

Acts 11:19-30

Introduction

Over the last few weeks, we've read about the events in Caesarea, where Peter preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius and the Holy Spirit came upon Gentile believers in a way that was reminiscent of Pentecost. It was a momentous occasion, as the gospel burst out of Jerusalem to the non-Jewish world. But this was not an isolated incident. As we read on in Acts, we discover that something similar was happening elsewhere. Caesarea was just the start. This week is a first in the history of the global church. It's the first church that's made up of Jewish and Gentile believers together. And Luke takes us to its beginning.

That's our first heading: The beginning of the church in Antioch.

The beginning of the church in Antioch

Please look down at verses 19 to 21. They say this: **Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 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.**

Luke begins by reminding us of the persecution that had broken out against the church in Jerusalem, following the stoning of Stephen. We were told about it in chapters 7 and 8 of this book of Acts.

We should take note of the fact that it was persecution that led to the spread of the gospel. The church didn't grow under favourable conditions. Under the Lord's hand, it grew at a time when believers were experiencing the distress of persecution. It's often been that way since then. In fact, it's often when the church is comfortable that it loses its evangelistic edge. I've heard that many of our Christian brothers and sisters in Africa, for example, don't pray for the persecution they're experiencing to be removed from them, they pray that God would deepen their faith, and that the gospel would advance, because of their persecution. They pray for us, in the UK, that we might experience more persecution, so that we might return to a biblical faith and rediscover our zeal for evangelism. It's an interesting contrast with how we might pray.

Persecution is a tool that God has used throughout history to build his church. And that's what happens here in Acts 11. The persecution that breaks out against the Christians in Jerusalem causes them to scatter into the surrounding areas. And wherever they go, new churches get planted. Some of them go as far as Phoenicia, a narrow coastal region north of Jerusalem. Let's look at a map again. Here's Jerusalem. And here's Phoenicia. Others go to the island of Cyprus, here. And others go north to Antioch, here.

According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Antioch was 'third among the cities of the Roman world' after Rome and Alexandria. It was an important city and was of huge

strategic importance for the advance of the gospel. It would go on to become the strategic hub for the apostle Paul's missionary journeys, his base of operations for his Gentile mission. And these verses tell how the church there began.

The believers who fled from Jerusalem presumably left with very little. They had only what they could carry. But what they did have was the gospel. And wherever they went – Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch – they spread the good news about Jesus. Luke tells us that most of them took the gospel only to their fellow Jews. Presumably, they had left Jerusalem before news had arrived of Peter's encounter with Cornelius in Caesarea. But some of those who went to Antioch started telling the Greeks about Jesus, by which Luke means Greek speaking Gentiles. And Luke tells us that: **The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**

These first believers didn't have million-pound budgets. They didn't have the latest marketing strategies or hi-tech resources. And they didn't need them, because that's not what brings people to repentance and faith. They simply told people the good news about Jesus. And because the Lord was with them, the church in Antioch was born.

That should encourage us greatly. The power doesn't reside in the resources we possess or the clever strategies we devise. The power resides in the simple proclamation of the gospel, and the Lord's hand with us. We should never underestimate the Lord's power to save people through us as we have simple conversations and speak of Jesus. We may feel weak. We may feel ill-equipped. The words may not always come easily or eloquently. What we *do* manage to say may not always feel particularly significant. These first believers probably felt all those things. But it doesn't matter. The power isn't in us. It's in the gospel.

There was an evangelist called Vijay Menon, who died earlier this year. He had been born into a devout Hindu family in India but moved to London for work in 1961. One day he accidentally walked into a church service at St Helen's Bishopsgate and heard the gospel. He was converted, gave up his job and became an evangelist. And one day he was travelling overseas with a big suitcase. As he passed through the airport, the security staff asked him what the suitcase contained. 'Oh, dynamite,' he said. 'Pure dynamite.' Unsurprisingly, they opened it up pretty quickly and had a look inside. What they found was a suitcase packed with Bibles. We can't save people eternally, but the gospel can. It is dynamite. It transforms people's lives. Our job is simply to pass it on as best we can. We don't need huge resources and clever marketing strategies. We just need to speak about Jesus. And to pray that the Lord would be pleased to work through us and build his church.

It was through these believers, who told those they met about Jesus, that the church in Antioch was born. And Luke goes on to tell us how the church grew. So, that's our next heading. Having read of the beginning of the church in Antioch, we now read about the growth of the church in Antioch.

The growth of the church in Antioch

Please look down again at verses 22 to 24, first of all. They say this: **News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw**

what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Barnabas is an encourager. He sees what God is doing in the life of these new believers, and he's thrilled by it. Some of them are Jews. Some of them are Gentiles. But there's no hint of suspicion or disapproval. He's glad to see what God is doing, and he encourages them to keep going and to give themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord.

Thank God for people like Barnabas who encourage us to stick close to the Lord. We all need them. We all need people in our lives who spur us on with the Lord. And God, in his goodness, provides them. Who is your Barnabas, who's encouraging you in your walk with the Lord? Thank God for them. They're his gift to you. And pray that God would use *you* as an encourager for others. Part of the joy of the Christian life is belonging to a church family in which we can encourage and be encouraged by one another. In the week ahead, think of ways you could encourage someone else in the church to keep going with Jesus; perhaps through a text, or a word of encouragement, or arranging a time to meet up and pray.

