

THE ANTIOCH CHURCH

Acts 11:19-13:3
Key Verse 13:3

“So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.”

Today's passage is an introduction to a new section in the Acts of the Apostles. As the church grew and grew, the torch of the gospel spread here and there. Jerusalem could no longer be the strategic headquarters of world evangelization. Antioch, a Gentile city, emerges as the future headquarters of world evangelization. Peter was the central figure of the Christian church. But for the world-wide evangelistic program, his leadership had to be replaced. Paul emerges as the future commander-in-chief for the world-wide evangelistic program. At that time, home mission work in the homeland of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria continued. But God's intention was to put on the church the responsibility of evangelizing all peoples of all nations. In short, foreign mission work to Asia and Europe was added to the responsibility of the apostles. Antioch was a Gentile city. In this passage let's learn how the Antioch church was born and how it grew as a missionary-minded church.

I. The birth of the Antioch church (19-30)

In this part we learn that the Antioch church was an exemplary church for all Christian churches to follow.

First, it was a Bible-believing church (19-21). The trait of the Antioch church was Bible-believing. The gospel work began in Jerusalem, where our Lord was crucified. Next, the first world mission headquarters in Gentile territory began in Antioch. Finally, the headquarters of world evangelization crossed over the Mediterranean Sea and settled in an underground graveyard of Rome. At that time, Antioch was the third greatest city in the Roman world, next to Rome and Alexandria. It was a cosmopolitan city with a beautiful environment. Because of this, it was known for luxurious immorality. It was also famous for chariot-racing and gambling. To put it in modern terms, it was a city of sports run mad, and a city of nightclubs. It is incredible that such a city could be evangelized. Nonetheless, in a city like that, the word of God gained power in the people's hearts,

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and it took a great stride forward, becoming the first world mission headquarters on Gentile soil.

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. But among the persons scattered from Cyprus and Cyrene some spoke the good news about the Lord Jesus to the Gentiles (20).

What happened when the gospel was preached to the Gentiles? First of all the Lord's hand was with them. God was pleased to see their gospel work among the Gentiles. So God blessed their work. When God blessed their work, a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. When they heard the good news about Jesus, great numbers of people believed and turned their hearts to God.

How could the people of Antioch, who had formed the habit of enjoying bits and pieces of worldly pleasures, turn their hearts to God? Humanly speaking, it was beyond imagination. In Antioch there were many playboys, like in Las Vegas. They must have been fanatics of the three "S's." But when they heard the word from these Christians scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen, they were touched by the word of life. When they were touched by the word of life, their thirsty souls were quenched. I know a young man who is handsome and artistic. He had formed the habit of enjoying worldly pleasures. In order to quench his thirst, he even traveled to Moscow several times. But when he was touched by the word of God, his delicate and sinful desires were changed into holy desires to know the holiness of God. Likewise, when the people of Antioch were touched by the word of truth, holy desires replaced their sinful desires. When they received the word, the word of God overpowered their vague anxiety about the future and their fear of death; the word of God convinced them and gave them assurance of salvation. Once, they were slaves of Satan, but now, they were saved from the hand of the enemy, Satan; they turned their hearts to God to serve him freely without fear (Lk 1:74,75). From the beginning, the Antioch church was a church where the word of God was taught and practiced.

In the early days of the Korean Church, every Sunday all the Christian people got up early in the morning, at 5:00 a.m., and went to

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church with bowls of rice for their lunch and dinner. They had a prayer meeting from 5:30 to 8:00 a.m. Then they had group Bible study from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m., and then a worship service from 11:00 a.m. to 12:30. In the afternoon, they visited the sick and needy, and from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. they had another Bible study. Probably the Antioch church was more earnest in studying the word of God.

Second, a man of God, Barnabas (22-26). News of the work of God reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem. The church leaders were prayerful about God's work growing here and there. But they were apprehensive about Jewish Christians who were still prejudiced toward Gentile Christians. So the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to see about them. They did not send someone who would see all the negative sides of stories, but someone who had a big heart and who would see everything from God's point of view. Barnabas had sponsored Paul when all men had suspected him (Ac 9:26,27). Also, he had offered money for the needy (Ac 4:36,37).

When the church sent Barnabas, it was to see how they could be a help to the Gentile Christians. When we study Christian church history, we find that in most cases, the church leaders became jealous when they saw other churches or organizations reviving. They were bent on destroying the growing work of God in other churches. One minister had the largest church in Korea. But another church grew 100 times larger than his church. His church was no longer the number one church. Then he formed a church court with his minister friends and condemned his rival minister as a cult leader. After condemning him, he got a stomach ulcer. But Barnabas did not think of his own prestige as a delegate in the Jerusalem church. When he saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (23). Because of the universal love of God in Barnabas, the believers in Antioch were not crushed but were preserved as future prayer servants for world mission. The author Luke commented on Barnabas. Read verse 24. "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."

The church grew. Barnabas knew that Antioch had a great number of church members and that they were happy to do anything to please God and to love one another. Still, they were spiritual babies who needed to grow in the knowledge of God. What did Barnabas do for them? He

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went and invited Paul, the outstanding Bible teacher. Barnabas could have made the Antioch believers his own flock of sheep by teaching them by himself. But he humbled himself and invited Paul to teach them better. What a beautiful story it is! After bringing Paul, Barnabas and Paul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. It's obvious that Paul mainly taught the Bible and rebuked them to repent, while Barnabas counselled and babysat Bible students day and night, serving them with delicious food.

