

## Group Study Outline

### Acts 11:19-30 Theme Sentence

The new multi-racial 'Christian' church changes in order to grow

#### *Launching Question:*

Is 'change for change's sake' a good thing in church life? when is it? when isn't it?

Scan 11:1-18 ... what happens after the story of Peter and Cornelius?

#### **READ Acts 11:19-30**

v 19-20 acts like a summary: what are we being told is 'the story so far'?

What happens now in Antioch?

What is the significance of Barnabas going there?

what do we know about him so far? (cf 4:36-37; 9:26-28)?

What is the significance of Saul joining him there?

what do we know about him so far?

What is the result of their year-long ministry?

#### *Supply background info about Antioch from Commentary*

So why is this church planting and church growth there significant?

What is the significance of 28 and then 29-30?

who is giving to whom, and why?

what does this tell us about the Christian church?

How could we express family with ties with Christians we differ from culturally, racially, socially etc (ie in an equivalent of the collection in 29-30)?

Trace the movement through this passage (ie arrows to/from Jerusalem/Antioch)

What has Antioch become, for the new Jew-Gentile church?

(cf 13:1-3 and 14:26-28; 15:1 and 30-35; etc)

So why is 26b noteworthy? why is it significant that they get a new name here?

#### **Thinking it through**

*It seems as if the 'operational base' has moved from Jerusalem to Antioch ...*

Who would find that hard to accept?

But why is it important that there is this new centre for the church?

What should motivate changes that we might need in our church life?

If we are to reach all the world, what changes might we need to accept?

(eg to cross racial, generational, social, and class divisions)

Change is often hard ... when is it necessary?

So ...

Is 'change for change's sake' a good thing in church life? when is it? when isn't it?

# Acts 11:19-30



## The story so far ...

Acts follows the schedule summarised in 1:8 as Jesus equips his church to be his witnesses 'in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth'.

The book therefore neatly divides up into four sections:

- the giving of power (roughly, chapters 1-2)
- Jerusalem (3-7);
- Judea and Samaria (8-9);
- the ends of the earth (10 to the end, where the gospel reaches Rome).

Acts 10:9-48 shows the seismic change in thinking, and Acts 15:1-21 the thoughtful policy required genuinely to open the way for Gentiles to become Christians. And to make this point, Luke tells two hugely contrasting stories:

9:32-11:18 Peter and Cornelius:

the blessing of God on believing Gentiles (Cornelius & his family)

12:1-23 Peter and Herod:

the judgment of God on unbelieving Israel (Herod & his nation)

with Peter's double declaration of the theological points in 10:34-35 and 12:11.

Acts 11:19-30 comes between them, and is key in this 'increase of the word of God' beyond the first Jewish Christians, beyond the first partly-Jewish Christians, and into non-Jewish territory. For Antioch is to be the new (non-Jerusalem) centre for this new Jewish-Gentile church's work and ministry; it is appropriate that this is the place where they receive their new name, 'Christians'.

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### Acts 11:19-30 Theme Sentence

The new multi-racial 'Christian' church changes in order to grow

## Application

- Do we really believe that the gospel is to go to every corner of the globe, and that there is no-one that the gospel is not for? If we are not convinced, then re-read the story of Peter and Cornelius (10:1-11:18).
- If we are convinced, then we may well need to change things in our church strategies to help us reach different groups of people (as the church apparently moved its centre from Jerusalem to Antioch). Are there things we do that are unhelpful for the spread of the gospel?
- Should we adopt the early church's strategy? (ie the best way to reach a nation is through its city, and the best way to reach a city is to plant a church)
- How could we express family with ties with Christians we differ from, culturally, racially, socially etc (ie an equivalent of the collection in 29-30)?

## Commentary

19 is like a recap of the story up to, and including, 8:2. And remember the point from there: God is achieving his purpose to spread (the proclaimers of) the gospel 'to the end of the earth', and not even vicious persecution will hinder him.

Those 'preaching the word' (8:4) here are unnamed 'anybodies', not famous apostles: evangelism is not the sole responsibility of just a few.

