**ANTIOCH, THE FIRST GENTILE CHURCH**

July 31, 2016

Acts 11:1-30

Key verse 11:26 “So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

In the last passage we learned that God accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. God is completely blind to race, culture, nationality or whatever our human origin came from. There are only two things that God is not blind to; fearing God and doing what is right. God reaches out to such people to bring them the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. There is no room for racial, national, or even generational prejudice in the body of Christ. We must learn the heart of Christ who accepts people from every nation who fear God and do what is right. We must be willing to share the gospel with them so that they may believe and be saved. In today’s passage Peter persuades the Jerusalem church that God has accepted the Gentiles. This opens the way for the Antioch church, which spread the gospel throughout the world. In Antioch believers were called Christians for the first time. A Christian is a person in Christ. Christians love Jesus and live like Jesus. We also learn how God established a world mission headquarters at Antioch through many nameless disciples. May God help us to grow as a world mission center through this study.

**First**, criticism arose among circumcised believers (1-3). Look at verse 1, “The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.” This event had happened when Peter visited Cornelius’ house. Some call it the “Gentile Pentecost.” As Peter preached the gospel message, emphasizing that Christ died to forgive our sins and that God raised him from the dead to give us eternal victory, it penetrated deeply into the hearts of all the Gentile listeners. Then the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began to praise God and speak in other tongues. They felt in their hearts that God had accepted them as his children. The heavy weight of sin was lifted from them. Eternal life filled their souls. They could begin to see the kingdom of God and have the living hope. On seeing this, Peter ordered that they be baptized into Christian fellowship. It was a most glorious day in Cornelius’ house and in Christian history. However, not everyone was happy about it. Peter was criticized for going into the house of uncircumcised men, that is, the Gentiles, and eating with them. To the Jews, this was an unthinkable thing because the Gentiles houses were not kosher, that is spiritually clean. Perhaps they began to doubt Peter’s judgment to lead the church because of this event. Until this time, the disciples of Jesus were all Jews. However, with the admittance of Gentiles, a question arose. How could Jews and Gentiles coexist in the church? Some wanted to make everyone a Jew in order to have fellowship in the church. This would mean that every male who was not circumcised, needed to be circumcised. This means that they would have to follow all the dietary laws as well. There was a strong possibility that the church would be segregated or even divided.

How did Peter respond? He could have said, “Listen, you guys, I am Peter the Rock. Jesus chose me as his top disciple. How can you challenge my authority? You must listen to me.” But he did not. He appealed to them on the basis of fact, the work of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus’ words. He was not defensive to their criticism. He was very calm and explained to them with detail, giving all the facts, and how everything had happened in verses 4-10. Peter shows us how we should respond to criticism when we do the work of God. We should not become defensive, but be patient and calm and support our actions by showing how God is working. The clear point he was trying to make through this, was that God opened the door to the Gentiles through the conversion of Cornelius and his household. This event convinced Peter that God makes everyone clean through faith in Jesus Christ. Peter’s heart became broadened to accept Gentiles as God’s people. It has been God’s desire to save the Gentiles through Israel. Isaiah 49:6 says, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” God has been eagerly waiting for this moment. Now God’s desire is being fulfilled.

**Second**, the gospel gives birth to the Antioch Church (19-21). Look at verses 19-20. “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.” Here, the message spreads from Jews to Greeks, that is, Gentiles. This was not done by the Jerusalem Jews; it was done through the Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene. It is amazing that we do not know the names of a single person who preached the gospel in Antioch. It was done by nameless ordinary believers. The world mission work is done by ordinary Christians. Notice that they did not preach Christ, which means Messiah. Greeks would not understand what it means. They preached the Lord Jesus. They preached him as Savior and Lord. They must have said, “Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But he came down to this world and lived among us as our friend and shepherd. He healed the sick and drove out evil spirits and gave sight to the blind. Then the Jewish leaders became jealous of him. They despised and rejected him and had him put to death. Yet, this was God’s will. It was the only way to pay the penalty for our sins. If you believe in him you will receive forgiveness of sins. That’s not all. God raised him from the dead. If you believe in him you will receive eternal life in the kingdom of God. You will receive the Holy Spirit and be freed from evil spirits. You don’t have to yell at your family members after working hard or to suffer from future security problem. You can have peace and joy and be truly happy.” The Greeks, who had imagined that the gods were like spoiled little children, whose temper tantrums resulted in human tragedies, were moved by the good news of the gospel. This gospel, by its universal nature, had power to cross any cultural barriers. It is for all people.

Look at verse 21, “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” God was pleased when the gospel was preached to the Gentiles. God worked among them through the Holy Spirit. The Greek listeners understood the message, repented of their sins and accepted the gospel. Person by person, a body of Christ was formed at Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman world after Rome and Alexandria. It was full of idol worship, gross immorality and indecency. The people lived for their pleasures. One writer said that life there was a perpetual festival of depravity revolving around the brothels, the amphitheater and the circus. And so it was an evil place. It was a cosmopolitan city full of Romans, Arabs, Jews and Greeks. It was the perfect place to meet peoples of all nations, like Toronto. It is amazing that a great number of people in Antioch who once worshiped idols, believed the message and turned to the Lord for their salvation. This shows their thirsty and desperate desire to know God and the truth. In the past, they had lived with the very fatalistic and foolish philosophy, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.” They accumulated many credit card debts to enjoy exotic foods, cheap thrills, computer games and vacations. But when they heard the gospel, they were freed from worldly desires. They were freed from fear and the grip of evil spirits. They realized the love of God. They realized God’s good purpose for their personal lives and for the growing church at Antioch. They wanted to live for the glory of God. They cut up all their credit cards and paid back their debts. They stopped going to wild parties on the weekends and instead studied the Bible and shared Bible testimonies together and prayed late into the night. They joined together and prayed for Antioch to be a holy city and a blessing to the world. The gospel has great power to save people, even cities. St. Paul calls the gospel, “…the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes…” (Rom 1:16) The gospel itself gave birth to the Antioch church.

