

The First Christians

Acts 11:19-30

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Most of the time, the first person to do something is remembered for it. Most people know that the first person to set foot on the moon was Neil Armstrong. Many can tell you that the first person to fly faster than the speed of sound was Chuck Yeager. We know that the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean was Amelia Earheart. Even in the book of Acts, we know that the first Gentile convert was Cornelius. Today we're going to come across another first—we're going to meet the first people to be called Christians. Yes, there were thousands of followers of Christ by this point, but the term "Christian" had not yet become part of people's vocabulary. Though we don't learn the name of the first individual to be called a Christian, we do get to see the story that led to it happening in our text today.

As we've been working through the book of Acts, we've traced the spread of the church across several different fronts. First, we saw the Holy Spirit descend at Pentecost, causing many in Jerusalem to be saved. Then we saw the gospel spreading beyond Jerusalem to people in Samaria and the Ethiopian eunuch. Then we saw a major shift as Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius, a Gentile, and the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles just as He had descended upon the Jewish believers at Pentecost. This created massive waves in the fledgling church, and they wrestled with how to handle these changes. That process would continue for a while.

Today's passage shows us that the Lord was continuing to push the early church to reach further than they had before. As the church continued to spread, we see it slowly taking shape.

The Dispersion

Our passage picks up in the aftermath of Peter meeting with the other church leaders in Jerusalem after the conversion of Cornelius and the other Gentiles.

¹⁹ Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. ²⁰ However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-21, NLT)

Luke now shifts to focus away from Jerusalem, this time to the city of Antioch. After Stephen was martyred, most of the believers scattered. It is reasonable to assume that many of them returned to their hometowns. This dispersion of the early believers served to spread the gospel even farther, as they inevitably told others about what had happened. So Christianity spread far and wide.

But Luke tells us that these early believers had only been sharing the gospel with other Jews. This is not a big surprise, as that's what the apostles had been doing as well. Apparently, some of these dispersed believers began preaching to Gentiles in Antioch though. We don't know whether they had heard about what had happened with Peter and Cornelius, or if they had simply been led by the Lord to do so, but we do know that many in Antioch began to believe in the Lord.

There were 16 cities in total named Antioch near the Mediterranean Sea, because they were named in honor of the Seleucid kings Antiochus I through IV. The Antioch to which we turn our attention today was located in Syria, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem, quite a distance from where the apostles were. We are told that the gospel spread there because of believers who were from Cyprus and Cyrene, who when they went to Antioch, preached the gospel. These individuals covered a lot of ground.

Antioch was a booming metropolis at this time. It likely had a population of around 500,000 people, making it the third most populous city in Rome at that time. The first was the city of Rome itself, and the second was Alexandria. Antioch was a massive place.

It was also a bit of a melting pot. There were Jews there, but they were a minority. It was also filled with Greeks, Romans, and Arabs. Situated in the middle of the Roman Empire, it became an important center for trade. Because of all the different cultures there, there really wasn't any one set of guiding values for the people of Antioch. As a result, Antioch became a very pagan place, known for its decadence and sinful indulgence. Some commentators have compared it to an ancient version of Las Vegas, known as sin city.

It is in this quagmire of debauchery that the gospel began to take hold among the Gentiles. These early believers, whose names we don't know, had the boldness to share the gospel even here. They were willing to be a light in a place that seemed utterly dark.

That's a good reminder and encouragement for us. We may be tempted to believe that some places are so utterly sinful that there is no hope for change, whether it's your workplace, a group you belong to, or even an entire nation. But the spread of the gospel to Antioch reminds us that when God is part of the equation, all bets are off.

The Investigation

Once word of what was happening in Antioch reached Jerusalem, it definitely got people's attention. Antioch was not a place people would have expected to be the center of Gentile Christianity, but it was. So they felt it necessary to investigate these claims and find out exactly what was happening.

²² When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord.

²⁴ Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:22-24, NLT)

The church sent Barnabas to go and see what was happening. We were introduced to Barnabas earlier in the book of Acts. We first saw him in chapter 4, when he sold some land that he owned in Cyprus, and gave the proceeds to the apostles. Prior to this, he was known as Joseph, but the apostles gave him the nickname Barnabas, which means “Son of Encouragement.” He was well-respected in the early church.

