

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 11:1-18 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 11:1-18 ESV

1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." 4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' 10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' 15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

STRUCTURE

- I. Jewish believers criticize Peter's association with Gentiles (11:1-3)
- II. Peter shows how God overcame his own similar objections (11:4-17)
 - a. God overcame Peter's resistance through a trance (11:4-10)
 - b. God overcame Peter's resistance through providence (11:11)
 - c. God overcame Peter's resistance through the Spirit's authoritative message (11:12a)
 - d. God overcame Peter's resistance through the report of Cornelius (11:12b-14)
 - e. God overcame Peter's resistance through the Spirit's outpouring (11:15-17)
- III. Jewish believers worship God for His acceptance of Gentiles (11:18)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

These verses seem at first like overkill. Luke just told the story of Cornelius and his household at length in the prior chapter, and now he repeats it almost verbatim, only this time by Peter's mouth.

That last part—"by Peter's mouth"—explains the story's necessity. For the gospel to extend to the ends of the earth, it would require the buy-in of God's leading apostle and his Jewish compatriots. We observed a similar scenario with the Samaritans, who did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John—representatives of the Jerusalem church—laid hands on them. Both people groups required Jewish and apostolic buy-in. Why? Because God's heart is for the unity of His church. Not three separate churches—one Jewish, one Samaritan, and one Gentile. No, His heart is for one global church. What seems like overkill in repeating this story instead emphasizes just how weighty church unity is to God.

Modern churches divide themselves along different lines, but we divide nonetheless. We fight about baptism in water, baptism in the Spirit, communion, church governance, roles of men and women, the age of the earth, and more. Whether we ever agree on these things is beside the point. "Unity" is not the same as "agreement." We can disagree in our interpretations about secondary issues and nevertheless unite around our common heart for Christ and His mission.

The Nicene Creed defined the church as “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.” We are “one” in that Christ has created us as one new body, the body of Christ, consisting of many members. We are “holy” in that God named us “saints” (holy ones), set apart for His sacred purposes. We are “catholic” (meaning “universal”) in that we belong to the universal church of Jesus Christ by holding to the core doctrines of the faith. (Incidentally, Roman Catholicism derives its name from this historic term, however, Protestants have long held that we belong to the “lowercase-c” catholic church on account of our doctrinal unity.) We are “apostolic” in that we submit to the gospel preached by the apostles, and we align with them in proclaiming it to all nations.

The historic church sought to differentiate itself from the world by these qualities, but we must not separate from each other. Acts 11 is about a God who unifies His church by refusing to relegate Gentiles to the status of second-class citizens. Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, Baptists, Pentecostals, Anglicans, Arminians, Calvinists, Complementarians, Egalitarians, Young-earthers, Old-earthers, and everything in between—we all belong in the same family, by receiving the same Word and same Spirit.

May our lives reflect the Word that unites us doctrinally and the Spirit who unites us relationally to God and each other. O, how rich is “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor. 13:14)!

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. 2 So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, 3 “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

—Schreiner, commenting on the repetition of Acts 11, on the heels of Acts 10: “Luke is not ready to move on. Gentile inclusion needs to be established not only by the event but also by a defense of the event. The unity of God’s people is at stake.”

—“the apostles and the brothers”: this includes leaders of the church and the church itself.

—“who were throughout Judea”: Jerusalem (located in Judea) was the governmental center for the global church. Until this scene, however, they had no clue what it meant for the church to be “global.” Jerusalem (and Judea) would need to get onboard with God’s acceptance of Gentiles who lacked official boundary markers like circumcision.

—“heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God”:

- “the Gentiles”: Cornelius seemed to be the primary focus of chapter 10, but the Jews were more concerned about the people group he belonged to. Jews despised Gentiles.
- When the Spirit moves, news spreads. We’ve seen this repeatedly throughout Acts:
 - 2:6: pilgrims visiting Jerusalem for Pentecost gather at the commotion of the Spirit’s outpouring
 - 4:17: the Jewish leaders contemplate how they might squelch the burgeoning movement “in order that it may spread no further among the people”.
 - 5:11: “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”
 - 9:42: “And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.”
 - Many more examples could be cited.
- “received the word of God” is just one of several ways Luke characterizes their salvation:
 - They were counted among “everyone who believes in him” and “receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43).
 - “the gift of the Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:46).
 - They had “received the Holy Spirit just as we have” (10:47).
 - They were “saved” (11:14).
 - “the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning” (11:15).
 - They were “baptized with the Holy Spirit” (11:16).
 - “God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ” (11:17).
 - “God has granted repentance that leads to life” to the Gentiles (11:18).
 - In summary: believing in Jesus, receiving the word about Him (the gospel), receiving forgiveness of sins, receiving the Holy Spirit (the baptism of/in the Spirit), and being granted repentance all happen at the same time.

