

## **ACTS: I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH (PART 14)**

**Acts 10:44-48** While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days.

Peter certainly never expected to be the one God would use to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles! He was as surprised as anyone else when they received the Holy Ghost as he began to preach the gospel – but he knew exactly what to command when they did – BAPTISM! Why? Because this is the New Testament PATTERN of obeying the gospel!

**Acts 2:38** Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Sadly, one of the things Peter probably DID expect was the opposition of the Jewish believers toward these Gentiles experiencing the new birth. They just didn't believe God would actually do something like that!

**Acts 11:1-3** And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter was come up to Jerusalem, they that were of the circumcision contended with him, Saying, Thou wentest in to men uncircumcised, and didst eat with them.

Notice that instead of rejoicing that “the Gentiles had also received the word of God,” these men were upset with Peter, assuming that he had not kept the traditions of the Jewish law regarding eating certain foods! There is nothing inherently wrong with a “tradition” – unless it gets in the way of what God's Spirit wants to do!

**Mark 7:1-16** Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem. And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brasen vessels, and of tables.

Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands? He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye. And when he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear.

CORBAN: “a consecrated present; something brought near the altar”

Your tradition can bring you “near” to the altar, even while you are totally missing the POINT of the altar! Tradition makes the word of God have NO EFFECT, because your confidence is really in something else!

**Acts 11:4-14** But Peter rehearsed the matter from the beginning, and expounded it by order unto them, saying, I was in the city of Joppa praying: and in a trance I saw a vision, A certain vessel descend, as it had been a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came even to me: Upon the which when I had fastened mine eyes, I considered, and saw fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air. And I heard a voice saying unto me, Arise, Peter; slay and eat. But I said, Not so, Lord: for nothing common or unclean hath at any time entered into my mouth. But the voice answered me again from heaven, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. And this was done three times: and all were drawn up again into heaven. And, behold, immediately there were three men already come unto the house where I was, sent from Caesarea unto me. And the Spirit bade me go with them, nothing doubting. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered into the man's house: And he shewed us how he had seen an angel in his house, which stood and said unto him, Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon, whose surname is Peter; Who shall tell thee words, whereby thou and all thy house shall be saved.

Peter's "defense" to these men was basically "I DIDN'T DO THIS!"

- GOD gave this vision to me (and did it three times)!
- GOD sent His angel to Cornelius to tell him to send for me!
- GOD told me He sent the three servants of Cornelius to my house!
- GOD told me to go with the men, nothing doubting ("no disputing")!
- GOD prepared the hearts of Cornelius and his family to receive!

The only thing PETER did was to take six witnesses with him – and it's a good thing he did, because they never would have believed it otherwise!

Please notice that it was not PETER'S VISION that resulted in the Gentiles coming into the church. Rather, it was the EVIDENCE OF SPEAKING IN TONGUES that let everyone know it was God's doing!

**Acts 11:15-18** And as I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them, as on us at the beginning. Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that he said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as he did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God? When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

"as on us at the beginning" = Acts 2:4

**Acts 2:4** And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

"then remembered I the word of the Lord" = Acts 1:5-8

**Acts 1:5-8** For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence. When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Jesus had to remind them, "THIS IS NOT ABOUT YOU!" ... and they STILL had made their Holy Ghost experience all about them!

"God gave them the LIKE GIFT as he did unto us" = speaking in tongues!

**WHAT WAS I, THAT I COULD WITHSTAND GOD ?!**

"repentance unto life" – repentance is always the first step toward LIFE!

The church was promised POWER in Acts 1:8. The Holy Ghost was given primarily to empower an expansive evangelism effort that would impact their city and region (Judea) and then quickly expand to include a cross-cultural witness (Samaria) and – ultimately – a global presence. However, the narrative contained between Acts 1 and Acts 11 covers a period of more than ten years. During this time, the Jerusalem church was blessed with divine visitation, miracles of healing and holy boldness – and they grew in spite of persecution, opposition, and even internal disputes. Their growth rate is impressive by any standard – 3000 people in Acts 2:41, 5000 men in Acts 4:4, multitudes of men and women in Acts 5:14, and even a great company of Jewish priests in Acts 6:7.

**But it all happened inside Jerusalem!**

Jerusalem certainly enjoyed the rich blessings of the Lord during the church's first decade, and many souls within her walls did come to salvation during that span of time. But what about the 99.9% of people in the world of their day who did not live in that one city? And what about the other cultures that God specifically told them to reach? All of these issues beg us to answer a similar contemporary question: How many blessings does the church have to receive before she is ready and willing to wholeheartedly fulfill the Great Commission left by Jesus Christ?

One of the great dangers when we transition from a struggling small congregation or movement to a successful larger entity is that we tend to lose our cutting edge and even our dependence on God's power. We become self-centered instead of God centered, more reliant on human programs than biblical principles, and more focused on ease than on evangelism. In many of our conferences, campmeetings, conventions and church services, the attention then becomes centered on our "Jerusalem" – that it may grow and prosper so that it may continue to minister to *us!* We have "received power" (the first promise of Acts 1:8) but we have not "become witnesses" (the second promise of Acts 1:8). And the second promise is more significant than the first, because the real test of any visitation of God is whether it results in evangelism.

