

## **FIRST CALLED CHRISTIANS AT ANTIOCH**

**Act 11:19-30**

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If a minister is praying for a sick person and a church member is praying for a sick person, who is God more likely to listen to? If a minister is evangelising or a member of the church is evangelising, who is the Holy Spirit more likely to help convert the person? Obviously, it's the same in both cases. A minister should know more about the Bible and be a teacher in their church. But there is nothing exceptional about a minister that gives him superior power in praying or witnessing. So, who is capable and responsible for doing ministry in our church? All of us. Paul wrote in Ephesians (Ephesians 4:11,12) the task of the *"...pastor/teacher is ...[to] equip God's people for work of ministry..."* This understanding is central to what we see here in our text. What is significant is that we see a new church was set up in Antioch. It was a large church, which would eventually take over from Jerusalem as the centre of Christianity. And it would be the launching pad for outreach into all the world. Here's the thing. The starting of the church did not involve any of the apostles. It all began with ordinary folk sharing the good news about Jesus. (Acts 11:19-21) *"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*

In Acts 7 we saw how Stephen stood up to the Jews. With his brilliance he out argued them. He demonstrated that Jesus was the fulfilment of the Old Testament. He called them stiff necked and murders of the Christ. For that he was martyred. Then the rest of the Christian community was persecuted and scattered. God used that scattering to get his people out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria with the gospel. We see in our text that the scattering of the Jewish Christians eventually went much further. They went all the way to Phoenicia, the island of Cyprus and Antioch. They were well and truly out of their own country and culture. Now notice these scattered Jewish Christians were *"...telling the message only to Jews"*. You will remember that the Jews regarded the Gentiles as 'fuel for the fires of hell'. Jews did not associate with Gentiles. That was the huge paradigm shift we saw last week in Acts 10. There Peter was confronted with the vision of the unclean food. God said the 'unclean' was now to be regarded as

'clean'. The point was that God was opening the way for everyone, even Gentiles could be saved through Jesus. Peter and his six witnesses had been totally stunned seeing the Holy Spirit come on Cornelius and his family. It was such a huge shift in thinking. It made clear God had showed no favouritism. God loved all people and they could come to him just as they were.

But we see those who were scattered far away from Jerusalem still held their old Jewish views. Perhaps they hadn't heard yet what had happened to Peter. It maybe they stuck to relating with Jews because of language and cultural issues. All of us do that don't we? You find yourself in a foreign land. You don't speak the language. You don't know customs. It's great to find people of your own kind. It's nice in that situation to speak the same language. It feels safe. It's more comfortable. When we see who did share the gospel with Gentiles, we are told specifically they were "...men from Cyprus and Cyrene". Cyprus is the island, and Cyrene is on the north coast of Africa. Both were Greek speaking places. The Jewish Christians who came from those places were Hellenists Jews, like those mentioned in Acts 6. Barnabas was from Cyprus. The men from Cyprus and Cyrene had mixed with other cultures and languages for years. They were the ones who shared the gospel with the Gentiles. Those who spoke only to the Jews were most likely the Hebrew speaking Jews. They were refugees from Judea, who were very parochial in their language and ideas. They had only associated with Jews and couldn't dream of sharing the gospel with others.

The evangelism had remarkable results. We are told that "*The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*" If a church is serious about evangelism it needs eventually to get out of its cultural ghetto. Christians migrating to a new country will want to relate with those who have the same language and culture. That's understandable. It's needed till the people feel at home in the new country. The danger is ethnic churches can stick to their language and culture. That ends up creating a barrier to sharing the gospel with their communities. It will stifle their growth as a church. Eventually their own children will adopt the language and culture of the new country. Luke does not mention any names of those who came from Cyprus or Cyrene. In other words, there is no apostle amongst them. They were ordinary Christians who shared their faith in Antioch.

Antioch was a strategic place to plant a church. It was founded in 300BC on the Orontes River. It's where modern Antakya is in Turkey. It was the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It was the third largest city in the Roman empire. It was surpassed only in population by Rome and Alexandria. Its population well over 500,000. It was known as 'Queen of the East' or 'Antioch the Beautiful'. Athens was known for its

intellectualism. Rome for its power. Antioch was known for being cosmopolitan. There were people from all over the known world. If you have seen the movie Ben Hur, the great chariot race was at Antioch. The city was rich, cultured and corrupt. They had temple prostitutes and even a garden where couples could pass the time. It's to this huge cosmopolitan city that these Christians came and shared the gospel. Luke tells us 'God's hand was with them' in their witnessing. To such an extent, that when the Nicean Council was held in AD 325, there were more than 200,000 Christians in Antioch. Between 253 & 380 AD Antioch was the seat of no less than ten church councils. Its patriarchs took precedence over those at Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Alexandria. Think again of who brought the gospel to this huge, vibrant city. The unnamed Jewish Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene. No apostle is mentioned. No evangelist like Phillip. Just ordinary Christians. Let us never belittle ourselves in what we can do when we faithfully witness for Jesus. It is God who makes people change. It is the power of the Spirit that converts. We are just to faithfully tell about Jesus. You as ordinary Christians can be so much more useful in witness than a minister. At work, at uni, school or TAFE, at football, at your clubs and associations you are rubbing shoulders with all the different kinds of people in our communities. You know their culture, their stories. You speak their language. Take the opportunities to speak for Jesus knowing 'the hand of God' is with you.