- Schreiner: "While the previous narrative seemed to climax with the descent of the Spirit, Luke summarizes it as 'receiv[ing] the word of God.'" Word and Spirit go hand-in-hand.
- "the word of God" throughout Acts is almost personified as an active agent:
 - [Act 6:7 ESV] 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.
 - [Act 12:24 ESV] 24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.
 - [Act 13:49 ESV] 49 And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.
 - [Act 19:20 ESV] 20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.
 - [Act 20:32 ESV] 32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.
- It's not just that disciples are increasing in number; it's that the Word is increasing and multiplying. The Word is spreading. The Word is prevailing. The Word is what builds them up and sanctifies them. The Word is portrayed as a divine actor.
- Schreiner (quoting Peterson): "The real hero of Acts is the logos, the Word... The ascended Lord Jesus is the central figure in the narrative, and he employs his word and his Spirit to advance his purpose through human agents in the world."
- Schreiner: "The centrality of the word in Acts can be seen not only in the explicit emphasis on this theme but also in the form in which Acts was written. About one third of Acts is comprised of speeches or evangelistic preaching."
- This reminds me of the famous quote from Martin Luther about his role in the Reformation: *"I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it."*

—"the circumcision party criticized him": this is not the unbelieving Jews but the believing ones. Like Peter in the previous scene, they are unaware of the change in redemptive history. By the end of the passage, they come around to accepting Gentiles (11:18).

—"you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them":

- Their criticism was not that he preached to them or that they "received the word of God" but that Peter ate with them. This violated Jewish custom.
- The Apocrypha was not considered "on par" with Scripture, however, it was considered important, formative, and in a way (though less authoritative than Scripture), sacred. It says this: "Separate thyself from the nations, and eat not with them: And do not according to their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness" (Jubilees 22:16). Writings such as this shaped Jewish culture. Their outrage was culturally conditioned.

4 But Peter began and explained it to them in order: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. 6 Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. 7 And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' 9 But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' 10 This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. 11 And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. 12 And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; 14 he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.'

—This section essentially repeats what we saw in chapter 10. I explained the repetition in the introduction. For comments on the relevant verses/storyline from Acts 10, see Convergence's Bible Study Guide Page for the Study Guides on 9/3/23 and 9/10/23.

—The only new information in this section is what Peter states in 11:14, quoting the angel: *"he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household."* This reinforces that the primary concern of the passage is vertical. Horizontal issues of cultural prejudice must be dealt with, but these spring from the primary issue. God calls every human to obey the two greatest commandments: love God and love people. The second flows out of the first. If Jews love God, then they must love Gentiles, accepting them on equal terms.

15 As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. 16 And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

—"just as on us at the beginning": Peter connects the experience of Jews on Pentecost to that of Gentiles associated with Cornelius. This is a Gentile Pentecost.

—"And I remembered... you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit":

- This is new information. Peter lets us in on his thinking as he observed the Spirit's descent on Gentiles. He thought about (1) the Spirit falling on Jews, and (2) the promise Jesus made about the baptism of the Spirit.
- This is a story about the baptism of the Holy Spirit reaching Gentiles. Jesus had spoken this word to His Jewish apostles, but the exalted Christ extended it even to Gentiles.

17 If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" 18 When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life."

—"gift":

- [Act 2:38-39 ESV] 38 And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the **gift of the Holy Spirit**. 39 For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."
- [Act 5:32 ESV] 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the **Holy Spirit, whom God has given** to those who obey him."
- [Act 8:20 ESV] 20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the **gift of God** with money!"
- [Act 10:45 ESV] 45 And the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the **gift of the Holy Spirit** was poured out even on the Gentiles.
- [Act 11:17 ESV] 17 If then **God gave the same gift to them** as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?"

—The Holy Spirit GIVES gifts (1 Cor. 12:11); the Holy Spirit IS the gift. Both are true.

