

The Acts of the Apostles

Sermon Number: 19

Acts 11:19-30

August 14, 2011

The First Christians

Acts 11:19-30

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ²³ When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

²⁷ And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸ Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. ²⁹ Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. ³⁰ This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. NKJV

26 ... And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Although the title of this message is “The First Christians” it should be noted that there were Christians already but they were called “The Way” and here at Antioch the believers were first called Christians.

To be called a Christian in most places today is not an insult, but at this time the term meant “little Christs” and was used in a derogatory sense.

“Oh, you are just a “little Christ.”

It would not trouble me at all if there was enough of Christ to be seen in me that someone would call me a “little Christ.”

Before we continue with the exposition of this text let's have a geography lesson.

Words have meaning and sometimes when we read the Bible and we are not careful we may not really understand the meaning. Perhaps the best [worst] example is when we read the word "baptism" and just assume it always means water baptism. But there are five "baptisms" in the New Testament, viz. Water, Repentance; Moses; Suffering; Fire and the Holy Spirit are all forms of baptism. What I want you to see about these five baptisms is that they all have one thing in common. They all involve being **overwhelmed**.

Not as serious as baptism but still important is the city of Antioch.

26 ... And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

There are two cities named Antioch that occur in the New Testament.

ANTIOCH OF PISIDIA

ANTIOCH OF SYRIA

Now let's get into the content of our message.

It is in our nature to associate with those of similar beliefs, language, accepted manners, and styles of worship. The problem with getting too comfortable in church is that, whether we intend to or not, we will exclude people who do not fit into our mold.

It is important to see that it wasn't until those of "the Way" were driven out of Judea that racial and cultural barriers began to break down. This is when believers were first called "Christians."

Acts 11:19-30 is the record of the first time that the Gospel was deliberately offered to Gentiles and it was a major turning point for the church.

The Holy Spirit was working and before Peter or anyone else realized it the Jewish believers in Christ found themselves flooded with uncircumcised pagans with no knowledge of Jewish law and no tradition in the practices of Judaism.

Centuries of tradition and separation and cultural pride was faced headon with the Gospel. God is not interested at all in who you are, He justifies the ungodly, has no respect of persons. So the time has come that the believers are not Jews or Gentiles, they are all just Christians.

Evangelism

Acts 11:19

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.

Connect Acts 8:1-4 with 11:19.

After the stoning of Stephen [8:1] the believers were being persecuted and they were widely scattered. They preached the Gospel everywhere they went but still held on to the separation of races; preaching the word to no one but the Jews only.

Under persecution, some of the believers went to Phoenicia, 150 miles from Jerusalem; the Island of Cyprus, 250 miles from Jerusalem, and Antioch, 300 miles from Jerusalem. Some may have gone as far as Rome, 1000 miles from Jerusalem.

What Happened at Antioch Acts 11:20-21

²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

Antioch of Syria was a significant city with a population of about 500,000. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, Rome and Alexandria was larger.

Antioch was thoroughly pagan with its “Grove of Daphne,” the place of worship of Apollo, Artemis, and Astarte. The worship involved a nightly ritual with prostitutes enacting a mythical sexual encounter between the god Apollo and the human maiden Daphne.

What better place for the Gospel?

The Jewish synagogue at Antioch was beautiful and many Jewish people had migrated there. Also, large numbers of pagans converted to Judaism.

The church at Antioch was almost exclusively Jewish. The Ethiopian Eunuch that Philip preached to about Jesus was probably a proselyte to Judaism and Cornelius, to whom Peter was sent, though not a Jew was a “God-Fearer.”

But up to this time no one had shared the Gospel with pagans who had no connection with a synagogue, who had no background in the Scriptures, and who showed no interest in the Gospel.

It would be pointless to begin the Gospel with people who had no expectation of Messiah. That had meaning for the Jews; Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah.

But the pagans could relate to “Lord” and “Savior” because they used these words in their religion. The Gospel is “Good News” to anyone that the Holy Spirit convicts of sin and guilt and their need for a Substitute.

Encouragement

Acts 11:22-26

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Earlier when the news of the spread of the Gospel comes to Jerusalem they send Barnabas to check it out. Barnabas was well-qualified for the mission. We know about Barnabas from:

Acts 4:36-37

³⁶ And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, ³⁷ having land, sold *it*, and brought the money and laid *it* at the apostles' feet.

Barnabas was from Cyprus. He was a Levite, schooled in the Scriptures. He was wealthy, but shared his money and land to feed the poor. He had spent considerable time listening to the teaching of the apostles.

The word “apostle” means “sent.” Later Barnabas is referred to as an apostle [Acts 14:14].

Barnabas’ name means “son of encouragement” and in Antioch he takes part in evangelism, he affirms the activity of the Holy Spirit, he teams up with Paul, and he discipled new believers.

In verse 25, the word “seek” implies a serious search for a person. There is no indication that Saul/Paul was at Tarsus, instead he appears to be in seclusion [Galatians 1: 21-22].

But Barnabas found Saul and brought him to Antioch where they both taught a great many people the Gospel from the Scriptures.

They Were First Called Christians Acts 26-30

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The word “Christian” is applied to believers only three times; here, in Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16.

Acts 26:28

Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian."

1 Peter 4:16

Yet if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.

Often names that are intended to ridicule become accepted.

Examples include, “Puritan,” “Quaker,” and “Methodist.”

As we have pointed out “Christian” means “little Christs” but there are a few other interpretations of the Greek word *Christanous*:

Christ-folk

Friends of Messiah

Christ-people

Belonging to Christ

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch he immediately saw what was happening; he affirmed it and gave it his blessing [23].

It must have been interesting and exciting for these Jews, with their dietary rules and tradition of Sabbath-Keeping to have to get along with these uncircumcised gentile “dogs.” You can read in Romans how Paul instructs the church how to worship God, how to receive one another as a brother and sister, and how to deal with matters of conscience.

Paul, in his epistles, wrote about the practical and theological implications of the situation at Antioch. The fundamental themes in his epistles can be traced back to his experience with Barnabas in that mixed congregation. Paul teaches us to be ready and willing to accept anyone as a brother or sister in Christ regardless of race, nationality, economic status, or any other distinction that has nothing at all to do with being a disciple [a learner, an imitator] of Jesus Christ.

How is it with your soul today?

Are you satisfied that Jesus and His righteousness are necessary and sufficient for your acceptance by a holy God?

Repent and believe in the Gospel.