

## The First Christians Acts 11:19-30

Portions adapted from Church Expansion In Antioch. By Otis McMillan

*Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord*

Acts 11:19-20

From the day of Pentecost, the early Church grew rapidly in Jerusalem and surrounding regions as the Holy Spirit guided it through conflict, prejudice and crisis. Then about 5 years after Pentecost, the Jewish authorities launched a massive persecution intending to wipe the young Church out; much of it led by a zealous young Pharisee named Saul of Tarsus. Because of the persecution, Jewish believers, both Hebrew and Greek speaking, scattered out over the Palestinian countryside taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ with them to wherever they traveled. But it seems that none of the Jewish speaking believers including the Apostles really understood that God wanted to offer salvation to the whole world. So whether due to language or prejudice barriers they only spoke to fellow Jews about Jesus.

But amazing Holy Spirit led changes were in the works. During this time of the believer's exodus from Jerusalem, Saul their chief persecutor was on his way to Damascus to cause more trouble for the followers of Jesus, but instead he was converted to the faith; his subsequent return to Jerusalem with his own testimony and powerful debate skills both deflated the Jewish opposition while adding fuel to the revival fires.



At the same time, Philip the Deacon, one of those Greek speaking Jews, sharing his faith while walking home to Caesarea, sparked a tremendous revival among the nearby Samaritan population.

And then Peter was specifically ordered by the Holy Spirit to go to the home of Cornelius, a God fearing Roman officer, with the result that he, his family, and a large group of Gentile Friends became believers.



I didn't mention this last week, but did you realize that Cornelius was living in the same town as Philip the Deacon, who had just come home? Philip was a gifted evangelist, he could also speak fluent Greek, and he had no qualms

about witnessing to Gentiles. And yet the Holy Spirit told Cornelius to send for Peter – a day’s walk away – to have Peter come to his house to share the good news. Why?

Because God was using Cornelius to help Peter and the other Jerusalem leaders to overcome their own prejudices, realizing that God was no respecter of persons, but truly desired to save the whole world. Neither was it a coincidence that God chose Cornelius to be the first Gentile convert, because this God-fearing Roman soldier was a born evangelist even before he was saved. After he had sent for Peter, he called for his entire family and friends to gather in his home. So that when Peter arrived, they would all be assembled there, waiting and willing to receive the word of the Lord.



And while all this was going in Phoenicia, Samaria, Caesarea, and among Jerusalem Church leadership, unbeknownst to them something equally marvelous was happening in the Greek city of Antioch some 300 miles north of Jerusalem.

After Rome and Alexandria, Antioch was the third largest city in the Empire; having a largely Gentile population of over 400,000 at the time along with a small Jewish community. While exiled Jewish speaking believers who found their way to Antioch still only spoke to other Jews. The Greek speaking believers – just like Philip, feeling no such restrictions – witnessed to everyone they met: Jew and Gentile alike. And a surprising thing happened. A massive revival broke out among the Gentiles of Antioch.

This was quite unexpected, because Antioch, as the regional capital of Rome, and a crossroad for major Eurasian and African trade routes, was one of the more cosmopolitan, culturally sophisticated, and morally lax cities in the Empire. So for the Christian faith to take root among these worldly Gentiles, was truly the work of the Holy Spirit. And even more so because, not the Apostles, but common, everyday, lay believers were the ones causing this great awakening among the citizenry of Antioch.

Understand that up to this point, the Apostles had been the leaders in the Church growth movement. But now, the Church that was being birthed in Antioch came about because everyday Christians – no one famous – having headed out into the world, were sharing their faith along the way.

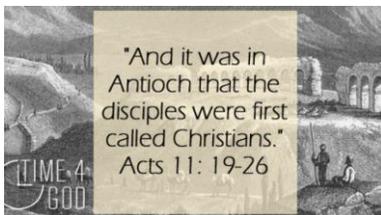
Jerusalem did not even know anything was happening in Antioch until someone brought them news of the new and different Church that was growing there. Then the Apostles dispatched Barnabas to check out the legitimacy of this young Gentile Church; probably because, having grown up in Cyprus, Barnabas was another of those foreign raised Jews who had no compunctions against speaking with strangers; and even more so

because he was – as the Bible described him – “*a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith* (vs.25)



Barnabas, who shared in none of Peter’s or the other Church leaders’ prejudices, rejoiced to find faith in Christ sprouting there among Antioch Gentiles. And he decided to stay awhile and help with the revival. At first he worked with these new Christians by himself, but as the revival continued to grow, he knew he needed help. So Barnabas went to find and then bring to Antioch Saul of Tarsus, that brilliant Jewish Rabbi turned believer, who by his own testimony had been commissioned by Christ to minister to Gentiles. Together they worked for a year helping to establish the Gentile Church of Antioch; as an ever increasing number of Gentiles continued coming into the faith..

OF course, the conversion of so many people to this new faith did not go unnoticed by the other residents of Antioch. So non-believers gave these new believers a nickname that wasn’t meant to be complimentary: “*Here comes one of those new ‘Christians;’ Watch out! They are going to try to convert you.*” But once given to them, the label “Christian” seemed so appropriate, too beautiful, too dear, to be ever allowed to disappear. By the end of the first century all believers were calling themselves “Christians.”



The word “**Christian**” literally means “**one who belongs to Christ,**” or a “**little Christ.**” I like “little Christ” because it accurately describes what I am supposed to become as I grow in my faith; letting the mind of Christ dwell in me.

Apparently these zealous Antioch Christians did a really good job of sharing their faith, because by 325a.d. more than a quarter of the population of Antioch now claimed to be Christian (this made up a church of over 200,000 members).

