Preparing to Teach Acts 11

“Redundancy or Reinforcement?”

The simplest way to see the content outline of this chapter is to divided between the Jerusalem church and the church at Antioch, as per Pheme Perkins [Perkins, Pheme, *Reading the New Testament: An Introduction: Third Edition* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 238.]. A more interesting way to see what’s happening is to use a wider lens, like Norman L. Geisler in his New Testament survey textbook.

**The Transition of the Church—Greeks (chapters 8-12)
 A. The three conversions (8:1-11:18)
 1. Eunuch, an Ethiopian (8:26-39)—a son of Ham
 2. Saul, a Tarsian (9:1-19) – a son of Shem
 3. Cornelius, an Italian (10:1-11:18) – a son of Japheth
 B. The two persecutions (11:19-12:25)
 1. Because of Stephen (11:19-30)
 2. Because of Peter (12:1-25)**

[Geisler, Norman L., *A Popular Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007),
p. 129.] Taking the approach of the Table of Nations (Genesis 10), he looks at three critical conversion experiences, two Gentiles and a Jew, as representative of the division of humanity into three groups based on Noah’s sons. This is interesting, but Luke doesn’t build on this idea, so it may “preach” better than letting the text speak (and that can be dangerous). In addition, the blame for the persecution in next week’s text (Acts 12) would probably be better assigned as “Because of James” because Herod Agrippa became bolder in his persecution after killing James. Regardless, both overviews help us to understand that the church as a dominantly Jewish congregation will never be the same.

So, to get started, has anyone ever put you on the spot? Have they ever asked you why you did something you thought was right as though it was wrong? That seems to be what’s happening in Acts 11. Do you remember the pattern I pointed out to you earlier where Greek-speaking Jews would accomplish something and then, Peter and John would come along later and verify it? [Foakes-Jackson, F. J., *The Moffatt Commentary: Acts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 97.] explained it much like I did in our last session. Well, Chapter 11 gives us something of the reason for this. Can you imagine what would have happened if Philip would have been the one to report back to the church in Jerusalem? I certainly would have imagined that they would have said, “Whoa! We made a mistake laying hands on these Greek-speaking Jews. They’re getting out of hand.”

Some people think that Luke has indulged in unnecessary repetition here, but I agree with the scholar who wrote: “The story of the conversion of Cornelius would have been incomplete from Luke’s point of view without the addition of the fourth scene in which the effects of the incident on the church were described.” [Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 195.]

In a similar vein, I like the following explanation. “One reason is the historically plausible scenario that Peter’s unprecedented behavior would be challenged in Jerusalem by Jewish believers who continued to live according to the purity stipulations of the law revealed on Mount Sinai. Since Peter himself had voiced objections in three consecutive visions concerning the suggestion that he should eat impure and unclean animals, it is to be expected that the Jewish believers in Jerusalem would voice the same protest.” [Schnabel, Eckhard J., *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Book 5: Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), p. 883.]

But even though the church or a majority party in the church came at Peter with an accusation, they ended up having to listen to him and admit that he had a point. Luke has Peter retell the story and explain some of the significance so that no one will doubt the necessity of bringing Gentile believers into the church. Even so, we don’t see the message of Peter immediately accepted, despite his relationship directly with the Lord [Schnabel, p. 883.]. So, when God kept working and even more Greek-speaking people began to turn to the Lord, they didn’t know what to do, so they sent Barnabas (whose name is an Aramaic name, a later version of Hebrew) to see what was happening.

1. So, the apostles and the brothers [and sisters], those who were in Judea, heard that the Gentiles had received the Word of God. 2) So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcised created division against him, 3) saying that “You went in the presence of men who had no circumcision and dined with them.” [PJT]

There are some points which are debated concerning the first few verses which may seem somewhat beside the point. I’ll mention them briefly, but let’s not spend too much time on them.

Who were the apostles? After all, “It is quite uncertain who of the apostles were at this time in Jerusalem. It would seem that on Paul's visit, shortly before this, only Peter and James the Lord’s brother were there.” [Gloag, Paton J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 387.] We can surmise that, whenever possible, some of the apostles might stealthily enter Jerusalem to encourage the church and ensure that they were growing in grace and doctrine. It couldn’t have been safe, after all, James is executed in the next chapter and Peter is imprisoned. Still, they would have felt a certain duty to keep shepherding the church.