- Below I quote some church fathers and address some pretty heady stuff. I'm really just meditating on the mystery of the Trinity, and specifically the Third Person of the Trinity, with the help of church history. O Lord, help us love You with all our minds!
- Augustine: "As the body of flesh is nothing but flesh; so the gift of the Holy Ghost is nothing but the Holy Ghost." In other words, the Holy Spirit is GIFT.
- Thomas Aquinas:
 - "I answer that, the name Love in God can be taken essentially and personally. If taken personally it is the proper name of the Holy Ghost: as Word is the proper name of the Son."
 - "I answer that, Gift, taken personally in God, is the proper name of the Holy Ghost."
 - Aquinas echoes centuries of trinitarian thought by identifying the Holy Spirit as "Gift" and "Love," just as Jesus is "Word." The Holy Spirit is the gift of God, for He is routinely described as such in Scripture. The Holy Spirit is also the love of God, for as we read in Romans 5:5, "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." At salvation, the Holy Spirit is poured out on us; at salvation, love is poured out on us; the Holy Spirit epitomizes love. He is Love and Gift. The greatest gift is love—God Himself.

- Aquinas elaborates that the Spirit is the bond of Love between the Father and Son and that “from the fact that the Father and the Son mutually love one another, it necessarily follows that this mutual Love, the Holy Ghost, proceeds from both. As regards origin, therefore, the Holy Ghost is not the medium, but the third person in the Trinity.”
 - Historically, the church has defined each Person of the Trinity by His “eternal relations of origin”: the Father is unbegotten; the Son is begotten (eternally); the Spirit spirates. Spiration means “breathed out.” The Spirit is “breathed out” from the Father and the Son. (In both Greek and Hebrew, the word “Spirit” can be translated as “breath.”) This means that He proceeds forth from the Father and Son, like breath from our lungs.
 - Several key words throughout Scripture convey this about the Spirit (verses gathered by Dr. Matthew Barrett).
 - The Spirit as breath (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 33:6; John 3:8; 20:22; 2 Tim. 3:16).
 - The Spirit as gift (John 3:14; 4:10; 7:38-39; 15:26; Acts 2:38; 5:32; 8:20; 10:45)
 - The Spirit as love (Rom. 5:4-5; Gal. 5:22; 1 John 4:7-16).
 - Each of these key images expresses that the Spirit issues forth from the Father/Son. The Father and Son do not come from the Spirit, but vice versa. The Spirit comes to us like breath, like a gift, like love, channeled from the Father and Son into our hearts.
 - Augustine: “Love, therefore, which is of God and is God, is specially the Holy Spirit, by whom the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, by which love the whole Trinity dwells in us. And therefore most rightly is the Holy Spirit, although He is God, called also the gift of God. And by that gift what else can properly be understood except love, which brings to God, and without which any other gift of God whatsoever does not bring to God?”
 - Augustine: “Wherefore, if Holy Scripture proclaims that God is love, and that love is of God, and works this in us that we abide in God and He in us, and that hereby we know this, because He has given us of His Spirit, then the Spirit Himself is God, who is love. Next, if there be among the gifts of God none greater than love, and there is no greater gift of God than the Holy Spirit, what follows more naturally than that He is Himself love, who is called both God and of God?”
 - Matthew Barrett: “It is because the Spirit is given in eternity—spirated by the Father and the Son—that he can then be given to us in redemptive history. As Gift he can give gifts to the people of God.”
 - Matthew Barrett: “What does it mean for the Spirit to be given by the Father and the Son in eternity (spiration)? It means, says Augustine, that ‘the Holy Spirit is a kind of inexpressible communion or fellowship of Father and Son.’”
 - Gregory of Nazianzus: “No sooner do I conceive of the one than I am illumined by the splendor of the three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the one.”
 - Edmund Clowney: “To cherish the work of the Spirit, we need to think of the Gift before the gifts. Like the Levites of old, we have the Lord himself as our inheritance (Nu. 18:20; Dt. 10:9). The psalmist embraced that promise: God himself is his portion, his joy (Ps. 16:5-11). To possess, in the Spirit, the Lord himself is the seal and downpayment of glory (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; cf. Col. 1:27).
- I’m feeling led to meditate some more on the Spirit as “gift” throughout Scripture.
- The greatest virtue is love, and love gives. The greatest act of love, and therefore the greatest gift, is the gift of one’s self. God gives us Himself by placing His Spirit in our hearts. God gave us the greatest gift He could have given. He displayed the greatest virtue in giving Himself.
 - The gift He gave is infinitely great because the Spirit is infinite.
 - We often crave finite gifts for birthdays, Christmas, and other special days. But as an infinite gift, the Spirit is the true “gift that keeps on giving.” Like Jesus said, He is an eternal spring of living water. Water gives life; the Spirit gives life. The “life” He brings forth is eternal, not only in quantity (we live forever) but quality (we live abundantly).
 - We most often read that the Father “sent” the Son but that the Father/Jesus “gave” the Spirit. The identity of Jesus is “Sent One,” which explains why Hebrews 3:1 calls Him “apostle” (which means “sent one”). The identity of the Spirit is “Gift.” He is freely given. He is undeserved. He is given without strings attached, which means He is given unconditionally and cannot be retracted. He is given liberally, which explains why we read in Scripture that He is “poured out” and that we are

"baptized" or "immersed" in Him. He is given sovereignly, which explains why the Holy Spirit "came on" unsuspecting people.