Two other amazing things also came out of this Christian Church in Antioch while the Jerusalem Church was still struggling to overcome its prejudices.

The first being that this church, which had been started by everyday Jewish believers who had no problem sharing their faith across cultural lines, quickly became a powerful mission church, taking the lead in sending missionaries further into the Gentile world. Paul and Barnabas having first been called to the mission field of Antioch, continued to use the Church in Antioch – not Jerusalem - as their headquarters returning there to report and refresh after every mission trip.

Secondly, that this largely Gentile Church who had struggled to find acceptance by the Jerusalem Church, never shared in similar prejudices; in fact they developed a strong affection for their Jewish brethren. And when informed by the prophet Agabus that the entire world would see a famine, the Antioch church voluntarily took up a collection among its membership specifically to help the believers in Jerusalem.

Thus the Gentile church in Antioch became the birthplace of foreign missions and remained a powerful headquarters for the Christian church for many centuries thereafter. Why? Because God's light often shines brightest against a dark background.

**But the lesson we need to take home today, is that this generous, mission minded, big-hearted Gentile Church had not been started by the "experts" but rather was begun and then flourished under the leadership of everyday Christians, people like you. Not people like me.** People not necessarily having personally followed Christ, not formally trained in Biblical interpretation or evangelistic theory, but rather just ordinary run of the mill believers who joyously shared their faith with their neighbors ... whomever their neighbor happened to be.

While the professionals remained in Jerusalem, the church in Antioch (and probably Samaria and Phoenicia as well) continued to grow under the leadership of lay believers, everyday Christians who got involved sharing their faith. And if our church is ever going to expand and grow again, it will be because the laity – you who sit in the congregation – have again gotten involved in sharing your faith with your neighbors.

I saw something similar happen in Ethiopia. Officially a Christian nation by 330a.d., by the 1950's, Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity had dried up little more than formal rituals with no real Biblical knowledge. This had happened because as modern Ethiopian language grew further away from the ancient language of Ge'ez, the Orthodox Priests had lost the ability to read their own Bibles. But in the 1950s Lutheran missionaries sparked a modest revival by translating the Bible into the modern language of Ethiopians. I am proud to say that Presbyterian Missionaries were also involved in the region. However, all foreign missions were intentionally hobbled by Ethiopian law restricting foreign missionaries to their own compounds while letting only "locals" go out into fields evangelizing. Yet it was probably this very practice that eventually backfired on those who had tried to restrict the growth of modern Christianity in the region.

Then From 1974 to 1991, for 17 years, a militant Communist Government known as the Derge had taken over Ethiopia and kicked all the foreign missionaries out. Local Church lands were confiscated, local pastors were jailed and tortured. By 1991 the Derge had been overthrown and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was founded ( it is

still basically a corrupt government under a dictator, but there are a lot more liberties for the citizens). And when the missionaries were invited back in the country, what they found astounded them.



What had only been a modest revival before was now an explosive revival covering most of the nation. Even with the continued resistance of the official Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Evangelical Churches led by self-taught Elder/Pastors had sprung up everywhere and the buildings were crowded with joyous worshipers. The missionaries' task now quickly shifted away from trying to be a witness, to training and equipping as many pastors as possible to serve these ever growing Churches. That is why I was there, for two months, serving as a guest lecturer, helping to train local Church elders – many who had not even finished primary school – to be pastors in their home churches. That was a great privilege for me.

When the Antioch Church was left in the hands of the local believers, it exploded. When the Ethiopian church went underground during a time of communist suppression, only to be led by lay-believers, it also exploded. And if revival is ever going to come again to North America, if this Church is ever going to grow again here, it will only happen as everyday believers get involved, taking their faith out into the streets.



The Antioch and Ethiopian Churches grew because common every day believers were willing to speak their faith. They had simple and personal conversation with people about what they believed. These believers simply shared with those they met what Jesus had done in their lives and their lives, love, and hospitality proved the truth of what they said. **The same holds true for us, if this church is going to expand and grow again, believers first must be personally involved, and secondly, they must be impartial.**

The Church in Antioch was born because multiracial, multi-cultural believers from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene, a place in northern Africa, who both looked different and spoke with a different accent, felt no restrictions about sharing their faith with anyone. And for this reason, ***the hand of the Lord***, the power of God was with them and upon their work (11:22). Jesus died for all people and God's deep desire is that everyone come to know Jesus and have a relationship with Him; the people who were joyously serving as His ambassadors in this effort were everyday believers.



If we all get involved, and share Christ's message with everyone, we can be sure His hand will be with us as well. The Gospel has not changed: Jesus saves, heals and delivers. If the church is going to expand and grow again, All of us must have His hand upon us and all that we do.

The same hand that created the world and brought order out of chaos; the same hand that formed the body of Adam and blew the breath of life in him; we need him to bring order into our chaotic lives.

The same hand that healed the lame, the blind, the deaf and demon possessed was with them. The same hand that was nailed to the cross will also be with us.

The hand of Jesus is powerful.

The hand of Jesus still transforms lives.

The hand of Jesus gives strength to the weak.

The hand of Jesus gives courage to the fearful.

The hand of Jesus gives hope to the hopeless.

The hand of Jesus gives life to the dead.

When everyone of us finally realizes that it is not up to professionals and gets involved and shares their stories, then The Lord's hand will also be with us and transformation will take place.

According to the account in Acts, the results were amazing. A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. We are called to the same work, every time we scatter and leave this place. We are called to go into the Antiochs of life and get involved. It is not the work of clergy only, it's our work. I believe the same results can happen here but we must do the work.

Today as we come to the table, remember that Jesus said people will come from north, south, east, and west to sit at table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29). Remember this, get involved, share the Good News, and watch the Lord work