

THE GOSPEL TO THE GENTILES The Antioch Church

Acts 11:1-30
Key Verse: 11:20,21

“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.”

The news spread fast. The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea, including Jerusalem, heard that the Gentiles had received the word of God. This brought about a confrontation of cultures in the church which would become a major issue in the New Testament church. The fact that this controversy erupted in Peter’s ministry was God’s work, for if anyone could speak the will of God with authority it was Peter.

* GOD GRANTED TO THE GENTILES REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem called Peter on the carpet. They said, “We heard that you went to the houses of uncircumcised men and ate with them.” Peter told them about his vision and the unclean animals God had commanded him to eat. He told how he had been led to go to the home of Cornelius and preach to him and to his family and friends, and how, when they heard the gospel, the Holy Spirit came to them as he had come at Pentecost to the Jews. Peter said, “I remembered what the Lord had said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ 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.” The Jews heard this and had no further objections. They said, ‘God has granted even to the Gentiles repentance unto life.’”

God showed Peter that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.” God taught him that he should not call any man impure or unclean. (Ac 10:28) The Gentiles were not required to be circumcised. They did not have to become Jews in order to become a part of the Church of Jesus Christ. The church was breaking out of the straight jacket of Judaism.

* THE FIRST GENTILE CHURCH (11:19-27)

Because of the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen, believers of Jerusalem scattered. This scattering spread the church to Samaria and to all Judea. Philip had preached in Samaria, and Peter had traveled around encouraging the believers in Judea. But they spread farther. Some traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. The believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to Antioch began to share the gospel of repentance and salvation in Jesus with Greeks—non Jews. The Lord’s hand was with

them and a great number of Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord. When this news reached the church in Jerusalem, they decided to send Barnabas to Antioch to investigate. Their choice of Barnabas shows that their reaction to the news of what was happening in Antioch was positive, not negative. Barnabas, the encourager, was the man who had believed Saul and had sponsored him when he came to Jerusalem right after his conversion. He was broad minded and generous and saw people and events positively. He is described as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” So he went to Antioch not to criticize, but to praise God and to encourage the new believers. When he arrived he saw clear evidence of God’s work in Antioch. He rejoiced and he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

But Barnabas was also a practical man and a man of discernment. He saw that these Gentile converts were lacking in Biblical foundation. They needed good, solid Bible teaching in order to be grounded in their faith. So he went to Tarsus, which was not far from Antioch, and found Saul. It had been over 10 years since Saul had returned to Tarsus. He had been sent there after his short visit in Jerusalem following his conversion. Saul was a scholar. As a Pharisee, he had studied the Scriptures thoroughly. Now he studied again, this time as one who knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He found that the Old Testament clearly points to Jesus as the long awaited Christ. He met God who keeps his promises. He became familiar with the life and teachings of Jesus, perhaps from writings or oral testimonies of the apostles. He understood the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection, of the blood shed on the cross. He studied Genesis and the other books of the Pentateuch, the Prophets and the Psalms and saw the nature of sin, the implications of the fall of man, the meaning of salvation. In short, he developed Christian theology, based on the Old Testament Scriptures and the life and teachings, the death, resurrection, enthronement and coming again of Jesus Christ. He was still studying and growing. He was the man to come to this Gentile church and teach the Bible. He and Barnabas met with the church and taught great numbers of people. It was here that disciples of Jesus were first called “Christians.” It may have been a derogatory term in the beginning. But believers gladly accepted it and were proud to bear the name of Christ. It was here that Christianity broke out of Judaism and became an international, intercultural movement. Christians did not have to become Jews in order to be Christian. Anyone who repented of his sins and accepted the incarnate Jesus who died that our sins might be forgiven and rose from the dead on the third day to give us eternal life could be a Christian, a part of the church, the body of Christ.

The character of the Antioch church developed under the teaching of Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas, especially, knew how to see the positive things in people. He was not a critical man, but a man of grace. So, the church in Antioch was a welcoming church, a multi-cultural church which welcomed people from all kinds of backgrounds. It was a church that was solidly based on the Bible.

Very importantly, it was a giving church. Barnabas knew the importance of sacrificial

giving (Acts 4:36,37). In verses 27-30 an event is described which should have profound effect on the Christian Church. When some prophets came from Jerusalem and predicted a famine which would spread throughout the Roman world, the Christians of Antioch decided to provide material aid for the believers in Jerusalem. The believers in Jerusalem were very poor. They were persecuted by the non-Christian Jews. It was probably hard for them to get decent jobs. In the event of a famine, they would suffer the most. The Christians in Antioch were seeking to obey Jesus' command, "Love one another." Their sacrificial giving was an expression of the essential unity of the church. Gentile Christians were praying for and sending aid to their brother Christians, who were Jews. This was something very new. It would continue. Furthermore, this giving spirit grew and became the beginning of world mission—the giving of men and materials to spread the gospel throughout the world. Their gift was sent to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul. This was Saul's first visit to Jerusalem since he had left some twelve years before (See Galatians 2)

We can see in this chapter how God was working to lay the foundations for the world mission task of his church. He prepared a man for the task—Saul. He prepared a church to be a missionary sending church. He prepared an environment in which all people of all races and cultures could be accepted into the fellowship of the church on the basis of faith alone. He prepared his church to obey Jesus' command, "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations..." He showed that the command of Jesus to love one another could be obeyed.