

The Church at Antioch

Lesson Scope: Acts 11:19-30

Lesson Focus

A few years had passed since the disciples had been scattered at the time of the stoning of Stephen. The Gospel seed was scattered hither and yon, no one knowing which would prosper, this or that (Ecclesiastes 11:6). As the Spirit opened people's hearts (Acts 16:14), Jewish believers were established in Cyprus and Cyrene. These took the Gospel to a large community of Grecians (Hellenized Jews) in Antioch.

Antioch, capital of Syria, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire with a population of one-half million people from many countries. While the Gospel was being preached to the Jews (11:19), many Gentiles were also hearing and believing. A large number of believers were established, and Antioch soon became an important center of church activities. Paul's three missionary journeys began here. The growing prominence of the church at Antioch reflected the movement of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

The Lord leads the church in establishing new congregations. The success of these new congregations requires careful adherence to Biblical principles for church building.

Barnabas, the prominent mover in our text, is a good role model. He was a Levite of some means, who earned his name (Acts 4:36-37). A "good" life, grace, and steady faith in everyday living attract others to the faith. A gracious personality is worth cultivating.

The fruit of the Spirit will be evident in one filled with the Holy Ghost. It takes deliberate application to cultivate these qualities along with the crucifixion of the flesh with its affections and lusts (Galatians 5:22-24). A first principle for church extension is to experience regeneration in our own life. Then our character will complement the Gospel message.

Lesson Aim: To present principles for church extension.

Theme Verse: Isaiah 54:2. Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.

Lesson Text:

Preaching the Gospel

Acts 11:19-21 ¹⁹ Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. ²⁰ And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

Nurturing the Believers

Acts 11:22-26 ²² Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. ²³ Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. ²⁵ Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.

Sharing With the Brethren

Acts 11:27-30 ²⁷ And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. ²⁸ And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: ³⁰ Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Questions for Study

Preaching the Gospel

1. Why may the Jewish believers have kept preaching to the Jews only?
2. What is convincing about preaching Jesus Christ and the Word?

Nurturing the Believers

3. List the things Barnabas did to strengthen the church at Antioch.
4. What empowers the true church that separates it from other orga-

nizations?

5. What kind of abilities can God use (1 Peter 4:11)?

6. What special role had Paul been given that would make him useful at Antioch?

7. How can we prepare to be a strengthening and stabilizing influence to other believers?

Sharing With the Brethren

8. What gift was used to give guidance in the early church before the New Testament was written?

9. How does brotherly assistance strengthen the church?

Analyzing the Passage

The Grecians were Greek-speaking Jews influenced by the Hellenistic Greek culture. The believing Jews of Cyprus and Cyrene found a ready audience in the large colony of Jews in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch. While they were preaching only to the Jews (Acts 11:19), many Greeks (Gentiles) were also hearing and believing (Acts 15:23).

Numerous words in this text express principles for effective evangelism. Preaching was done in everyday social contacts as well as in a formal presentation of the Gospel (Acts 11:19-20). Barnabas exhorted the new believers (Acts 11:23) and taught them doctrine for a full year (Acts 11:26).

Barnabas means "son of consolation." His character is evident in this experience and shows why the apostles gave him this name (Acts 4:36).

Barnabas went "to seek Saul." Saul had been sent earlier from Jerusalem to Tarsus, the town of his birth, to save his life (Acts 9:30). Barnabas had since lost contact with Saul (soon to be called Paul), but when he was found, they conducted an effective instruction of the new believers.

To the Jews, Christ was a title meaning "the Anointed One," the Jewish Messiah. However, the Greek-speaking Jews soon were known (likely derogatorily) as Christians, or followers of Christ.

Prophets (Acts 11:27) came from Jerusalem forecasting famine. This gift of foretelling events was for a short time one of the signs of the followers of Jesus.

Principles and Applications

Preaching the Gospel

1. God uses varied circumstances to extend the Gospel witness (Acts 11:19-20). Wherever and however Gospel truth meets with a heart's need,

salvation is offered. It can be through singing in the work place or on the street corner. It can be through words spoken to a stranger in the grocery store or at our door. We are to be "ready always," whether it is convenient or inconvenient.

2. The preaching of Jesus Christ and the Word must be central in all church extension (Acts 11:19-20). In these early accounts of the believers, we find expressions such as "they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." We likewise teach that Jesus is the world's only Saviour and that a full surrender to His lordship is the only way to salvation. We uphold the Word as God's final message to mankind and the standard by which all men shall be judged.

3. The level of response determines where to start new congregations (Acts 11:21-24). It is inspiring to see how the Spirit moves through many cultures, reaching open hearts. As the world becomes more hardened to Christianity, souls are being saved throughout the world. Are we ready to provide the spiritual and financial support that starting new congregations requires? Are we building strong, stable congregations that can give up some of their members to help in establishing new congregations? God is counting on us.

Nurturing the Believers

4. New congregations must maintain strong ties with parent congregations (Acts 11:22). It is especially important that new congregations continue to uphold the time-honored and Scriptural practices of the parent congregation. Those who are part of newly established congregations must guard against a spirit of independence and the temptation to experiment with novel ideas for a "more spiritual church life."