**Mark 16:15** And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

This issue was at the heart of a philosophical and spiritual battle within the early church. They started out in obedience to Acts 1:8, but stopped too soon. They wanted to reach out in Jerusalem – *among their own kind* – but they did not really want to go to the ends of the earth, or even to Samaria for that matter! The Jerusalem church needed a complete reversal in its thinking. They wanted God to "restore again the kingdom to Israel" (Acts 1:6) so they could sit in Jerusalem and have the nations come to them, but Jesus wanted them to leave their comfort zone!

**Luke 14:23** And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

The seemingly natural desire of many Christians to stay within the warm confines of the church is not the will of God! On the contrary, He desires to lead us, even prod us and push us outside of our four walls to become His witnesses in the world. Statistics show a nearly universal trend for Christians to disconnect from unsaved people the longer they are around the church. But that's not the way the Jesus or Paul did it! They were not isolationists; they were compelled to impact their culture with the gospel.

**Matthew 11:19** The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

**1 Corinthians 9:22** To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

This is why God allowed their ten-year “honeymoon” to be shattered by the martyrdom of Stephen and the intense persecution led by Saul of Tarsus – suddenly, disciples were being scattered everywhere. But while things grew worse in Jerusalem, great things were beginning to happen in Judea and even in Samaria. In one swift act of persecution, God had forced obedience on His church and compelled them to mobilize. Stephen's death probably resulted in more obedience to the Great Commission than any other single event in the history of the early church, and was even a major factor in the conversion of Paul.

**Acts 8:1** And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

God is not primarily committed to successful ministries or even great churches; He is primarily committed to the Great Commission. Thus, if we will not “GO” (Mark 16:15) God only has two alternatives ...

- **PERSECUTION**, to drive us out, or
- **SUBSTITUTION**, to find someone else who will go willingly!

It is not that the Jerusalem church rejected the Great Commission outright; it is just that they could not seem to manage the kind of vision required during this period of church history. So, God used persecution first (with some results) and then substitution when they continued to resist. Here is the firsthand account:

**Acts 11:19-21** Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

Antioch was a predominantly Gentile city, and it is *inconceivable* that the Christians who ended up preaching there should ignore all but a miniscule minority of Jews, assuming that they were the only ones God wanted to save. But that is exactly what they did, because their vision was limited only to the religious culture they already identified with. Thank God there was a second group (from Cyprus and Cyrene, not Jerusalem) that targeted their efforts to reach the Greek majority of Antioch's population – **and the hand of the Lord was with them!**

This was a moment of destiny, when the church at Antioch was born. It was not just a few transplants from the Jerusalem Jewish subculture, but some sinfully irreverent, biblically illiterate Gentiles who came to know God. This moment is why the Apostolics would soon be known as those who “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) in the first century; this moment is why there is a church at all in the twenty-first century.

Jerusalem never did know how to deal with revolutionary revivalists like the Apostle Paul, who continually jumped fences, ignored protocol, and broke tradition to win the lost. That's why they sent him back to Tarsus to “cool off” when he first appeared in Jerusalem with wild tales of a life-changing encounter with God and wild ideas about evangelizing those pagan Gentiles. And that's why Jerusalem never got to send out history's greatest missionary – instead, that honor fell to the church in Antioch because they had a missionary heart.

**Acts 11:22-26** Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Thank God for BARNABAS, who again had VISION that others lacked! Although not one of the leaders, he was instrumental in bringing these GENTILES together with the APOSTLE PAUL – and the rest is history!

The Jerusalem church was unwilling to change to reach the culture of the world around it; instead, they demanded that the Gentiles essentially become Jewish before they could get saved. Sadly, the same thing happens today when churches insist that people speak their lingo, conform to their customs, like their music, agree with their politics, and observe a thousand unspoken traditions before they can “join the club.”

The Jerusalem church was richly blessed and doctrinally sound, but God still turned His attention to Antioch because Jerusalem would not embrace His command to WITNESS. Jerusalem held on to their resources and blessings, but Antioch accepted that God had the right to demand of them anything or anyone He wanted to use. They accepted that the Great Commission was at the very TOP of the Lord’s priority list.

There are really only two New Testament church models, the Jerusalem Church and the Antioch Church. We must choose to be one or the other!

**C.T. Studd:** “Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell, I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

The greatest danger is always at the edge (where the church meets the culture). But so is the greatest opportunity for rescue and redemption. The New Testament church lived “on the edge” – never safe, always one step from disaster if God didn’t intervene! Jude felt the tension:

**Jude 1:22-24** And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

Many Apostolic people have gotten too comfortable with the status quo. Church has become a comfortable place, a place that is always the same ... same friends, same events, same songs, same sermons, same faces, same size, same methods, and same results! That mentality is an affront to God, who called us to impact our culture with the gospel.

**Acts 11:27-30** And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

**ANTIOCH ended up blessing the JERUSALEM church**, and pulling all the assemblies of the first century headlong into the Great Commission!