

“Connected”
- Acts 11 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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1 Now the apostles and brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God. 2 And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those of the circumcision contended with him, 3 saying, "You went in to uncircumcised men and ate with them!" 4 But Peter

explained it to them in order from the beginning, saying: 5 "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object descending like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came to me. 6 "When I observed it intently and considered, I saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, creeping things, and birds of the air. 7 "And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' 8 "But I said, 'Not so, Lord! For nothing common or unclean has at any time entered my mouth.' 9 "But the voice answered me again from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' 10 "Now this was done three times, and all were drawn up again into heaven. 11 "At that very moment, three men stood before the house where I was, having been sent to me from Caesarea. 12 "Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. 13 "And he told us how he had seen an angel standing in his house, who said to him, 'Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, 14 'who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved.' 15 "And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, as upon us at the beginning. 16 "Then I remembered the word of the Lord, how He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' 17 "If therefore God gave them the same gift as He gave us when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" 18 When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life." 19 Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. 22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. 27 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.



A quote from the book **Christianity: History, Belief, and Practice**

“Christian love leads to the peculiar exchange of gifts and suffering, of exaltation and humiliations, of defeat and victory; the individual is able through personal sacrifice and suffering to contribute to the development of the whole. All forms of ecclesiastical, political, and social communities of Christianity are founded on this basic idea of the fellowship of believers as the body of Christ...”

A Barna Group telephone survey of Christians across the United States reveals some interesting facts about the state of accountability in the church: **only 5%** of people say their church does anything to hold them accountable for integrating biblical beliefs and principles into their lives. Why the distaste for accountability in the church?

There could be, of course, many reasons why such accountability is uncommon. These are the reasons I see:

1. People hate conflict. The Barna Group states church leaders don't often engage in accountability because they don't want to be confrontational. The same is true among church members. Few people want to call out others on their sin.

2. Christians do not understand that sanctification is a community project. Many texts in the Bible assume or state outright that one of the ways we grow as Christians is through gospel-centered conversation with one another. The New Testament places great importance upon motivating one another to love and good deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25), bearing each other's burdens (Galatians 6:1-2), and instructing one another (Romans 15:14). Many Christians are never taught that sanctification is a community project.

3. People like their privacy. Accountability is about confessing sin to one another, but few today like the idea of divulging their temptations, sins, and the state of their heart. This is far too personal for some.

4. Christians are not taught (seriously) about biblical accountability. James 5:16 is not a suggestion but a command. "Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." Moreover, this is a command tied to our health as Christians. In this text James mentions cases where personal sin leads to a serious physical or emotional illness, calling for the elders of the church to administer healing. Before we get to that point, however, we should be in the practice of the regular "preventative medicine" of confessing our sins to each other and praying for each other.

5. Christians falsely believe accountability is only for behavior modification. Some reject the idea of accountability because they believe it is all about fear or shame-based change. Accountability for them is about staying away from certain taboo sins so they can avoid an awkward conversation in the future. But the Bible says there's a kind of conversation we can have that actually addresses the heart—not just outward behavior (Hebrews 3:13).

6. Some Christians have experienced unhelpful accountability. For some Christians, their accountability partners and groups simply did not "work" for them. They experienced no change. But what if we used this excuse for anything in which we engage: listening to sermons, praying together, taking communion, engaging in service projects? We don't give up on any of these things because at times they don't seem to "work." Rather, each time we strive to do them better, with a true heart, and with careful thought.

7. Christians falsely believe accountability in the church is only a crutch for when things get really bad. Often we seek out accountability when things have come to a head in our lives, when we are facing a grave consequence. But the various "one anothers" of the New Testament are not just for those facing specific consequences for their sin, but for all Christians.

8. Christians are not disciplined. Accountability makes most sense in a context of discipleship: being personally mentored, guided, and directed by spiritually mature individuals, and in the context of a community of disciples. In a church culture that makes true disciples, accountability is the most natural thing in the world.

9. Christians lack quality friendships. Accountability is also most natural in a gospel-centered friendship. We need the kind of friends mentioned in the proverbs: men and women who stick with us through thick and thin, who aren't afraid to confront us, and who compel us to do what is right. Accountability is not only giving an account of my sin to another, but receiving an account of God's grace in return from a Christian friend.

10. Christians have not tasted gospel-centered accountability in the church. The gospel of Christ is what guides and protects good accountability. Informed by the gospel, a good accountability partner will not be condemning, but gracious. Informed by the gospel, a good accountability partner will treat sin seriously because Christ took sin seriously. A good accountability partner will use the eternal promises of the gospel to motivate us to a higher standard. As Christians, we need to be taught how to do this well.