Why “The Gentiles” rather than Cornelius? This is most likely because the issue is broader than merely the acceptance of one uncircumcised individual into the church [Schnabel, p. 884.]. Many had received Christ (the Word of God) and been verified by the Holy Spirit, creating a precedent that made the “toe-the-line” church members uncomfortable.

How quickly did Peter go to Jerusalem? Our text is technically indefinite since it reads as though Peter quickly returned to Jerusalem but may, as in many biblical narratives, reflect a longer period of time where nothing out of the ordinary (or directly relevant to the narrative occurred). However, the so-called “Western” texts of Acts feature an extended itinerary where Peter preaches his way back to Jerusalem with no real sense of urgency. Those texts include the 5th century Bezae manuscript we mentioned in one of the early sessions, four different Old Latin versions from that same century, Vulgate manuscripts from the 4th and 5th centuries, Syriac (Aramaic) manuscripts from the 6th century, and Coptic translations from the 3rd century onward. Our earliest papyri and Greek manuscripts do not contain that extended itinerary, bringing Peter more abruptly (or dramatically) to Jerusalem.

As for the extended itinerary, “There may be some truth in this, although the Western reviser’s main concern may have been to avoid giving the impression that the outpouring of the Spirit at Caesarea was followed immediately by controversy within the Spirit-filled community at Jerusalem.” [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 233.]

Who were “all the circumcision?” After all, presumably everyone in the Jerusalem church, having been circumcised at birth, were of the circumcision [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 234; Gloag, p.387; Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 70.]. Some think that Luke was identifying the whole church as creating the problem [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), p. 86.]. Schnabel is quick to assert that since the issue of circumcision is not coming up here, this cannot be the group mentioned in Galatians 2:12 [Schnabel, p. 884.]. That logic isn’t necessarily sound, though. People who are legalistic in one area have a tendency to be legalistic in others.

Rather, I think Luke was probably making this distinction to: “…draw our attention to the existence of a conservative section of the church which is extremely Pharisaic in its outlook.” [Smith, p. 70.] Even older commentators go this route: “The great controversy which then existed was not concerning any of those doctrines which afterwards gave rise to our modern controversies, such as the divinity of Christ, the nature and extent of the atonement, and predestination; but it was concerning the bearing of the Jewish religion on the Gentiles. The point discussed was, whether the gospel should be preached to the uncircumcised Gentiles—the admissibility of the Gentiles into the church of Christ. Afterwards, in the celebrated Council of Jerusalem, the question was revived in a somewhat different shape—whether

the converted Gentiles were bound to be circumcised, and to keep the Jewish law.” [Gloag, pp. 388-389.] I particularly like French Arrington’s understatement: “Apparently Peter’s critics viewed the law as largely summed up in circumcision.” [Arrington, French L., *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), p. 116.].

What was the contention? Du Veill observes that it was not because “…not he had preached the word of God to Gentiles; for no law or ancient tradition forbade to teach the way of salvation to all who desired to know, and be admitted into it; but for that he had conversed and sojourned with them for some

days.” [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 262.]. Interestingly, the accusation that he had gone into the house of those who didn’t live up to orthodox Jewish ideals is the same one leveled at Jesus Himself when He had eaten with publicans and sinners in Luke 15:2 [Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: The Acts of the Apostles* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 152.]

What lesson can be learned, then, from this accusation? We should probably see that this overly legalistic mindset would have endangered the gospel itself if Peter hadn’t responded. In these verses, the issue is both the ritual of circumcision and fellowship with those who aren’t perceived as ritually correct. In today’s world, we may do the same kind of damage: “When we insist on doctrinal agreement about such matters as a certain view of the Bible or the kingdom or the ordinances (baptism and Lord’s Supper) of the church as a test of soundness or a condition of Christian fellowship…” [Smith, pp. 70-71.]. At this point, I would ask my students what kinds of things we may argue about that would endanger the gospel today (types of music, partisan politics, dress, building aesthetics, etc.)?

4) So, Peter initiated, expounding [lit. “he expounded”] this matter in order, saying: 5) “I was in the city of Joppa praying and, in an ecstatic experience, I saw a vision, a vessel came down, something like a great sheet let down from the heavens by four corners and it came expressly to me. 6) When I had focused [lit. “fashioned”] my eyes, I was concentrating, then I saw quadrupedal creatures from earth, beasts of prey, and the birds of the heavens. 7) And then, I heard a voice saying to me, ‘Rise, Peter, kill [as in sacrifice] and eat.’ [PJT]

It's interesting that Peter starts at the beginning. That’s a good lesson for all of us when there is a controversy. Don’t assume everyone knows all the facts, so get the facts out there in an ordered way. And speaking of ordered, this is the very same word that Luke uses in Luke 1:3 to state his intent to write down an organized account of the life of Jesus. In the same way that Luke believed the ordered gospel would give his readers a better chance to agree with God’s plan, Peter’s ordered account was designed to help his hearers have a better chance to agree with him [Marshall, p. 196.].