The last phrase of the verse may seem strange: 'speaking the word to no-one except Jews'. Haven't there been some non-Jewish converts? But the important thing to remember is that those reached in Judea and in Samaria (ie in the stories of Acts 8) were in some sense Jewish, albeit 'half-Jews'. Even the Ethiopian eunuch, excluded from the temple, had been to Jerusalem for the purpose of Jewish worship. The significance of 10:1-11:18 is that Cornelius is the first non-Jewish convert (which is why Luke tells us about a 'Gentile Pentecost' in 10:44-48; 11:15-18 as evidence of God's acceptance of them).

20 therefore shows the next stage. 'Hellenists' simply means 'Greek speaking', and we have to read further in the context to know whether Luke means 'Greek-speaking Jewish Christians' (as 6:1) or 'Greek-speaking Jews who were not Christians' (as 9:29) or outright 'pagans'. Here it seems that the contrast is between speaking to Jews 'only' (19) and speaking to non-Jews 'also' (20). So Luke's point is theological not merely racial: following the 'conversion of Peter' and the persuasion of the Jerusalem church, non-Jews should be hearing the gospel now, and some Christian brothers are ensuring that happens.

Antioch is highly significant. A Syrian sea-port, about 500km north of Jerusalem, with a population of about half a million, it was made capital of the Roman province of Syria in 64BC: 'the third among the cities of the Roman world' (according to Josephus, the Jewish historian).

The church there is founded independently of the apostles, not to make the point that this was a church simply doing its own thing, but that after the apostles have authenticated something (as in 11:1-18), the gospel will make its own way (cf 12:24 for the summary verse to conclude this section). It only needs to pause at significant boundary markers for the apostolic stamp of approval. So now Antioch will take on a symbolic significance: it's the base for Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey (13:1; 14:26), and the momentous Council of Jerusalem is set in a journey to and from Antioch (15:1, 30-35). Maybe the political importance of this city made it an ideal centre (better than Jerusalem) for the worldwide, multiracial Christian church.

22 Barnabas has already shown himself to be a man of extreme graciousness and generosity who brings both money (4:36-37) and people (9:27-28) to the apostles. No wonder he'd gained the nickname 'son of encouragement' (4:36)!

### The significance of Antioch

Follow through the geography in this section:

- evangelists, fleeing from Jerusalem, arrive in Antioch (19-21)
- news of conversions travels back from Antioch to Jerusalem (22a)
- Barnabas is sent from Jerusalem to Antioch (22b)
- Barnabas (with Saul as his willing recruit) work to establish the church in Antioch for a year (23-25)
- prophets travel from Jerusalem to Antioch, warning of a famine-to-come back in Judea (27-28)
- *the significant step, as the movement is reversed*: Saul and Barnabas are sent as messengers from Antioch to Jerusalem with financial aid (29-30). For the first time, the tide flows back.

What seems to be happening here is that Antioch is replacing Jerusalem as the centre for this new Jewish-Gentile church's work and ministry.

23-26 shows the prototype of the church-planting pattern that will feature in Paul's subsequent missionary journeys. His normal pattern is to go to the big city of a region and invest time in planting a church there: the best way to reach a nation is through its city, and the best way to reach a city is to plant a church (eg 16:9-12).

26 The name 'Christians' suggests 'belonging to Christ' (cf Mark 3:6; 12:13 where 'Herodians' are those identified with Herod). It is appropriate that a new name is needed once it is apparent that this group is neither Jews, nor Gentiles, but a third race, 'Christians'. And in view of role of Antioch as the new 'operational base', it is appropriate that the designation is first used there.

29-30 This collection is not the same as the one mentioned in 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:25-32. But there is an interesting parallel. Luke calls their 'help' or 'relief' (29) a 'ministry' (using the normal word *diakonia*). Paul uses that same word in 2 Cor 9:1 to describe the later collection. The reason that financial help like this can be called 'ministry' is that it brings glory to God (2 Cor 9:12-13) and demonstrates the extent to which God's grace has impacted the givers (2 Cor 9:14). That is exactly the point here: the gospel has so impacted the lives of these new Antioch non-Jewish converts that they generously give to support their impoverished Jewish 'brothers' (29).

12:24 is Luke's familiar conclusion to a section. He marks the outward spread of the gospel 'in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (1:8) by telling how the word of God increases ...

- 2:47 among the first Christians
- 6:7 ... in Jerusalem
- 9:31 ... in Judea and Samaria
- 12:24 ... in Gentile territory: Syria
- 16:5 ... in Gentile territory: Cyprus and Asia Minor ... etc