It should be no surprise to anyone that the greater church today finds itself locking horns with the tide of social culture and principles of rabid individualism. Can we, in any stretch of the imagination, see the chasm of divide between biblical and overtly corporate Christianity, and the revolution ...the tidal wave, of self-determining individualism without clearly recognizing that such is simply a cornerstone of Satan's onslaught against this world?

If you were to pull back the curtain you would find that this issue is not just **A** problem...**AN** issue, but it is effectively **THE** issue facing the greater church today. It is the root and foundation of every angry departure from the church, every argument with church authority and goals, every rebellion...every bitter heart.

In an online letter I read the other day...sort of a Christian 'Dear Abby' kind of column moderated by a pastor of some stripe, I read a rather typical complaint. The person said "**I am frustrated with how things are, and I am having a hard**

time finding a church that shares my convictions.” The sentiment shared...a very common one actually, is one of seeking a church that thinks as I do, believes as I do, fellowships as I do, lives as I do and effectively operates the church as I think it should operate. Sadly, the quest is not to find a *biblical* church...one that teaches scripture, disciplines its members and righteously serves the kingdom pursuits. This mentality has had widespread and frankly catastrophic results. We live currently in the cultural embrace of the ‘me too’ movement but in the church we are enduring the ‘me *only*’ movement!

We so often talk now about a “personal relationship with Christ.” A nice sentiment, and in the right context has its value. But let’s also acknowledge that that phrase never occurs in the Bible. How is it that the thing we find most important about our faith was never mentioned in the Bible? When you follow the Apostles around in the New Testament, they never ask people to ‘invite Jesus into their heart’ or to have a personal relationship with Jesus. Generally, they proclaim Jesus as the risen Lord and Savior and call people to lay down their lives and follow him. ...to take their place in the body of Christ...and to live their lives in service of the pursuits of the kingdom of God.

Yes, the apostles ministered to individuals, but the overwhelming aspects of their ministries was to establish churches and disciple the believers within them. Scripture is rich with corporate and ‘other-centered’ instruction. Battles were fought together, Christian fellowship was crucial. Believers supported each other, corrected each other, pray with each other, and held each other up.

That is not to say that there were never any solo runs. But such was never conducted without corporate backup. There were no spiritual ‘Rambos’, and no pastoral ‘Lone Rangers.’ Even when it was hard, everyone answered to somebody. Even when the individual was absolutely in the right and had to fight his way through the fray to prove it! Today’s scripture opens on just that kind of situation. And despite the fact that Peter was clearly and even supernaturally ‘in the right,’ he still took the time and the grief to lay out his argument before others. He took the humble road and honored others. It would have been easy for him to tell these guys to take a flying leap and then went out and started his own church. Lord knows that countless individuals have done exactly that and believed that they had righteous reasons. But God has always honored humility and has always rejected pride...*even when we are right.*

Instead of running away mumbling curses under his breathe, Peter moves now to *tell the story*. In what appears to be only a “peace-maker” move, Peter again lays out the events that had transpired in our chapter 10. Events that had transpired to bring him now to the “hot seat” that he was in. The point that Peter began to extol was more than just an obvious “save-my-hide” play by play. God was trying to get through all the muck and muddle to declare His grand plan. The objective was to get past the preconceived ideas... make His grace and *His gospel*, available to *all*. But such had to occur in the context of Godly discussion, not running away.

Peter took the correct and godly approach on this matter by looking to the words of the Lord, to *scripture*, for the final word. We all are quite fond of claiming we are ‘bible people’ until we come up against a principle or position we don’t like or we personal reject. Again, that’s when we hoof it on down the road to find a church that agrees with me! We separate from the body of believers that God assigned us to and go back on our word...our promises to those we called our brothers and sisters, all because of one person: *me*.

Peter had the spiritual maturity and the common sense to go *God’s way* instead of attempting to get God to go *his way*! How we could learn from Peter’s lead! He knew clearly that what occurred was not his doing, but was a sovereign act of his Father. Further, he was not shy at declaring that fact. But he also seemed to understand that ultimately it was God’s fight and God wasn’t threatened, scared, or intimidated.

