

REFLECTION GUIDE

ACTS 11:1-18 |

CONVERSION, CULTURE, AND THE CORE OF THE GOSPEL, PART 2

KEY TERMS

The Circumcision Party - Although the ESV translates this phrase *the circumcision party*, the Greek phrase is simply *koi ek peritomēs*, which literally means “those of the circumcision.” It’s unclear whether Luke uses this term to refer to all Jewish Christians in Judea or the particular group within the Church that Paul mentions in Galatians 2:11 who overvalues circumcision. Either way, in Acts 11 they are concerned that Peter sought out and ate with Cornelius, an uncircumcised Gentile, which challenged centuries of Jewish practice towards Gentiles and dietary practice.

DID YOU KNOW?

Despite his vision, subsequent encounter with Cornelius, and the excitement over Gentiles believing in Jesus, we know of at least one instance where Peter refused to eat with Gentiles out of fear for Jewish Christians who still considered Gentiles “unclean” (see Galatians 2:11-14).

BACKGROUND

After Gentiles trust Jesus for salvation, receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptized (Acts 10:44-48), the Church throughout Judea, which is almost exclusively made up of Jews at this time, hears about it (v. 1). And when Peter returns to Jerusalem, he’s confronted by some who are concerned that he ate with uncircumcised Gentiles (vv. 2-3). Old Testament law did not prohibit Jews from eating with Gentiles, however, in the 1st century many Jews forbade eating with Gentiles because Gentiles did not adhere to the same laws as they did. In response to their criticism, Peter explains to them the entire story of his vision and how the Gentiles turned to Jesus (vv. 5-17). Peter concludes his explanation by arguing that because God gave the Gentiles the Holy Spirit (as evidenced by *speaking in tongues and extolling God*, 10:46) they should be accepted as genuine followers of Jesus.

After hearing Peter’s explanation, Luke says *they fell silent* (v. 18a). But their silence eventually gave way to praise as they accepted Peter’s testimony and conclude, ‘*Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life*’ (v. 18b). Their statement highlights two important components of the gospel: turning away from one’s old way of life apart from Jesus (*repentance*) and entering into new and abundant life that is only found in Christ (*life*). Although tensions between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians would rise to the surface later (see Acts 15:1-35 and Galatians 2:11-14), this story paves the way for Jewish Christians to begin actively inviting Gentiles to follow Jesus. Much of the rest of Acts delves into the new Christian church in transition and finding its footing as an entirely new entity with a rich historical/religious past.

GOING DEEPER

Read Acts 15:1-35. Why did the Jerusalem Council come to the conclusion (vv. 22-29) they came to? Why do you think the apostles told Gentiles they did *not* need to be circumcised, but did ask for certain requirements (vv. 28-29)? Read Galatians 2:11-21. How do Paul’s words encourage you?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

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LEARNING THE WORD

1. Read Acts 11:1-18. Make 5-7 quick observations about these verses. What catches your attention? Why are these verses included?
2. In Acts 10, Peter receives shocking instructions from God as he participates in the gospel coming to the Gentiles. Then, in Acts 11, he is asked to explain all that happens to his Jewish friends. How do you account for the change that we see in Peter? What emotions might he have felt along the way?
3. In verse 16, Peter remembers an important teaching from Jesus. How do Ezekiel 36:25-27 and John 3:5 help us understand all that we see God doing in Acts 10-11?
4. Verse 18 reads, "And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'" How is this a helpful way to describe what it means to experience salvation through the gospel?

LIVING THE WORD

5. When Peter returns to Jerusalem, we observe a Christian community work through their concerns and criticisms in a potential conflict. How do we see them "speak the truth in love" and work through these tensions in a healthy way?
6. Two key components of the book of Acts are (1) how God takes the initiative to advance his plans each step of the way, and (2) how the entire Bible unveils the plans of God which Jesus' disciples are now seeing unfold in front of them. How do these two realities encourage your faith in God and his plans?
7. Ephesians 2:11-22 provides a helpful theological summary of the historical events happening in Acts 10-11. Where do we fit into this description? Why is it important for us to see God's grace at work through it all?
8. Spend a few minutes praying through the above passage in Ephesians 2:11-22. Praise God and express gratitude to God for all that he's done in your life.