

Acts Series Part 30

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[0 : 00] What is a Christian? How does somebody become a Christian? These are very important questions. They're important questions for somebody who wishes to become a Christian, but maybe isn't clear what that involves or what it means to be a Christian.

They're important questions for those who are unsure as to whether they are Christians. They think they're Christians or they would like to be Christians, but are not sure if they are or not.

They're important questions for those of us who are Christians or who profess to be Christians, who believe that we are Christians, to consider, well, what is a Christian?

And to confirm, indeed, that our profession is a valid one. So they're important questions for all of us, whatever we stand or whatever we profess.

And I want to consider these questions and answer them in a measure with reference to the chapter we want to consider this evening, which is Acts chapter 11.

[1 : 13] Now, before turning to explain the manner in which I want to consider these questions, let's just take a wee step back and remind ourselves where we are and what we've been considering, especially in Acts chapter 10 and now as we move in to chapter 11.

Now, those of you who have been here when we've been preaching through chapter 10 will be clear that this section of the book of Acts relates to the conversion of the Gentile household of Cornelius.

And we're not going to dwell on the great significance of that. We've done so already on other occasions. But the events that this section of Acts describes are actually related on three occasions in the course of these two chapters in three different circumstances.

We have at the beginning of chapter 10 the visions themselves described, the vision to Cornelius, the vision to Peter. But then, of course, we know that as a result of that vision, Peter goes to the home of Cornelius.

And as they meet, so there is occasion to once again relate the visions, that they would explain to each other why they're there.

[2 : 42] And so we have that recorded for us also. And so the same events are recorded on a second occasion. And as we move into chapter 11, we find largely the same events recorded for us on a third occasion.

And now there is a reason for that. And the reason is that Peter heads to Jerusalem, and it is necessary for him to explain what happened in the home of Cornelius, to explain why it was that he baptized Gentiles.

The Christians in Jerusalem have heard of this, and they are concerned. They're not sure if this is right and proper. And so Peter has to not justify himself, but certainly explain what happened and why he did what he did.

And we'll find as we read the chapter that the Christians in Jerusalem are satisfied with the explanation given. But it does mean that on a third occasion, the events of the visions in particular, and the conversion of the household of Cornelius is related to us.

Now, given that, and given that we've already had occasion to consider these visions, I want to consider this chapter in a different way. And I've already indicated what it is I want to think about in the light of this chapter, the questions that we've posed.

[4 : 13] What is a Christian? What is involved in becoming a Christian? And we'll do so really taking as our point of departure the fact that in this chapter 11, while the first part of the chapter relates to what I've commented on, Peter explaining his actions to the believers in Jerusalem, the chapter then goes on to give us a brief account of how other Christians who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem take the message to other places.

And particularly, we're interested in what is said concerning those who reached Antioch and spoke the good news there to the Greeks in Antioch.

We read there in verse 20 of chapter 11, Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

Now, this announcing of the good news is blessed by God, is owned by God, and we're told that many became Christians. And then we're told in verse 26 that it is in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

And so, that serves as a useful starting point for us to consider the question, well, what is a Christian? At Antioch, they were first called Christians.

[5 : 45] But what is a Christian? And how do you become a Christian? Chapter 11 will help us in the following way. Throughout the chapter, we find five different descriptions of how folks became Christians or what involved in somebody becoming a Christian.

Now, I stress five different descriptions, not five different ways of becoming a Christian, but five descriptions that together give us a very full and helpful picture of what is involved in being a Christian and indeed in becoming a Christian.

And each in turn, and especially as we draw them all together, presents for us a clear and full picture, perhaps not an exhaustive one, but a very clear one, of what a Christian is and how one becomes a Christian.

So, what we're going to do now is read chapter 11 from the beginning through to verse 26, which is pretty much the whole chapter, but we will leave out the final few verses.

And I want you to do some of the work this evening. And as we read, see if you can identify five different ways in which becoming a Christian is described.