It is at this juncture that we usually go for our spiritual nuclear bomb...dropping the ‘God told me’ deterrent on all those around me. However, *and I cannot stress this enough*, we must be very cautious to declare the voice of God. It must never be a self-serving act in order to justify our own desires. Those who have attempted to do so throughout scripture *and history* have paid dearly. And at the very least, it’s even more of a bitter pill when we have to cough it back up again in attempt to back peddle out of the situation we have gotten ourselves into.

Jeremiah 14:14-15 “*Then the LORD said, "These prophets are telling lies in my name. I did not send them or tell them to speak. I did not give them any messages. They prophesy of visions and revelations they have never seen or heard. They speak foolishness made up in their own lying hearts. Therefore, says the LORD, I will punish these lying prophets, for they have spoken in my name even though I never sent them. They say that no war or famine will come, but they themselves will die by war and famine!"*

What brought Peters accusers to silence was the simple presentation of the facts. It was just the truth. But both parties had to sit at the table and hear all the details. No one ran away or cowered in the church down the street. They *wanted* the truth. Even if it hurt their flesh and bruised their egos. In the end, everyone glorified God. That's the end of a meeting when God is the judge.

And please note that this was an important turning point in the future of the church. Who knows what would have happened if things had gone the other way. One can only step back and wonder what incredible paths have been unwittingly lost out of self-righteousness and a singular mindset instead of a corporate one. Except in a lot of cases, I don't have to wonder' because I have been at this church thing now long enough to measure such not in years' but rather in decades, and thus I have many times been the sad witness to where that solo road took someone. It has been universally "not pretty." Oh God still did what he wanted to do, He just got someone else to take point and get the job done.

Praise God that Peter was man enough to talk it out...to acquiesce in humility. He still got what he wanted and what was right. He just didn't have to burn down a village to get it. That's the difference between man's way and God's way I guess.

Because of Peter's testimony and faithfulness, the Jewish believers were forced to drastically reappraise their religious position. It is a great thing to witness hearts that are receptive to the leading of the Spirit. When that ceases within a body of believers, it's all over. Not God's plans, but God's use of that body to execute those plans.

It's been said that "*The door that was cracked by Peter, was now going to be crashed by Paul.*" (KJV Bible Commentary). The Jew of Jews...highly educated at the feet of the best teacher of his time...a pharisee and the youngest member of the Sanhedrin in history ...was now going to be fetched out of spiritual oblivion by a nobody apostle named Barnabus. Hmmm...apparently God doesn't use the same yard stick as we do to measure worth and ability! Paul had already had a few helpings of crow in the past, and he was going to have some more before this was over.

The years had passed and the great "Saul of Tarsus" was languishing in obscurity. Humbled? No doubt. Broken? Highly likely. Paul had carried on for years trying to do things his own way, and look where it got him. Paul had operated his life according to his own rules...all for his own advancement and self-interest. Now it was no longer about him...no, now it was about everyone else. Now it was for the church. The offer had come.

The language speaks of an arduous and long search that was exercised in order to find him. Oh to have heard that conversation! Where was he? Working as a bag boy in a grocery store someplace? Pumping gas? Sweeping offices at night? In my minds eye, suddenly there was a familiar voice... "*are you Saul? Saul of Tarsus?*" "*yes...yes...I was him once.*" "*Are you ready to go to work?*" *Oh yes....oh God yes...* The "Great Commission" had begun.

A new breed of ministers had been born. Men born at the hands of tribulation. Because of the persecution that began at the murder of Stephen, much of the church scattered throughout the known world. However, they did not cease to do the work of the Kingdom. The things we count as adversity and difficulties can often turn for the benefit of the gospel if we refuse to be deterred. The humbling...the breaking...all necessary for God's use. The text says that "*the hand of the Lord was with them.*" No matter what is faced, that is the one and only weapon to make sure is packed for the journey.

John 6:44 "*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him...*"

Because God was in it, the work bore great fruit. Verse 21 tells us "*a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*" Without Him calling in advance, *their* efforts and *our* efforts would have come to an empty end.

The church, either reeling from the speedy advance of the gospel within the Gentile ranks or rejoicing in the same, sent Barnabas to check out the situation. Barnabas, nicknamed the "Son of Encouragement," was out in the field again. He recognized God's grace being poured out. He knew when it was not just a "good thing, but moreover a "God thing." In his joy, he encouraged them all that, "*with purpose of heart,*" they should "*continue with the Lord.*" Barnabus was the man chosen by God. Not a Rambo. Not a Lone Ranger. Barnabus, like Peter before him...and Paul who followed in kind. These men were **connected**. They were part of something bigger than themselves. Men "full of the Holy Spirit and of faith."