Now, news of this large church in Antioch reached Jerusalem. So, they sent Barnabas up to check things out. Why Barnabas when he was not an apostle? When new things happened in Samaria, Peter and John checked it out. With the gospel spreading to the Gentiles in Caesarea in Cornelius' home it was Peter who was there. Why Barnabas? Well, for one thing, being a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus, he knew those who shared the gospel in Antioch. He understood the language and culture of Antioch. He wouldn't have been skeptical of this new church just because it wasn't like the church in Jerusalem. He was more open-minded. It was his openness to God, his big heart, his ability to encourage those outside the box that made him perfect for the job. Barnabas, we were told in Acts 4, sold land to help the poor. He did it easily because he trusted God in new situations. Barnabas was the one who introduced Saul when all the other apostles were afraid of him. Luke says of Barnabas, that he was a *"good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith"*. Barnabas was able to see the new things God was doing. The church today needs more of Barnabas. People who have the vision to see what God can do in our secular culture. People who are not scared to change. God is taking us through a paradigm shift. We cannot just look at our past, our own ethnic version of the faith. We cannot just complain that we are doing things we have never done before. We need a Barnabas to mentor us, to encourage us, to walk the faith with us and show God at work in our midst. That's what Barnabas does (Acts 11:23) *"When he*

*arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts".* Barnabas saw a whole new church full of people from this cosmopolitan city. People who were anything but Jews. People who didn't follow the old rituals. But who had obviously experienced the grace of God. He didn't criticize them for not knowing the Jewish ways, as others would do later. He understood they were Christians in their own setting. He didn't ask them to change to the old pattern, but to remain true to God. People who are young and post modern in our communities will express their worship in different ways to that of the migrants from the 1950's. Young people love to worship God with different styles of song, with different involvement in worship, more casual, more open. Let's understand the culture and speak to it. Let's encourage the expression of the faith in a new way. As long as, in the different cultural setting, we remain *"true to the Lord with all our hearts."*

Barnabas did notice one thing that was needed. The Christians in Antioch were young in the faith and needed lots of Bible teaching. The church had grown "great in number" by the people with their simple knowledge. They were not afraid to witness what they knew and experienced of Jesus. We need to be careful we don't hesitate to witness because we don't know enough. You are not asked to win a theological argument. Any Christian, new or old, can tell their own story of Jesus in their life. Any of us can pray with someone and read the Bible with them. But for a Christian to keep growing and mature in the faith they need good Bible teaching. So, what does Barnabas do? (Acts 11: 25-26) *"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."* Trust Barnabas to think of Paul, the brilliant Bible scholar! Paul had been out of circulation for 8-10 years for him to settle down. Now it's Barnabas the great encourager, the prime example of a mentor and coach, who gets Paul. The two of them do the teaching at Antioch. Barnabas is an example for ministers today. He teaches the people. At the same time, he is coaching someone to teach, namely Paul. It is interesting to note that when the two are mentioned from here till halfway chapter 13 it is always "Barnabas & Saul". Then, after that, it always "Paul & Barnabas". Barnabas is the coach, the maker of gospel workers.

At the end of verse 26 we are told that *"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."* You might find that odd, but prior to Antioch, the Christians were basically Jewish. They had been called people of "the Way". But in Antioch the converted locals were not at all Jewish. So, what should they call this new religious group in Antioch? Christian. The word comes from two other words: the Greek word 'Christos', Christ, and the Latin ending 'ian'. That meant 'belonging to', or 'the slave in the household of'. There are three ways in English to show possession: Plato's philosophy, philosophy of

Plato, Platonian philosophy. It is interesting to note that the word 'called' in the Greek denotes a relationship to a business. For example, being called Cooper, meant you were in the business of making wine barrels. So, putting it together it meant they were known by their 'main business' which meant being a slave of Jesus. 'Christians' were those 'belonging to Christ'. Now, it must be said, this first calling of Christian was not a pleasant thing. One Greek historian said, 'The vulgar call them Christian'. Antioch prided itself in being people who were free. To call out to someone, to say their main business was to be someone's slave, to be 'a little Christ', was a gross insult. But for those early Christians it was taken as a compliment. That their lifestyles revealed that their main business in life was to be servants of Jesus, was a great encouragement. What did the people see of their lifestyles? Well from our text we see they were constantly witnessing. From the likes of Barnabas, we see that they were discipling new Christians. And from the last part of the text we see that they were incredibly generous. The prophet Agabus saw that there would be a severe famine. So, the church at Antioch gave very generously to their 'brothers and sisters' in Jerusalem. They gave to a people they didn't know, who would initially have despised them as Gentiles. They gave because their main business was to be like Christ. That meant to deeply care for others. In our city being called Christian is no longer always a term of respect. Some of that has been brought on by the failures of the church. We can help change that by ensuring our main business is being true servants of Jesus. Caring for others with humility and grace. Sharing hope by revealing what God has done in Jesus.