

# THE DIVIDING WALL: ACTS 11



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*A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

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## Introduction to Acts 11

For centuries – as long as anyone could remember – a dividing wall, or, a middle wall of separation, had kept Jewish and Gentile communities apart. That wall consisted of the various religious statutes of Hebrew Law that Jews applied uniquely to themselves, and that, in their minds, marked them off as alone God’s special people.

Jesus abolished that dividing wall by fulfilling all the requirements of the Law of God in His perfect life and sacrificial death (Eph. 2.14-18). But it would take the Holy Spirit, working through Peter, to break that wall down and open the breach through which the grace of God would flow to the Gentile world (Acts 10).

It’s understandable that some Jewish believers would be reluctant to accept this change. But Peter calmly and lovingly explained the workings of the Lord, to the satisfaction (for now) of all.

And it’s a good thing he did, for while he was making his case back in Jerusalem, Gentiles were hearing the Gospel and coming to faith in Jesus Christ as far away as Antioch in Syria. With the dividing wall down, the Spirit began flowing freely and fruitfully into the once-despised Gentile world.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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## 1 Opposition in the Ranks

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.* Luke 24.27

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.1-3.*

It's still early in the progress of the Gospel, so we can perhaps understand why some were reluctant to accept that God's promised Kingdom was being extended to the Gentiles.

*For reflection*

1. It's neither sinful nor uncommon for believers to disagree about various matters. We all come to the Gospel and are reared in the faith within particular contexts and traditions, and we're naturally reluctant to accept perspectives, points of view, or developments that don't comply with our familiar take on things. In your experience, what are some areas where Christians tend to disagree with one another?

2. So before Peter arrived back in Jerusalem, the news of events in Caesarea had already preceded him, and some folks were not happy about what they'd heard. But if we look carefully, the problem surfacing here seems to have very little to do with the Gospel. Instead, this is a *racial* issue: "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." Besides race, what are some other areas of life, external to the Gospel, that can get in the way of the unity and peace the Gospel brings (cf. Eph. 2.14-18)?

3. Peter's transgression, according to these men, was not that he had preached the Gospel to Gentiles, but that he had accorded them what amounts to an *equal standing* with Jews in the Kingdom of God. He had gone into the home of a Gentile and shared a meal with him! These Jews didn't mind Gentiles coming to faith; rather, they were zealous to preserve the "first class" status of Jews, so much, in fact, that they would *continue* to insist on ways of preserving their presumed elite status, and of keeping the Gentiles second class citizens in the Kingdom. Do we see such theological hubris at work in the Church in our day? How can we tell when that is beginning to be so in our own lives?

4. With the conversion of Cornelius and his household, it looked as if a major watershed had been crossed, and a great season of Gospel expansion was about to begin. But there will always be opposition, even from within the ranks of the household of faith. When personal agendas get in the way of the Lord's, problems arise. The next several chapters will school us in how to deal with these problems and to continue the ongoing work of Christ at the same time. What course should Christians follow when these differences and disagreements arise, so that we continue on course together in the ongoing work of Christ?

5. Are any personal agendas hindering the ongoing work of Christ in your church at this time? What should your role be in trying to help your church stay on course with Christ and His Kingdom?

*Summary*

Believers remain sinners even after they have been redeemed. The law of sin operates within us still (Rom. 7.21-25), and if we're not careful and prayerful, it can cause us to value our own agendas

more than the Lord's. What might be some telltale signs that personal agendas were disrupting the ongoing work of Christ in your church?

*Closing Prayer*

Come and see the works of God;  
*He is awesome in His* doing toward the sons of men.  
He turned the sea into dry *land*;  
They went through the river on foot.  
There we will rejoice in Him.  
He rules by His power forever;  
His eyes observe the nations;  
Do not let the rebellious exalt themselves. *Selah*  
Oh, bless our God, you peoples!  
And make the voice of His praise to be heard,  
Who keeps our soul among the living,  
And does not allow our feet to be moved.  
For You, O God, have tested us;  
You have refined us as silver is refined.

Psalm 66.5-10

## 2 Here's the Deal

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.* Luke 24.27

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.4-17.*

We recall that Peter is an unschooled fisherman, whose only claim to leadership is that he had been with Jesus. But Peter is wise, thoughtful, and persuasive in responding to those who have called into question his actions in Caesarea.

