

“They Were First Called Christians in Antioch”
(Acts 11:19-26)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation – This morning we considered:

1. That Peter’s preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles was quite a shock for the brethren in Jerusalem.
 - a. Word of what had happened in Caesarea quickly spread throughout all Judea.
 - b. The apostles and the brethren heard that the Gentiles had received the Gospel.
 - c. So when Peter returned to Jerusalem, the believing Jews very naturally took issue with him.
 - (i) They called him to account.
 - (ii) They thought he had broken God’s Law.
 - (iii) What did he have to say for himself: notice they didn’t condemn him out of hand, but allowed him to defend his actions, and most importantly, they listened.
 - (iv) They were having the same problem he had had earlier: how can the Lord receive those who were unclean.
2. To convince them of what he was now fully convinced, he related to them the events that had taken place.
 - a. The vision that was repeated three times.
 - b. The command of the Spirit to go with the messengers of Cornelius.
 - c. The testimony of the six men who were with him.
 - d. The vision Cornelius had and the command of the angel to send for Peter.
 - e. And the testimony the Lord Jesus gave when He poured His Spirit out on them.
3. These were powerful evidences that couldn’t be overcome in their minds.
 - a. And so they quieted down, and gave glory to God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads* to life” (v. 18).
 - b. He had given them the gift of the new birth and with it a new heart.
 - c. Now they hated sin and loved God and trusted in His Son.
 - d. Now they had the Spirit and were gloriously born again from above.
 - e. Now they were fellow heirs of the kingdom of heaven and fellow citizens with the saints.
 - f. And all this without first becoming proselytes to Judaism.

B. Preview.

1. But the Lord didn’t stop there – He continued forward with His plan to bring the Gentiles into His kingdom.
 - a. There were those still persevering in preaching the Gospel, after the stoning of Stephen.

- b. After evangelizing Judea, they made their way north to Phoenicia, northwest to Cyprus, and further north to Antioch.
 - c. Though most of them preached only to the Jews, there were some from Cyprus and Cyrene who also began to preach to the Gentiles in Antioch.
 - d. The result was that a church was formed in Antioch, perhaps mainly composed of Gentiles, that became a base of operations for the missionary efforts we'll see in the following chapters.
 - (i) Antioch was later one of the five most important centers of Christianity.
 - (ii) It was third in importance next to Rome and Alexandria.
 - (iii) Some think that both Luke and Theophilus – the man to whom this book was addressed, were originally from Antioch.
 - (iv) This, along with the fact that it is from here that Paul will begin his greater work of evangelizing the whole Roman Empire – which is what Luke will soon begin describing – may explain why he spent so much time describing its history.
2. Tonight, we'll want to look at two things:
- a. First, the founding of the church at Antioch.
 - b. And second, how the Lord used Barnabas and Saul to establish and strengthen that church.

II. Sermon.

A. First, let's consider the founding of the church at Antioch.

- 1. We've already seen that this also came about through the preaching of those who were scattered through Saul's persecution in connection with Stephen's death.
 - a. They went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch preaching the Word.
 - b. Again, the Lord is able to bring good things out of things that are bad:
 - (i) Even while unconverted, Saul is unwittingly the Lord's instrument in causing the kingdom to advance.
 - (ii) This was not the last time He would use Saul, only this time as a friend, rather than an enemy.
- c. Notice again that those who fled the persecution did not turn away from the work.
 - (i) Jesus told His disciples earlier when He had sent them out to preach that if they persecute you in this city, flee to the next (Matt. 10:23) – to continue the work in those areas the Lord opens.
 - (ii) They were not to run because they were afraid of dying, but because there's no sense in suffering when you can escape it without sinning.
 - (iii) If everyone who was ever persecuted for the truth were to run away from the work, the church would soon come to a standstill.
 - (iv) We need to continue to press forward, expecting that we will meet with all kinds of opposition.
 - (v) Satan hates the truth and will do everything in his power to stop it.

