIS CHURCH (vs. 22 -26)

Now when the church in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch they sent a delegation to verify what they were hearing. So Barnabas was sent on the church's behalf. Barnabas was a good man and man filled with the Spirit (v 24).

From what we know of him from elsewhere in this book of Acts we know that he was a loving gentle and generous man, a man who lived up to his name which means "son of encouragement." Therefore he possessed the necessary spiritual qualities for one to discern exactly what was happening in Antioch.

Now although God's work in the hearts of sinners is invisible the result of that work is clearly seen When Barnabas arrives he sees clear evidence of the grace of God (v 23). As a result he rejoiced and encouraged them to remain loyal and true to the Lord.

The temptation on all new believers to become unfaithful is great and so they need to be encouraged to remain true to the One who has saved them and given them new hearts for God. The only way to remain true to the Lord is to remain faithful to his word through obedience and that is true of us all whether new converts or not. The temptation to become unfaithful is always there, our enemy is seeking constantly to trip us up and to get us to be unfaithful, But it is important that we stay loyal to the Lord and therefore we must seek God's help to walk in obedience to his word and to do so afresh each day.

We cannot live today on yesterday's obedience each day we must yield our hearts to the Lord and seek with the help of the Holy Spirit to walk faithfully before him.

There were that many coming to faith in the Lord that the task was too much for Barnabas so he went to get help from Saul who in Barnabas' view was the best man for this new situation (vs. 25-26). He no doubt had to search for him, as it is now several years since Saul fled Jerusalem for his home in Tarsus (9:30).

But Barnabas brought Saul back to Antioch where they both set about teaching the new believers and they did this for a year (v 25). My dear friends; new believers need to be taught in the things of God. We must not leave new believers to find their own way in the Christian faith they need to be instructed about the basics of the Christian faith.

How else will they learn about the importance of baptism, church membership, the Lord's Supper evangelism etc unless we who are more experienced in the faith instruct them? New babes in Christ are vulnerable therefore they must be instructed and built up in the faith and that takes time and patience.

One of the tasks of the church today is to teach believers, yes we are to evangelise but our main task is to teach and instruct believers and then each believer can do the work of evangelism in the situations of life where God has placed them That is why at the heart of any gospel church there must be a faithful ministry of the word of God.

That is why churches appoint elders, they are the teachers of the church, they are to rule the church well and the main way that they do that is to preach and teach God's word and to encourage God's word to be applied both in the life of individuals and within the life of the church. The way that God enables churches to grow is through the preaching of His word.

Churches can grow numerically and spiritually but in whatever way a church grows it can only do so through the preaching and teaching of God's word. God by his Spirit uses the teaching of His word to enable His people to develop and mature spiritually and he uses the preaching of his word to enable a church to grow numerically. Please pray for those who teach and preach God's word ask the Lord that He will grow his church here in Wensleydale through the ministry of the word of God.

3. GOD AT WORK THROUGH THE CHURCH (vs. 27-32)

God worked in establishing this church in a Gentile land, He was at work in seeing it grow but this church was not only sound in doctrine but it was sound in love. God sent some prophets from Jerusalem to Antioch in order to warn the church of difficult days ahead.

Prophets and apostles existed side by side with the prophets becoming less and the apostles became more dominant until the foundation of the church was established and then both offices ceased to exist. The leaders of the church today are God appointed elders. One of these prophets Agabus proclaimed by the Spirit that there was going to be a famine all over the Roman world.

This prediction came to pass during the reign of Claudius (41-54 AD). The years AD 45-46 saw great famines in the land of Israel but the important thing to notice is the response of the church at Antioch (v 29). They provided money in order to help the Judean believers. They wanted to help the Jewish church in Jerusalem who was in need.

This was an expression of their love for all of God's people even those who were from a different race and who initially hated the thought of Gentiles being added to God's church. The money was sent to the elders via Barnabas and Saul. The elders were the ones in charge of the pastoral care within the church, therefore they knew where the need was and they would know how best to use the money in meeting that need.

God uses His church to demonstrate His love for His people by enabling His church to help one another and to meet the needs of fellow churches. We must be careful that we do not become isolated as a church. We must not think that our church alone matters. We are glad of the support that we receive from other churches but we must be careful that we do not become only a receiving church.

Let us be a giving church. We might need to give of our resources in order to help meet the need of other churches but then that is how God works to meet the needs of His people. That is one way that God demonstrates His love for the church by using each church to meet the needs of others. As an independent church the danger can be that we become too independent for our own good.

I believe in the independence of the local church and will do all I can to protect that belief, but we are all interdependent because God works through His church to meet the needs of His church.

Therefore let us as a church be outward looking so that God will use this church with our limited resources to meet the needs of other Christians and other churches because that is how God works in our world and that is how He expresses His love and care for His people.

Let us be a outward looking, loving and caring church by using the resources that God has given to us to meet the needs of His people and of this world through the preaching of the gospel and through practical help and care.

Therefore in conclusion the final stage in the Lord's command recorded for us in Acts 1:8 has been reached. The church originally Jewish has expanded from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and now to the Gentile lands. God's plan and purposes can never be halted. There may be set backs and defeats occasionally but God's fixed purposes will always be accomplished and one of His purposes is to build His church.

That is what He is doing today and nothing will alter his purposes or hinder them from being fulfilled. Therefore we must trust Him and continue to do what God has called us to do which is to preach His gospel to all people and leave it with the Lord to establish and grow His church and He does that by working through His church.

Amen