*For reflection*

1. Note, first of all, that Peter doesn't get angry and start throwing his weight around – which is probably what you or I would do in his position: “Who do you think you are, challenging me?” Peter, giving his opponents credit for being reasonable men, simply “explained to them in order” what had happened. How does Peter's response demonstrate the wisdom of Proverbs 15.1 and Colossians 4.6?
2. God showed him a vision, which he explained again in detail. He was careful to tell them that this vision came to him three times – three being a very important number in Biblical thought. Next, the men arrived to fetch him. He went with them, as the Spirit commanded him to do, and the rest is history. That story may have seemed a bit far-fetched to some. But this was *Peter*, and what had these men seen in Peter to make them believe he wasn't making this up?
3. Notice Peter's concluding point: the baptism of the Spirit. John had promised it; Jesus had promised it. And Peter and his challengers had experienced what John and Jesus promised. They were convinced by this that salvation and the Kingdom had come to them. Peter explains that the same thing happened to Cornelius and his household. Who was he, even the chief of the apostles, to try to stand in the way of what God was doing? Look at verse 15. Where does Peter “lay the blame” for what these men considered an outrage? Was he right in doing this? Explain.
4. With that statement, Peter threw the gauntlet squarely down at the feet of his challengers. *Peter* would not dare to stand in the way of God and the ongoing work of Christ. Do *they*? We may not *challenge* the preaching of the Gospel to certain people. But can we stand in its way in other ways? Explain.
5. It is possible to speak truth in love – to speak it convincingly and decisively in love. That's what Peter is doing here. Even when disputes arise within the household of faith, this is no call to arms for a rhetorical punching match, filled with exaggerated claims, *ad hominem* swipes, and “So's your old man” snide remarks. Rather, patiently, thoughtfully, and in love, believers must seek to help one another understand the will of God and work to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace (Eph. 4:3). How can we resist the temptation to flare up whenever others challenge our views or practices?

*Summary*

Peter's challengers may have been all worked up about this situation. But he was calm, patient, and

persuasive in relating his experience and observations. Is there a lesson for us here in sharing the Gospel with the people in our Personal Mission Field?

*Closing Prayer*

“Oh, that My people would listen to Me,  
That Israel would walk in My ways!  
I would soon subdue their enemies,  
And turn My hand against their adversaries.  
The haters of the LORD would pretend submission to Him,  
But their fate would endure forever.  
He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat;  
And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you.”

Psalm 81.13-16

### 3 The Sweet Sound of Silence

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27*

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.18.*

After all, what could they say? Those objecting to Peter's having gone into a Gentile's home for a meal would look stupid and racist if they said, "But that's not the point. The point is *they're Gentiles!*" Even though that was their true objection – and they will come back to it again and again, and even Peter will get tripped up in their racial snobbery – but in view of the baptism of the Spirit coming to those Gentiles, those objecting simply kept silent; they didn't have anything to say.

*For reflection*

1. The sweet sound of silence indicated that Peter's report had prevailed. What followed is important: The NKJV exactly captures the meaning of the Greek, *edoxazon*. They begin glorifying God. Or they repeatedly glorified God, or continued to glorify Him. What does it mean to glorify God? Given 1 Corinthians 10.31, it would seem to be pretty important that we understand this idea.
2. Those who heard Peter's report broke into praise, remarking to one another this wonderful work of God, and expressing glad surprise at what God had done through Peter's witness. We are called to glorify God, and we can do so with our words, as we encourage and affirm one another with the great works God continues to do through His people in the ongoing work of Christ. But what does it mean to glorify God by our *lives*?
3. This passage is important for another reason. It reminds us that even the most respected leaders in the Church are not free to act alone. All believers are accountable to the Spirit of God working within the Body of Christ. There is no human "head" of the Church, nor of any local church. Christ is the Head, and His Spirit is the animating power for the church's work as sign and outpost of the Kingdom. How do you see this expressed or demonstrated in your church?
4. The Spirit works through the community of faith, according to the Word of God and proven teachings of the apostles and the Church, to guide faith and practice in all ages. Is it important that church leaders and all believers have a good understanding of the struggles of the Church in the past? What they were, how they were resolved, and what they mean for us today?
5. How do you expect to glorify God with your life today? How can you prepare in order to help make sure you will glorify God at every opportunity?