- d. This is very likely the same group that was first scattered in the persecution – one of whom was Philip, who went down and preached in Samaria.
 - (i) As the Lord continued to bless their work, they continued to encourage themselves and persevere in it.
 - (ii) When they had finished within the land of Israel, they began to work their way to Phoenicia – just north of Caesarea – Cyprus – which is northwest off the coast of Palestine – and Antioch – which is further north in Syria.
- e. Most of them preached to no one but to Jews:
 - (i) There were many Jews in different parts of the Roman Empire, who were there because of the dispersion
 - (a) Some fled during Solomon's reign.
 - (b) Some were dispersed by the invasion of the northern kingdom by Assyria.
 - (c) Others were relocated by Alexander the Great to Alexandria.
 - (d) Some migrated into Syria at that time, and others moved for commercial purposes on other occasions to other parts of the empire.
 - (ii) They had synagogues of their own, where the disciples came and preached to them. They apparently did not yet understand that Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs with them.
- 2. But we read there were some from Cyprus and Cyrene who came and preached the Gospel also to the Greeks.
 - a. Barnabas was originally from Cyprus.
 - b. Cyrene was a city in Upper Libya, North Africa, which was founded by a colony of Greeks in BC 630, that contained a large number of Jews who were brought to the city by Ptolemy.
 - (i) Simon, the one who carried the Lord's cross, was from this city (Matt. 27:32) and there were Jews from Cyrene in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10).
 - (ii) Later, we'll see that one of the men listed as a prophet or teacher at Antioch was Lucius of Cyrene.
 - c. These came and preached the Gospel to the Greeks.
 - (i) It's interesting here again that these who preached to them were Hellenistic Jews – who wouldn't have had as strong a bias against them, as would the native Jews – which is why the Lord gave Peter a vision to prepare him and these apparently didn't need one.
 - (ii) This also could have come about because they had heard that Peter had already preached the Gospel to the God-fearing Gentiles, and they had received the grace of God, as we read that news spread throughout all Judea.
 - (iii) But the result was that many were converted – a large number believed and turned to the Lord.

- (a) And why was this? Because the hand of the Lord was with them (v. 21).
- (b) If the Lord is not with us in the proclamation of the Gospel, then no one will be affected.
- (c) But if He is pleased to send His Spirit to drive that message home, open eyes, and change hearts, then it is not only effective, but nothing can stop it.
- (d) This is one of the main reasons why if we want to see anyone come to the Lord through our efforts as individuals or as a church, we must pray and ask for God's help.

d. This was how the church at Antioch was founded.

B. Second, let's consider how the Lord used Barnabas and Saul further to establish and strengthen the church at Antioch.

1. The church at Jerusalem heard what had happened at Antioch.
 - a. Perhaps someone who was there went to tell them, they sent a message, or the news simply traveled from place to place until it reached Jerusalem.
 - b. They would all have had an interest in what was going on in every part of the country regarding the church.
 - c. They were especially concerned to help whenever and wherever they could to establish the kingdom of God more fully.
- 2 And so they sent Barnabas to them to encourage and build them up.
 - a. His name means "encouragement" and he seems to have had a particular gift in this area. (We should recognize the gifts the Lord has given to each one of us and utilize them in the best places whenever possible).
 - b. When he arrived and saw what the Lord had done there, he rejoiced.
 - (i) We should always be excited to see what the Lord is doing to promote the work of His kingdom, especially when it isn't done by us, but by others.
 - (ii) There is only one area where we are to try and outdo one another: in showing honor to one another (Rom. 12:10).
 - (iii) Barnabas may have been thankful that some of his own countrymen were instrumental in bringing this about. He was certainly thankful that the Lord had moved in such an unexpected way in Antioch among the Gentiles.
 - c. He also did what he could to promote this work.
 - (i) Rather than become jealous or upset that he wasn't the one the Lord used to bring this about, he did what he could to help it along.
 - (ii) He encouraged them to remain resolute, steadfast in their walk with the Lord: to hold fast to Jesus and to follow Him wholeheartedly, not only for their justification, but also for the strength to live a godly life.
 - (iii) Again, this was his particular gift, and he used it, not to his own advantage, but to that of others, showing that he was a good man, with a good heart.