We also saw him when Saul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion. No one else was willing to get close to Saul, because they feared he might be trying to trap them. But Barnabas talked with him and vouched for him to the other believers, enabling Saul to meet with Peter and James while he was there.

The Jerusalem church thought Barnabas was the right man for the job. Barnabas was originally from Cyprus, so he might have even known the believers who began preaching to the Gentiles. If nothing else, he would have been familiar with the area and likely spoken the language of the people there. Most importantly, Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. The people trusted his judgment and felt comfortable sending him to investigate and report back to them.

And what did Barnabas find? He found evidence of God’s blessing among these people! The people had trusted in Jesus! How could he know that was the case? What evidence of God’s blessing did he find? Throughout scripture, we are told that there are certain things that will accompany the coming of the Holy Spirit into a person’s life. In Galatians, Paul gives a list of such things,

²² But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! (Galatians 5:22-23, NLT)

Barnabas saw lives being changed for the better. He saw people becoming more like Christ, and he rejoiced at what God was doing!

Barnabas was clearly the right man for the job, because his instructions to the people were simply that they needed to stay true to the Lord. This was a pagan city. The people did not live in accordance with Jewish law. They would not have fit in with the believers in Jerusalem. They were probably still very rough around the edges. It would have been tempting for Barnabas to come and try to tell them that they hadn’t made it yet. He might have come with a list of things they needed to fix before they could be in fellowship with the church in Jerusalem. But that’s not what he did. He exhorted them to put the Lord first. He knew that if they did that, the other things would eventually take care of themselves. He was willing to be patient with them and allow the Lord to work. It’s a good reminder to us as well. We must strive to make the Lord first in all we do—when we do that, many of our rough edges will be knocked off in the process.

Getting Help

Barnabas rejoiced at what was happening in Antioch and had the opportunity to see many others come to the Lord while he was there. But he quickly discovered that the task before him was greater than he could handle on his own. So he decided to recruit some help.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. ²⁶ When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.) (Acts 11:25-26, NLT)

Barnabas decided to head to Tarsus to recruit Saul to the mission. Tarsus was another 100 miles further from Antioch, so this was not a trivial undertaking. But Barnabas believed Saul was the right man for the job.

Saul had come to Jerusalem with great zeal for Jesus. He was excited to tell others how they needed to trust in Jesus for salvation. But Saul ruffled feathers there and the believers decided to send Saul back to his hometown of Tarsus. We don't know much about what happened during the intervening years. We think Saul was probably back in Tarsus for 8-10 years after this time in Jerusalem. It seems likely that he met resistance there too and may have suffered some of the hardships he lists in 2 Corinthians 11 during this time. Personally, I suspect that the Lord used this time to shape Saul into the man He needed him to be. I suspect he used this time to soften and humble Saul, while still maintaining and refining his keen intellect and sharp arguments.

It's possible, however, that Saul had begun to get discouraged during this time. Imagine, you had a vision from the Lord that said you would be the apostle to the Gentiles, only to find yourself relegated to your hometown, struggling to make much of an impact at all. I wonder what the conversation between Barnabas and Saul was like. Did Barnabas have to encourage Saul to come? Had Saul begun to doubt himself? We don't know. But we do know that Barnabas, the Son of Encouragement, was able to bring Saul back to Antioch with him, and that together, they spent the next year teaching and preaching to large crowds of people. They made a significant impact on a significant city.

Barnabas deserves to be commended here, because he did not seem to have any ego. It would have been tempting for many leaders to conclude that they could handle such a large task, because being the leader of a major ministry appealed to them. Not Barnabas. Barnabas had no problem enlisting help. And Barnabas did not seem to mind that Saul quickly became the more popular and well-known person. It is interesting to note that in the early days of their partnership, they are referred to as Barnabas and Saul, but in fairly short order, they are referred to as Saul (and later Paul) and Barnabas. Many leaders couldn't handle this, but Barnabas understood the value of playing to his strengths and allowing others to play to theirs. He wasn't threatened by Saul's gifts; he simply rejoiced in them! What a good example for us to emulate!

At the end of this section, we learn that it was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. The church had been in existence for more than a decade now, but to

this point, they were not known as Christians. They called themselves followers of “The Way”, or they were known as “the brethren”, or other such names, but not Christians. At Antioch, they first started being called that.