*Summary*

It's official: The Gospel of the Kingdom is for all nations and all people, not just for the Jews. The witness of the Spirit led the Church to submit to the Lord's Kingdom agenda, and to pursue His ongoing work on new fronts. How does your church demonstrate that it believes God intends His Gospel for all the people in your community?

*Closing Prayer*

God be merciful to us and bless us,  
*And* cause His face to shine upon us, *Selah*  
That Your way may be known on earth,  
Your salvation among all nations.  
Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
Let all the peoples praise You.  
Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy!  
For You shall judge the people righteously,  
And govern the nations on earth. *Selah*  
Let the peoples praise You, O God;  
Let all the peoples praise You.

Psalm 67.1-5

## 4 The Gospel to Antioch

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.* Luke 24.27

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.19-21.*

See, all this interlude about Peter in Caesarea, and his report to Jerusalem, was in order to clear the decks for what was already going on elsewhere and would, beginning in chapter 13, become the focus of the ongoing work of Christ. The Kingdom has broken out and is loose in the world.

*For reflection*

1. People who were persecuted in Jerusalem went to other cities, perhaps seeking out relatives or friends with whom to start their new lives. And wherever they went, they evangelized the Good News of Jesus – at first to Jews only, but increasingly, to Gentiles as well. In Antioch the Gospel really began to bear fruit among the Gentiles, as “the hand of the Lord” (v. 21) carried forward the work begun by Peter in this next stage of the Gospel’s expansion. How can we tell when the “hand of the Lord” is on our church? On our own witness?
2. Notice the focus of the evangelizing: “preaching the Lord Jesus” (v. 20). The Good News is not so much about going to heaven when you die as it is that Jesus is Lord and King and Savior. Preach that, and the hand of the Lord will be with you to carry forward the ongoing work of Christ! Our salvation is as great (Heb. 2.3) as the reach of Christ’s Lordship. What are the implications of Christ’s Lordship, and His great salvation, for your life today?
3. Let’s pause to examine the last part of verse 21 a little more closely. The Greek says, literally, “a great number having believed turned to the Lord.” The “having believed” and “turning” – repentance – are in the same action, not two separate actions. You cannot believe in Jesus and not turn to Him. What is repentance? How is it related to saving faith? To daily faith in the Lord Jesus?
4. Believing in and turning to the Lord is one complete action, not one now and then perhaps later, the other. Not *believing* in Jesus as Savior now, then *turning* to Him as Lord maybe later (maybe not?). It’s believing and turning to Jesus as Lord and Christ, just like Peter preached on that first Christian Pentecost. As Christ, from what does Jesus save us? As Lord, over how much of our lives does He rule? How does this relate to our call to glorify God in whatever we do?
5. In what sense are *believing* and *turning* every Christian’s everyday duty and calling? What should the practice of this look like throughout the day?

*Summary*

The Good News is that Jesus the Lord and Christ has gained salvation for us, and calls us to repent and believe this Gospel, so that the presence, promise, and power of His Kingdom might be ours as surely as it was for the first believers. How can we tell when we have made the Kingdom turn into this great salvation?

*Closing Prayer*

Give the king Your judgments, O God,  
And Your righteousness to the king's Son.  
He will judge Your people with righteousness,  
And Your poor with justice.  
The mountains will bring peace to the people,  
And the little hills, by righteousness.  
He will bring justice to the poor of the people;  
He will save the children of the needy,  
And will break in pieces the oppressor.  
They shall fear You  
As long as the sun and moon endure,  
Throughout all generations.  
He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing,  
Like showers *that* water the earth.  
In His days the righteous shall flourish,  
And abundance of peace,  
Until the moon is no more.

Psalm 72.1-7

## 5 Grace Visible

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.* Luke 24.27

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.22-24.*

Now we see why Peter's report to the church in Jerusalem was so important. God was bursting the dam which had held the Gospel back within one ethnic community, and the Body of Christ needed to be ready for this powerful new movement of God's Spirit.