[7 : 12] And hopefully you will notice them. And if you don't, well, following the reading, we will identify them and consider each in turn. And that really is what we want to cover this evening.

So, let's read the chapter. And as I say, I would encourage you as we read to see the occasions during the reading where we have described what is involved in being a Christian or becoming a Christian.

Let's read then in Acts chapter 11. The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God.

So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them. Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened.

I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was.

[8 : 20] I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, Get up, Peter, kill and eat.

I replied, Surely not, Lord. Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth. The voice spoke from heaven a second time. Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.

This happened three times, and then it was pulled up to heaven again. Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them.

These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, Send to Joppa for Simon, who is called Peter.

He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved. As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.

[9 : 24] Then I remembered what the Lord had said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?

When they heard this, they had no further objections, and praised God, saying, So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also.

Telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord and with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

[10 : 39] Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. The Word of God. Well, I wonder how many you found.

I must confess that as I was reading, I think I found one or two additional ones that I haven't noted down and won't be sharing with you this evening.

So in saying that, I suppose I'm also saying that if what you find or found isn't exactly the same as mine, it doesn't mean that you're wrong and I'm right, but rather the richness of the passage is greater than perhaps I had first imagined.

But I will just mention and then think of each in turn five descriptions that we do find and that I want to think about briefly this evening. The first one is in verse 1 of the chapter.

[11 : 41] We're told there that the brothers in Jerusalem recognized or relate the fact that the Gentiles had also received the Word of God.

That's the first thing we want to notice. They received the Word of God, a description of what's involved in becoming and being a Christian, those who receive the Word of God.

But then the second one that I will be commenting on that again you may have noticed as well is in verse 14. And that is a language that is brought to us by the angel.

And we read there that the angel spoke to Cornelius with these words, He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

So a Christian is one who receives the Word of God. A Christian is one who is saved. Then in verse 18, the objections have been met satisfactorily.

[12 : 46] The Christians in Jerusalem are not only content or satisfied with the explanation, they rejoice in discovering that it really is the case that Gentiles have been converted, have become Christians.

And how do they describe it? Well, they're in verse 18. So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life. Being granted repentance unto life.

Another description of what's involved in becoming a Christian. Then in verse 21, as we move on, the passage moves on really to a new account of these Christians who had been scattered as a result of the persecution.

And those who are in Antioch and were told the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. So a fourth description of men and women becoming Christians.

What does it involve? It involves them believing and turning to the Lord. And then finally in verse 24, as the work that is being done in Antioch is, if you wish, is summarized.

[13 : 59] And we read there at the end of the verse, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Becoming a Christian. Becoming part of the church of Jesus Christ.

What does it involve? Well, it involves being brought to the Lord. So, let's think briefly of each of these in turn. In verse 1, Now the disciples in Jerusalem clearly knew something of what had happened in the household of Cornelius.

We don't know how much they knew, but I'm sure they must have known at the very least that Cornelius and his household had been baptized. And for them, there would have been no clearer evidence that Peter considered them to be Christians, bona fide Christians.

And so, they were baptized. And of course, they are disturbed by this and are unsure if this was the right way for Peter to proceed. But for our purposes, what is of interest is how they describe these baptized believers?

Well, they are those who have received the Word of God. So, in answer to our question, what is a Christian? Well, a Christian is one who receives the Word of God.

[15 : 28] What does that mean? What does it involve, receiving the Word of God? Well, it involves certainly these elements. To receive the Word of God, it is fundamental and necessary to recognize that the Word that is brought to your attention, the Word that you are presented with, is indeed from God.

If you doubt whether it is from God, if you doubt the origin of the message, then it's impossible to receive it as the Word of God. Cornelius and his household received the message from Peter as the Word of God.

That's actually stated for us explicitly in verse 33 of chapter 10. From the very lips of Cornelius, what do we read?

Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. They received the Word as the Word of God.

So, to receive the Word of God is to recognize the Word as being from God. But to receive the Word of God also has the meaning of accepting as true the message that is delivered.

