

Title: The first “Christians”
Date: 6/1/25
Subject: Insights from the church in Antioch
Scripture: Acts 11:19 - 30

Welcome to Antioch on the Orontes River which flowed sixteen miles through hills until it reached the Mediterranean. Antioch was just a short 15 day walk of 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It had a long and storied history as it was founded in 300 B. C. shortly after Alexander the Great’s empire was divided. It became capital of an empire that stretched from modern Syria to India. When Rome conquered the area, Antioch maintained its status and was the third largest city of the empire behind only Rome and Alexandria. It had a large Jewish community. For you literature or movie fans, it was the location of the hippodrome where Ben Hur raced his chariot.

But all was not bright and shiny. Antioch was characterized as spewing the “sewage of the Syrian Orontes” into the rest of the empire (Roman satirist Juvenal). It had extremely lax morals in large part because of the cult of Artemis and Apollo which included ritual prostitution. Author John Pollock, from whom we heard last week, “Antiochenes had a rumbustious reputation, partly from their satirical wit and lively sense of the ridiculous but mainly because of a sex life which even ancient Rome rated excessive” (The Apostle: The Life of Paul, p. 63).

It's in this setting that God established a church which soon became a major hub of Christianity. It was the sending center as Paul and others set out from Antioch on evangelism and missionary journeys. The prevalence of Christianity is noted by the 20 plus 4th century churches that have been uncovered by archaeologists.

Those who placed their trust in Jesus as Savior had been known in the book of Acts by many names - brothers, referring to men and women, disciples, the church, believers and the Way. The generic meaning of a disciple meant a person found a particular teacher to follow. They listened and adhered to the teacher’s teachings. They followed his example and lifestyle. They aligned themselves with that person. They got a new name in Antioch - Christians.

The origin of name is unknown. The disciples may have begun using it. It may have come from enemies as a form of reproach. It may have arisen from the culture in Antioch that simply wanted a way to categorize these people who were constantly talking about Jesus Christ. The city was filled with all sorts of belief systems and cults, but this new group didn’t fit any. They had their own meeting place, worship. They weren't a new kind of Judaism. The label given to them was half Greek and half Latin - Christiani.

The suffix “ian” means follower or miniature version. Therefore, Christians are little Christs. They’re Christ’s people, servants of Christ. They belong to Christ.

1. Christianity is for all people. READ Acts 11:19-22

Christianity isn't limited by the typical things that separate people - ethnicity, social status, etc. It took a while for this idea to sink in. The initial disciples of Jesus were Jewish. There were a few Gentiles who had placed their trust in Christ as Jesus had contact with non-Jews during his ministry. And there were prophecies about the Christ/the Anointed One/the Messiah coming - not just for Jews but also for the Gentile world. However, in the immediate aftermath of Christ's death and resurrection, Peter, Matthew and the other original 12 disciples mainly shared the Good News of Jesus with fellow Jews.

This was the case in Antioch. People who'd scattered from Jerusalem because of persecution that began with Stephen's martyrdom and settled in the city concentrated on Jews. There may have been an underlying racial element as Jews and Gentiles weren't exactly best buds. There certainly was a comfort level in speaking with people of a similar language and culture. Plus, Jews were more familiar with the OT teachings and stories.

Acts 2 informs us that on the day of Pentecost, there were people in Jerusalem who were God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). Some of them may have returned to Cypress and Cyrene, places heavily influenced by Greek culture and thinking. They later went to Antioch to speak to Greeks, meaning Greek speakers, both Gentile and Jew. A great many believed and turned to the Lord.

This paragraph uses the word "Lord" three times. F. F. Bruce (The Book of The Acts, pp. 238, 239) suggests the men of Cypress and Cyrene were daring spirits who took a monumental step forward in speaking to the Greeks. In doing so they didn't talk about Jesus as being the Messiah as it would have been a meaningless procedure because the people didn't relate to the hope of Israel. Instead, they spoke with Greek terms *Kyrios* (Lord) and *Soter* (Savior). Bruce notes that those words "were widely current in the religious world of the eastern Mediterranean. Many were attempting to find in various mystery cults a divine lord who could guarantee salvation and immortality to his devotees; now the pagans of Antioch were assured that what they vainly sought in those quarters could be secured through the Son of God who had lately become man, suffered death and conquered the grave in Palestine."

God's heart has always been open and welcoming to people of every tribe, language and nation. It was a different story for the leaders and the Jerusalem church, the first headquarters of Christianity. They were skeptical yet hopeful of what was happening among the Gentiles. They needed to check to see if it was the same as they had experienced, just as they felt it was necessary to check the legitimacy of any new ministry.

Our friend Barnabas, I think we'd like to call him our friend, was born in Cyprus. Therefore, since he had a natural fit with those who were proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, he was the one who was designated as the apostles' ambassador. He was ready for the assignment.

He was pleasantly surprised but not shocked as he saw evidence of God's grace. People didn't just buy into some temporary experience. People had truly put their trust and hope in Jesus Christ. They'd repented and turned from their sins. This doesn't mean they were perfect. They were like us and still had lots of room for growth, but they were growing in their faith. This was extremely good news which caused Barnabas to rejoice.