- (a) This was not by his own strength or by his own ability, but through the grace of God's Spirit working in him – he was filled with the Spirit and faith.
 - (b) His having faith in the work of God and His ability to do great things through those with meager gifts was why the Lord was willing to use him and why He accomplished so much through him.
 - (c) The Lord has not chosen many mighty or noble, but the things that are weak, but full of faith, to accomplish His work (1 Cor. 1:26-29).
- 3. The result was that the Lord used him to bring many more to Himself: "And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord" (v. 24). So much so that Barnabas began to look for help.
 - a. He went to Tarsus to find Saul.
 - (i) When Luke last wrote about Saul, the church at Jerusalem had sent him to Tarsus since the Jews of Jerusalem were threatening his life.
 - (ii) But Barnabas now goes to find him, to tell him about what the Lord did in Antioch, and to urge him to come and labor there.
 - (a) It's not very often that we desire to share credit with others, especially with others we perceive to be better than ourselves.
 - (b) But Barnabas was not seeking his own things, but Christ's.
 - b. Remember how William Farel strongly urged John Calvin to remain in Geneva and to help the work of the Reformation there, again not seeking to be the father of Geneva, but that the Lord's work would be established there, knowing that Calvin's gifts were far superior to his own.
 - (i) We should never be jealous of one another, but should always be thankful when the Lord gives others gifts that are greater than our own and are able to do more good than we are.
 - (ii) It's possible that Saul would have seen in this the beginning of the fulfillment of the Lord's call on his life to be the apostle to the Gentiles.
- 4. Finally, we see that both Barnabas and Saul remained in Antioch for a year.
 - a. They met with the church, ministered to the Lord's people, and taught considerable numbers, which must have been very encouraging: there's nothing more encouraging to a teacher than to have eager and attentive students.
 - b. And it was here that the disciples were first called Christians "those who follow Christ."
 - (i) They were probably called Christians by the Gentiles of that city to distinguish them from the Jews.
 - (ii) The Jews wouldn't call them Christians, because they didn't believe Jesus was the Christ and reserved that name for the one they believed would come: the Jews called them Galileans or Nazarenes.
 - (iii) Those who followed Christ called themselves disciples (learners), believers, brethren, saints, those of the Way.

- (iv) Christian would be a helpful name now that the Gospel was going to the Gentiles, so that one wouldn't say I was a Jew and another I was a Gentile, but now I am a Christian.
- (v) It would also help them to remember what they were all about:
 - (a) That they were to give glory to Jesus Christ by seeking to become like Him – It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher (Matt. 10:25).
 - (b) And that they were not to be afraid to own Him – their enemies would soon turn this name into a name of reproach (1 Pet. 4:15-16): “Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.”
- c. If we bear that name, the same should be true of us.
 - (i) We ought to be seeking to become more like Jesus.
 - (ii) We should not be afraid to own Him as our Maker, our Lord, our Savior.
 - (iii) We should also not be ashamed if we should suffer reproach for being identified with Him.
 - (a) Alexander the Great once said to a soldier whose name was also Alexander, but who was known for being a coward: “Either change your name or mend your manners” (Henry).
 - (b) If we call ourselves a Christian but aren't living like Christ, we should either change the way we live, or change our name.
 - (c) To name the name of Christ and not to live like Him is to dishonor his name.
 - (d) But to name Him and live as He calls us to live is to honor Him. Let's not just call ourselves Christians, or be called so by others, let's strive to be Christians. Amen.