

## THE ANTIOCH CHURCH

Acts 11:1-30

Key Verse: 11:26c

“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

In the last passage we learned that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. God reaches out to such people to bring them the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. God helped Peter to share his heart through a vision from heaven. There is no room for racial, national, or even generational prejudice in the body of Christ. We must learn the heart of Christ who accepts men from every nation who fear God and do what is right. We must be willing to share the gospel with them so that they may believe and be saved.

In today’s passage, Peter persuades the Jerusalem church that God has accepted the Gentiles. This opens the way for the Antioch church, which spread the gospel throughout the world. In this passage we can find what is truly essential in the church of Christ. It is for the members to love Jesus and live like Jesus lived. We can learn how God established a world mission headquarters at Antioch. May God help us to grow as a world mission center through this study.

First, criticism arises among circumcised believers (1-3).

Look at verse 1. “The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.” This happened when Peter visited Cornelius’ house. Some call it the “Gentile Pentecost.” As Peter preached the gospel message, emphasizing that Christ died to forgive our sins and that God raised him from the dead to give us eternal victory, it penetrated deeply into the hearts of Gentile listeners. Then the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to praise God and speak in other tongues. They felt in their hearts that God had accepted them as his children. The heavy weight of sin was lifted from them. Eternal life filled their souls. They could see the kingdom of God and have a living hope. On seeing this, Peter ordered that they be baptized into Christian fellowship. It was a most glorious day in Cornelius’ house and in Christian history. However, not everyone was happy about it. Peter was criticized for going into the house of uncircumcised men and eating with them. They did not criticize Peter for preaching the gospel to Gentiles or baptizing them, but for eating in their houses. Until this time, disciples of Jesus were all Jews. However, with the admittance of Gentiles, a question arose. How could Jews and Gentiles coexist? Some wanted to make everyone a Jew in order to have fellowship in the church. There was a strong possibility that the church would be segregated or even divided.

Second, God saves everyone who believes in Jesus (4-18).

How did Peter respond? He could have said, “Listen, I am Peter, the Rock. Jesus chose me as top disciple. I have apostolic authority. You must listen to me.” But he did not. He appealed to them on the basis of fact, the work of the Holy Spirit, God’s sovereign rule, and Jesus’ words. He spoke to them as a fellow Jew who was persuaded by the work of God in his own life. His defense is a personal testimony. But it has a clear point that God had opened the door to Gentiles.

In verses 4-10, Peter recounts the vision God had given him while he was praying. God’s main point to him was, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” God had declared all food clean. In the same way, God declares all men clean. Peter had to see Gentiles as human beings whom God loved and for whom Christ died.

In verses 11-14, Peter explains how God orchestrated his meeting with Cornelius. The meeting could happen only because God was working simultaneously in Peter and in Cornelius for a specific purpose. In verses 15-17, Peter explained how the Holy Spirit had worked in the listeners. Peter regarded it as equivalent to Pentecost. Finally, he makes his conclusion, "So 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?" (17) Clearly, it was God who led Peter to accept the Gentiles. Peter had been resistant. But God had made it clear to him that to believe in Jesus was the only criteria for receiving the Holy Spirit. God saves everyone who believes in Jesus, including the Gentiles.

When the Jerusalem church members heard Peter's factual explanation, authenticated by the Holy Spirit and the word of Jesus, they had no further objections. Their disdain vanished and they could praise God whose grace was so great that it extended even to the Gentiles. To Luke, the evangelist and historian, the acceptance of Gentiles into Jesus' fellowship by the Jerusalem church was a significant event in God's work. It opened the way to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. But as we will see, God was already doing this.

Third, the gospel gives birth to the Antioch church (19-21).

Look at verse 19. "Now 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." God was working among the scattered believers who fled from Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom. They traveled north to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. They had endured severe persecution, but they were not sad as they traveled along. They were full of joy over the good news of Jesus Christ. When they found other Jews, they shared the good news with them.

Look at verse 20. "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." Here the message spreads from Jews to Greeks, that is, to Gentiles. This was not done by Jerusalem Jews; it was done through Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene. They must have said, "Jesus Christ is the one and only Son of God. But he came down to this world and lived among us as our friend and shepherd. He healed the sick and drove out evil spirits and gave sight to the blind. Then the Jewish leaders became jealous of him. They despised and rejected him and had him put to death. Yet, this was God's will. It was the only way to pay the penalty for our sins. If you believe in him you can receive forgiveness of sins. That's not all. God raised him from the dead. If you believe in him you can receive eternal life in the kingdom of God. You can receive the Holy Spirit and be freed from evil spirits. You don't have to yell at your family members after working hard or to suffer from road rage. You can have peace and joy and be truly happy." The Greeks, who had imagined that the gods were like spoiled little children, whose temper tantrums resulted in human tragedies, were moved by the good news of the gospel. This gospel, by its universal nature, has power to cross any cultural barriers. It is for all people.

Look at verse 21. "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." God was pleased when the gospel was preached to the Gentiles. God worked among them through the Holy Spirit. The Greek listeners understood the message and accepted it. Person by person, a body of Christ formed at Antioch. Antioch was a large city, ranking third in the world at that time after Rome and Alexandria. It was a cosmopolitan city full of Romans, Arabs, Jews, and Greeks. It was the perfect place to meet peoples of all nations, like Chicago. It was also a city known for gross immorality.