[16 : 47] You can't be a Christian if the message of the Gospel is presented to you and you say, well, I'm not sure if that's true. I'm not sure if I believe that. I'm not altogether happy with some of what's being said.

That doesn't seem right to me. I don't believe that. Well, it's very honest perhaps of you to say that, but you're not a Christian. A Christian is somebody who receives the Word of God, who recognizes that what is being presented to them, the Gospel message that is presented, is from God and is true.

All that they are told concerning their own condition and their own need. All that they are told concerning who Jesus is and what He has done for them. A Christian receives the Word of God. But this receiving also surely implies not only a mental assent to what is heard, but it implies adopting and accepting the actions that need to be taken in the light of the message received. You see, the message of the Gospel isn't simply a presentation of facts for us to ponder on or to intellectually consider. The message of the Gospel is one that challenges us to act, to believe, to repent, to change our lives.

[18 : 03] And we'll move on to think about that in some of the other language that's used to describe becoming a Christian. But in order to move on, such is a Christian.

A Christian is one who receives the Word of God. Now, that has many implications that we haven't got time to develop fully, but as those who are entrusted with the task of telling others and sharing with others the good news, we have to be very clear that that proclamation, that evangelism, must be message-centered.

Because if it is necessary for somebody, in order that they become a Christian, that they receive the Word of God, then how important for us to present the Word of God and to make it clear what the Word of God says.

For how can they receive a Word that they have never heard? But it also has an implication for us in our lives as Christians, not simply in terms of what is involved in becoming a Christian to receive the Word of God, but how we live as Christians.

As Christians, we are those who receive the Word of God. We are those who submit to the authority of the Word of God. We accept it as true whether we like it or not, whether it's uncomfortable or not.

[19 : 23] We are those who receive the Word of God. We don't stand over the Word to select from it that which is convenient for us, but we are those who stand under it and submit to its authority because we know its origin.

It is indeed the Word of God. So that's the first description we have. These believers, Cornelius and his household, received the Word of God.

But then secondly, we've noticed that another word is used, another language is used to describe becoming a Christian in verse 14. And here it's the angel who is speaking.

Now it's a curious matter, somewhat intriguing, that though this is the third occasion that we're told of this vision that Cornelius had, yet it's the first time that we find this detail there that we find in verse 14, and it's Peter who shares it with us.

Evidently, Cornelius had told Peter, though we're not given that in the previous account, but here it comes to light. The angel, in his conversation or in his presentation to Cornelius, he assures him that this Peter who he is to call to his home will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.

[20 : 52] The angel is contemplating the scenario, the expectation that Cornelius will become a Christian.

And how does he describe it? Well, he describes it as Cornelius and his household being saved. What is a Christian? A Christian is one who has been saved.

Now what does that word mean? What does it mean to be saved? Well, the Greek word used is not a particularly religious word. It can and is used in a religious context, but it simply means to be rescued, to be liberated, to be preserved from harm.

And the angel tells Cornelius that that is what must happen if he is to be a Christian. He must be saved, he must be rescued, he must be liberated.

And that word carries with it as its primary meaning the idea of being saved from something. We are saved from danger, we're saved from death, we're saved from harm.

[22 : 03] What are we saved from when we become Christians? Well, we're saved from condemnation. The Bible tells us that we stand condemned for our sin.

But when we become Christians, when we put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we are saved from that condemnation. Now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We're saved from condemnation, we're saved from death. The wages of sin, and we are all sinners, is death. Death now, in the lives that we live, spiritual death, and eternal death.

This is our condition, this is what we deserve. But when we become Christians, we are saved from that death. We're saved also from the dominion and the authority of the devil.

We're saved from the power of sin. We are by nature under the authority of the devil. He holds us in his sway when we are out with Christ, when we are not Christians.

[23 : 07] But when we become Christians, we are saved from that. We have a new king and a new ruler. Our new king is Jesus, and we are saved from the dominion of the devil, saved from the power of sin in our lives.