Peter identifies his experience as an ecstatic experience. In his world, that would commend a supernatural origin. Unfortunately, in our world, we tend to be suspicious that something out of the ordinary like Peter’s vision—identified as both an ecstatic experience and a vision—is akin to hallucination, imagination, or delusion. Yet, even here, we have a clue. We can verify Peter’s experience in that it changed his mind. It didn’t just conform to his preconceived notion.

Then, we see some differences between the third-person narrative account in Acts 10 and the first-person account here. What’s the difference? For one, the sheet is described as being “let down from heaven” rather than just being let down [Gloag, p. 389]. Later, it will be “drawn up,” as opposed to being “received up.” Again, the emphasis is on supernatural agency, heavenly involvement, in the appearance of the sheet. Notice also that Peter could ignore it. I translated it as “came expressly to me” where older translations made it “even to me.” Either way, there is no doubt but what this sheet full of creatures and birds is directed at Peter.

I was intrigued to notice that the word for killing is usually used for killing a sacrifice. Does that mean in both verse 7 here and in 10:13 that it was Peter’s religious duty to sacrifice these animals and participate in a holy meal with the Lord? It might, though I haven’t run into any other interpreters who see that. Regardless, it was a command from the Lord and that makes a difference.

***8) But I said, ‘No way, Lord, because nothing common or non-kosher [“unclean”] has entered into my mouth.’ 9) But the voice answered a second time out of heaven, ‘What God has cleansed, is not common.’ 10) So this happened three times and all were drawn up again into the heavens. 11) So, check it out, immediately there were three men arrived at the house where I was, commissioned from Caesarea to me. [PJT]***

Here's yet another difference, though it may be a small distinction. Nothing common or unkosher has even entered his mouth, much less been ingested. Does this refer obliquely to some torture such as we saw in more modern times where cruel tormentors would put trafe in a starving Jew’s mouth so that they would be tempted to swallow it, but most would bravely spit it out? If so, Peter would be saying that he hadn’t even violated kosher law involuntarily. He was totally one with it. More importantly, this phrasing would have been familiar to the conservative Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem church. Why? Because it is exactly what Ezekiel tells the Lord in Ezekiel 4:14. After being given the recipe for Ezekiel 4:9 bread, made of wheat, barley, beans, and lentils, he is told—and the makers of Ezekiel 4:9 and Pure Life Bread don’t seem to realize this—to bake it over dried human dung (4:12). Why? Because God says that Israel will have to eat defiled bread, a fitting punishment for people who have defiled their covenant with God. But Peter’s use of that phrase should indicate to his hearers that, like Ezekiel, he hadn’t defiled his covenant with the Lord.

And in case his hearers still didn’t get it, the dialogue occurred three times and, when vision and dialogue were finished, three men showed up at the house in Joppa where Peter was staying. Three represents God as He Who causes to be, He Who is, and He Who will continue to be. So, three is a divine number of significance and the three times/three men provides yet another clue.

***12) But the Spirit said to me, ‘Go along with them, making no distinction [no separation, no division].’ So, these six brothers went with me and we entered into the man’s house. [PJT]***

I like the phrase “no distinction” in this verse. It’s the same verb used earlier in the chapter when the conservative Jewish faction is creating a division. God specifically tells Peter not to draw that line, not to create that barrier [Robertson, p. 153.]. I also like the fact that we see Peter emphasizing the fact that the Spirit is leading him and blessing him in this whole enterprise, here and in verses 15 and 16, as well.

And, of course, in Jewish tradition, Peter’s witness alone would not have been sufficient. So, he brings along the six brothers who went with him and also entered into the house of the Gentile centurion. Also, in case you’re following the witness of the mathematics here, notice that the witness of six brothers plus Peter equals seven, the basic number for God and the created order in right relationship. All in all, the emphasis on the vision, Spirit, and testimony of the seven of them involved indicates that what happened at Caesarea had divine approval [Smith, p. 71].

Also, I can’t help but notice that Peter doesn’t use either the name Cornelius nor his title in this retelling. I believe the reason for this is to keep the emphasis where it belongs—on the Holy Spirit. It also serves to make a more general application that anyone, no matter their name, race, or rank can be saved by God’s intervention.

