

Time to Reflect

- Can you think of occasions when you experienced conflict because of a lack of communication? How could this have been avoided?
- Do you have a favourite passage of the Bible? What is it and why do you like it?

Last week looked at how the mission of the Early Church developed and widened. We reflected on the association between mission and vision, and we sought to draw some practical conclusions which could apply to our own particular contexts. This week we look at the importance of obedience, the significance of repentance, and the further spread of the Christian faith.

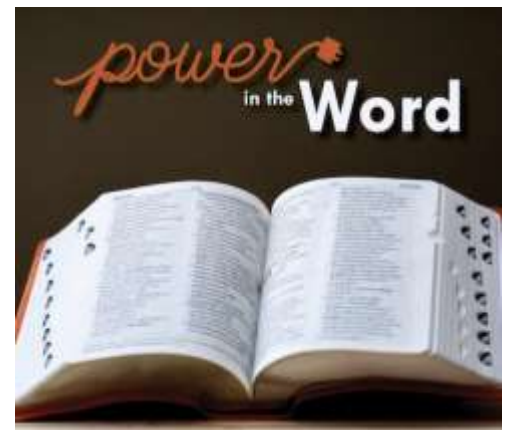
“Persecution spurred the church on to expand into new territory. Difficulty taught the church to give to and support their brethren. Hardship drove the church into prayer and dependence upon God. No worldly circumstances could prevent the growth and multiplication of the Word of the Lord.”

(John-Michael Wong, *Opening Up Acts*, p85).

Passage Specifics

- Unsurprisingly, news of what had happened with Cornelius and his household spread quickly. More surprising is the fact that the reaction to this was hostility (v2-3). Peter met with resistance from other believers who questioned his association with the Gentiles.
- The nature of their opposition is revealed in (v3). They took issue with Peter for eating with the Gentiles – a sign of fellowship among equals. The big mistake that was made here was that Peter’s accusers were unaware of the whole story!
- How often do we find ourselves in a similar situation? Conflicts and confrontations emerge because of poor communication, jumping to conclusions, or failure to listen.
- Last week we saw how Peter had a God-given vision which enabled him to learn about God’s inclusion of the Gentiles into the Church. But the Jerusalem believers did not have this vision.
- Peter responded to his accusers by retelling the whole story about his visions, the journey to Caesarea, and the Cornelius episode. Like all good story telling, he started at the beginning and relayed the whole story (v4).
- By telling his whole experience (v4-15), Peter proved that God had accepted the Gentiles. They received the same outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the Jews received after believing in God (v17).
- Peter does, however, go further than just storytelling. He moves to a point of challenge and application (v16-17). There is a profound lesson in humble obedience here. Peter, with great openness and honesty, declared “...who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way.”
- In making this declaration, Peter was also challenging his accusers to align themselves to God’s will and not to stand in opposition to it – no matter how sincere they may believe their own motives to be.
- (v18) indicates that they heard this and had no further objections. They even moved to praise God and declared, “So, then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

- It is also important for us, in the twenty-first century church, to ensure that we are listening to God and actively pursuing His will. This challenges us to spend time with God, to read His Word and to pray. Prayer is more than us talking to God. In fact, some of the most profound moments in prayer are when we be still and seek to listen to God.
- What is God’s will for us as individuals, as a local community, as churches, as a nation? Let’s commit ourselves to asking this question of God daily and open ourselves to whatever it may be that He wants to reveal to us.
- The remainder of our passage is focused on ‘The Church in Antioch.’ We are immediately told that persecution planted the church in Antioch (v19). The Gospel message was spreading, even in the face of opposition.
- Interestingly, especially given the content of the first half of this passage, the believers proclaimed the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (v19-20). The results of this missional outreach were incredible and the church in Antioch grew very quickly (v21).
- Isn’t it interesting that there is no mention of projects, programmes, or gimmicks? Here we see church growth being the direct result of the faithful proclamation of the Word of God.
- We can encounter God through His Word. Corrie Ten Boom wonderfully observed, **“I’ve experienced His presence in the deepest darkest hell that men can create. I have tested the promises of the Bible, and believe me, you can count on them. I know that Jesus Christ can live in you, in me, through His Holy Spirit. You can talk with Him; you can talk with Him out loud or in your heart when you are alone, as I was alone in solitary confinement. The joy is that He hears each word.”** This is the message that we need to constantly make know.
- Antioch was an important location for the spread of Christianity. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, located at the crossroads of major trade routes, and had a thriving commercial port. Antioch was a strategic place and was full of opportunities for mission and evangelism. We need to be attentive to, and in line with, God’s strategic plans in our own localities.
- The news of the incredible church growth in Antioch reached Jerusalem and Barnabas was sent to teach and pastor this rapidly growing and emerging church. John-Michael Wong observes, **“These new believers needed the pure milk of God’s Word in order to grow as newborn Christians and learn to obey Christ.”¹**
- Barnabas was delighted when he saw the new believers and he sought to encourage them (v23). As a result of his faithful ministry, even more people came to faith (v24). The rate of growth was such that Barnabas soon needed help and he reached out to Saul (v25). Together they engaged in mission and ministry for over a year (v26).
- It is noteworthy that the term ‘Christian’ was first used in Antioch.
- The remaining verses of our passage focus on ‘*The Service of the Church.*’ The great famines of 45-46AD provided an opportunity for the church to demonstrate their joy and peace by helping other people through acts of kindness (v29). What we see here is a practical outworking of the Christian faith.
- **Martin Luther King Jr brilliantly reflected, “Life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’”**



¹ John-Michael Wong, *Opening Up Acts*, p86.