

Acts 11:1–18

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[0 : 00] The year was 1915 when Carter G. Woodson, with Ph.D. from Harvard in the area of history and hand, joined with Jesse E. Moreland, a prominent minister to form the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Woodson was the second African American in this country to receive a Ph.D. from Harvard, the first, of course, being W.E.B. Du Bois from just a time earlier.

By 1926, some 11 years after the forming of that association, Woodson's group sponsored Negro History Week.

And it wouldn't be until some 50 years later, 1976, that President Gerald Ford would offer the month of February as African American History Month, which has continued annually from that time.

They chose the month of February because it capitalized on the birthdays of both Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, that great agitating voice that moved America to more proper union.

[1 : 39] Why do I open with that? Not simply because it's in the middle of February and we are commemorating Black History Month, but I open because the text that we have heard read from is embedded in the struggle of ethnic particularities that keep one group from the dinner table of another.

People often ask me, do you ever break your regular sermon series to deal with the pressing issues of the day? To which I would say again today, the sequential teaching of God's word from anywhere has its own ability to break with convention and press itself relevantly upon the issues of the day.

Today is no different. I didn't magically look to hit Acts 11 at this moment. It's simply another testament of the way the Lord is working in our midst, but he would have us deal with this today. What are we dealing with? The Jerusalem church needed to be converted from their internal sense of superiority and move itself under the mind of Jesus.

Just as Cornelius himself earlier needed to be converted under the exclusive message of Jesus, just as Peter before that needed to be converted under the universal mission of Jesus.

[3 : 45] And so this wonderful moment in the midst of Acts, chapters 10 and 11, are all about conversion. Conversion to the universal mission, to the exclusive message, and repentance from any superiority that would keep you from the mind of Jesus.

It doesn't take long, an opening salvo in chapter 11, and I hope your eyes are on it, to see that the church in Jerusalem was resisting change on the status quo as it related to Jew-Gentile relations. Here it is. Now the apostles and brothers who were without Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised party criticized him, saying, you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.

Verses 1 to 3, the church at Jerusalem is resisting any change in the status quo. So, the presenting issue was Peter had shared a meal in the house of Cornelius the Gentile.

Underneath the presenting issue, though, was a religious history that had lost its way. Israel, of course, had been elected by God for reasons only known to God.

[5 : 16] that through Abraham and his seed, all the families of the earth would reignite under a blessing from God. And so that election had nothing to do with themselves.

But over time, those who are privileged begin to think that being separated from means better than.

And that's what happened to the truth from Jerusalem. Attend to that sections in their law, like Leviticus 17, that talked about having nothing to do with the blood of animals in the eating of it.

And also Exodus 34, 15, that talks about being careful when you're invited to the home of a Gentile that you would eat with them. And what happens in the psyche of a people over time is this.

God has specialized us with a role in the world. God, because he wants himself to be known in the world, makes us distinct from the world.

[6 : 31] In being distinct from the world, I segregate myself off from the world, for indeed I am special and should be treated as such in the eyes of the world.

It says here that they criticized Peter. The word criticized actually isn't in the original language, but it certainly conveys the interpretive force.

There's a manuscript tradition, and in the western manuscript tradition, it goes on to speak of the Jews were actually disputing with him. In other words, they weren't just saying, welcome home, bro. Tell me how'd it go. They were actually at odds with what he had done while he was away. Take that with this word saying or this idea of this word that had gone out that they had received you think of even this thing about there's a word that's gone out.

Often that can also be an argument. I'd like to have a word with you means I'd like to pick a bone with you means I have an issue with you and that is what happened. Now remember, these are Christians in Jerusalem.

[7 : 51] We know that because later in verse 16 he will say that the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us. These are not Jews in Jerusalem that have not yet found their way to Jesus.

These are Jesus folk saying the status quo should be retained. That's called ethnic prejudice. In other words, let me give it to you clear, the proclamation of the euangelion in their minds had no influence on the participation of the table.

The advance of the gospel in their own heart did nothing in regard to their affiliation with other groups. Think of it. That the church in worship yet needed to understand the work of worship.

And so they are taking issue with Peter, no holes barred, looking to preserve the status quo.

[9 : 07] Am I home yet? Am I in Chicago yet? Isn't it interesting how you read the Bible? No big bridge. I got a cross between the ancient world and our own.

