

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 11 November 2001

No. T0188

Speaker: Dr. Gordon Hughes

Acts 11 - The First Conference

In this current series of talks, we have been looking at significant 'first' developments in the life of the infant Christian Church. The title of today's talk is "The First Conference" We might sub-title it "From carping critics to praising people". You'll understand the reason for that sub-title as we move on. As I began thinking about our message for today, the tragic destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Building in New York, with its consequent appalling loss of life, had just taken place. There can be no more solemn witness to the terrible consequences of strife between nations than that.

Today, sadly, many of us find ourselves caught up in strife of one kind or another. Perhaps not on an international scale, but how often we are confronted with situations of strife within the family, within the workplace, and even sometimes within our church life. The first conference of the Church, as set out in Acts 11, is an absolutely critical event in the history of the Church. Apart from the developments described there, the Church might have for ever been split by strife between Jew and Gentile. We need to take to heart the lessons of Acts 11 if we are to avoid those situations of strife which so often threaten to overwhelm us. Last week, we saw how the Gentile, Cornelius, together with many of his relatives and friends, came to faith in Christ, recognising that His atoning death at Calvary was for their sins. As a result, they received the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. They were baptised and, in this way, testified publicly to their part in this infant church. We were reminded that this was an epoch-making event in the history of the Church.

It is, perhaps, difficult for us to appreciate just how important this event was. When Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, about three thousand in Jerusalem were converted, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and were baptised. So the Church began. But these were all Jews, or those who had accepted the Jewish faith, and had been circumcised as a mark of their 'Jewishness'. In the months which followed, the Gospel continued to be preached, but generally to Jews only. With Cornelius and now to turn to our important chapter.

The chapter opens, "Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, saying, 'You went into uncircumcised men and ate with them!'" (verses 1-3). Peter, having stayed a few days with Cornelius in Caesarea, comes up to Jerusalem. Was he still full of wonder and rejoicing in the grace of God which had so evidently been shown to the Gentiles? Then it must have been like being doused with a basin of ice-cold water to hear these carping critics complain, "You went in to uncircumcised men..."

It's so easy to criticise. Pulling down is quickly done, but building up is often slow, painful work. If you've built a tower of bricks for a young child, you will have seen the great delight that child takes in knocking it down. That's easy But building it up again? That's another matter!

We should not be too hard on these disciples, remembering the deep, in-built prejudices in which they had been brought up. But what about ourselves? Are we as ready to criticise? The words of Paul in his great hymn to love still challenge us:

"Love suffers long and is kind. Love ... thinks no evil ...never fails" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). Do we refuse to recognise that sometimes God may act in ways other than those in which we think He ought to act? Then He may want to surprise us! Have you noticed that Paul, in his epistles, even though he may have things to criticise, always looks first for what he can praise in those to whom he is writing? It's a good habit to get into.

But, to his great credit, Peter did not take offence. How easy it is for us when faced with criticism to get on our high horse! "How dare they speak to me like that", we think, even if we don't say the words out loud. Then we go off in a huff. But Peter was not like that. The wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon, wrote, "A wrathful man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger allays contention" (Proverbs 15:18). Peter was slow to anger and so averted a strife which might have divided the Church for ever. So we read, "But Peter explained it to them in order from the beginning" (verse 4). That simple statement underlines some important lessons. There would be no half-truths, no misunderstandings so far as Peter was concerned. How important it is that, faced with situations of possible conflict, we be ready patiently to set out all the facts, in order, so that everyone is fully in the picture.

The disciples too, to their credit, were ready to sit down and listen to what Peter had to say so that they might be properly informed of all that had happened. So often we come to conflict situations with our minds already made up, refusing to listen to any alternative explanation. So often, alas, those minds are made up on incomplete possession of the facts. Let us, in our day, take careful note of the behaviour of these early believers and seek to be like them.

