

## **The Church at Antioch      Acts 11:19-30**

### **Introduction**

When we began looking at the book of Acts we did so with the intention of **seeing God's mission for the church**

And since we know how the early church was so successful in fulfilling the mission in their day, we have looked at Acts to see how we might imitate them and translate their ministry and methods into our present day

In our study thus far we have seen some admirable demonstrations of personal faithfulness but we have seen little that actually translates well to our day insofar as the church as an organization is concerned

We saw how the earliest believers in Jerusalem pooled their resources and viewed all property as communal and from that we gleaned the principle of benevolence in the care of the less fortunate

But we also saw that their actions and attitudes were largely for that time, place, and circumstance and that we are not commanded or even advised to do exactly as they did in the area of communal living

We have seen how salvation first came to the Jews at Pentecost accompanied by the signs of the sound of wind, the image of fire, and the sound of unlearned foreign speech

And we recognized that those things were unique to that occurrence and not the norm for today

The same was true when the gospel spread and salvation came to the Samaritans and as we saw last week to the Gentiles

Things like **the delayed giving of the Holy Spirit and sign gifts** simply don't occur today as they did then and we would fall into error if we expected to see them duplicated today

Those were one-time events that were according to God's plan and purpose as his church was being established

**They were necessary and they are informative but they don't translate directly to us today**

But in our text today we will see things are beginning to change and we will find much in the example of the church at Antioch that we should be seeking to emulate

Luke's reporting in Acts 11:19-30 shows us that the church is maturing beyond the direct ministry and influence of the apostles

And we will see in this account that the church at Antioch is closer to our local churches today than those we have seen thus far in Acts

If you have not done so already, please join me in Acts 11 in your Bible where we will be looking at verses 19-30

In these verses we will first see that the church at Antioch was **Organic in Its Origin**

Next we will see that it was **Commendable in Its Conduct**

And lastly we will see that it was **Generous in Its Giving**

Follow along as I read the entire passage (**Acts 11:19-30**) –

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

## **I. Organic in Its Origin**

The first thing we notice is that the church in Antioch was **organic in its origin** meaning that it wasn't a part of a missional program or some planned strategy to reach the people of this area

It just happened naturally as regular, every-day believers did what they were *supposed* and *disposed* to do

***Those who were part of the dispersion carried the gospel with them as they went northward***

Our passage begins by taking us back to the dispersion of believers as a result of the persecution that arose after the stoning of Stephen that we read about in **Acts 8:4** and how those who were fleeing took the gospel along

And in **verse 19** we see **three different places** named that those fleeing believers travelled to as a result

**Phoenicia** was a region, a strip of land along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea roughly 7-1/2 miles wide and 75 miles long in what we know as Lebanon today

**Cyprus** is an island in the eastern Mediterranean that lies about 75 miles off the coast of Syria

Barnabas was a Hellenistic Jew, a Levite, who was originally from Cyprus as we saw in **Acts 4:36**

This may have had something to do with why he was chosen to go to Antioch by the church in Jerusalem

**Antioch**, was a city that lay 300 miles to the north of Jerusalem and about 17 miles east of the Mediterranean coast

It was established on the Orontes River and was a major trade center

Antioch was the **capital of the Roman province of Syria** and **home to about 500,000 people** making it the **third largest city in the Roman Empire** at that time behind only Rome and Alexandria

Of those half-million people some **70,000 of them were Jews**, many of them proselytes to Judaism

Antioch of Syria had a **reputation for moral debauchery** in part due to the nearby temple of the goddess Daphne and the temple prostitution that went along with worship of her

And as they went to these places these refugees from persecution took the gospel message with them

Again as **8:4** says, "they went about preaching the word" and here in **verse 19** we see that their ministry was concerned with and focused on their fellow countrymen as they spoke the word to no one except the Jews

This would have been typical of the believing Jews coming out of Jerusalem as they didn't understand yet that the gospel was meant for all

They may have been unaware that they were fulfilling the Great Commission but they were living, breathing examples of it as they spread the gospel message as they were going

***Some of them were bold enough to break with tradition and carried the gospel to the Gentiles also***

And then we come to that little word “But” in **verse 20** that signals a change in direction and we see that some of the Jewish believers were bold enough to break with tradition and they carried the gospel to the Gentiles also. It’s interesting that the men who took the message of the gospel to the Gentiles were Jewish believers but not from Jerusalem – they were Hellenistic Jews who were natives of other places – like Stephen was.