Barnabas stayed in Antioch for a while before determining he needed help teaching the Christians.

2. Team teaching READ vv. 24 - 26

Barnabas was a good man. It's not in the sense of being a good ol' boy who didn't mean anybody not harm. He wasn't good in and of himself. He was good because God had changed him and he possessed godly character. He loved God desired to live in a way pleased him. He was full of the Holy Spirit meaning he was controlled by God and not by his impulses and desires. He was full of faith. He trusted in the Lord taking him at his word.

How would people sum up our character? More importantly, how does God sum up our character?

As great Barnabas' credentials were, he couldn't do everything by himself. He needed help. The name that came to mind was the one he had vouched for in front of the apostles. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul. The original Greek language implies it wasn't an easy task to find Saul. Barnabas couldn't just go to a particular address and Saul would be there. It's likely Saul had been disinherited by his parents because he became a Christ follower. Saul may have been traveling in the provinces. Barnabas was on the hunt to find Saul. When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. The two taught for a year and the people gobbled it up.

3. Meet needs READ vv. 27-30

Another group trekked from Jerusalem down to Antioch. It's always intrigued me about the directions applied to Jerusalem. Antioch is north of Jerusalem so one might think people would go up from Jerusalem. No. If people were going to Jerusalem from the north, south, east or west, they were going up to Jerusalem. If they were going away from Jerusalem they were going down from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the center.

A group of prophets showed up in Antioch either to check up on things or help people learn more about Jesus. They were in the mold of Old Testament prophets in this transition phase of God's work among people. These men taught - forthtold God's truth but also foretold the future. Agabus, under the control of God, predicted a severe famine would affect the entire Roman world and in particularly Jerusalem.

The Antiochian church decided to help those who'd be affected by the famine. We aren't told if the relief was monetary as people collected finances or it was foodstuffs or a combo. The important matter is they needed to get it to Jerusalem and highly qualified people to deliver it. The group selected the two men who had taught them and whom they trusted - Barnabas and Saul. If they could be trusted with major matters like spiritual things, they could be trusted with lesser stuff like money.

There've been numerous times where we've done things to meet practical and physical needs of others. It stretches from contributions to local food pantries, assistance to those needing gas, to water projects and assistance for moms and pregnant women. This year's Vacation Bible School project is providing food for hungry children in the United States and around the world through Children's Hunger Fund.

Jump ahead to the end of chapter 12. We bypass Peter's escape from prison when Herod wanted to kill him and Herod's death because he refused to acknowledge God. It's not that those things aren't important but they don't really focus on our main traveler - Saul.

12:25. Read.

Barnabas and Saul gain a new traveling companion - John Mark. This is a teaser of things to come. At this point all we know about him is he returns to Antioch with Barnabas and Saul.

We skipped a verse. Go back to 23.

4. Remain true to the Lord. READ v. 23

Barnabas initially didn't return to Jerusalem to report his findings. He had more important things to do. He stayed in Antioch and encouraged the new Christians. Barnabas was true to his nature - a friend who came alongside others. He was again the encourager.

What a great trait to have. An elderly widow was eager to serve Christ but was restricted in what she could do. After praying, she realized she could bless others by playing the piano. She placed a small ad in the *Oakland Tribune*: "Pianist will play hymns by phone daily for those who are sick and despondent--the service is free." When people called, she'd ask, "What hymn would you like to hear?" Many freely poured out their hearts. Within a few months she had encouraged several hundred people by her words and playing.

Barnabas encouraged the people to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts, to maintain their faith and confidence in the Lord, to not back away from their newfound faith. He encouraged them to strengthen it and keep at it. Keep obeying. Keep serving. Keep persevering.

Andy Cook (lifeway.com/en/articles/sermon-jesus-king-of-kings-palm-sunday-hebrews-3-12) recalls a retired missionary who served in Africa who visited his church. She spoke of a baptismal service she had witnessed alongside a few friends and family members who'd gathered. A younger missionary took three new converts into a shallow river where he dug a hole in the sand so there'd be enough water for the baptism. Even then, the new believers were forced to sit in the sand so there'd be enough water to immerse them.

The missionary raised his hand, repeated familiar scriptures before baptizing the converts. When the first one came up out of the water, he excitedly and joyfully shouted and shouted. The second man did the same as did the third.

The woman missionary asked the younger one about the unusual tradition - why all the shouting? He responded, "I haven't been able to completely communicate in this tribe's language. They heard the scripture I gave them, but they didn't understand the symbolic nature of it. When I told them that they would be *buried with him through baptism into death...and raised to walk in the newness of life* (Romans 6:4) they actually thought baptism would kill them!"

Andy and those with him chuckled, until the missionary froze them with her gaze. "Let me ask you a question. If you thought baptism would kill you, would you be willing to get in the river?"

Quite the question. The three men were willing to persevere in their faith to the end of their lives, which they mistakenly thought would happen much sooner than later.

Persevere. Encouragement to persevere from Ben Fuller's song If I Got Jesus: "If I've got Jesus, I've got all that I could ever need. Take the world away from me and I'll be okay. If I've got Jesus, There's a hope that's living deep inside, A joy that I could never hide, And a safe place to fall, If I've got Jesus, I got it all."