Peter carefully tells the disciples of God's dealings with him prior to his visit to Cornelius. He tells them of his vision of the great sheet containing many wild animals and creatures, and of the command, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat". He does not hide his deep unwillingness, as a Jew, to eat any unclean animal. But Peter had then heard a voice, "What God has cleansed you must not call common". To emphasise its importance, this vision had been repeated a further twice (verses 5-10).

"What God has cleansed you must not call common." This is the second time we meet this important statement in Scripture. The first is in the actual narrative of the vision in chapter 10. Did those words remind Peter of that night, just before the crucifixion, when the Lord Jesus had taken a bowl of water and washed the disciples' feet? Then Jesus, in the light of His atoning sacrifice at Calvary, had uttered those momentous words to His disciples, "You are clean" (John 13:10). That same blood of Jesus which would wash away Peter's sins would equally wash away the sins of all, Jew or Gentile, who put their faith in Christ. Peter then tells his audience how, after the vision, he had set off for Cornelius' house with the same six men who now stood with him before them. They would be able to testify to the truth of Peter's statements. In the law given to the Jews, God had wisely insisted, "One witness shall not rise against a man...by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15). Here is a principle of vital importance in every age for every man, Jew and Gentile alike. Are we as careful to make sure that the so-called facts on which we base our decisions can be independently confirmed? How much heartache in the church, as in many other situations, might have been avoided if only facts had been properly established!

Peter then tells his audience about what happened in the house of Cornelius: "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. Then I remembered the words of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit'" (verses 15-16). This is just what the Lord Jesus, before He left His disciples, said the Holy Spirit would do. Jesus said to them: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you" (John 14:26). Peter experienced the truth of those words in the house of Cornelius.

That same Holy Spirit is still able to bring the words of the Lord Jesus to our remembrance today. But that means we must have read them first! How important it is, then, that we begin each day by reading the Bible, the word of God. Better still if we can commit parts of it to memory. Then, in situations of conflict or of other needs, the Holy Spirit is able to bring that word of God to our remembrance. How much better life will be if our actions are guided by the word of God rather than by our own thoughts and self-will!

Peter then challenges his listeners: "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (verse 17). None could refute this powerful argument. God had acted in grace and blessing towards Gentiles. No one could deny this work of God. It is interesting that, some months earlier, Peter and the other apostles had been arrested and brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews. Those Jews were furious that, although the apostles had earlier been forbidden by the Sanhedrin to preach Jesus, they continued to do so. Peter and the other apostles uttered their celebrated defence: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). When Peter charged the rulers with the murder of the Lord Jesus, they were furious and would have killed the apostles. Then one of the Pharisees, Gamaliel, a much respected teacher of the law, stood up and pleaded for restraint. He ordered that the apostles be put outside for a while. Gamaliel then reminded the Sanhedrin how that, in past years, others had arisen and drawn men after themselves. In time, those leaders had died and their followers had scattered. He then continued, "And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it - lest you even be found to fight against God (Acts 5:38-39). Sweet reason prevailed and the apostles were released. It is interesting that it was this same Gamaliel under whom Saul of Tarsus was educated before he was converted.

Peter could not possibly have overheard Gamaliel that day but now here, before his fellow believers, he argues in much the same way. He tells them, "If therefore God gave them (i.e. the Gentiles) the same gift as He gave us (i.e. the Jews) when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" (verse 17). All were won over by this simple, but powerful, argument. So we read, "When they heard these things they became silent: and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life" (verse 18). From carping critics to praising people! Let us underline those words: "And they glorified God"! But the result might have been so horribly different - a permanent split between a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church. Let us thank God that these early Christians were able to show that Christian love and forbearance which enabled them to meet together and constructively to work out their differences together! Let us thank God that the apostles and the other Christians in

Jerusalem were ready to recognise that God sometimes works in ways that are outside our predetermined scheme of things! Let us in our day take to heart these vital lessons from the example of this first Christian conference!

In the purposes of God, it was left to the apostle Paul, some years later to set out the God-given basis of the unity of the Church. As we come to the end of our message this morning, it is worth listening to his message to the Christians at Ephesus: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:1-6).

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.