We're saved from an empty life, a directionless life, and perhaps we could go on. But to become a Christian, to be a Christian, is to be one who has been saved from these things.

I think that language does in the first instance and primarily speak of being saved from. But I think we can also legitimately speak or recognize that we are also saved for.

We are saved for a new life. We are saved for the enjoyment of a great spiritual heritage, of great gospel privileges. We become, as Christians, members of the family of God.

We enjoy a new life in relationship with and in service to God. Saved from death, saved from condemnation, saved from the power of sin, but saved for a new life, life in all its fullness.

[24 : 26] So that's the second way in which in this passage or in this chapter we have described what is involved in becoming a Christian, in being a Christian. We are those who are saved.

But then we move to the third description in chapter 18. Here we have the same Christians from Jerusalem who began the chapter, or the beginning of the chapter are described as speaking of Cornelius and his household receiving the word of God.

Now they've heard what Peter has to say. They're persuaded. They're convinced. In fact, they're rejoicing that these things are so. And now they describe what has happened to Cornelius and his household in a different way.

They're speaking about the same people. It's not talking about different ways of becoming a Christian. They're describing the same people who have become Christians but in a different way. And in what way do they do it?

Well, there we read it at the end of verse 18. And so then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life. What is a Christian?

[25 : 32] A Christian is one who has been granted repentance unto life. And in that brief phrase we have three elements just briefly noting each of the words that we have there.

Repentance. What is that? Well, it is, I think, familiar to us. Because we become Christians by the way of repentance and faith. We repent of our sins.

We turn from our sins and we turn to God. We were thinking of this not that long ago. Repentance as one movement from our sin to God.

And here, the believers in Jerusalem, in speaking of Cornelius and his household, they say they're Christians. And why are they sure that they are Christians? Because they have repented. They've turned from their sin.

They've turned to God. This is something that we must do. This is something that you must do if you are to be a Christian. If you have not repented of your sin, you are not a Christian.

[26 : 35] You may believe many things that the Bible says. You may be very sympathetic to the gospel message, but if you have not repented of your sins, then you may be many things, but you are not a Christian.

Cornelius and his household are Christians. Why? Because they have repented. This is something that we must do. It's something you must do. In fact, we might think that the way of salvation is graciously provided for us by God.

Jesus has done all that is necessary. He has given His life as a sacrifice for sin. He's died in our place. He rose triumphant from the grave. All is provided.

All is set before us. And then there's something we need to do. We need to repent. Now there is some truth in that. But as we consider this phrase that is used, we discover that even our repentance, which is indeed something we must do, is something that is given to us.

Because this is what the believers say. That Cornelius and his household, they're Christians. Why? Because they have been granted repentance unto life. They've been granted it. They've been given it.

[27 : 46] God is so good and so concerned that we might be saved. Not only does He provide a way of salvation, but He works in us and gives to us faith and repentance.

A Christian is indeed a blessed person because he has been given by God the grace of repentance. He's been enabled by God to repent of his sin, to recognize his need and put his trust in Jesus.

Cornelius and his household are Christians because they have received the gift of repentance and they have repented. But then there's a final element.

A Christian is one who has been granted repentance unto life. That movement that we spoke of, we turn from death, we turn from sin, but we turn to God and we turn to a new life, to a life, in the words of Jesus, in all its fullness.

This is a Christian, one who, by a gracious God, has been granted repentance unto life. But then, fourthly, we noticed another description in verse 21.

[29 : 01] The passage moves on. It's speaking of the missionary work of the believers in Antioch, and we're told that a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

It's worth noting, just very briefly, why does this happen? You know, why the success of these evangelists, of these missionaries? Well, we are given the answer. The verse begins, the Lord's hand was with them.

The Lord's hand was with them. The Lord accompanied, the Lord owned the proclamation of the good news, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

They became Christians. What was necessary for them to become Christians? Well, it was necessary for them to believe and to turn, to believe and to turn to the Lord.

The message that is presented is one, going back to what we've already been considering, is a message that they recognize as being from God. They receive the message.

