

F. The Composite Church (11:19-30)

God had orchestrated the outcome in Cornelius' house as much as the events leading up to it, but not merely to demonstrate to Peter and his companions His capacity and intention to save Gentiles as well as Jews. God's purpose in this Gentile Pentecost was to impress upon His fledgling flock in a mighty and unmistakable way that the "Christ event" had profoundly and forever transformed His covenant household. Moreover, this transformation, wrought in Christ by the Spirit, was a matter of fulfillment long promised by the Scriptures. In Jesus, the True Israel, the Abrahamic household had finally attained its prophetic destiny; Abram had at last become *Abraham* in truth: the father of a multitude of nations, joined to him in covenant union through the true circumcision performed by his Seed to whom the promises were spoken.

The Cornelius episode was a radical development in the life of the Church, and news of it spread like wildfire throughout the congregations of Christ's saints. Gentiles coming to faith in Jesus and entering His Church wasn't itself the point of amazement; as noted, Gentiles had always had access to the covenant community. What radicalized the Jewish believers was the notion of a *composite Church*: the idea that God's covenant household was now to be populated by Jews and non-Jews from all tribes, tongues, and nations. No longer were covenant identity and unity associated with any physical or religious criterion; in Christ, membership in the "commonwealth of Israel" had become solely a matter of "*one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*" Those who were formerly excluded had now been brought in by the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 2:11-13, 4:1-6).

The apex of Luke's treatment of the Cornelius episode is the Church's exultant confession that God was granting to the Gentiles repentance unto life, and that affirmation further serves as the transitional introduction into the subsequent context. In this way Luke showed that he intended his readers to regard the conversion of Cornelius and his Gentile associates as the formal beginning of the composite Church and the foundation for the Gentile mission. The balance of Luke's account focuses on that mission, which reflects his own recognition that the ingathering of the Gentiles and their equal place in God's covenant household – that is, the forming of one new man in Christ – is the most radical and profound development in the outworking of salvation history. The Law, Prophets and Writings promised that day and Jesus Himself spoke of it; now at last it was dawning. In and through Israel's Messiah, the God of Israel was declaring Himself the God of all the earth (cf. 14:8-17, 17:22-31). He was poised to begin gathering in the Gentiles, and His little flock at Syrian Antioch was to be the epicenter of that work.

1. Luke introduced the church at Antioch by observing that it had the same genesis as all the other congregations of believers outside Jerusalem, namely the great Jewish persecution that arose following Stephen's stoning (11:19). That opposition drove Christ's disciples from Jerusalem in all directions, and Luke traced their fruitful ministry in the gospel as it spread outward toward Samaria (8:5-25), the Mediterranean coastal regions (8:26-40) and even as far north as Damascus in Syria (9:1-2). In the present context, Luke enlarged the circle of the Spirit's saving work, extending it to Cyprus to the west, north into Phoenicia (modern day Lebanon) and beyond to Antioch in Syria.

2. The congregation in Antioch was spawned out of the same persecution as its sister churches, but it also shared with them a common missionary perspective and approach: Until that time, the Antiochene believers proclaimed Christ's gospel to Jews alone (11:19b). An entirely Jewish mission would perhaps not be unexpected in Jerusalem and Judea, but Luke insisted that it was the practice of the churches as far away as the Mediterranean island of Cyprus and the land of the Arameans (Syrians). Even in those predominantly Gentile regions well outside the land of Israel, the saints still directed their proclamation of Israel's Messiah exclusively to the sons of Israel.

Luke's statement is significant in that it highlights the fact that the convictions which incited the Jerusalem saints to confront Peter were shared throughout the Church; the believers everywhere would have had exactly the same reaction to the Caesarea episode, but only the Jerusalem church had enjoyed Peter's explanation and experienced the epiphany it provoked. Nevertheless, the Gentile Pentecost represented a monumental paradigm shift which would impact and forever redefine the churches everywhere.

3. The Gentile mission was to have its hub at Antioch, but Luke recorded that it was believers who came to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene who first began preaching the Lord Jesus to non-Jews. (Luke uses same term that previously denoted Hellenistic Jews (6:1, 9:29), but the context here indicates that he was referring to Hellenized Gentiles.) What motivated them to take the gospel to such Hellenists is unclear. It's certainly possible they had heard the news of what happened in Caesarea and then in Jerusalem, but Cyprus – and especially Cyrene – are a long way from Judea (ref. again 11:1). Perhaps residing in strongly Hellenized areas of the Empire made them more comfortable interacting with Gentiles. In the end, Luke doesn't provide any insight. Rather, his concern was to emphasize that this new direction in the Church's witness was of the Lord, evidenced in many Gentiles coming to faith in Him (11:20-21).
4. Paralleling the earlier Samaritan mission, news of this Gentile outreach and its success soon reached the church in Jerusalem and they dispatched Barnabas to investigate (11:22). What he found there filled him with joy, and Luke noted that Barnabas stayed on for a time to encourage and exhort "*them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord*" (11:23). This summarizing description is significant for a couple of reasons:
 - a. First, Luke used Barnabas' actions to affirm the genuineness of this work of the Spirit. He traveled to Antioch to verify the accuracy of what the Jerusalem church had heard, and he found things exactly as reported.
 - b. But secondly, and more importantly to the larger context, Luke's treatment highlights the fact of the continuing challenges facing the emerging composite Church. Whether or not the saints in Antioch had heard about Peter's defense in Jerusalem, it seems unquestionable that at least some of the circumcised believers there continued to struggle with uncircumcised Gentiles entering the covenant community. This would later be the case in Jerusalem and elsewhere, and there's no reason to think that Antioch – as the first church to experience Gentile converts – would escape this difficulty.