We read that they were from the **island of Cyprus** and from **Cyrene** which is on the north coast of Africa.

Perhaps their separation from Jerusalem and their association with Gentiles in their native lands made them less averse to associating with Gentiles.

We can’t say for sure but in this event they were bold enough to preach the good news of the Lord Jesus also to the Gentiles in Antioch when they travelled there.

***God blessed their faithfulness and many were saved – both Jews and Gentiles***

Then in **verse 21** we read that God blessed their faithfulness and many turned to the Lord.

God’s power and favor was with these men as they took the gospel to the people, both Jews and Gentiles, of Antioch.

The verse reads “a great number who believed turned to the Lord” – this was salvation on a grand scale.

This was an organic movement without the impetus of the apostles.

It was because regular believers were faithful in carrying out the commission that Jesus given to his church.

***Because their message was Jesus Christ***

And God was able to bless their efforts because the message that they took to the people of Antioch was Jesus Christ.

Far too often today the message of the church has become muddled; cluttered with various other causes.

We live in a politically charged world and it’s easy to lose track of what is essential as we get caught up by other things and become focused on issues that cause us to deviate from our God-given mission.

And often they are very good things but when they begin to take too much of our time and attention so that they take us away from what’s important and shift our message from Christ – they lessen our effectiveness as God’s church.

God didn’t give us the mission of scoring political victories or winning the culture war or of setting people straight on every point of doctrine – he didn’t.

He gave us the mission of spreading the word of his Son and telling others how they might be saved and of training them in righteousness after they have accepted Christ.

And it’s through the salvation of people and the re-orienting of hearts and minds to align with the heart and mind of God that the rest of those things can and should come about.

It’s often lamented in the church that God isn’t blessing our efforts when our efforts are aimed in a different direction that God would have them be.

While it’s unlikely they were on a mission trip and other matters undoubtedly vied for their attention the men from Cyprus and Cyrene kept the most important thing the most important thing.

Remember, Antioch was a large commercial center these believers were likely there on business rather than purposely heading out to share the gospel and their “preaching” was most likely not preaching in a formal sense but more like an ordinary sharing of what was important to them in their every-day encounters.

They were believers and their relationship with Jesus was precious to them so they naturally shared Christ with those with whom they came into contact and God blessed their efforts by saving large numbers of converts

Today we might call what happened in Antioch a “grassroots movement” although it wasn’t political in nature  
It was of the people and by the people and many people turned to the Lord as a result of it

**This was a new thing, a different thing than we have seen up to this point in the book of Acts**

At **Pentecost**, the apostles were heavily involved and Peter preached a powerful public sermon and the apostles performed validating miracles in front of the people – and three thousand were saved as a result

In **Samaria**, Philip proclaimed Christ and performed the miraculous signs of exorcisms and healings and when the news of people being saved in Samaria reached the apostles in Jerusalem they sent Peter and Joh to check it out

And when the apostles came, prayed for them, and laid hands on them the Samaritan believers received the Holy Spirit

And then Peter was sent by a vision from God to Cornelius thus opening the gospel to the **Gentiles**

But in Antioch, Jews and Gentiles alike were being saved and presumably receiving the Holy Spirit instantly at the moment of salvation without apostolic involvement

Of course, in due time word of this new thing reached Jerusalem

It seems to be a phenomenon among believers that we are quick to let leadership know when a new thing is going on

The disciples certainly did that in **Luke 9:49-50** as they told Jesus that others were casting out demons in his name and asked whether they should make them stop because they weren't a part of the "in crowd"

Paul also alludes in **Philippians 1:12-18** to a similar report coming to his ears while he was in prison – others were preaching Christ and not everyone was being nice about it – and the question of what to do about it is implied but not stated in Paul's response

So the news of what was taking place in Antioch reached the ears of the church and the apostles in Jerusalem

But this time, instead of sending an apostle the church sent Barnabas, a layman from Cyprus to Antioch

And when he arrived what he found pleased him

## **II. Commendable in Its Conduct**

In **verse 23** we see that the church was **commendable in its conduct**

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose

### ***The church at Antioch was doing well in spite of no apostolic involvement***

In spite of no apostolic involvement Barnabas found a group of believers that was doing well

There was nothing amiss that needed immediate correction

All Barnabas needed to do was to encourage them to keep going as they were – to *remain* faithful to the Lord and steadfast in their purpose

### ***Why the apostles sent an emissary to check on the church at Antioch***

But why did the church in Jerusalem think it necessary to send an emissary to check on the church at Antioch?

