

Title: Acts 10-11

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Session 13

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Abstract

This lecture covers Acts chapters 10 and 11, focusing on the conversion of Cornelius and the subsequent expansion of the early church to Antioch. Dr. Craig Keener explains how the Holy Spirit sovereignly orchestrated independent, coordinated visions for Cornelius and Peter to break down deep-seated ethnic and table-fellowship barriers between Jews and Gentiles. He highlights Peter's defense of this breakthrough to the conservative Jerusalem leadership, who ultimately celebrate that God has granted eternal life to the Gentiles. Finally, the lecture transitions to the multicultural church at Antioch, detailing the partnership of Barnabas and Paul, and the sacrificial, cross-cultural famine relief sent to the Judean believers.

Outline

I. Introduction to Acts 10-11: The Conversion of Cornelius

- A. Narrative of Cornelius is the first and lengthiest account of its kind in Acts.
- B. Background context: Caesarea, Roman military service, and centurion duties (recap from previous session).
- C. Devotion and culturally humbling actions of Cornelius (Acts 10:2).
 - 1. Loved by the Jewish people due to his generous almsgiving.
 - 2. Parallel to the synagogue-supporting centurion in Luke 7.
 - 3. Humbling of himself culturally to follow Jewish customs.

II. Cornelius as a God-Fearer

- A. Seekers and God's sovereign initiation.
 - 1. Keener's personal conversion story: from teenage atheist reading Plato's arguments on the immortality of the soul to encountering Christ.
- B. The category of "God-fearers" (righteous Gentiles).

1. Attested in Josephus, Philo, and ancient inscriptions (e.g., Aphrodisias).
2. Monotheistic Gentiles who avoided idolatry and sexual immorality but were not circumcised (not proselytes).

C. Soldiers and religious interests in the Roman Empire.

D. Cornelius's household and family dynamics.

1. Roman military laws prohibited official marriage during the 20-year service period.
2. Practice of concubinage and post-retirement marriage legalization.
3. Troops in Caesarea were highly attached to the local area.
4. Relatives (genetically related) vs. general household servants and freedpersons (Acts 10:24).
5. Financial status: Slave prices compared to centurion pay (centurions made 15 to 60 times a regular soldier's pay, indicating high wealth).

III. The Coordinated Visions of Cornelius and Peter

A. Cornelius's prayer at 3 p.m. (the traditional Jewish hour of evening prayer).

B. Peter's vision in Joppa (Acts 10:9-16).

1. Geography: Caesarea is 30 miles north of Joppa; Cornelius's messengers traveled urgently overnight.
2. Setting: Rooftop prayer at noon (not a regular Jewish prayer hour).
3. Peter's hunger and the sheet vision of mixed clean and unclean animals.
4. Cultural boundaries of food: Maccabean martyrs and Ezekiel 4 parallels.
5. The divine lesson: "What God has made clean, do not call common" (anticipating God cleansing Gentiles in Acts 10:28 and 15:9).

IV. The Messenger's Arrival and Holy Spirit Guidance (Acts 10:17-23a)

A. Messengers locate Simon the Tanner's house.

1. Location: Joppa's tanning district (noted for its distinct smell near water).
2. Outer gate indicates Simon was a man of some financial means.
3. Messengers call out from the gate due to ceremonial impurity restrictions against entering Jewish homes.

B. Immediate direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:19).

1. Spirit commands Peter to go with the men (parallel to Philip in Acts 8:29).
2. Keener's personal anecdote of the Spirit revealing a young man's name in a block-long walk.

C. Crossing table-fellowship boundaries: Peter hosts the Gentiles overnight.

V. Peter Visits Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10:23b-33)

A. Six companions (totaling seven witnesses) accompany Peter.

1. Exceeds the standard Deuteronomy requirements of two or three witnesses.

B. Meeting Cornelius and refusing divine homage.

1. Cornelius bows down to Peter; Peter rejects it ("I too am a man").
2. Contrast with pagan expectations and Lystra/Malta examples.

C. Explaining Jewish boundary restrictions.

1. Jews traditionally avoided entering Gentile homes or sharing banquets, leading Gentiles to view Jews as "antisocial".
2. God is transcending Levitical separation rules to send witnesses to all nations.