*For reflection*

1. Again we note that the first believers felt the necessity of reporting back to Jerusalem. The Church and the apostles needed to confirm this work of God. To whom is your church accountable for the ongoing work of Christ? What forms does that accountability take?
2. So Barnabas was dispatched to have a look-see. I always find that phrase striking: "he came and had seen the grace of God..." What did he see? Based on what we've seen thus far in the book Acts, what evidence did Barnabas likely see to convince him that the ongoing work of Christ had broken out in Antioch as well?
3. People hungry for the Word. People in prayer together, publicly and house to house. Folks sharing with one another of their material possessions and resources. New people coming to Lord. People talking about Jesus and "gossiping the Gospel" all over the city. The whole gamut of what he was familiar with in Jerusalem was on display here in Antioch as well! Is this what you see in your community, as the churches there pursue the ongoing work of Christ?
4. God is consistent in how He makes Himself known. So Barnabas ladled on the good word of encouragement, doubtless affirming their work, enlarging their vision, and urging them on in the grace of the Lord Jesus. As a result, "a great many people were added to the Lord." Note again the emphasis on Jesus: "added to *the Lord*" – not to "the church." We call people to come to Jesus, not to our church. Why do you suppose we see so little evidence of this ongoing work of Christ in our communities?
5. Luke's writing style is impeccable. He prepares us for each new development, then sets us down into the midst of it, to experience it for ourselves. Luke is a historian, and the Gospel makes a difference in the way we view and experience history. He is helping us to put on a different *outlook* toward everyday events, so that we learn to *see and seek* the sovereignty of the Lord in all things. Does it matter whether we see history from the Lord's point of view, with an eye to His agenda and purposes? Why or why not?

*Summary*

The presence of the Kingdom was visible in Antioch. The promise of it was becoming the possession of increasing numbers of people. And the power of the Kingdom was winning souls, transforming lives, and turning the world rightside-up for Jesus. Meditate on Matthew 11.12 and Luke 16.16. What will it take for us to begin realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of

the Kingdom in our day?

*Closing Prayer*

Those who trust in the LORD

*Are* like Mount Zion,

*Which* cannot be moved, *but* abides forever.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem,

So the LORD surrounds His people

From this time forth and forever.

For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest

On the land allotted to the righteous,

Lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.

Do good, O LORD, to *those who are* good,

And to *those who are* upright in their hearts.

As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways,

The LORD shall lead them away

With the workers of iniquity.

Peace *be* upon Israel!

Psalm 125

## 6 The First “Christians”

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. Luke 24.27*

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.25, 26.*

Why Saul? We don't know. God must have impressed on Barnabas to head over to Tarsus and see if he could find Saul. The need was great for excellent teaching, greater than Barnabas could fulfill by himself. How humble is that? A megachurch has sprung into life at his teaching, and he heads off to find someone else to join him in this great work.

*For reflection*

1. Whatever Saul has been doing in Tarsus has prepared him for this ministry among the Christians in Antioch. Indeed, Antioch will become Saul's – Paul's – “home base” for nearly the remainder of his ministry. Barnabas provides an example for church leaders in all ages of the ongoing work of Christ. What lessons have you been learning from him thus far?
2. We note that teaching was the focus of this whole year of ministry. The Church can never receive too much excellent teaching. Nothing substitutes for good teaching to ground people in the faith and help them get on the growth curve with the Lord. But good teaching alone won't get the job done. Each believer needs time with the Lord in prayer and in His Word. How does that work out in your life?
3. The great outreach to the Gentile world that will begin in chapter 13 is the result of solid grounding in the Word of God. And we know that it took, because the believers in Antioch soon became so identified with Christ – by their words and their works – that their neighbors took to calling them the “Christ-ones” – Christians. It seems the people of Antioch observed the same grace of Christ that Barnabas did. These days many people seem to have a different view of Christians. Why do you think this is so?
4. Again, Luke is setting up the next phase of the ongoing work of Christ: Saul – Paul – and the church in Antioch will play a major role in the expansion of Christ's Kingdom. It will take us two chapters to get to it – a reminder in the next chapter that the unbelieving world is not taking the ongoing work of Christ lying down – but then we'll be into the meat of the remainder of Acts. How would you describe your church's role in the ongoing work of Christ at this time?
5. Would you say that you receive ample teaching? Are you getting sufficient time with the Lord in prayer and in His Word? In what ways is the grace of Christ evident to the people around you each day? Where would you like to improve?