Sending an emissary to Antioch reflected a concern by the church in Jerusalem to make certain that this ministry was bona fide

The apostles were responsible as the Lord's chosen leaders of the church and they wanted to make certain that this new thing was as it should be because they were accountable for it before God

### ***Barnabas***

So the church selected Barnabas to go

In **verse 24** we see **why he was selected** and **why he was glad with what he found**

Luke describes Barnabas as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith"

Being a **good man** meant that Barnabas possessed positive moral qualities

He was good in the sense of being in alignment with moral excellence as defined and personified by God

When we were first introduced to Barnabas in **Acts 4:36** we learned that his name was actually Joseph but he was nicknamed Barnabas which means "son of encouragement" by the apostles and we saw how he sold a piece of property and gave the proceeds to benefit the needy in the church

Then in **Acts 9:27** we saw how he was the one who took Saul by the hand after his conversion and vouched for him with the other disciples

So, every time we've seen Barnabas to this point he has lived up to his name and his reputation as a good man

And he was **full of the Holy Spirit** which tells us the source of his character –

He in tune with the Holy Spirit so he was thinking and acting as the Lord would think and act and when he saw what would please God he was also pleased

Every believer is indwelt with the Holy Spirit at the moment of salvation but not every believer is filled with the Holy Spirit at any given time

The filling is incidental as we are specially empowered for ministry

Apparently this was the natural state for Barnabas perhaps because he was also **full of faith**

As we have discussed before, we tend to think of faith as a noun but faith is really an action word as biblical faith requires a person to act on, to fully commit to, their beliefs

Beliefs are very cheap things that really require nothing of us – we can believe anything we want to no good or ill effect

### **But faith is demonstrated when we act according to our beliefs**

God only fills us with the Holy Spirit when we are in need of it so being full of faith means stepping up and being busy which requires being filled with the Holy Spirit

Most of us are occasionally filled with the Holy Spirit but this seems to be how Barnabas lived his life – which means it is possible for each of us to live that way as well by the way...

### ***Barnabas encouraged them***

Then we see that when Barnabas came to Antioch he didn't come in looking to find fault and make changes

He came with an objective eye ready to really and truly see what God was doing in the church at Antioch

And when he saw that what the believers at Antioch were doing was pleasing to God, the son of encouragement lived up to his name and he **exhorted** or **encouraged** them to continue with what they were already doing

**He validated them** and the result of his validation was that "a great many people were added to the Lord"

When the believers were encouraged they did even better!

In the movie Patton I remember a scene where General Bradley was shown looking at a copy of the military paper Stars and Stripes and saying, "Give George a headline and he's good for another 30 miles."

### **Criticism is easy and anyone can find fault – especially when they aren't on the firing line**

But we all like to be encouraged and encouragement will often spur us on in ways criticism never will

The church could use more people like Barnabas who didn't show up looking to find fault or to offer "constructive criticism" or try to remake the church in the image of what he thought it should be but to see what was going well and to encourage more of the same

Rather than tear them down Barnabas wisely built them up and the growth rate of conversions increased

### ***The church at Antioch was open to instruction***

In fact, so many people were saved that Barnabas had more than he could handle so, as we see in **verse 25**, he went to Tarsus to find and fetch Saul to help him

And he and Saul taught the believers in Antioch for a year

In this we see that the church at Antioch was also to be commended for being willing to receive instruction

Even though they had started without apostolic assistance and doing quite well, they recognized that they didn't know all they needed to know and they were willing to be under authority in order to learn

### **Evangelism and teaching are distinct activities but both are part of the commission to make disciples**

The two things must be viewed as inseparable and making disciples requires both evangelism and teaching much like an airplane needs both of its wings if it is going to get off the ground and arrive at its destination