***13) So he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying: ‘Commission messengers to Joppa and compel Simon, the one called Peter, to come. 14) That one will speak words to you in which you and everyone in your house will be saved.’ 15) Then, as I initiated speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as upon us at the beginning. [PJT]***

“He compares the experience of the Gentiles with that of the group in the upper room, rather than with that of the first converts from Judaism: there is nothing that might suggest a status as ‘second-class citizens’ for the Gentiles.” – [I. Howard Marshall, p. 197.]

***16) So, I remembered the words that the Lord spoke to us saying, ‘John immersed with water, but you will be immersed by the Holy Spirit.’ 17) If, therefore, God gave them the same gift as to us upon believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hold back God?’ [PJT]***

Once again, no hint of “second-class citizenship.” Indeed, the emphasis continues to be on God’s leadership through the Holy Spirit and affirmation by the Holy Spirit.

***18) Then, when they heard these things, they were silent and gave glory to God saying, “So then, God gave repentance toward Life to the Gentiles. [PJT]***

“From what we observe later, the conservative element in the church became more unified in their opposition to accepting Gentiles who had not been circumcised.” [Smith, p. 71.] We should never become too overconfident because when we take strides forward in God’s kingdom there is always a not-quite equal but certainly disconcerting counter-reaction from our enemy. A believer or even a church who/that doesn’t face opposition from our enemy, the Satan, is probably not accomplishing much. We shouldn’t seek out controversy or stir it up, but we should never be surprised when it appears.

But the events in the early church did not happen in isolation. Simultaneously, there was persecution going on. ***19) So, when those dispersed from the persecution because of Stephen was happening, they went as far as Phoenicia (now Lebanon), Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the Word to no one except only Jews. 20) But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who coming to Antioch even spoke to the Greeks sharing the regime-changing news of the Lord Jesus, 21) and the hand of the Lord was over them, and a large (sizeable) number of them believed, turning [another word for repentance] to the Lord,* [PJT]**

The diaspora likely began in the reign of Tiberius, but almost surely continued during the reign of Caius Caligula (yes, the depraved Roman Emperor who burned Christians alive as torches in his garden and committed every possible sexual sin) for it was said: “if Caius be not cruel, he is not Caligula.” [Lightfoot, John B., *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), p. 229.] One example cited by the same author was when Caligula built a bridge of ships so that he could ride his horse across the Bay of Baiae because a soothsayer had said that he could no more rule effectively than ride across that bay on horseback. He did ride across on that bridge of ships and then, invited a multitude of friends on board the ships for an elaborate night’s entertainment. Yet, “After this his entertainment of his friends and of the company, he suddenly cast a great multitude of them into the sea; and when they laid hold of rudders or any thing that might succour and save their lives, he caused them to be thrust away, and so they perished.” [Lightfoot, pp. 228-229.] Such cruelty continued into the puppet kingship of Herod Agrippa (as we’ll discover in Chapter 12) and presumably into the reign of Claudius (since the famine prophesied at the conclusion of our chapter occurs during his tenure).

Antioch, a major city in what was originally the Seleucid Kingdom and is now still in Syria, was a city comparable in size to Rome and Alexandria. It was also the Roman capitol of Syria at the time. With size also comes crime and moral problems to go with the mixed blessing of power and wealth. The Roman satirist Juvenal is referring to Antioch on the Orontes River when he wrote: “…the sewage of the Syrian Orontes has for long been discharged into the Tiber [Rome’s river].” [Bruce, p. 238.] But it was definitely a significant place of influence. With this simple account, Luke establishes a parallel timeline where the persecution goes beyond even that of Saul and his compatriots in Damascus, but drives people up close to what is Turkiye today. Yet, the word of what had happened in Caesarea must not have reached these house churches in Antioch because we are told in verse 19 that they were only preaching to Jews [Robertson, p. 156.] and it is only in verse 20 that some men from what is now Libya (Cyrene) and the island of Cyprus start preaching to Greeks [not just to Greek-speaking Jews—Robertson, p. 156.]

 So, it should be no surprise “…that the formation of the church at Antioch was an event of great significance in the expansion of the church and its mission to the Gentiles.” [Marshall, p. 199.] It seems, however, that when the shift from preaching to Greeks instead of Jews came along, the terminology shifted from Messianic terms to terms like “Lord” and “Savior” which fit the Graeco-Roman understanding better [Bruce, p. 239.] But we have the assurance that this shift in ministry didn’t pass into heresy because God’s hand was in it and the ministry/mission was blessed.