Barnabas was an encourager. And through his encouragement and ministry, the church continued to grow. In fact, the church grows so much that he needs help. Look at verses 25 and 26. **Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.**

We last heard of Saul, or the apostle Paul as he became known, back in chapter 9. In the beginning, he had despised Jesus. He was a zealous Jew and had been one of those who had persecuted the Jerusalem church. He had been present when Stephen was killed and had given his approval. But amazingly, the risen Jesus had appeared to him on the road to Damascus, and he had been converted. Unsurprisingly, the believers in Jerusalem were sceptical. They weren't convinced that his conversion was genuine and continued to be afraid of him. But it was Barnabas who had seen what God was doing in Saul and had brought him to meet the apostles. Thanks to Barnabas, they had welcomed him. And when the Jews tried to kill Saul, they sent him off to his hometown of Tarsus, for his own safety. And that's where Barnabas goes now.

As the church in Antioch grows, he realises that he needs help to cope with the demands of a growing ministry. And he knows exactly who to ask. So, he travels a considerable distance to find Saul in Tarsus. Let's look at the map again. Here's Antioch. And here's Tarsus. Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find Saul and bring him to Antioch. And Luke tells us that the two of them teamed up for a whole year, to disciple the growing church.

Notice that growth in Christian maturity requires two things. Firstly, it requires mature Christian to teach those who are new to the faith.

New believers grow in their faith as more mature believers teach them what it means to follow Jesus. That discipleship happens first and foremost in our church gatherings as we meet around God's word and hear it preached. But it also happens in our home groups, and

in the young people's ministries, and one-to-one, as we study the Bible in smaller groups. The church grows in maturity as those who have been Christians for longer take responsibility for helping those who are newer to faith.

For us to grow as a church, it requires mature believers to work together to teach others.

And secondly, it requires time and patience.

Barnabas and Saul committed themselves to that work for a whole year. Helping people grow into wholehearted followers of Jesus takes time and patience. The change that happens as we grow as disciples is often slow. Often frustratingly slow. And we mustn't lose heart when it is. There might be setbacks along the way. It takes perseverance. But when we commit to discipling one another with patience, the church will grow. That's what happened in Antioch.

As Barnabas and Saul stuck to the task of teaching these new believers what it means to follow Jesus, the church became established in the faith. The believers began to gain a new identity as those who were devoted to Christ. They became known for their devotion to Christ. And that's why they became known as Christians.

That's what we long for here; to be a church that is established in the faith and known for our devotion to Christ. For that to happen, we need those who have been Christians for a while to commit themselves to teaching those who are newer to faith. And we need those who are newer to faith to be willing to learn. That's how the church will grow into maturity. And Luke finishes by showing us a wonderful picture of what a mature Christian faith looks like. So, our final heading is: The maturity of the church in Antioch.

The maturity of the church in Antioch

Please look down at verses 27 to 30.

During this time 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. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

This famine that Agabus predicted happened around A.D. 47. Several famines are documented around that time; one of them particularly severe. And when the church hears of it in advance, the believers decide to provide help for their brothers and sisters in Judea.

Once again, generosity is presented as a sign of mature faith. We've already met Tabitha, who was known for her generosity to the poor. We've met Cornelius the centurion, who was known for his generosity to those in need. And here it's the whole church in Antioch that displays a generous and compassionate heart. As they heard the prediction of the coming famine, no doubt the believers in Antioch would have feared for their own survival. But they don't think only of themselves. They think of their brothers and sisters in Judea to whom they owed so much. This mixed Jewish and Gentile church in Antioch had received

the gospel from the Jewish Christians in Judea and now they want to give something back. They don't just send their thoughts and prayers. They pull together to send practical help in the form of a financial gift. Everyone contributes. Each member gives as they're able. And they send the gift with Barnabas and Saul.

It's a wonderful expression of unity in the gospel. Jews and Gentiles didn't mix socially outside of the church. They avoided each other. But this was a gift that bridged the deep social divide between them. It demonstrated the love the believers in Antioch had for their fellow believers in Jerusalem. And it was a wonderful expression of their solidarity in Christ. This solidarity was completely unheard of in the ancient world. It was radically and shockingly new. And it was produced solely through their common faith in Christ. Christianity is about faith in Jesus not ethnicity. And as a person grows in Christian maturity, they delight more and more in the love of Christ that bridges all social and cultural divides.

It's a sign of Christian maturity to cherish the unity we share in Christ with believers from different cultures and social backgrounds than our own.

And it's a sign of Christian maturity to express that unity in practical ways. It might be providing practical help in a time of need. It might be offering hospitality. Or simply spending time together socially. But the more we cherish the love of Christ that crosses social divides, the more we will delight in expressing our solidarity with one another, whatever way we can.

Conclusion

This story of the birth, growth and maturity of the church in Antioch is full of encouragement.

It should encourage us to talk to others about the good news of Jesus in the confidence that this is how the Lord is building his church. The power isn't in us; it's in the gospel. It should encourage those of us who have been following Jesus for a while to help others understand what it means to be his disciple. As older Christians teach newer Christians, the church grows in maturity. And it should encourage us to delight in the love of Jesus that crosses all social barriers. There is no place like the church where people from different cultures and backgrounds can come together as one. And that should move us to treat one another with love and generosity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the life you have given us as a church family here on the West Hill. Please continue to add to our number as we speak about Jesus with those we know. Please give us courage to open our mouths in the confidence that the power isn't in us but in the gospel message. Please help us to disciple one another so that we might grow in Christian maturity. And please help us to love one another in practical ways as those who are united together in Christ. And we ask it in his name. Amen.