Far too often churches today err in favor of one of these activities or the other in their disciple-making activities but a balanced approach is needed if we are to fulfill the Lord's commission to us in the way he intends

The church needs both evangelists and teachers

### ***Mixed church***

Lastly, the church was to be commended for readily accepting a blended membership

There seems to have been no problem with Jews and Gentiles worshipping together in Antioch

Perhaps this is because they were removed from Jerusalem and used to dealing with each other in their daily lives

Perhaps the fact that even though there was a rather large Jewish contingency in Antioch, they were still very much in the minority so that they had learned long ago how to get along with their Gentile neighbors

Whatever the reason, they seem to have been able to keep the first thing as the first thing and weren't distracted by those more esoteric concerns

The church at Antioch had started well and continued well and they were a church that was on the grow

Not only in numbers but also in knowledge and in spiritual maturity

It would not be long before Antioch surpassed Jerusalem in importance as the mission of Christ continued to spread in its reach and influence throughout the known world

### **III. Generous in Its Giving**

There is one more area in which the believers at Antioch are worthy of commendation but it deserves its own heading

The church at Antioch was **generous in its giving**

Verses 27-30 record for us a remarkable attitude of generosity on the part of these believers

In **verse 27** we read that prophets came to Antioch from Jerusalem during the year that Barnabas and Saul were there teaching

We aren't told why they came – only that they came

And while they were there one of the prophets, Agabus was his name foretold of a world-wide famine that was coming

Luke helpfully adds parenthetically that the famine that was predicted actually took place “in the days of Claudius”

I don't know about you but I sometimes have had difficulty recognizing and relating the history that I have learned from different sources to each other – you know, making those connections from one to the other

For instance, I was shocked the first time I was watching a cowboy movie to see someone driving a car

I think it was in the John Wayne movie Big Jake where I first saw a posse chasing the bad guys in a car

It had never occurred to me that cars had been invented and were becoming somewhat commonplace in the east at the same time that cowboys were conducting cattle drives and riding the range out west

Reconciling biblical history and the world history that we learned in school can be difficult as well

At least that's true for me – perhaps because education tends to be compartmentalized and the schools don't related the history they teach to the Bible and the church likewise fails in relating the Bible to world history

So I find the kind of reminders of the fact that world history and biblical history were happening at the same time helpful

They allow us to go to the history books and see what we can learn about what was going on during the time of Claudius

And we find that history records that there were successive years of bad harvests in the years of 45-48AD which was during the reign of Claudius

And food became quite scarce in what was considered the known world of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and Judea

Luke doesn't say how the believers in Antioch came to understand that the believers in Judea would be affected

Maybe he just shared the headline for the prophecy here in our passage and Agabus was actually more detailed when he spoke

Regardless of how they knew, they decided to put together a collection and send it with Barnabas and Saul to their brethren in Jerusalem

There are some things that would be easy to overlook that we want to take time to make note of in this passage

**First**, this mixed-race group of believers was willing to sacrifice for fellow believers who they didn't likely know and who would have tended to look down on them for associating together as they were doing

They had a heart for them because they were family, fellow members of the Body of Christ



**Second**, they gave from their discretionary funds to help their fellow believers – they sacrificed

We know this wasn't taken from their regular giving because Luke includes the phrase "according to his ability"

The members of a local church have always been expected to provide for the support of the local church

But then, just as we do today, and will do in just a little while this morning, there were occasions where additional offerings were given according to one's ability to give – offerings for special purposes such as benevolence

God allows us to use the vast majority of the possessions he gives us as we see fit and we have the opportunity to use our possessions for his glory or not

So as God has blessed each of us we often have the opportunity to fund special projects and to meet special needs according to our own discretion

These offerings require us to sacrifice because they are in addition to our regular giving which is required of us to support the local church

And we see that spirit of willing sacrifice exemplified for us in the response of the church at Antioch

**Third**, this is the first time that the **office of elder** is mentioned in the New Testament church

The church at Antioch sent the money to the elders which shows that the elders were responsible for the general oversight and leadership of the church in Jerusalem

In **Acts 4** we saw that the people were bringing their gifts for benevolence and laying them at the **feet of the apostles**

Then in **Acts 6** we saw the apostles were being overwhelmed by the logistics of managing the distribution of the benevolence which led to the appointment of **the Seven**