[29 : 59] They believe the message. They believe that it's true what the evangelists are announcing and proclaiming to them. And the genuineness of their belief is demonstrated by their turning to the Lord.

So, these two things to go together. They're not two independent requirements. Well, you have to believe and then, well, once you've done that, you then have to turn to the Lord. They go together. The genuineness of their belief, the assurance that we can have that they have a saving faith, they have believed as they ought to believe, is demonstrated by the fact that they then turn to the Lord. What is a Christian? A Christian is one who believes the gospel message and in believing does what is needful, turns to the Lord, lays hold of Jesus, casts himself upon the mercy of Jesus, bows down before the authority of Jesus.

A Christian is one who turns to the Lord. It's not adopting a new religion. It was common in Peru where we served for many years that when folk became Christians that others would say, oh, they've changed their religion.

That is how it was perceived. They've changed their religion. Now, on level, you could understand how people would describe it in that way, but it is a very false description of what becoming a Christian is.

[31 : 29] It's not about changing religion. It's about turning to the person of Jesus Christ and trusting in Him and bowing down before Him and casting ourselves upon His mercy as our Savior.

They believed and they turned. And so, we have this fourth description. And perhaps we should have been doing this at every turn when we thought of each one, but now I ask you, is that something you have done?

Have you believed and turned to the Lord? Indeed, we can put that in the present and make it applicable to all of us here present. Do you believe and constantly and permanently and daily turn to the Lord and lay hold of Him and trust in Him?

Such is a Christian those who believe and turn to the Lord. And then finally, in verse 24, we have a further description of what is involved in becoming a Christian.

As we noted, this is a summary statement of all that has been going on in Antioch, and we read there at the end of the verse, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

[32 : 45] Now, that word that we have translated there on this occasion in Acts as brought is used in other occasions in Acts and especially in the first couple of chapters or in chapter 2 particularly where we have the word translated added.

You remember the occasion when so many were converted and we're told and 3,000 were added to the church and they were added to the church daily those who were being saved. You remember those references right at the beginning of Acts.

Well, it's the same verb that is used here but on this occasion translated somewhat differently.

We're told that a great number of people were brought to the Lord. I think perhaps the use of the verb brought is helpful on this occasion because if we think of it simply as them being added to the church, we could think of it simply as a description of a growing church.

More people became Christians, more were added to the church and it doesn't go beyond that. It doesn't tell us anything more about what becoming a Christian involves. But the verb bringing does introduce an element and essentially what it does is identify the central part that is played by the Lord Himself.

It's the Lord who brings to the Lord. He is beginning and end of the whole process. He is the one who brings and He brings to Himself. A great number of people were brought to the Lord.

[34 : 16] You don't bring yourself to the Lord. Somebody needs to bring you. And who brings you? Well, it's the Lord Himself by His Spirit and making use of others as His instruments also.

It is the Lord who brings and He brings to Himself. A great number of people were brought to the Lord. So, a number of descriptions in this one chapter that help us as we draw them all together and see the fuller picture that is painted by each of them.

It helps us to have a better understanding of what a Christian is, of what is involved in being a Christian. And so, as we do close and as we draw the threads together, I would simply ask you, have you received the Word of God?

Do you receive the Word of God? Are you saved? Have you been saved by God as you have put your trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?

He is a Savior and He is a Savior who has come to save. Are you saved? Have you been granted repentance unto life? Have you been brought to that point of recognizing your condition as a sinner and your need of a Savior?

[35 : 36] And have you turned from your sin and turned to the Lord? Have you believed and turned to the Lord? Have you cast yourself upon His mercy? Have you accepted Him as your Lord and Savior?

Have you believed and turned? Has the Lord brought you to Himself? And if you have, if you are a Christian, well, praise God, but if these things are not true of you, then now is an opportune time.

Now is a time when the Lord invites you and would draw you to Himself. He would bring to your attention these things that you might receive the Word of God and believe and turn to Him.

Let us pray.