

“The name, Christian.” (18)

The last time we were together we left Peter in Cornelius' household amazed that God's Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. And so Peter who earlier had a vision finally understood the meaning of the vision in the fact that God shows no favouritism between people. He understood that you don't have to be a Jew to please God; you don't have to have been circumcised in the flesh to please God.

But what you do need is the right heart and attitude towards God by obeying His commands from the heart. And what we're going to see today is Peter trying to explain to other circumcised Jews that God accepts Gentiles. In other words the Gentiles could enter the church through baptism without first submitting to the requirements of the Law of Moses.

I heard a story about a police officer in a small town that stopped a motorist who was speeding down the main street. The motorist said, "But officer I can explain." The officer said to him, "Just be quiet, I'm going to let you cool off in jail until the chief gets back." The man said, "But officer, I just wanted to say." But again the policeman said, "And I said to keep quiet! You're going to jail!" A few hours later the officer looked in on his prisoner and said, "Lucky for you that the chief is at his daughter's wedding. He'll be in a good mood when he gets back." The man in the cell said, "Don't count on it, I'm the groom."

I guess the point of the story is it would be nice if people would give others a chance to explain our actions. And that's exactly what Peter is going to do next here in Acts 11:1-3, "The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them."

It seems as though news of the events in Cornelius' house reached Jerusalem and the apostles, even, apparently, before Peter made his way back to the city. You see before the baptism of Cornelius and his household, everyone who had been baptized had been subject to the Law of Moses and circumcision, whether they were of the fleshly Israel or proselytes. And so Luke tells us there was a bit of a dispute which arose from some of that number and Peter. They did not understand why he had gone into the house of a Gentile and actually eaten there.

And so Peter goes on to explain his actions in Acts 11:4-12 "Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' "I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' "The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again. "Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house".

Now I don't want to look too much into this text because we already dealt with that in Peter's vision back in Acts 10. But if we take one lesson from this text it would be this, Peter's answer teaches us a great deal about resolving controversy within the church. He defended his actions by saying they were authorized and approved by God.

How many times have we seen already when a doctrinal dispute happens, what's the first thing the apostles do? They go back to their source of authority, that's what they do. And loved ones going back to the source is what we must always do. I remember having some difficulties communicating with some brethren and Nthembako said some wise words to me before he left to go back home. He said, 'Mike, when there are difficulties between brethren always fight with the word of God.'

Loved ones those are wise words from a wise man, and he was right, those difficulties aren't there any more because I stuck to word of God when I was dealing with those difficulties. Now Peter not only went back to the source but he revealed to those disputing believers how this authority was shown. He told them he had seen a vision which indicated to him that he should no longer regard any other man as common and he says, he heard the Spirit tell him to go with the three men who had been sent from Caesarea.

And so Peter did what we must all do when our authority tells us to do something, he went to Caesarea, accompanied by six other brethren.

Now Peter begins to move away from explaining his vision to explain Cornelius' vision in Acts 11:13+14 "He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'" Peter related the story of the vision which Cornelius had which directing him to send for Peter so that he could hear words that would save him and his household.

Now I don't know about you but I hate some furniture which comes in flat packs, it takes me ages to build those things and half the time the instructions aren't all that helpful. That's why I usually leave those things like a bedroom unit to Funmi or our friend Terry to build but if I took the time to read carefully the instructions I would be able to build the unit. But let me ask you at what point is that unit built and ready to go into our bedroom? Well the unit is ready and finished when I have finished reading all the instructions and followed them step by step.

Now notice what Peter says here, he doesn't say that Cornelius and his household were saved because the Holy Spirit came upon them. He doesn't say that Cornelius was saved because he had a vision. He doesn't say that Cornelius was saved because he was a good person. He doesn't even say that Cornelius and his household were saved when they heard Peter's message. No, he says that salvation was to be theirs only **after** they had **heard** and **obeyed** the words spoken. In other words when they had heard the instructions and then followed them by obeying them step by step then they will have the finished product which was salvation.

And so Peter follows on with his explanation about what happened when he met up with Cornelius and his household. Acts 11:15-17 "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

Peter says to them that "the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning." What does he mean? Do you remember Acts 2 and the Day of Pentecost? Acts 2:1-4 "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them".