5. Success of new congregations is by the grace of God (Acts 11:23). Yes, we all must do our part, but it is God who touches men's hearts with truth. It is God's grace that turns a self-serving, carnal man into a loyal church builder. Truly, "God ... giveth the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:7).

6. New converts need exhortation to "cleave unto the Lord" (Acts 11:23). To hold fast to the faith requires firm resolve. Satan soon brings evil influence and doubts to destroy faith. This is illustrated in Jesus' parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15). We can do much to help new converts through prayer, our friendship and encouragement, and especially a consistent life.

7. Those who help in church extension must be sound in faith and full of the Holy Ghost (Acts 11:24). There are usually enough different ideas in a mixed group that it takes sound doctrine and right thinking to remain on

course. Holy Spirit direction and the Word must go together. Attempting to follow either one without the other will lead one astray. Also the oil of "fervent charity ... shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

8. Church members in all areas must be identified with God's people (Acts 11:26). The disciples were called Christians because they confessed Christ, they put on the mind of Christ, and they did the work of Christ. They were different because of their virtuous life, not for the sake of being different. Being identified as one of God's children is more than a means of giving a testimony; it is also a safeguard against becoming too close to the world.

Sharing With the Brethren

9. Mutual sharing in material needs enhances church extension (Acts 11:29-30). Church building is a spiritual work, but there is also a time and place to meet material needs as well. Unselfish sharing is a testimony of God's love and grace in the heart that will touch others. It will also keep members in a frame of mind that lends itself to church building.

Important Teachings

1. God uses varied circumstances to extend the Gospel witness (Acts 11:19-20).

2. The preaching of Jesus Christ and the Word must be central in all church extension (Acts 11:19-20).

3. The level of response determines where to start new congregations (Acts 11:21-24).

4. New congregations must maintain strong ties with parent congregations (Acts 11:22).

5. Success of new congregations is by the grace of God (Acts 11:23).

6. New converts need exhortation to "cleave unto the Lord" (Acts 11:23).

7. Those who help in church extension must be sound in faith and full of the Holy Ghost (Acts 11:24).

8. Church members in all areas must be identified with God's people (Acts 11:26).

9. Mutual sharing in material needs enhances church extension (Acts 11:29-30).

10. Outreach congregations must have sufficient leadership (Acts 11:25-26).

Answers to Questions

1. Why may the Jewish believers have kept preaching to the Jews only?

The Spirit had shown that the Gentiles were included in God's offer of salvation, but strong feelings die hard. They also had the earlier command of Jesus, "Go ... to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6).

2. What is convincing about preaching Jesus Christ and the Word?

Honest souls realize their need for a redeemer. In the Old Testament, we find the sacrificial system described with many detailed types of the Redeemer's work. The New Testament fulfillment of these prophecies puts the stamp of divinity upon Jesus Christ as God's provision for man's sin.

3. List the things Barnabas did to strengthen the church at Antioch.

Barnabas discerned true faith in the believers and rejoiced with them. He strengthened them by exhortation, which encouraged loyalty and added to the number of believers. He sought out good leaders to help him instruct them in sound doctrine.

4. What empowers the true church that separates it from other organizations?

Rather than being driven by strong individual personalities, the church is Holy Spirit empowered, which is evident in the expression of truth with grace through the body. "Speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) is the opposite of self-willed men leading others after themselves by clever policies and promised favors.

5. What kind of abilities can God use (1 Peter 4:11)?

The Scriptures show that God gives brethren in the church different abilities for various roles (Ephesians 4:11-16). The differing gifts such as pastor, teacher, and evangelist must all be exercised according to the ability that God gives. The gifts must be Spirit directed.

6. What special role had Paul been given that would make him useful at Antioch?

Paul was given the role of apostle to the Gentiles and Peter to the circumcision (Galatians 2:7-9). Paul's ability to teach and his acceptance of the Gentiles were valuable in reaching the Hellenistic Jews and also the increasing number of Gentile believers.

7. How can we prepare to be a strengthening and stabilizing influence to other believers?

We do not need to go for university training, but we do need to "study to shew [ourselves] approved unto God." It takes effort and perseverance to keep key Bible texts in our hearts. It also takes devotion to God to "excel to

the edifying of the church" (1 Corinthians 14:12).

8. What gift was used to give guidance in the early church before the New Testament was written?

The gift of prophecy was used to give Holy Spirit guidance and inspiration. At different times, Scriptures show that the Holy Spirit gave the apostles specific direction (Acts 8:29; 10:19). This filled a need for direction until a broader church organization was established.

9. How does brotherly assistance strengthen the church?

Acts of kindness give evidence of true love (James 2:15-16). The New Testament attitude toward our goods is that they are not our own. Sharing helps the ties of brotherhood and fellowship to grow.

Summarizing the Lesson

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Research Guide

1. Notice that the Greek root word for consolation (#3874) is the same as the one for exhorted (#3870). Barnabas was a demonstration of his name again.

2. Check on a map to see the proximity of Cyprus, Jerusalem, and Antioch. Antioch is about three hundred miles north of Jerusalem.

3. "Christian" (follower of Christ) was first applied to the believers at Antioch, likely with a negative connotation similar to the name Anabaptist (re-baptizer) given to our forefathers. This name was gradually adopted by Jesus' followers. Christ is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah meaning "the Anointed One."