And, as we’ve seen earlier in the chapter, for every action there is a reaction. So, starting in verse 22, we see that reaction. ***22) Then, the word[message] concerning these things were heard by those in the church which was in Jerusalem, so they commissioned Barnabas [to go] as far as Antioch.* [PJT]**

I believe that there were two reasons why the Jerusalem church chose Barnabas to verify what was going on. First, some of these men who were preaching to the Greeks were Cyprian and Barnabas also was from Cyprus [Du Veill, p. 265; Gloag, p. 401.]. Second, where they had sent Peter and John to check out the Samaritan revival, they now knew where Peter stood. He would have had a conflict of interest in their minds [Robertson, p. 157.] Also, I notice in this verse that, as the Spirit led him, Barnabas went beyond his mission which, was only as far as Antioch. We’ll see that later.

***23) who [Barnabas] arriving and seeing the grace of God rejoiced and kept on exhorting [encouraging] everyone for the purpose of their determination [will, heart] to hang onto the Lord 24) BECAUSE he was a good man and full to the brim with the Holy Spirit and faith, and a significant crowd was added to the Lord.* [PJT]**

Although he was sent to “report,” he ends up getting involved. His exhortation, a type of encouragement, was the kind of much-needed discipleship that wanted people to maintain the purpose, the heart’s direction, the will of their initial decision. “True to his name, Barnabas gave all the encouragement he could to missionaries and converts alike. They had begun well; what they needed was the gift of perseverance, and he urged them to carry on and maintain their loyal service and obedience to the Lord in whom they had believed.” [Bruce, p. 240.]

His report could have been perfunctory and ended with the observation that they weren’t fulfilling any of their legalistic obligations to the Jewish faith. Instead, his emphasis was on seeing that the new believers stuck as closely to the Lord as they could [Arrington, p. 120; Marshall, p. 202.]. The phrase, “a good man” refers: “not to the reason why the church of Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch, but to the reason why Barnabas rejoiced at the success of the gospel among the Gentiles. ᾿Ανὴρ ἀγαθός---α good man ; referring not merely to his uprightness of character (Meyer), but to the benevolence of his disposition—a benevolent man.” [Gloag, p. 401.] He had the right demeanor to extend God’s work in Antioch as opposed to terminating it with a critical report.

And he wasn’t afraid to admit that he could use help. Further, in some ways it seems like he goes to an unlikely source for that help: ***25) So, he went to Tarsus to search for Saul,******26) And when he had
found him [Saul/Paul], he brought him to Antioch. So it happened that they assembled themselves
together with the church for a full year and they taught a lot of people. And the disciples were
called “Little Christs” first in Antioch.* [PJT]**

The impact of evangelism can’t be judged in the excitement of a believer’s initial decision. It will be seen as the decision is lived out in the long-term. To give believers assistance in this, there needs to be discipleship. And that’s what Saul and Barnabas did at this point. But they weren’t the only leaders God used at this time.

**27) And in those days, prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28) So, one of them
named Agabus rose up and presaged by means of the Spirit that there would be a huge famine
upon the whole world, and this took place in the days of Claudius. [PJT]**

One of the best definitions of prophets which I have found in describing these is as a class of church leaders. “They were individuals with the charismatic gift for revealing God’s will in matters that affected the well being of the Christian community.” [Arrington, p. 119.] Although, in this case, we see a prophet who presages or shares a future event, that wasn’t the primary task. The primary task was to tell people what was happening and prepare them to do something about it. Even in this case, Agabus (who later appears in Acts 21:10) shares about the future famine, it is so that they can prepare to minister to those who will have need in the days of Caesar Claudius (from 41-54) when a famine reached its peak in AD 46 (as recorded by Flavius Josephus). Authentic prophecy is designed not to entertain, to satisfy curiosity, or to make people feel smug and comfortable. Authentic prophecy is intended to spur God’s people into action. It speaks to situations and points to solutions.

Interestingly enough, the solution here, is for the church (as individuals) to give according to their capacity an offering for the relief of those to be struck with the famine in Jerusalem (v. 29) and who do they choose to take that offering? It’s to be distributed by means of the hands of Barnabas and Saul (v. 30). So, we not only have a full-fledged expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles in Acts 11, but we have a situation where the two key players, the soon-to-become dynamic duo of missions, are entrusted with a practical mission in preparation for their bolder mission.

<https://youtu.be/XIqkholTMsQ>