This was not a term the Christians coined for themselves, but a name others used to describe them. The name is quite simple, it means “Christ’s ones”. And that’s a pretty good description of what a Christian is supposed to be—those who belong to Christ and follow Him. Apparently the people in Antioch saw such a difference in these people that they could readily identify them as Christ’s people, so that’s what they called them. Though it may have initially been used as a slur, the believers realized it was a pretty apt description of who they were, so the name stuck, even to today.

The Offering

There is one last scene in this passage today, and it is also significant.

²⁷ During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹ So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could.

³⁰ This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 11:27-30, NLT)

Prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch and prophesied. They were apparently given insight from the Lord and came to speak to the fledgling church there. One of the prophets, named Agabus, predicted that a great famine would come upon the Roman world (which Luke tells us was fulfilled during the reign of the emperor Claudius). The response of the Christians in Antioch was to take up a collection and send it to the church in Jerusalem to help care for them.

This is an incredibly significant act! It gives us a glimpse into how these new Gentile believers viewed themselves. They were not Gentiles who were believers—they were believers who happened to be Gentiles! If they had identified themselves as Gentiles first, they would have had little care for the Jews in Jerusalem. They would have only been looking out for themselves. But they viewed themselves as Christians first and therefore recognized that the believers in Jerusalem (Jew, Gentile, or anything else) were their brothers and sisters and felt the need to care for them. This may be the first time in recorded history that a group of people from one culture took up a collection to benefit people they’d never met from a completely different culture.

This reminds us that the gospel breaks down all the walls humans use to divide ourselves. God transcends those things and has made it so that those divisions no longer matter. All that matters is the title of Christian. Everything else is secondary. Though the believers in Antioch may have still been rough around the edges, they had come to understand and embrace the truth of the gospel; the evidence was seen in their hearts and concern for others.

Conclusion

While this is a short passage, many significant things happen in it. So let's draw some lessons from what we've seen today.

First, the gospel can spread anywhere. This is a repeated theme in the book of Acts, and it's a theme we need to keep remembering. We often become timid, afraid to speak up about Jesus to other people, because we are afraid of how they will respond. We are afraid of how people might respond negatively, but we don't consider that they might respond positively! If that happens, we will have the joy of knowing that person's eternity is secure because we told them the truth! No matter what the odds, no matter how dark the place, be bold for the Lord. Choose to be a witness, choose to be a light, choose to tell others about Jesus, because you never know how the Lord might use you. Antioch would be the last place you would have expected the gospel to take hold, but it did!

Second, we should work to rid ourselves of ego. We often become territorial and competitive with other Christians. On the one hand, we're glad when we see God using others in exciting ways, but on the other hand, we're a bit jealous that He's not using us in the same way. We begin to resent people whose actions are spotlighted more than ours. We need to learn from Barnabas that we are all on the same team. Our actions are important and valuable to the Lord, even if they aren't as readily visible. Barnabas was ok with staying in the background. He knew that's where his strengths were. He wasn't threatened by Saul, but saw in Saul some gifts he didn't have, and sought to encourage them! This should be our approach. Rather than being concerned about how much people notice us, we should be more concerned about encouraging each person to use their gifts to the best of their ability. When we do that, we become more concerned with God's glory than our own.

Third, we should ask how people would describe us. The believers in Antioch became recognizable to the people around them for one simple reason—they all followed Jesus. As such, the label that made the most sense was to call them Christians. What label would people apply to you? Is "follower of Christ" the first thing they think about when they think of you, or is it something else? Can people even recognize you as a follower of Jesus? We should not only claim the title of Christian for ourselves, but we should live in such a way that the world around us can see that clearly. Our goal should be that the world around us looks at us and says, oh, they're one of Christ's ones as well.

That should also be the question we ask of ourselves as a church. How do people describe us? My hope is that we would be known as the people who follow Christ. I've heard our church described in lots of different ways. Some seem inaccurate, while others seem fair. But my hope is that the thing we are known for the most is following Jesus.

We must decide what defines us the most. What label do we claim first for ourselves? Let us strive to be Christians above all and to all, just like the believers in Antioch.

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