

Text: Acts 11:19-30

Title: The Planting and Ministry of the Antioch Bible Church

Truth: Luke wants the reader to understand the important place of Antioch in church history.

Date/Location: Wednesday 3/20/2013 and 2/28 & 3/13/2024 at FBC

Introduction

Luke makes a change of scene from Peter's ministry in Acts 10:1-11:18. Now we learn about the gospel's movement into Syrian Antioch after Stephen's persecution that happened back in chapters 6-7. This Syrian Antioch is different than Antioch of Pisidia in Asia Minor which comes up later in Acts 13:14. It became an important missionary church, because it sent Paul and Barnabas and others on their missionary tours.

I. Formation of the Church at Syrian Antioch, v. 19-21

An international team of missionaries partnered to start this church. Note:

- A. People scattered by persecution surrounding Stephen (Acts 6-8:4) traveled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They started by preaching to Jews, who were in their cultural comfort zone. The preachers were apparently Jews since the persecution was in Jerusalem and the church there was almost entirely Jewish in composition in the early days and years of the church.
- B. Then some from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and preached Christ to the Hellenists – Greek speaking Jews. Cyrene was a coastal city in North Africa, home of Simon of Cyrene (Matt. 27:32). (Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, Mark 15:21. Also, Lucius was from Cyrene, Acts 13:1.) It is not clear if these were Jewish or Gentile preachers, since Jews could also be from Cyprus (large island northwest of Israel) and Cyrene (modern Libya).

Antioch was a very large city at the northeast "corner" of the Mediterranean Sea. It had at least 200,000 residents and possibly as many as 500,000 according to some sources. Rome and Alexandria were larger (800,000 and around 500-600,000, respectively).

- C. The Lord was with them and they had a **great harvest of people** turning to the Lord. God was working in their midst. Let us pray for such a work of God in our own day.

II. Connection of the Churches at Antioch and Jerusalem, v. 22-24

A. Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem on official church business. He was a “messenger” of the Jerusalem church. He went to find out about the new church in Antioch, which was about 300 miles away.

B. Barnabas observed the good work of God and was glad.

Barnabas is a good example: start by observing.

He saw the grace of God operating in the lives of the disciples. An invisible attribute of God became visible in the lives of the believers in the church.

Evidence of God’s grace should make every believer glad.

C. Barnabas encouraged them to continue with the Lord.

Continue – to remain, to continue steadfast in association with the Lord, not to deny him or walk away from the faith. To persevere, keep on believing. This is what true faith does.

Barnabas enjoined that their attitude accompanying their continuance with the Lord was “with purpose of heart”—purposefully, intentionally, etc. Not accidentally or haphazardly or mindlessly.

D. The character of Barnabas was excellent, 24a. This is why (“for”) he was glad and why he encouraged them to continue with the Lord. He was a good man—contra Romans 3:12—which is explained by the gospel.¹ Good people rejoice when they see God’s work being done.

He was also full of the Spirit and faith. This means that the Spirit of God was His guide. He was a man who completely believed in God. He is a model for us. He was an encouragement to them.

E. Around that time, many people were added to the Lord. This may be the result of Barnabas’s ministry combined with that of the evangelists, 24b.

F. Barnabas either decided to stay at Antioch, perhaps because of the fruitfulness of the ministry there and the need for helpers, or because the Jerusalem church wanted him to do so.

III. Ministry in Antioch, v. 25-30

A. Barnabas traveled to Tarsus to get Saul. Remember Acts 9:27-30.

B. Teaching at Antioch. Saul and Barnabas and the others undertook a teaching ministry. They taught Bible and gospel, crucial aspects of

¹ <https://www.fbcaa.org/MattPostiffBlog/2018/09/A-Few-Good-Men>

ministry in Antioch. We take very seriously this style of ministry and believe it should be reproduced in our churches.

For this teaching to function, they assembled—gathered!

It seems that they settled into this style of Christian and church ministry. As a result, the church was solidified and began to move from its infancy stage to its more mature state, at least in Antioch.

C. The Name “Christian” Originated in Antioch

Because of the more settled nature of things, now a moniker was attached to the group: *Christian*.

“Christian” means “one associated with Christ.” Up to this point they may have had several names or descriptive identifiers. One was “the way” as in Acts 9:2, 19:9, 19:23, 24:14, 24:22, and probably related to 16:17, 18:25-26. After all, Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life.” The name was initially a derogatory term but was eventually accepted by Christians worldwide. The name is meant to be a shorthand that will brand and identify the people of this unacceptable cult.

D. Prophecy of Famine, 27-28

Agabus was a prophet that made a couple of key prophecies—here and in Acts 21:10 about Paul. He was ministering around the Jerusalem church, somewhere in the region of Judea.

Historical information about this famine is available. Claudius was Roman Emperor from 41 to 54 A.D. The timing of the revelation recorded in Acts 11 therefore must have been during this time. It is not necessary to believe that the prophecy was given before 41, for this would not give enough time for Saul to come back on the scene after his 11 silent years, perhaps around AD 46. The famine occurred at that time or after. There is a famine recorded in AD 44-48.

E. Determination to Send Relief, 29-30

Their focus was to help the Christians in Jerusalem. I suspect that those who had not converted would help “their own” and the Christians had to help their own people.

They made a serious decision about money. They did so each according to his ability. This is the way of giving. The rich give more, the poor give less. There is no idea of fixed amounts or percentages. It appears that all or most of the disciples participated—not just Barnabas or Paul or the “apostles” (who were not present in Antioch).

Christians were not the only ones who sent relief. Queen Helene of Adiabene also did. Adiabene was an ancient kingdom in Assyria, with its capital at Arbela (modern-day Arbil, Iraq). It was a Parthian vassal state. Its rulers converted to Judaism from Ashurism in the 1st century, around 30AD. Queen Helena of Adiabene (known in Jewish sources as Heleni HaMalka) moved to Jerusalem where she built palaces for herself and her sons, Izates bar Monobaz and Monobaz II at the northern part of the city of David, south of the Temple Mount. According to the Talmud, both Helena and Monobaz donated large funds for the Temple of Jerusalem. It was during this famine that Queen Helena of Adiabene relieved the Jews by purchasing grain in Egypt (Ant. 20.49-53).

Conclusion

Learn from the example of these people:

1. Evangelism and church planting is important. They are important enough that God sometimes uses persecution to spur it on.
2. Encouragement toward new believers is critical, so God mentions it in Scripture here. They need it—especially in the face of strong persecution.
3. Example of Barnabas' character. He is a model for us as Christians, and gives us hope that we too can be good people, not just unworthy worms.
4. Edification of the church happens through teaching. This teaching is not just imparting knowledge, but helping believers to obey what the Lord has taught. Note that the church gathered together to receive the teaching.
5. Determination to send relief to famine-stricken Judea. Benevolence was built in to the local church from the start. A similar thing happened in the Jerusalem church: remember the work of the first deacons in Acts 6 as they supported the widows.
6. At the end of v. 21 and 24, many people became Christians. God can do the same among us today.

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