



The Church Led by the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:1-18)

Commentary: Week Nineteen

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

(7) Endorsement of the Witness to the Gentiles [11:1-18](#)

[11:1-2](#) Peter had himself been convinced of God's inclusion of the Gentiles. Now his fellow Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem needed convincing. The strongest reservations seem to have been entertained by a group of especially conservative Jewish Christians whom Luke called "those of the circumcision" (v. [2](#), NKJV; "circumcised believers," NIV). These seem to be distinguished from the apostles and wider group of Judean brethren mentioned in v. [1](#). Evidently they represented a strongly Jewish perspective and felt that any Gentile who became a Christian would have to do so by converting to Judaism and undergoing full Jewish proselyte procedure, which included circumcision. Hence they were known as the circumcision group, since they would require it of all Gentile converts. They may well have been the same group as those believers mentioned in [15:5](#) who belonged to the Pharisees and required Gentiles to be circumcised and to live by the Mosaic law. Their perspective is understandable, given that at this point Christianity was still seen as a movement within Judaism. It followed that if Gentiles became Christians they also became Jews by so doing and should thus undergo the normal procedure for converts to Judaism. Needless to say, if this line had been adopted, there never would have been an effective Gentile mission. Most Gentiles had real problems with some of the more "external" aspects of the Jewish law, such as circumcision and the food laws. Such factors doubtless had kept many Gentiles like Cornelius, who believed in the God of the Jews, from becoming full proselytes.

[11:3-12](#) It is interesting that the circumcision group raised a question about Peter's table fellowship with the Gentiles rather than about their being baptized. As has already been shown in the discussion of [10:9-16](#), the issues of table fellowship and acceptance of the Gentiles were closely related. Peter's eating with the Gentiles showed his acceptance of them as fellow Christians, and they were still *uncircumcised* (v. [3](#)). In any event, Peter's response quickly led them to the *real* issue—God's acceptance of the Gentiles. Luke basically summarized chap. [10](#), again using the device of repetition to underscore the significance of the event. The account contains only slight differences from the earlier one. It is considerably condensed, and Peter occasionally added a previously unmentioned detail. Naturally, Peter began with his own vision in [11:5-10](#), which is a detailed retelling of [10:9-16](#). In fact, that is the most extensive repetition in Peter's report to Jerusalem. For Peter it was the heart of the matter. There are no unclean people. God accepts the Gentiles. Verses [11-12](#) summarize the narrative of [10:17-25](#), relating the arrival of the three messengers from Cornelius and Peter's accompanying them to Caesarea. The most significant difference from the earlier account is the additional detail that there were six Christians from Joppa who accompanied Peter to Caesarea (v. [12](#)). More than that—it was "these" six whom Peter brought to Jerusalem as witnesses to what transpired in Cornelius's home (cf. [10:45](#)).

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 264-267.

[11:13–16](#) Verses [13–14](#) summarize the vision of Cornelius, how the angel instructed him to send to Joppa for Peter. Verse [14](#) is more specific than any of the accounts of Cornelius’s vision in chap. [10](#). Peter was to bring a message to Cornelius “through which [he] and all [his] household [would] be saved.” This expansion elucidates the reference to Peter’s words in v. [22](#) and above all explains Cornelius’s eager anticipation of Peter’s message in [10:33](#). There was no need for Peter to summarize his sermon before the Jerusalem Christians, so he quickly moved to the coming of the Spirit on the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house (v. [15](#)). Peter noted how the event interrupted his sermon. He added that the Spirit came upon them just “as he had come upon us at the beginning.” The comparison is to Pentecost. Peter made explicit here what was implicit in [10:46](#). He continued to draw the comparison in v. [16](#), which harks back to [Acts 1:5](#) and Jesus’ prediction of a baptism with the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ prediction was fulfilled for the apostles at Pentecost; for Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles it was fulfilled with the coming of the Spirit at Cornelius’s house. Certainly for Peter it was a Gentile Pentecost. He could hardly make more explicit comparisons!

[11:17–18](#) Peter concluded his report in Jerusalem by reminding his hearers once again that God gave the gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles and added, “Who was *I* to think that *I* could oppose God?” Once again he used the verb *kōlyō* in expressing the idea of opposition to God, just as he employed the same verb in [10:47](#) to question whether anyone could oppose the baptism of the Gentiles. Opposition to the Gentiles’ baptism *would* be opposition to God, for God’s leading of Peter and of Cornelius proved beyond doubt his intention to include them in his people. There really was not much the “circumcision group” could say now. God was clearly in it. Who could object? Silence quickly gave way to praise of God in his triumphant advance of the gospel. God had granted “repentance unto life” to the Gentiles.

Not all the problems were solved, however. Not all the Jewish Christians were satisfied with taking in Gentiles without circumcision. As yet there had been no mass influx of Gentiles, and the problems were not altogether evident. Things would change, particularly with the great success of Paul and Barnabas’s mission among the Gentiles. Once again the issue would be raised by the more staunchly Jewish faction—“Shouldn’t Gentiles be circumcised when they become Christians?” “Can we really have table fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles who do not abide by the food laws?” (author’s paraphrase). These issues would surface once more for a final showdown in the Jerusalem Conference of chap. [15](#).