- Augustine meditated on how the Spirit's identity as "Gift" existed before God ever "gave" Him to people. His identity in eternity predates His expression in history. For eternity past, the Father and Son enjoyed perfect and infinite self-giving love. We can call that self-giving love, according to Augustine, the Holy Spirit.
- This does not suggest that the Spirit is a "thing" like a gift or like love. Instead, the "things" we call gifts and love exist because the Living One, the Spirit, is Himself both "Gift" and "Love." The "things" we experience by these names point us to the Living Spirit who exists eternally as Gift and Love.
- O God, I marvel at Your eternally self-giving love, expressed as the capital-g Gift in eternity—the Holy Spirit—long before we experienced it in lowercase-g gifts in history. For eternity past, You have given and given and given. Somehow, mysteriously, You have always given, even before creatures existed to receive. Creation overflowed from Your ever-giving heart, which in turn flooded the finite banks of sin and law with the grace of redemption, expressed in the Father and Son who gave, and the Spirit who was given. O God, forgive me for minimizing Your generosity, for considering You stingy based on circumstances I fail to understand! O God, I repent for not magnifying Your lavish generosity with every breath! Father, thank You that even when I grieve the Spirit, He never ceases to seal me until the day of my redemption. Ephesians 4:30: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit, with whom you have been sealed until the day of redemption."
- Sin takes. Adam and Eve took fruit. Cain took life. Abraham took his maidservant. Jacob took the birthright. Joseph's brothers took seventeen years. Israel took after the pagans.
- The pagan gods they worshiped take. Besides the one true God, every other god is a taker. False gods take sacrifice. They take the sacrifice of blood, the sacrifice of money, the sacrifice of years. They make demands, but what do they give that actually costs them? The gods of the nations are not glorious; they are needy.
- Our God demands obedience, but whatever we offer pales in comparison to His lavish generosity. Our God gave in a way that cost Him everything. First, He gave His one and only Son, sacrificing His precious blood rather than "taking" our own blood sacrifices. Second, through Him, He gave us the gift of Him who is eternally both Gift and Love. He gave us the greatest gift He could offer—that of Himself.
- All the other gods are takers, not givers. This puts their insufficiency on display, for the Giver gets the Glory. Takers are despised. We don't speak well of them at funeral services. Givers are praised by all because giving is beautiful. The Giver gets the glory, and God is the greatest Giver of all time. He is both Giver and Gift, for He gives us Himself. In return, He earns the glory, which is how this section ends. Those who "criticized" Peter ultimately "glorified God" (11:2, 18). The Giver gets the Glory!
- Do you view God as a Giver or a Taker? Do you view Him as a lavishly generous Giver or a stingy Giver? Does He give "tit for tat," or does He lavish grace that overflow the banks of your sin?

—"stand in God's way":

- How would Peter stand in God's way? He had already preached to them. This can only refer to baptism. Peter could have obstructed Gentile access to the baptismal font. This would effectively have made them second-class citizens in the kingdom, relegating them to a state of quasi-obedience.
- Support for this perspective can be found in Acts 10:47, where Peter asks, "Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" Peter's inquiry conveys that neither he, nor anyone, can stand in the way of God. Therefore, when he says in 11:17 that he could not "stand in God's way," he must refer to baptism.
- If we believe someone has been baptized in the Spirit—converted—we must not stand in the way of their baptism in water.
- How do we "stand in God's way" of people getting baptized? By insisting they prove themselves for months and years before baptism. We don't see that in Acts. To the contrary, we see an insistence upon prompt baptism in obedience to Christ.

—“They glorified God”:

- They began the passage by criticizing Peter; they ended by worshiping God.
- This statement displays emphatically to Luke’s readers that the Gentiles have not only God’s full acceptance but also the Jewish church’s.

—“God has granted repentance that leads to life”:

- There is no eternal life outside of repentance. We must turn from sin, which leads to death, and turn to God, who is life.
- God “has granted” repentance. Like the Spirit, repentance is a gift.
- Schnabel: “The ‘life’ that the repentance of sinners leads to is the reality of salvation (11:14), a reality that includes the forgiveness of sins (10:43) and the reception of the Holy Spirit (10:44-47; 11:15-17).