

Gospel Breaks Free from its Enclosure in Judaism !

V 1-3 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.

And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him,

saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!"

"Those of the circumcision contended with him." The "circumcision" (Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah but also kept the Law of Moses) were outraged over this breach of Jewish custom, that Peter had visited the "uncircumcised. . . and ate with them."

V4-15 But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying:

"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me.

"When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air.

"And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.'

"But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.'

"But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.'

"Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven.

"At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea.

"Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.

"And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter,

'who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.'

"And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning."

"Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning." Peter didn't

have to give some deep theological discourse; re-telling briefly the events of the past few days was more than sufficient.

“As upon us at the beginning.” Those present at this meeting had experienced the powerful infilling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. At that time they were *“new bottles”* filled with *“new wine”*, but now their *“bottles”* had become old and were in need of stretching to accommodate the fresh *“new wine”* that Peter was trying to deliver to them. (Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37-39 - KJV)

V16-17 *“Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, ‘John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’*

“If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?”

“Who was I that I could withstand God?” It was like saying, “Don’t blame me; you’ll have to blame God for giving the Gentiles the Holy Spirit.” Since God had honored these Gentiles with the gift of the Holy Spirit, then the matter of eating with them was no more an issue.

V 18 *When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.”*

“They became silent.” The simple testimony of what happened was the most convincing argument. As He often does, God arranged the recent events to happen in such a way that no one could deny the new direction He was moving.

“Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance.” To their credit, these men humbly acknowledged the truth. Although this startling realization shattered their old preconceptions, it had been God’s plan all along, which He had laid out clearly centuries before (especially in Isaiah 42:1,6, 49:6 and other places). Now that we can see the glorious results of this “expansion” of the Holy Spirit to all peoples of the earth, we may wonder why this new direction was such a big deal for the early disciples. But in their situation and with their Jewish mindset, it was a difficult adjustment. *“No one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for*

he says, 'The old is better.'" (Luke 5:39)

It is difficult to pinpoint a definite time, but it is estimated that 5 or so years had passed since the Church was first established in Jerusalem. And now that Judah, Samaria, and Galilee had been evangelized, it was God's time to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles.

V 19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.

The "*persecution that arose over Stephen*" had succeeded in spreading the Word to Phoenicia, the coastal land just north of Israel (modern day Lebanon) where the port cities of Tyre and Sidon were located, the centers of the once great Phoenecian commercial empire; also to the island of Cyprus and to Syrian Antioch, 200 miles north of Sidon.

"To no one but the Jews only." The prevailing idea up to this point was that the disciples' mission extended no further than that of reaching the scattered Jews.



V 20-21 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

“But some. . . spoke to the Hellenists. . . and a great number believed.”
Some brave pioneers from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern Libya) broke from tradition and had great success preaching to *“a great number”* of Gentile Greeks (*“Hellenists”*) in Antioch. This happened perhaps around 42 A.D.

V 22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.

“They sent out Barnabas.” Barnabas was sent to investigate this unusual *“news”*. He was chosen probably because, being a Jew from Cyprus and that part of the world, he could better relate to these Greeks

and Jews who had been raised outside Judah.

“Antioch.” Present day Antakya in southern Turkey. This Antioch was known as “Queen of the East”, capital of the province of Syria, and the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. With a population of over half a million people, it was located on the River Orontes at a junction of trade routes between East and West. It should not be confused with Pisidian Antioch, a Phrygian town in the Roman province of Galatia (in central Turkey).

V 23-24 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.

For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

“Encouraged them all. . . he was a good man.” Note that the measuring stick for being “a good man” was to be “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith”; it was no longer a matter of merely being faithful to keep the old Law. In later years Paul wrote that there was much that “the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh”, but Jesus’ teachings about the “law of love” and His sacrifice on Calvary resulted in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Human society was now empowered to rise above the limitations of the flesh and the Law; to adopt a new and more loving, wise outlook in his thoughts and in the realm of his interaction and behavior with others. ***“For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. . . that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. . . For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.”*** (Romans 8:2-4,14)

In this mission Barnabas, being “led by the Spirit of God”, took the right positive approach, encouraging and welcoming in the new Gentile believers. (Romans 8:14) Rather than taking the “exclusive” approach that Jews had always used whenever they interacted with Gentiles, Barnabas adopted the new “inclusive” culture that Peter had just introduced into the Church. Throughout history the Church, in its

missionary endeavors, has always had to learn to be more inclusive. This seems to be an ongoing lesson, even in modern times:

As Christians, we are no better than anyone else in the world. We're just privileged with a high calling, and with that calling comes responsibility - the responsibility to love, to be like Jesus, to be an embodiment of His Spirit to others.

We need a whole lot more good old-fashioned love! Basically, we all need to be more like Jesus, Who loves each person unconditionally, will work with anyone who wants to be His vessel, and wants us all to work together in cooperation, respect, and camaraderie. Get desperate and ask the Lord to help you with this new mindset today - it's something, I'd venture to say, that all of us need!

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V 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.

"For Tarsus to seek Saul." Tarsus was not too far away from Antioch, 130 miles to the northwest. This may have been some eight years after Saul's conversion. Three of those years had been spent in Damascus and Arabia, so likely he had been in Tarsus about five years. Barnabas was the one who had introduced Saul to the disciples in Jerusalem when everyone was still afraid of him, and here again he is interested in Saul, likely because of the need for more laborers at the growing church in Antioch.

V 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

"A whole year they assembled. . . and taught a great many people." Barnabas and Saul made a good team. Cosmopolitan Antioch was an ideal place to start a new church, the first real organized training center for Christianity outside of Jerusalem, and the first one to focus on reaching the Gentile world. *"The disciples were called Christians."* Apparently, it started off as a term of derision and meant "of the party of Christ".

V 27-28 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit

that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar.

“Prophets came from Jerusalem. . . Agabus.” Agabus re-appears later in Acts 21 where he delivers a prophetic warning message to the apostle Paul.

“Great famine.” Prediction of a large scale famine, *“which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar”*, emperor of Rome. Claudius ruled 41-54 A.D., and the famine is thought to have occurred in Judea in the latter half of the 40’s A.D.

V 29-30 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea.

This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

“Determined to send relief.” The financial plan of sharing the wealth, as outlined in Acts 2:44-45, 4:34-35, hadn’t been forgotten. The brethren from the wealthier area of Antioch sent funds to the brethren in the poorer district of Judea *“by the hands of Barnabas and Saul”*. This mission (somewhere between 44 and 47 A.D.) marks Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem since his conversion.

“Elders.” These were the pastors/overseers in the Jerusalem church. They were not all necessarily the original apostles, most of whom, according to tradition, were engaged in the work of bringing the Gospel to other lands.

[\(Continue to ACTS, chapter 12\)](#)