*Summary*

In the Kingdom of God we're always *preparing* for the ongoing work of Christ at the same time we're *doing* the ongoing work of Christ. That work takes place in our individual lives, our churches, our communities, and our world. And it is a work that is *noticeable* by others. How can Christians encourage and help one another to become more consistent and fruitful in the ongoing work of

Christ?

*Closing Prayer*

I will praise *You*, O LORD, with my whole heart;

I will tell of all Your marvelous works.

I will be glad and rejoice in You;

I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.

Psalm 9.1, 2

## 7 One Church

*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.* Luke 24.27

*Read and meditate on Acts 11.27-30.*

Barnabas has been gone for over a year, so the church in Jerusalem decides to send a team up to help. These men are described as “prophets.” Their work appears to have consisted in traveling about to teach the Word, supplementing whatever ministries and teaching existed in places like Antioch. But at least one of them also had the gift of prophetic foresight, given by the Spirit to prophets, and not to everyone.

*For reflection*

1. What Agabus prophesied, Luke tells us, came to pass a bit later. But receiving his message as the Word of God, the church in Antioch was not going to wait for disaster to come upon their brethren in Judea. They gathered up a collection and sent it to Jerusalem with Saul and Barnabas. Do churches today have any responsibility for suffering believers in other lands? Explain.
2. The believers in Antioch and the believers in Judea were one Church, one Body of brethren, with one common concern for the Kingdom and the wellbeing of God’s people. We have to “work hard” to maintain this kind of unity (Eph. 4.3), but doing so is an important part of the ongoing work of Christ. How does your church work to achieve unity with other churches in your community and beyond?
3. Jesus said it’s unity like this that convinces the world that He has come for its salvation (Jn. 20.21). Paul would maintain this focus on the worldwide oneness of the Body of Christ throughout the course of his ministry, and across the vast expanse of the Roman world (cf. Rom. 15). Why don’t church leaders today follow Paul’s example of working for unity with other churches? And within their own?
4. Things are expanding rapidly, but Luke does not want us to lose sight of the fundamental oneness of the Body of Christ. Of course, today we pretty much have lost sight of that. At least, we don’t do much, except perhaps within denominations, to maintain and demonstrate the oneness we have in Jesus Christ. This was not an easy thing for the believers in Antioch. Why should it be easy for us? And even though it’s not easy, how do we dare neglect working to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace with other congregations of the Lord’s people? What suggestions might you offer to help your church become more responsible and obedient in this matter?
5. Can you see how the *disunity* of churches today is a hindrance to the ongoing work of Christ? If we refuse to tackle this challenge, and to begin working harder at this aspect of our Kingdom-and-glory calling (1 Thess. 2.12), can we expect to know the blessings of the Lord as fully as we otherwise might? Explain.

*Summary*

Unity among the churches of the Lord doesn’t just happen. We have to work hard at it. If we will

not, then we can't blame our unbelieving neighbors for not taking seriously our claim that Jesus has come for the salvation of the world. What can you do *today* to encourage more unity among the Lord's churches in your community?

*Closing Prayer*

Behold, how good and how pleasant *it is*  
For brethren to dwell together in unity!  
*It is* like the precious oil upon the head,  
Running down on the beard,  
The beard of Aaron,  
Running down on the edge of his garments.  
*It is* like the dew of Hermon,  
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;  
For there the LORD commanded the blessing—  
Life forevermore.

Psalm 133

*For reflection or discussion*

1. What do we mean by “the ongoing work of Christ”? How does that work go on?
2. What evidence should we expect to see in a community where Christians are realizing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?
3. What does it mean for an individual believer to take up the ongoing work of Christ in his or her daily life?
4. Why is it so important that churches work for unity in the faith, both in their own churches and in their communities (Jn. 13.35)? What are the primary obstacles to this happening in our day?
5. What’s the most important insight or lesson you’ve learned from Acts 11?

*Glory to Glory*

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God’s Word to the way we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31).

What have you encountered *of* God’s glory in our reading and meditations in Acts 11? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you live more consistently *for* His glory in the daily details of your life?

What have you learned about yourself from Acts 11 to help you in knowing more of the presence, promise, and power of the Kingdom?

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Thank you.