VI. Peter's Message of Jesus the Benefactor (Acts 10:34-43)

- A. Jesus's life of "doing good" (benefaction language, euergetes).
- B. Anointing of Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit (Luke 4 / Isaiah 61).
- C. Christology: Jesus as Lord of all (divine and counter-imperial terminology) and supreme Judge.
- D. Forgiveness through God's grace testified by all the prophets.

VII. The Gentile Pentecost (Acts 10:44-48)

- A. Holy Spirit interrupts Peter's sermon (Acts 10:44).
- B. Shock of the Jewish believers: The outpouring of the Spirit was traditionally expected only for Israel (Ezekiel 36, Isaiah 44).
- C. Speaking in tongues as a repeating confirmation:
 1. Confirms the Gentiles received the exact same gift as Pentecost (Acts 2).
 2. Empowers them to cross cultural barriers as partners in ministry, avoiding maternalistic/paternalistic dynamics.
 3. Prophecy and praise as standard expressions of Spirit-inspired speech in Luke-Acts (Zechariah, Simeon, Mary).
- D. Immediate water baptism without circumcision.
- E. Peter lodges with the Gentiles, cementing table fellowship.

VIII. Peter's Defense to the Jerusalem Leadership (Acts 11:1-18)

- A. Controversy over eating with ritually unclean Gentiles.
 1. Sensation among conservative believers who viewed circumcision as an absolute covenant marker (Genesis 17).
 2. Historical comparison: Peter's later withdrawal from table fellowship in Galatians 2:12.
- B. Argument from "Divine Necessity" and Empirical Evidence.
 1. Peter presents his six witnesses and recounts the coordinated visions.
 2. God's baptism of the Gentiles in the Holy Spirit made circumcision superfluous as a barrier.
 3. Classical rhetorical device: using divine necessity as an unassailable justification.

C. Resolution and praise: The conservative church marvels that God has granted repentance and eternal life to the Gentiles.

IX. The Breakthrough at Antioch (Acts 11:19-21)

- A. Scattered believers fleeing Saul's persecution reach Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.
- B. Diaspora believers from Cyprus and Cyrene speak directly to "Hellenists" (Gentiles/Greeks).
 - 1. Hellenistic Jewish background served as a natural cultural and linguistic bridge.
- C. Geography and Social Profile of Antioch on the Orontes:
 - 1. Third-largest city of Mediterranean antiquity (estimated population of 100,000 to 600,000).
 - 2. Headquarters of Rome's Syrian Legion (6,000 troops).
 - 3. Close proximity to Apollo's cultic center and known for pluralistic mystery cults.
 - 4. More integrated and cosmopolitan compared to highly segregated Alexandria.
 - 5. Large, accepted Jewish population with many God-fearers and proselytes.

X. Barnabas, Paul, and the Nickname "Christians" (Acts 11:22-26)

- A. Barnabas sent by Jerusalem to Antioch.
 - 1. Character of Barnabas: trusted God's work in people and welcomed outsiders (Hillel parallel vs. Paul's more critical stance).
- B. Barnabas recruits Paul from Tarsus (100 miles north).
 - 1. Matches the calling of Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles.
- C. Origin of the title "Christians" (Christianoi):
 - 1. Nickname coined by the citizens of Antioch, known for mocking others.
 - 2. Modeled on political partisans (e.g., Caesareans, Herodians, Pompeians) as "partisans of King Jesus".
 - 3. Embraced with pride by second-century believers.

XI. Prophets and Cross-Cultural Famine Relief (Acts 11:27-30)

- A. Prophetic movements in the early church.
 - 1. Unprecedented in antiquity: groups of mobile prophets moving from Jerusalem to Antioch (mirroring Old Testament prophetic groups under Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha).
- B. Famine prophecy of Agabus during the reign of Claudius.
 - 1. Famines attested historically (high grain prices in 46 AD, Rome grain shortage in 51 AD).
 - 2. Judean famine of 45-46 AD aided by Queen Helena of Adiabene.
- C. Sacrificial, global relief response of Antioch.
 - 1. Famine was "world-wide" (affecting Antioch too), making their relief to Judea a major sacrifice.

- 2.** Act of ethnic reconciliation and mutual sharing within the unified body of Christ (2 Corinthians 8-9).
- 3.** Multi-provincial financial transfers were politically suspect in the Roman Empire, yet executed boldly by the church.