Get to that little church meeting in your home. Think of our own country. You can't speak of our country, the history of our country without speaking of the history of race.

It's impossible. Think of our own doctrine in the 19th century called Manifest Destiny.

This movement that began to work in the minds of the people that we had come here to do something special for God, to be a light to the world and that meant that God was with us in what we did so that the Spanish-American War is actually rooted out of this imperialistic claim that our national expansion is divinely appointed.

And I don't have to go long for you to know all the ugly history of how that movement of freedom-seeking people to worship God as they please over times becomes encrusted and overlaid with separate from meaning better than, meaning right to, meaning even worse than in that day, subjugation of.

[10 : 41] segregation is one thing. We have the attending weight of sin, namely subjugation. What a world.

Think of our own country, Plessy versus Ferguson, 1896, that actually places in law state sponsored segregation.

segregation. Of course, that's where the distinction of even what water fountain you're at is going to matter. What door you enter is going to matter.

And if you think that somehow we're over it all, well, I've only got one eye and I can see more than you got with two. My father worked for many years with Lenny Wilkins, Hall of Famer in the NBA, and here he is, Hall of Fame NBA player, traveling the country after 1964 in the Civil Rights Act. And on the road, still having to be careful whose room he was in, in the hotel, segregated from, equal but separate, restaurants, fountains, bathrooms, all of life.

[12 : 02] Oh, if it had just been particularized to a fountain, but it was universal. That is our reality.

Back to the text, their resistance is met by Peter's rebuttal. That's the way the text moves. You're moving out of verse three.

And into verse four through 17, which is his rebuttal to that way of life. I don't need to spend much time on it because we've seen it two weeks ago.

It's a retelling of what happened. And so in verses four through ten, he displays his own experience. I saw a vision.

God told me not to call unclean what he called clean. God told me not to make the distinctions among people that my ethnic heritage had made me to make.

[13 : 04] And then he weds his own vision retelling in four to ten with an independent source of confirmation, namely Cornelius. And I met this guy. He also had a vision at the same time.

As I got out of my prayer closet on the roof, they were at my door. You can't make this up, Peter says. Independent confirmation that my vision was wedded to his vision. And so that made me go with him. And yes, I ate. And yes, I sat. And yes, we had an enjoyable time together. But then his personal experience, the independent confirming fact of Cornelius' experience, is actually by the end of his retelling, and here's the majesty of it all, he basically throws on the church not just what happened to me or what happened to him. Because this isn't going to be a he said, she said thing. No, let me tell you what God then did. My experience was wedded with his experience, and guess what? The Holy Spirit came. Just as it did upon us at the beginning. That's quite an argument. It's called an experiential argument. It's called what are you going to say now argument. How do you argue with that? [14:21] How do you argue with that? I actually had something occur which you could question rightly. Cornelius had something occur which you could question rightly, but what I occurred, what occurred to me and what occurred to him happened in the same moment.

And by the way, when we got together and I preached to them, the Spirit, even before I finished preaching, made these people new in Christ. Now how was I then? Peter says. What am I going to do?

Tell God to get out of the way? So he's already here. And so he says, I can't stand in God's way. How could I stand in God's way?

That is his argument. And so the resistance of the church is met by the rebuttal of the apostle and it gives way, look here, at the very end, the church's response twofold.

Verse 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.

[15:26] The twofold response, silence, praise. It's a very interesting way to put it. One would think all you would have to say is when they heard these things, they glorified God saying, then to the Gentiles, also God has granted repentance that leads to life.

But Luke is not able to actually write that clearly. He has to say, when they heard the rebuttal, they fell silent and praised.

Which is some indication that this silence wasn't mere awe, acceptance, agreement, astonishment, that this silence is acquiescence.

Think of it this way. If you have a child or you remember being one, and the parent looked at you and said, now, come here, I want to talk to you about what you just said.

You might be silent, but that doesn't mean you're on their page. And it seems to me that what happened there in that moment was silence was one of acquiescence.

[16:46] Praise was one of inevitability. And we know that because in the future of the biblical record, they're still working this thing out. what about us?

You know what's amazing about us in this country? We don't even have the benefit unless you're Jewish by birth. And some of you here are. But by and large, this country doesn't even have the benefit of thinking that someone is more elect or special than someone else.

