

Acts Chapters 11&12

Introduction

All who bring pioneering-type changes in the church—for that matter in any sphere of life—usually face criticism.

- When styles of music we are unfamiliar with are presented in church, many protest, saying it is irreverent, without really trying hard to understand why the changes have been made.
- When George Frideric Handel performed his oratorio *Messiah* for the first time in Dublin, Ireland, it was warmly received. But when he brought it to England, the reception was luke-warm. The words were from Scripture, but the style of music and the place it was performed (the concert hall) did not sit well with many.
- William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, broke new ground for the church by going out to the poor, the alcoholics, and others considered undesirables in society. But respected and devout leaders of the church criticized him.
- When missionaries like E. Stanley Jones in India expressed solidarity with the Indian struggle for independence from Britain, evangelicals accused them of liberalism.
- Many immediately branded the Pentecostal revival as demonic because it did not square with their understanding of the place of some gifts of the Spirit in this dispensation.

Peter's actions show how important it is to take pains to get body approval or the directions we are moving in. How often we try to sidestep this difficult process.

Making a serious effort to convince the church of a new position takes hard work and sometimes comes only after a long and tiring struggle. Modern day pragmatism, which does not have much place for commitment to long-lasting relationships, does not have patience for such a long struggle. They feel their agenda does not allow such a "waste of time." Thus, they simply leave the group and join a new one.

Read Acts 11: 1-18

- Why is Peter criticized by the believers in Jerusalem?
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- What does Peter say in response to the criticism?
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- In describing these events, Luke repeats a lot of details from the previous chapter. Why do you think Luke does that?
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Barnabas's first response to seeing the evidence of God's grace in Antioch shows why he was given the name "Encourager." "He was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" To sum up, when Luke uses "good" to describe Barnabas, he is describing someone with true Christian character, a man of integrity and wholesomeness. That goodness was specially mentioned suggests that Barnabas "was outstanding for the Christian quality of his life."

Read Acts 11: 19-30

- What type of people are turning to Jesus in these verses? How is this similar to the events involving Cornelius?
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- Why do you think the believers in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch? Why is Barnabas a particularly good person to send? (Compare 4:36 and 11:20)
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- Why is it natural that Barnabas would contact Saul? (See 9: 26-29).
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We do not know what will happen to us. But we do know that whatever happens, the greatest challenge we face is the challenge to be obedient. The answer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to the furious king who was getting ready to kill them is instructive:

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the

God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up" (Dan. 3:16—18).

Because the Bible highlights both situations of miraculous deliverance and of triumphant fortitude amidst painful suffering, we must present both possibilities in our preaching and teaching. Of course there may be times when God gives someone an assurance of deliverance, as he did to Paul on his way to Rome that no one would die from the shipwreck (Acts 27:23—24). At such times we can act on that assurance. But that does not happen every time.

A constant refrain in Acts is that through all of the triumphs and seeming tragedies of life the word of God continues to spread (12:24).

Read Acts 12: 1-25

- How do the details of Peter's imprisonment (12:4,6) make his escape all the more dramatic?

- If the believers were praying for Peter (v.5), why were they so surprised when he escaped?

- Compare the attitude of Herod (12:21-23) with that of Peter (10:25-26).

- Which King is victorious, Herod or the risen Christ? (Don't be afraid to say the obvious, it's not a trick question!)

- Peter realizes that “God shows no partiality” (10:34). In what ways do we sometimes show favouritism in:
 - our evangelism?
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- our church relationships?

- So far in Acts, we have seen that the risen Christ is powerfully committed to saving all peoples. To what extent do you share this desire? How can we encourage each other to share Jesus’ priorities?
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- Barnabas has appeared in Acts a few times now. Skim back over the following verses and see what type of person he is: 4:36-37, 9:26-28, 11:22-26, 12:25. In what ways is Barnabas a good example for us?
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Conclusion

When we recover the biblical vision of God and his truth, we will recover biblical passion. If God is who the Bible claims he is and if what the Bible says about life is true, then we must face up to the implications of those truths. We must be inspired to dream great things and be horrified by what we see in our lives and in the church and world. Coldness, boredom, and cynicism melt at this twofold vision of the greatness of God and the sinfulness of his creation. Fired afresh by an ambition to see all that God wishes for us, we will be emboldened to pray earnestly towards that end.

This earnestness may express itself in prayer for a loved one, as in the prayer for Peter’s release in Acts 12. It is seen in the prayers of parents as they agonize for their rebellious children, just as Monica agonized for years for her son Augustine. It is seen in prayers for the conversion of unbelieving spouses. It may also express itself in prayers for church and nation. The Scottish reformer John Knox expressed this earnestness when he cried, “Give me Scotland or I die!” We end this section with a plea from the Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte: “Let every man put his passion into his prayers.”