

In chapter ten we studied about how God worked in the lives of Cornelius, and Peter in order to bring about the conversion of gentiles who sought the Lord with all of their hearts. Last time we read about Peter's defense of his actions in sharing the gospel with the gentiles, staying in their home, and eating unclean foods

In tonight's passage we see a distinct change in the direction of Luke's record of the history of the church, which sets up all that is to follow. Christian Jews begin to actively reach out to share the gospel with gentiles who have never heard the gospel, and who had no association with Judaism. They spread the gospel with a heart to evangelize the whole world. Our passage this evening is rich in that it provides the historical and cultural context for the expansion of the gospel to all people throughout the Roman Empire. It also sets up how Paul comes to fulfill God's calling upon his life to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Let's read together, Acts 11:19-30.

Our passage begins with how God used the tragedy of Stephen's murder to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. The Jews killed Stephen for just standing on truth of the gospel. You will recall that when the Jews stoned Stephen, great persecution against the church broke out, with Saul as one of the ringleaders of that oppression. The bible indicates that most of the believers fled, while the Apostles remained in Jerusalem. God used those who fled to spread the gospel outside of Judah. This should encourage us to trust God, even in the most tragic of personal circumstances, because God works all things for good for those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose.

Here we learn that they fled to Phoenicia, which was to the north of Samaria, to Antioch, which is in northern Syria, not that far from Tarsus, in what is now Turkey, and Cypress which is an Island off the coast in the Mediterranean Sea. But as a whole, the believers who fled to these places only shared Jesus with other Jews. That was about to change.

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. It was a center of commerce that had a large Jewish presence. Overall it was a pagan city, but it overtook Jerusalem as the center of Christian faith. Antioch becomes Paul's home base, from which he set out on his three missionary journeys.

It is interesting to note that Paul's ministry focused in the larger centers of commerce in the Roman Empire. If it were today in America, he would invest himself in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, New York City and New Orleans. These were areas with the strongest pagan influence, but held the potential of reaching the greatest number of people with the gospel.

The bible says that some of the Jewish Christians from Cyprus, the island in the Mediterranean Sea, and Cyrene, which lies on the Northern coast of Africa, came to Antioch, and began to share Jesus with the Hellenists. Some manuscripts read that they shared the gospel with the "Greeks." Hellenists are people who immersed themselves in Greek culture and philosophy. In previous passages the word Hellenists referred to Jews who embraced the Grecian worldview. Context in this passage shows us that Luke here refers to Gentile Hellenists. Some of the Jewish Christians actively witnessed to Gentiles who had no ties to Judaism.

The bible says that God's hand was on them, and many received the gospel, and turned to Jesus in faith. We can assume that the Gentiles, who came to saving faith in Jesus Christ, also shared their faith with other Gentiles. From this time on, the Christian church becomes more and more Gentile, and less and less Jewish.

When word of this reached the church in Jerusalem, they were uncertain if this movement was from God. They still clung to their Jewish tradition, and it was hard for them to understand how people could be saved without first becoming Jews. They still thought of themselves as God's chosen people. In their minds, the practice of their traditions, and their way of worship, was the only way approved and accepted by God. It was unthinkable to them that God might accept and bless others outside of the Jewish faith.

Still, so many things changed after Jesus' resurrection. The Holy Spirit came; believers were persecuted and murdered, by the Jews, because of their faith. As the gospel spread, people surrendered their lives in faith. Many of them held to other worldviews, outside of traditional Judaism. Now, people became Christians who did not know anything about Judaism. So with the ministry of the Holy Spirit, they sent Barnabas to check it out, and report back to them what was really going on.

We really can't blame them for their skepticism. Not everything that appears on the surface to be godly really is. Not every opportunity for ministry is from God, and not every legitimate ministry opportunity is where God wants us to invest ourselves. I have been one of your pastors for almost 17 years, and have seen numerous people try to attach themselves to the ministries of our church in order to advance themselves, or to draw resources, and people, from our church. I get a ton of mail, e-mail, and messages in social media, where people solicit for our financial support, every week. All of it appears, on the surface, to be godly, worthwhile, and something we might want to look into. But not every opportunity is from God, and not every legitimate ministry is something that God wants us to do.

The decisions we make concerning the ministries of the church require investigation and discernment from the Holy Spirit. If God reveals that this is something He wants us to do, we pour ourselves, and our resources, into that ministry. If it is not according to God's will, we focus on the ministries we already have.

The church in Jerusalem didn't know what to make of the reports coming out of Antioch. They wanted to make sure that this movement was of God, so they chose Barnabas to go check it out and report back to them. We learned earlier that Barnabas was known as the Son of Encouragement. He came to Paul's defense when the church in Jerusalem questioned the validity of his Damascus Road experience, and his ministry of the gospel after his encounter with the Lord. Here we read that Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith.