I mean, in the Bible, we're talking here about a Jew and a Gentile, a Jew who actually received the promises of God. By and large, in this country, none of us received any of those promises of God. We were grafted in. All of us. Any of us. Every one of us. So how in the world do Gentiles begin to think in the world of Gentiledom that some Gentiles have it better or more special than other Gentiles?

Don't ask me how, but we do it. Let me put it differently. The silence that fell on the group in the church in Jerusalem who were resistant to the change of anything related to status quo is a silence in our country that is taking a lot longer to take hold.

[18:24] On matters of gender, we owe it to the women's suffrage movement to get the ball rolling.

On matters of race, many people look to 1954, the Brown versus the Board of Education, as a landmark moment where finally the activity of 1896 that authored separate, segregated world is actually overturned.

Finally, for the first time, it was indeed unlawful. By the time I was 10 years old, this takes you to 1970, 71, growing up in the western suburbs, my sister in the sixth grade, myself in the fourth grade, she's put on a bus for a six-week experiment to leave the white suburban enclave, journey into North Lawndale, 2,800 block South St. Louis, and attend Crown Elementary School for a six-month run at this, which she still to this day says was a shaping experience in her life.

Praise God. It wasn't for us until 1965 that the Voting Rights Act actually ended, at least legally, some of the barriers for African Americans to exercise their right under the amendment to vote in the first place.

Why am I saying all this? because I'm preaching the Bible. There's an old chorus.

[20 : 05] I don't have it right. Something to the effect of it. They sing it around Christmas time. Let all flesh keep silent.

This whole idea of, and with fear and trembling, stand before him, ponder nothing earthly minded. Come let us adore him. The world needs to fall silent. The church needs to fall silent. And I'm praying for the day when the silence in this country and in the Christian church, even in this neighborhood, won't be one of acquiescence.

Won't be one of gritting my teeth lest I say anything. Won't be one of, well, when I go out the door and get back with my own people, I'll bring the butt to my silence. But one of adoration.

One of awe. One of all embrace. One of actually saying, then, to us all, God has granted repentance through Christ that leads to life.

[21 : 20] I have a dear friend, some of you know him, Charlie Dates. He pastors a progressive Baptist right on the Dan Ryan 36th. Ministering to me.

Along with Ramell Williams at 107th in Michigan. Along with K. Edward Copeland in Rockford. I was on the phone this week with Pastor Copeland. He said, Dave, he said, I need to impose on you. Well, what a gracious way to put it. I need to impose on you to get down to Memphis with me for the MLK 50 thing so we can have some conversations on this. I need to impose on you to start working this out.

in this church. And as my dear brother said to me this week when I visited him in the hospital, he said, Pastor, this work has to happen organically, naturally. It's too big a weight.

This isn't something we got to carry around. This is something we need to, through the power of the Holy Spirit, begin to live with one another. This is why even some people in different parts of the country, it amazes me, they're doing special days where people have individuals over to meals, and I'm like, well, we already live in a place where all that happens anyway.

[22 : 40] Let me tell it to you this way. It began at a table. The problem began at a table. The problem is dealt with at a table. The Lord's table, but also your table, my table.

After lunch today, you say, how do I apply this message? What do I do? It's as simple as this. Go down that hall and eat lunch. Go down that hall and sit across from someone that you do not even know their name.

Say, good afternoon, I'm just trying to apply the message. Natural. Table fellowship.

Let me put it to you this way. If he's actually going to put us at his table in heaven, and it says he's going to serve us, how in the world can we not go about serving the interests of others that are different from us now?

I'm not going to stop the work that needs to take place in my own heart to get hold of this. I'm not going to quit with the work that needs to take place in our own church.

[24 : 09] I'm not going to let go until in this house no one is forced to assimilate to majority culture in order to feel as though they are fully at home.

I don't care how long it takes us. That's the road we're walking because this is true. Then to the nations God has granted repentance that leads to life.

Holy Trinity Church, Hyde Park, get converted. Get converted to the universal mission of Jesus.

Get converted to the exclusive message of Jesus. Get converted to the beautiful mind of Jesus.

Our Heavenly Father, we're going to break here after a song and have lunch. And we pray that as we do so, we would be exhibiting the answer to our heart's greatest need.

[25 : 39] And so we will do it with thanksgiving in Jesus' name. Amen.