

## Thoughts on Acts Eleven

When our brethren across the world tell us of the Gospel's success in calling people to obey Christ, some of whom are much different from us, how do we respond? Do we thank God in prayer that His Word still finds hearts to believe and follow Him? Are we thankful for the preachers and teachers in foreign countries who spread the Word and pray for them? Are we watchful for the reports from those we support in spreading the Gospel? Or are we unaware of their efforts and ignore their successes? In Acts 10, Peter had been privileged to deliver the Words of Christ to the first people outside Judaism. The response from them and God was astonishing. The household of Cornelius believed and was baptized, and God showed His approval by demonstrating the Holy Spirit. The reaction from the Christians in Jerusalem indicates that traditional concepts and new freedoms would be the subject of many discussions.

Acts chapter eleven begins with words describing the excitement, even the wonder, that the Gentiles had received forgiveness through the blood of Christ, *"The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that people who were not Jewish had accepted God's word"* (Acts 11:1). I remember the excitement among brethren when word came that preaching the Gospel resulted in new congregations established in the former USSR. Many of us aided the placement of Bibles in China and rejoiced when word came of the groups meeting in secret places to study them. It would seem to us that the Jews in Jerusalem would be overjoyed that Peter had been directed to carry the Gospel to Gentiles and tear down the separation between people. *"Now through Christ Jesus you, who were once far away, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. So he is our peace. In his body he has made Jewish and non-Jewish people one by breaking down the wall of hostility that kept them apart. He brought an end to the commandments and demands found in Moses' Teachings so that he could take Jewish and non-Jewish people and create one new humanity in himself. So he made peace"* (Ephesians 2:13-15).

In verse one, the apostles are described as rejoicing along with brethren throughout Judea. We might expect all those in Jerusalem to be overjoyed that Gentiles, even Roman Army officers, had heard and obeyed the Gospel. Some might expect the hatred of Romans to linger and raise complaints of them now being brethren. Instead, criticism comes from a group that holds tradition above God's revealed Words. *"Those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, 'You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them'"* (Acts 11:2-3). These men are a small group that the ESV translates as *"the circumcision party"* and may be the same group called Judaizing Teachers later. Their complaint centered on Peter and those with him eating in a Gentile's house.

The problem for those disapproving of Peter's actions would seem to be food since Peter begins his defense with the vision of things the Law of Moses declared unclean. Peter recounted his conversation with The Lord. *"I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common'"* (Acts 11:7-9). Imagine the shock to people who have despised pork for over 1450 years that now they can enjoy pork chops and ham?

To show that God directed everything he did, Peter explained the appearance of the Holy Spirit as proof that he should proceed in the Gentile's house. *"As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with*

*water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" As a result of Peter's explanation, the assembly became quiet. "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:15-18). But those that objected probably continued their complaints, for they were in Antioch later. "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party" (Galatians 2:11-12).*

With the spread of the Gospel to Antioch, many Hellenist (Greek-speaking) people obeyed the Gospel. The apostles and elders at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to confirm the Gospel was preached in its fullness. Barnabas soon found Saul in Tarsus and brought him to Antioch. That union formed the beginning of the preaching journeys that make up the remainder of Acts (Acts 11:19-30).

The disciples are called Christians first at Antioch (Acts 11:26). What does it mean to be a Christian?