It is amazing that a great number of people in Antioch believed the message and turned to the Lord. In the past they had lived with the philosophy, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." They accumulated credit card debts to enjoy exotic food, cheap thrills, computer gadgets and vacations. They suffered from pennant fever, spring fever—even in the fall, and Saturday night fever. But when they heard the gospel, they were freed from worldly desires. They were freed from fear and the grip of evil spirits. They realized the love of God. They realized the grace of Christ. They realized the good purpose of God for their personal lives and for the growing church at Antioch. They wanted to live for the glory of God. They cut up their credit cards and paid all their debts. They stopped going to parties on the weekends and instead studied the Bible and shared Bible testimonies together. They prayed for Antioch to be a holy city and a blessing to the world. The gospel has great power to save people and even cities. St. Paul calls the gospel, "...the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." (Ro 1:16). The gospel itself gave birth to the Antioch church.

Fourth, God used Barnabas to shepherd the Antioch church (22-24).

News of the great work of God in Antioch reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem. It must have been amazing to Jerusalem Christians that God was working mightily in Antioch. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to encourage them. Barnabas had a big heart. Barnabas knew how to see God's work and to embrace and build up new believers. Barnabas was the right person to shepherd the Antioch church.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw the evidence of the grace of God. He saw the new lives of people who were transformed by the gospel. He may have seen former rap artists sing the praises of Jesus in Sunday worship service. He may have seen suburban boys who overcame their fear and easygoing mentality and learned to work hard for the glory of God. He may have seen intellectuals who had been full of despair suddenly discover the hope of God in the gospel and use their brilliant minds to do something good for the glory of God. He did not dwell on the negative sides of things. He saw the evidence of the grace of God. When he did so, he was personally very glad. If Barnabas had been a typical ambitious church worker, he could have been sorry because the work of God was done in another fellowship, not in his own fellowship. He could have felt a sense of competition with the growing work of God in Antioch. But Barnabas was not like that. He saw the Antioch church members from God's point of view. He was truly glad from his heart because of the work of God in Antioch.

Then he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He did not crush them with heavy requirements. He did not impose his own standards on them. He recognized the work of God in them and gave them clear and vital direction to be true to the Lord with all their hearts. As long as Jesus was Lord in their hearts they would be okay. They could grow in the knowledge of God and in the grace of Jesus. Indeed, Barnabas was the right person to shepherd the Antioch church during its formative period. What was his secret? Verse 24 says, "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."

Fifth, intensive Bible study transforms Antioch church (25-26).

Barnabas saw the Antioch church from God's point of view. He realized that what they really needed was intensive Bible study. They needed to be rooted and grounded in the word of God. Barnabas could have taught them all by himself. But he did not. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul, the renowned Bible scholar who had been completely transformed by the grace of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Perhaps Barnabas remembered Christ's words to Ananias that Saul was his chosen instrument for Gentile ministry.

Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch. Barnabas and Saul spent a whole year teaching the word of God in Antioch. Most likely, Saul taught the word of God diligently and Barnabas babysat and nurtured Antioch believers. They were like a father and mother to the Antioch church. They must have taught Genesis. Gentiles, and especially Greeks, had many weird theories about the origin of all things, based on the ridiculous behavior of childish gods who acted at random. Their world view was not conducive to living a holy life. They had to know that Almighty God created heaven and earth. Barnabas and Saul must have taught the history of God—how he promised to send a Savior, how he called Abraham and formed the nation of Israel, and how he finally sent the Savior by his one-sided grace. This helped the Antioch believers root their faith in the Creator God and in the history of God’s work. They could see where God’s work had come from and where it was going. They could learn world mission vision based on God’s world salvation plan.

Most of all, Barnabas and Saul focused their Bible teaching on the person and work of Christ. Look at verse 26c. “The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” A Christian is a person in Christ. The defining characteristic of the Antioch church was that they followed and imitated Christ. This gave the Antioch church its unique identity and character. The church is a body of believers who become like Christ. They were full of affection for Christ. They were crazy for Jesus Christ. To them, Jesus Christ was the way and the truth and the life.

The Antioch church was built on the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church was formed solely by the grace of God. The Antioch church grew as its members imitated the life of Christ. Like Jesus, they learned to deny themselves and take up their crosses. Selfish men became sacrificial servants of God and revealed the glory of Christ. Foxy women became humble and prudent mothers of prayer and revealed the grace and power of Christ. Being like Christ is everything. Cultural or ethnic background is irrelevant. Educational level, wealth or social standing is irrelevant. Christians are those who love Jesus and worship Jesus and grow to be like Jesus in every way.

Sixth, they practiced what they learned in Bible study (27-30).

Look at verses 27-30. Some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. In this way, God established a spiritual relationship between Antioch and Jerusalem. The marvelous grace of Jesus came to Antioch through Jerusalem. When Antioch Christians remembered the grace of Jesus, they were willing to give. They decided to make a relief offering for the brothers living in Judea. They gave sacrificially from the heart. No doubt, they received good influence from Barnabas, who had a record of generous giving. Moreover, they knew the grace of Jesus, who gave his life for them (2Co 8:9). The Antioch Christians did not study the Bible from their heads; they studied the Bible as the word of God from their hearts. They put what they learned into practice, especially by keeping spiritual order and giving generously to those in need.

Today we learned that the Antioch church was founded purely on the grace of Christ through the gospel. She became the bride of Christ. She loved Jesus, served Jesus and took on the character of Jesus. She had a firm foundation in the word of God through intense Bible study. She practiced a giving spirit. May God help us to imitate the Antioch church as a world mission headquarters for this generation.