When Barnabas saw what God was doing, he joined God in the work at Antioch. He became a primary Christian leader in the church, but recognized that he needed help in the expanding ministry. Being a man of God, he discerned that he must call on Saul, who lived and ministered in Tarsus, about 86 miles away. Saul went with Barnabas to Antioch, and the two of them invested themselves in the ministry there for a whole year before being set apart for world missions. They preached the gospel, and taught the people the word of God, and its application to their lives.

It is important for churches to recognize that as the ministry grows, pastors sometimes need help. If this were not the case, I would not be a pastor here at Hickory Hammock. There is nothing going on in our church that Brother Carl cannot do, he just cannot do it all by himself. The ministries of the church sometimes would overwhelm the ministerial staff if it were not for the hearts of our members and their willingness to be directly involved in ministry. Our deacons are co-ministers with the pastors. I praise God when I go to the hospitals and see groups of our members praying for and ministering to patients and their families. So many of you take the

initiative to reach out to others when they are in need. All of this is of God, and I am so proud of you, and thankful for all that you do.

The bible says that the believers were first called Christians in Antioch. The word Christian occurs in scripture only three times: here, in chapter 26, and in 1 Peter 4. When we look at those other two verses, and read the writings of the early church fathers, we come to understand that the word Christian was not originally meant to be a complimentary term. It was a slang word of disdain, used by those who rejected the gospel message, and disapproved of the teachings of the faith. Later, because of opposition and persecution, the church adopted the name Christian as a badge of honor. You call me a Christian and intend for it to be a put down, but I bear the name of Christ as a badge of truth, and honor. I am not ashamed, but proud to be called a Christian.

It is really no different in the world today. People who are of other faiths, or who refuse to submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, sometimes call us Christian as if it were a curse word. When Muslims refer to a person as being a Christian, it is not a complement, but as an indication of that person being an infidel who stands in condemnation of Allah, and whose influence must be eradicated. But we are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. I am so honored, and thankful, to be called a Christian.

The bible says that there were prophets in Jerusalem who came to Antioch to join in the ministry. One of them was named Agabus. We read about him again in chapter 21 where he prophesied that Paul would be bound and arrested when he traveled to Jerusalem with another collection taken up from the gentile churches to aid the church in Jerusalem. In this passage he predicted a great famine, which occurred as a series of famines during the reign of the Emperor Claudius.

This bit of information gives a sense of context because we know from literature outside the bible that Claudius reigned from 41-54 AD. If Jesus died between 30 and 33AD, then a significant number of years has passed since the birth of the church. This fact would easily be missed if we did not have these clues. We also know that one of Claudius' most significant proclamations, so far as scripture is concerned, was that he expelled all of the Jews from Rome. When we get to chapter 18, Paul meets up with Priscilla and Aquila who fled to Corinth because they could not stay in Rome. Much of Paul's ministry occurred during this time frame. We also know that Nero had Paul beheaded so his death occurred sometime after 54AD.

It is at this point that we read that the church at Antioch took up an offering in order to support the brothers in Judea. This is a significant event that we see repeated in later chapters. The primarily Gentile church in Antioch sent support to the primarily Jewish churches. While the Jewish Christians were hesitant to accept the Gentiles as brothers and sisters through faith in Christ, the Gentiles had no such reservations about their Jewish brothers and sisters.

The practice of supporting Christian ministries in other places is an important function of the church today. Each year, with joy in our hearts, we send large sums of money in support of the Jack Goldfarb Christian School, where impoverished children have a better chance at life through a Christian education. A part of our Cooperative Program giving goes to support other churches in need, and to help build facilities where there is need to establish a new church. When disaster strikes, we send teams to help in the recovery, and I am so proud of our youth in these kinds of efforts, as well as the Vacation Bible Schools they teach, and the other ministries they embrace. It is good and right for us to do this, because we do it for the cause of Christ, as God makes clear His will for our involvement.

The bible says that they sent the collection to the elders, by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. This is the first mention of elders in the bible. Different churches and different denominations have different interpretations. Sometimes the word elder is used interchangeably with deacon, or pastor. Some churches have elders, some have deacons, and some have elders and deacons. The word may be used to refer to people in leadership positions, or people who are older, or more mature in their faith.

What is important to us is that we do not worry about positions and badges, but that we embrace God's will for our lives and we conduct the affairs of the church in a godly and orderly fashion that is pleasing to the Lord. We have deacons, but no elders. If another church uses a different structure within their church, it doesn't matter. What is important in this verse is to see the trustworthiness of Barnabas and Saul, and the way that God used them to fulfill His plan.

You and I will never reach the notoriety of these two men in the eyes of the future church, but God does have a purpose and a plan for each of our lives. Giving our very best to the Lord revolves around finding and fulfilling that purpose. It will be a little different for each of us, but the one thing that God desires for every single person, is to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. If there is anyone here who needs help with that decision, and commitment, we will be glad to help you and to answer any questions you might have.