There is absolutely no doubt that Peter is referring to the day of Pentecost when the apostles received the Holy Spirit and spoke in other languages. Peter says Cornelius and his household received the gift of tongues in the same way they did in the beginning, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And so with that evidence, Peter didn't feel that he could oppose God by refusing to baptize them, or in any other way place stiffer requirements on these Gentiles.

Peter's arguments convinced all assembled that the Gentiles had also been given the right to eternal life if they would submit to the Savior in repentant baptism. And with the full explanation over Luke tells us in Acts 11:18 "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'"

You know many people use the events of Cornelius' household to try and prove that they receive visions today or to prove that tongue speaking is still needed today. Now remember last time I showed you why I don't believe this was Holy Spirit baptism. Holy Spirit baptism was promised to the apostles and no one else.

But this one little verse clearly shows us the reason why Cornelius and his household received the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit being outpoured on them wasn't so much for Cornelius' benefit. In many ways it wasn't even for Peter's benefit but it was for the benefit of those who Peter was speaking to on this day. God was sending a clear message out to the Jewish Christians who were meeting in Jerusalem that He loves and accepts Gentiles into His church.

One day Dr Barnado was approached by a dirty, little, ragged boy who asked for admission into the London Orphanage. The doctor said, "But, my boy, I don't know you, who are you?" What have you got you recommend you?" The young boy was quick to seize his opportunity, and held up before the doctor his ragged coat. And with a little voice said, "If you please sir, I thought these here would be all I needed to be recommended." Dr Barnado lifted the little boy up in his arms and he was welcomed into the orphanage.

You didn't have to be a Jew to be recommended to receive a Saviour. You didn't have to be circumcised in the flesh to be recommended to receive a Saviour. Your sin is all the recommendation you need to receive a Saviour.

It doesn't matter about your age, your colour, your riches or debts, because we all come to the cross of Christ filthy with sin. That was Paul's point in **Romans 3:21-25** "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

Loved ones God accepted us just the way we were, we didn't have to prove ourselves first to God or anyone else. We didn't have to become righteous first, because Paul says, God gave us our righteousness through faith in Christ Jesus. Now meanwhile when all this praising of God was going on, something else was happening in the back ground.

Do you remember back in **Acts 7** at the end of the chapter where Luke informed Theophilus that Saul gave the approval of Stephen's death? Luke records in **Acts 8:1** "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria". And if you go down to **Acts 8:4** Luke tells us that, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went".

What we see happening next here in **Acts 11** was the purpose for God allowing this persecution of His people to take place in the first place. When Jesus said in **Mark 16:15**, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation", He meant it.

Acts 11:19-26 "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord".

Luke reported that those scattered by the persecution at the time of Stephen's death went over a large area preaching the word, but only to the Jews. But, the men of Cyprus and Cyrene preached the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch as well. And there was no doubt that God was working in the background. There is no doubt that God was with these men because Luke tells us that "a great number believed and turned to the Lord".

Now those young Christian converts that were scattered all over the place needed something we all need from time to time. **Encouragement**. And so Luke tells us that Barnabas was sent to Antioch to encourage these young converts. **Acts 11:22-24** "News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."

When word of the events in Antioch reached the church in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas. And he encouraged all the young followers of the Lord to commit themselves to the Lord with all their hearts.

I remember watching a film about **the life of Bruce Lee** and about half way through the film he meets up with his new girlfriend who encourages him to open up a few dojos. Well after some discussion he agrees and when he goes to check out this building for rent, to see if he could use it and he discovers an old coin in a glass jar which he said was a sign of good luck.

His girlfriend was getting excited about the whole prospect of opening up a dojo and he explains to her that this is the first of many dojos and asks her to stop speaking and listen. Well of course everything is silent but Bruce says, 'the setting up of this dojo will have a ripple effect all over America, before long there will be lots of dojo's all over America'. You see Bruce Lee was fully committed to teaching his form of Karate to everyone and anyone who was willing to learn.