Worldly people saw that those who were studying the Bible day and night were living differently from them. They couldn't understand why they loved God more than money. They couldn't understand why they didn't enjoy sinful pleasures, but studied the Bible day and night. They really didn't understand why they were not selfish, living in this selfish world. They thought these believers were bums. So they nicknamed them "Christians." In Greek, "Christian" means, "a man in Christ." But when worldly people called them "Christians," they meant "cult members of Jesus of Nazareth." Surprisingly, the people of Jesus were happy to be called "Christians." They also called themselves "Christians."

Third, the Antioch church had a spirit of giving (27-30). During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch and predicted that there would be a severe famine in the land. This prediction came true. It happened during the time of Claudius, and a severe famine spread over the entire Roman world. So Antioch was also driven to the wall. But the disciples in Antioch decided to provide help for the brothers in Judea, before taking care of themselves. This small event proved that they were men and women of God's grace. The Antioch Christians had a spirit of giving. They had the spirit of grace. They were true children of God.

After collecting money, they sent it through Barnabas and Paul. In times of destitution, everyone wants to be selfish. But the disciples in the Antioch church were different; they had a spirit of giving, as they had been taught. The disciples in Antioch knew the deep meaning of God's love, that he gave his one and only Son for the sin of the world. Once Paul said, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Co 8:9). The Antioch church

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knew that, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Ac.20:35). To give is not losing. According to the Bible, it is the expression of thanksgiving to God. It is the expression of utmost happiness. Those who know how to thank God and how to give something to others, even a cup of cold water, are truly happy, and they are remembered by God. Praise and thank God that we have the privilege of giving even a cup of cold water to the needy and thirsty in the name of Jesus Christ.

II. Herod's death (12:1-25)

The word of God gained power and the Antioch church had become the headquarters of the Gentile mission. Then the Jews were alert. They laid hands of persecution on the apostles. There in Jerusalem, persecution broke out against the church, and especially against its leaders. King Herod arrested Peter and James and some others Christians. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword (1,2). When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. What did the church members do in this critical moment? The church prayed earnestly for him and the angel rescued him from prison (7,8). Then he went back to the temple area and began to preach the gospel concerning Jesus' death and resurrection. Here we learn that in the time of persecution, prayer is the potent weapon and in the time of persecution we must deliver the word of God instead of being afraid of persecutors.

What happened to Herod? At that time, King Herod had caused political unrest among the people of Tyre and Sidon by deflecting their trade and not giving a food supply to them as he had promised. In due course, a public session was arranged to settle the matter between Herod and the people of Tyre and Sidon. The people shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." It was only flattery. But Herod enjoyed it. What happened to him? Look at verse 23. "Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." In this verse, the author Luke is saying that Herod was nothing but food for worms, and that his palace was a den of evildoers, while Barnabas and Paul were the true leaders of the world, and the Antioch church was the head-quarters of world salvation work.

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III. A missionary sending church (13:1-3)

In the Antioch church, there were some prophets and Bible teachers and many Christians who had studied the Bible: Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus; Simeon, called Niger; Lucius, from Cyrene in North Africa; Manaen, a man who had courtly connections; and Paul himself, a Jew and a trained rabbi. Men from many lands and backgrounds have no way to get together. But these men got together in Jesus, having discovered the secret of the kingdom of God. This togetherness in Christ expanded and multiplied throughout world history, and this togetherness changed the world. More over, their unifying factor was their readiness to obey the world mission command. They were all missionary-minded. They were ready to obey the world mission command of Jesus. There are two kinds of people who want to be missionaries to a foreign land. One kind think that being a missionary means flying to foreign lands in an airplane. The other kind are those who have experienced the grace of forgiveness of sin and who want to proclaim God's salvation to those who do not know the good news of the kingdom of God. We should be the latter kind. We must reach out to 200 nations to proclaim God's grace and salvation to those who do not know the good news of the kingdom of God. One day something unusual happened. Look at verse 2. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Obviously, they were seeking God's will for the church in prayer. When they sought God earnestly, God revealed himself to them through the Holy Spirit. It was to set apart Barnabas and Paul for world mission work. It was an impossible command for the church to obey. Barnabas and Paul were the pillars of the church. The body of the church was big, but it was too weak to stand on its own two feet. If Barnabas and Paul were sent out as missionaries, there was a possibility that the big church would collapse. The best way for them was to pick some people who were not so important but who could be "sort of" leaders in other places. But God commanded them to send the best ones, Barnabas and Paul. They obeyed the command. God does not care about the welfare of one church. Rather he cares for the salvation of the whole world. How did they respond to God's command? Look at verse 3. "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off." They took God's world mission command very seriously. So they fasted and prayed and placed their hands on them and sent them off. These

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days the world mission command of Jesus seems to be too hard to obey. Most people want to be practical. But when we study the Bible prayerfully, we come to know that God wanted his people Israel to be a light for the Gentiles. When we study the gospels we learn many things. But we learn most of all that Jesus raised disciples in order to send them out as missionaries. We must know that the world mission command is an imperative; it is not optional. In this passage we learn that the Antioch church was missionary-minded because they loved God.