Indeed, the larger context suggests that this was precisely the provocation for Barnabas' encouragement to remain resolutely faithful to the Lord: *The Jewish believers needed this exhortation in light of their inclination to marginalize, if not oppose, the new Gentile converts; the latter needed to be encouraged to stand firm in the face of such treatment, which was sure to come.* Both were to embrace one another by holding fast to Christ. The "son of encouragement" dispatched to Antioch to verify the Spirit's work in raising up Gentile saints became the Spirit's instrument for encouraging and exhorting this first composite community (11:24).

5. The Jerusalem church sought a report concerning Antioch, but Barnabas didn't return with it. Instead, he departed for Tarsus to find Paul and bring him back to Antioch (11:25; ref. also 9:29-30). Again, Luke provides no explanation for this, but clearly Barnabas' time with the church in Antioch had convinced him that Paul's presence was needed there. Being aware of Paul's calling (cf. 9:15, 26-27), perhaps he wanted Paul to observe God's saving work among the Gentiles, but the context suggests that he believed Paul needed to join himself to that work. Whatever the reason, Barnabas was able to locate Paul and persuade him to return with him to Antioch. There the two of them set about instructing and discipling the saints for an entire year (11:26; cf. 18:7-11, 19:8-10).

It is in the context of that account that Luke made an observation which is easily passed over, but is actually profoundly important: *It was at Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.*

- a. This is the first occurrence in the New Testament of the word "Christian," a term that specifically identified the followers of this new Way as being *of Christ*. Years later the name would come to be the recognized designation for believers in Jesus of Nazareth (26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), but it made its first appearance in Antioch.
- b. That the term "Christian" originated in Antioch in Syria is significant for at least two reasons. Antioch was recognized at that time as one of the great cosmopolitan cities of the Near East. It was founded in 300 B. C. by Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander the Great's four generals to whom his empire was apportioned upon his death. Babylonia was Seleucus' first allotment, but he expanded his holdings to include the entire eastern portion of Alexander's Macedonian Empire. At its height, the Seleucid Empire extended from Western Asia and the Indus River in the east to the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea in the south and Asia Minor (Phrygia) and the Sinai Peninsula in the west.

Seleucus founded Antioch early in his reign, naming it after his father Antiochus. It had a Mediterranean port fifteen miles to the west down the Orontes River, and became an important and splendid city, enlarged and embellished over the years by Seleucus' successors. It was one of the four cities of the Syrian tetrapolis built by Seleucus, and eventually rivaled Alexandria – founded and made glorious by Alexander himself – as the chief city of the Near East. It became known as "Antioch the Beautiful," renowned for its exquisite buildings and long boulevard bordered on both sides by a colonnade adorned with trees and fountains.

The Seleucid kings ruled the western region from Antioch, and its status as a capital city together with its Hellenistic culture led to its cosmopolitan stature. Seleucus' offer of equal citizenship attracted to Antioch a diverse group of people from all over his empire. It came to have a large Jewish population along with Persians, Indians, and even Chinese. This splendid city known as the "Antioch the Beautiful" also gained the moniker, "Queen of the East." Antioch became even more diverse when the Romans later absorbed it. Latins were added to its Jewish, Greek and oriental populace, and by the end of the first century Josephus referred to it as the third city of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria.

And so the fact that the term "Christian" originated at Antioch is important first because that city was the epicenter of the Gentile mission and ingathering. But beyond that, Antioch's cosmopolitan quality insured that the Gentiles coming to faith in Christ in that city were drawn from a diverse populace representing many tribes, tongues, nations and peoples. From the very beginning, the composite Church was more than merely a combination of Jews and Greeks; it was a *global* entity, embodying, even in one city, a rich and varied blend of all sorts of people.

If there was no place that could better serve as the epicenter of the emerging composite Church, neither was there a congregation that better epitomized it. It was eminently fitting that this widely diverse community of believers should be the first to carry the title, Christians.

What God had promised from the beginning, portrayed in manifold ways in the progress of salvation history and secured in His Son, was at last becoming a reality. For the first time in human history a spiritual community was emerging which had no earthly or natural component of "common-union." Not unified by culture, tradition, religious practice or even language, this new community testified to the world of a new human paradigm – a new creation – by virtue of their other-worldly union. Bound together only by the Spirit of Christ and the life He imparts, they manifested to a watching world the "communion of the saints" in their mutual faith, love and devotion.

6. God had chosen cosmopolitan Antioch to be the seedbed of His cosmopolitan covenant community, and He was pleased to have Barnabas and Paul play a key role in laying its foundation. If Antioch was the epitomizing epicenter of the composite Church, Paul and Barnabas were Antioch's central pillars. To remain vigorous and bear godly witness in the context of its expanding diversity – indeed to even survive as a congregation, the church at Antioch needed to grow deep in Christ, nourished and strengthened in His gospel. In His wise mercy, the Lord provided Paul and Barnabas for that task.

Antioch would remain Paul's "home church," but God's purpose for him reached far beyond it. In one sense, his year at Antioch was pedagogical as the Lord prepared His apostle for the work that would eventually take him as far as Spain. But now it was time for Barnabas to complete his mission and report to the Jerusalem church, and God used a widespread famine to orchestrate that return (11:27ff). At his side was Paul, eager and unafraid to return to the lion's den, fully confident in his calling and the grace of his God.