There was no indication that the receiving of the gifts had changed from the apostles to the Seven only that the Seven were in charge of distributing them

It's unclear whether the Seven had been disbanded with the death of Stephen and the persecution that led to the scattering of many of the believers – after all we have seen that it was likely the Hellenistic Jewish believers that were targeted for persecution and all of the Seven were chosen from the ranks of the Hellenists

But here in **verse 30** we see that the duty of **receiving** the gifts appears to have been transferred to the elders whether or not they were also in charge of disbursing them

And that's much the same pattern we follow in regards to benevolence and all other funds today here at Brick as the elders exercise general oversight of the funds regardless of who actually disburses them

## Conclusion

There is one item of interest that I left until the end of the sermon and it's found in the last part of **verse 26**

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

An entire sermon could be preached on the implications of that one sentence alone – but I promise that I won't start over

We recognize that this moniker was given to the believers at Antioch by outsiders – they were *called* Christians

This had to be a name that was applied to them by the Gentiles in Antioch as Christ means Messiah and it's unlikely that any unconverted Jew would have used that title to speak of Jesus of Nazareth

But it wasn't a name that they picked for themselves

We have seen the followers of Jesus referred to by many names up to this point in Acts

We have seen them called "disciples" as they are again here in verse 26

We have also seen them called "believers", "brothers", those "belonging to the Way", and "saints"

And now we see them called "Christians" – associating them directly with Jesus Christ

So, what caused those outside the church to refer to those inside as Christians?

Likely it was their pattern of speech and the fact that they talked about Jesus continuously

They "preached" the Lord Jesus to everyone who they could pin down long enough to listen – that's why the church was growing as rapidly as it was

No one had to wonder what was important to a Christian in Antioch

It was also likely because of their pattern of living

These were moral, commendable, generous folks who were living like Christ

Even the smallest light shines brightly in the darkest of places and Antioch was an immoral cesspool

No doubt the believers there stood out as being quite different from everyone else

In **Matthew 5:13-16** we are told that believers are to be as salt and light in the world

Let's look at those verses together just to refresh our minds about them –

"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

To live in accordance with these verses will raise questions and the opportunity to tell people why to the glory of God

Sadly, the title "Christian" has lost almost all of its original meaning today

These days people call themselves "Christian" simply as a way to say that they aren't Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Wiccan, or any number of other religions

If they aren't anything else then they must be a Christian, right?

But to truly be a Christian means to be like Christ, a follower of Christ who patterns his or her life after Christ, a person that is noticeably a member of the party of Christ

I read a story this week about Alexander the Great who had a soldier in his army who was also named Alexander. As it so happened, that Alexander was known to be a weak cowardly man and hearing news of his cowardice Alexander the Great summoned him to come before him.

With knees knocking he was asked, "Is your name Alexander and did your parents name you after me?"

To which he answered, "Yes, my name is Alexander and I was indeed named after you."

And Alexander the Great replied, "Then either find some courage or change your name!"

We can be glad that Jesus doesn't say that to us but it should be a natural expectation that anyone who calls himself a Christian should be modeling Christ to the best of their ability.

There should be a noticeable difference between a Christian and the world around him.

**I think a fair question that we each need to ask ourselves is what name would people apply to us?**

Seriously, what name would people from outside of Brick Church use to describe us?

Would they even notice us and if so, what label would they give us?

The church at Antioch was doing well.

They were **preaching Christ conversationally** to everyone they met as a normal part of their existence.

They were **faithful and steadfast** in their primary purpose of winning souls for Christ.

They were **unified** as they set aside racial differences as Jews and Gentiles worshipped and ministered together.

As **true disciples of Christ** they were **submissive to their leaders** and were **engaged in learning** and living what they had learned – **they were functioning as growing, learning disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ**.

They were **generous** in meeting the expressed needs of their brothers and sisters – even to those far away.

And as we will soon see in future chapters they were **about to become the central hub for outreach** to the Gentile world as the focus of Acts switches from Peter, the Jerusalem church, and ministry to the Jews to Paul, Antioch, and the Gentiles.

There is much we can learn from the church at Antioch.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table let's take a moment to reflect on how well we model the name "Christian" and ask God to show us if there is anything that needs to change in order for us to be worthy of the name.

Let's pray.