Luke tells us that Barnabas was a good man, full of faith and the Holy Spirit and he was fully committed to teaching the gospel to everyone and anyone who was willing to learn. Well in much the same way loved ones, when any child of God has these three attributes, the effects are always going to be the same. When you are good, full of faith and guided by the God's Spirit, it will have a ripple effect.

Luke says that, "a great many more people being added to the church". And God blessed Barnabas' efforts so much he needed help and so he went to Tarsus to bring Saul back to help in this rich work.

Acts 11:25+26 “Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch”.

You see loved ones there is nothing wrong with asking for help from time to time. And in many ways that's what we're in the process of doing **isn't it?** We're in the process of looking for a family to come and help us with our work here at Great Barr for a year or two. Because we can't do everything we would like to do without an extra pair of hands.

Birmingham is Britain's second largest city and it is a huge area with a population of just under 1.5 million people and we need all the help we can to reach those people. Now Antioch was the world's third largest city at that time, trailing only Rome and Alexandria. And Barnabas needed help and so Barnabas and Saul worked together with the church in Antioch for a year and were able to teach a large number of people.

Now notice also that Luke records that the disciples in the city of Antioch were the first to wear the name **Christian**. This seems to be the fulfilment of God's promise to give His people a new name after Gentiles had seen God's righteousness and kings had seen His glory. **Isaiah 62:2** “The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow”.

How appropriate that they would now be designated as followers of the Christ, or anointed King. You know when you speak with some religious people they will be more than happy to tell you that they are a ‘**Jehovah's Witness**’ or they are a ‘**Baptist**’ or they are a ‘**Roman Catholic**.’ But loved ones there is only one name which we should wear when people ask us and that's the name, ‘**Christian**.’

When Paul was speaking with King Agrippa in **Acts 26**, Agrippa said to him in **Acts 26:28**, “Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” **What is a Christian?** A Christian is someone who follows and obeys the words of the Christ.

The story goes that in the home of **Dr Goheen**, the well know missionary in India there was a native who was dusting and polishing his furniture and when accidentally he knocked over one of Dr Goheen's favourite vases. The young Indian didn't know what to do but fall on his knees and beg for mercy from the Doctor. The doctor just smiled and said, “**Never mind, I forgive you.**” The servant was astonished for a moment upon the quite face of the Christian man where there wasn't a trace of anger. Then the servant jumped to his feet and shouted, “**I believe, I believe!**” The story goes on to say that the servant had been gradually coming to know Christ through the doctor and now his readiness to forgive had won him over completely to Jesus.

You see being a Christian is more than just wearing the Name; it's all about living the Name. People should see the Name Christian in our lives, in our homes, in our speech, in our attitudes, even in the way we suffer. **1 Peter 4:16** “**However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.**” If you're going suffer loved ones, then let's just praise God we're suffering because we wear the Name Christian.

Now just before we finish, let me show you what else living the Name Christian should do. It should lead us to help others, as these Gentiles Christians in Antioch were about to do. **Acts 11:27-30** “**During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul**”.

Luke tells us that certain prophets, who had received a miraculous gift which allowed them to speak for God, came from Jerusalem to Antioch. A man named **Agabus** was among them and he stood up and told the church a great famine was coming. Now because Luke mentions that the prophecy was fulfilled in the days of Claudius that would mean that it would have taken place around **44-48 A. D.**

Now notice what they did, they weren't forced to give a tenth of their income. They weren't forced to give to the extent that they couldn't look after themselves. Luke says that each Christian, **as he was able to**, gave to send relief to the brethren still living in the area around Jerusalem. It was agreed that the offering would be taken to the elders in Jerusalem to be distributed to any Christian in need.

Now do you notice anything interesting about who they sent their offering to? The money was taken to the elders and not the apostles why? Remember in Acts 6 when the apostles asked the saints there to choose seven men from among themselves? Acts 6:3+4 "Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." The reason their gifts went to the elders and not the apostles was because the apostles still had work to do.

And so loved ones, being a Christian is more than just wearing a Name. Being a Christian means living the Christian life in all areas of life. It means totally giving of our hearts and lives first of all to God and to share the many blessings He gives us with others who are in need.

So the message we need to take to the area of Birmingham is that a Christian does more than just go to church every Sunday, a Christian will follow and obey the words of Jesus Christ all the days of their lives.