**Third**, God used Barnabas to shepherd the Antioch church (22-26). News of the great work of God in Antioch reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church sent Barnabas to encourage them. Who was Barnabas? His name was originally Joseph but the apostles gave him a new name, “Barnabas” which means, “Son of Encouragement” because he was not only so encouraging to others, but he was also very sacrificial and giving. Especially, he was very humble and patient, especially with new believers. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw the evidence of the work of God. He saw new lives of people who were transformed by the gospel. He may have seen former rap artists sing the praises of Jesus in Sunday worship service. He may have seen students who overcame their fear and easygoing mentality and learned to work hard for the glory of God. He may have seen intellectuals who had been full of despair suddenly discover the hope of God in the gospel and use their brilliant minds to do something good for the glory of God.

Look at verse 23. “…he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.” What does this mean? First, he did not crush them with heavy requirements. He did not impose his own standards on them. He recognized the work of God in them and gave them clear direction to remain true to the Lord. As long as Jesus was Lord in their hearts, they could grow in the grace of Jesus. Secondly, as young believers living in a godless and immoral culture, the believers were vulnerable to be tempted and to slip back into their old lives of sin. They could be tempted by old friends to come back and sin with them. Unbelieving parents might have kicked them out of their homes and threatened to cut off all financial support because they refused to believe in their family gods and worship Zeus. Barnabas knew that faith must be rooted in God’s word. Otherwise it would be emotional and uncommitted and fruitless like the seed that was sown on the rocky heart soil. He also knew that faith of the young believers could easily become just “group faith” and not personal faith. Then there would be no personal fruit in their lives. So he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. This means to keep our faith in Jesus’ love no matter what. Accepting with all our hearts that God loves us no matter what hardships, rejections, trials and difficulties we go through, is to remain true to him.

**Fourth**, intensive Bible study transforms Antioch church (25-26). Barnabas brought many people to the Lord in Antioch. However, he realized that what they really needed was intensive Bible study. They needed to be rooted and grounded in the word of God. Barnabas could have taught them all by himself. But he did not. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul, the renowned Bible scholar who had been completely transformed by the grace of Jesus on the road to Damascus. Perhaps Barnabas remembered Jesus’ words to Ananias that Saul was his chosen instrument for Gentile ministry. Look at verse 26, “and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught a great number of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” They must have taught Genesis. Gentiles, especially Greeks, had many weird theories about the origin of all things, based on the ridiculous behavior of childish gods who acted at random. They had to know that Almighty God created heaven and earth. Barnabas and Saul must have taught the history of God—how he promised to send a Savior, how he called Abraham and formed the nation of Israel, and how he finally sent the Savior by his one-sided grace. This helped the Antioch believers root their faith in the Creator God and in the history of God’s work. They could see where God’s work had come from and where it was going. They could learn world mission vision based on God’s world salvation plan.

Most of all, Barnabas and Saul focused their Bible teaching on the person and work of Christ. Look at verse 26c. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.” A Christian is a person in Christ. The defining characteristic of the Antioch church was that they followed and imitated Christ. This gave the Antioch church its unique identity and character. The church is a body of believers who become like Christ. They were full of affection for Christ. They were crazy for Jesus Christ. To them, Jesus Christ was the way and the truth and the life. Probably people called believers Christians as an insult. In modern terms, it is like being called “Jesus freaks.” People began to say, “Hey, here come those crazy people again coming to tell us about some guy who was raised from the dead, named Jesus Christ. They keep telling us about Bible study and how much they love Jesus Christ. They must be Christians.” But of course they were called this because they followed the teachings of Christ in absolute obedience. This showed how influential they were in the large cosmopolitan city of Antioch. One person caught all 142 Pokemon. He said that right after his work around 6pm, he would walk around for 8 hours every day in search of Pokemon. He is crazy for Pokemon. But people do not consider him crazy. They admire his dedication. On the other hand, Tim Tebow was criticized constantly for his outspoken Christian faith. His pure life in the world of wild living among athletes offended many people. It was surely a challenge to live like Christ. But this name “Christian” showed that they also belonged to Jesus Christ, not to their Greek gods and funny traditions any more. It is a challenge for us to keep this identity and remain united in Christ despite our different ethnic origins, different cultures and languages. Especially it is a challenge for us to be Christ-like in our thinking and in our actions. When people look at us, they should be able to see Jesus in us. God wants us all to be Christ-like.

Today we learned that the nameless ordinary Christians founded the Antioch church. Even though they were ridiculed for their faith and called “Christians,” like Jesus’ freak today, they liked the name and kept the name, “a person in Christ.” May God help us to reveal Christ in us so that people may be able to see Christ through us.