**THE ANTIOCH CHURCH**

Acts 11:1-30

Key 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 great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”

In today’s passage, we are introduced to the church at Antioch. The Antioch church, the first Gentile church became the bridge to which the gospel could spread to the whole world. The Antioch church emerged as a model church. May we learn of the characteristics of Antioch church which are bible teaching, co-working, encouraging and giving spirit. Most of all, let us think of what kind of people God uses for church planting ministry.

1.The Gentiles also had received the word of God (1-18)

Look at verse 1**. “The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God.”** How did the Gentiles receive the word of God? When Peter visited Cornelius’ house, there were a large gathering of people being ready to listen to Peter’s message. Cornelius answered, **“Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”** When the audience were ready like good soils, they received the word of God.

The good news of Jesus was spread to Caesarea, a Gentile region beyond Judea and Samaria through the apostle Peter. Instead of rejoicing with Peter for what he had done, the circumcised believers criticized Peter for entering the house of uncircumcised men and eating with them. Here the circumcised believers refer to those Jewish believers who were specifically zealous for the law. They held on to the Judaism. It must be difficult for Peter to bear their sharp criticism. But Peter recounted the details of the vision that God had given him while he was praying. In fact, verses 4-15 are the reiteration of the event in Acts 10. Verse 4 says, **“Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story.”** Peter told them about how he saw a vision of unclean animals in a sheet from heaven. Peter shared the messages with them that he had heard through voices from heaven. **“Get up, Peter, Kill and eat.” “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”** Peter also told them how God arranged his meeting with Cornelius, and how he spoke to him, his family members and friends.

Verse 15 says, **“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning.”** The gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. People in the room spoke tongues and praised God. This event of the Holy Spirit’s descending on Gentiles at Cornelius’ house reminded Peter of Pentecost in Jerusalem in Acts 2. We may call the event, “the Gentile Pentecost.” Then Peter remembered what Jesus had told him, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” So Peter made his conclusion in verse 17. **“So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?”** It was God who led Peter to go to Caesarea from Joppa traveling 54 Km in order to be a bible speaker. It was the work of God led by the Holy Spirit, not by men.

God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right. As God sends rain and shines the Sun on all people on earth, the Holy Spirit fell on all believers both Jews and Gentiles. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was God’s seal for their forgiveness and salvation. The coming of the Holy Spirit is the definite evidence that God saves the Gentiles solely based on their faith. Peter’s point was that he could not resist the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Jewish Christians heard Peter’s explanation about the work of God, they had no further objections. The praised God saying, “So then, even to the Gentiles God had granted repentance that leads to life.”

After listening to Peter, people nodded their head saying, “Ah…” The critics were silenced because they realized that God himself had acted and had clearly shown his sovereign will. Yes! When God’s word is spoken and God’s work is revealed, men cannot but be silent. Before God spoke, there were endless arguments between Job and his 3 friends condemning, judging and rebuking out of their self righteousness. But when the Lord spoke to Job out of the storm saying **“Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?** Job answered, **“I am unworthy- how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth.”** When God spoke, all became silent.

Likewise, no one can stand in God’s way, but just follow His plans. Sometimes, we hold on to our fixed ideas to the point of denying the work of the Holy Spirit. So we need to fold our own ideas and agenda, instead humbly follow God’s leading upon us and our church. May we be silent and listen to God’s word when He speaks and sensitively follow His leading upon our lives.

2.The church in Antioch(19-30)

Look at verse 19. **“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.”** Scattered believers due to persecutions became like small live pieces of coal. Wherever they went, they carried the word of God in their hearts and spread the word only among Jews. It fanned the fire of the gospel into a burning flame. These days, we are cautious to use the word “spread” due to current pandemic breakout. However, the word of God needs to be scattered and spread wide to all people of all nations because the word of God is the spiritual seeds that bears life in it.

Some of Jews who were from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman world, next to Rome and Alexandria. It was located in Syria with 500,000 people. It was renowned for worshipping pagan cults, a vital commercial center, the gateway to eastern world, chariot racing, and immorality. The people of Antioch were steeped in a sinful culture and pleasure seeking lifestyle. But when the good news about the Lord Jesus was preached, people were moved in their hearts. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. The Lord’s hand was the sign of God’s help and support. Through the witness of believers, the Holy Spirit worked mightily to give birth to the first Gentile church, Antioch.

This news reached the church in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas to Antioch. When Barnabas arrived and saw that the grace of God had done, he was glad. Barnabas saw the new lives of people who were transformed by the gospel. He rejoiced over the work of God in people’s lives. His joy revealed that he was a God-centered man. Some gospel workers are not happy over the work of God done by others. But Barnabas had a big heart. He saw the work of God with the eyes of God.

What did Barnabas do as their shepherd? Look at verse 23b, **“he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”** The name Barnabas means, “son of encouragement.” His greatest gift was encouraging others. He had eyes to see the good side of people with the hope of God. He encouraged them revealing their good points instead of discouraging them with negative perspectives. His message was to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 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. Remaining true means to put their faith rooted in God’s word, not emotional feelings. It also means to deepen their personal relationship with the Lord. Barnabas was a man of faith, full of the Holy Spirit. The influence of his godly character was enormous.

Barnabas’ pioneering church in Antioch grew rapidly and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. He saw that the harvest was plentiful in Antioch, but the workers were few. Barnabas saw a need for more bible teachers. He went to Tarsus to look for Saul. The last time as we read about Saul was in chapter 9 when he went to his hometown Tarsus in order to escape the Jewish plot to kill him(9:30). The Bible does not say what Saul did in Tarsus during these years.

Galatians 1:17 says, **“I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.”** Saul spent three years in Arabia. He likely spent a great deal of time reading the scripture developing the material that he would use later for future ministry and missionary journeys. Paul must be preparing himself as the chosen instrument for the light to the Gentiles. Later Saul was at Tarsus, Cilicia in his hometown for several years preaching to the Gentiles the message that God had given him. He had a time of preparation during the quiet years.

So for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The two disciples co-worked to serve the Lord. What was the result of Barnabas and Saul’s co-working ministry and their faithful bible teaching? Look at verse 26b, **“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”** The result was that the disciples of Jesus were raised up. This means committed bible teachers were raised up. Soon people in Antioch began to ask one another, “Who are these people?” “Oh, these are the people who are always talking about Christ. They are the Christ-people, the Christians.” In Latin, the ending “*ian*” means “one who belongs to the party of” like we are called as Torontonians or Canadians. A Christian is a person who belong to Christ. The believers in Antioch gained this unique identity because they followed and imitated Christ. The Jews and the Gentiles were united with one new identity as Christians.

We thank God for Jesus who saved us from our sins and made us his disciples that is Christians. Christian is our spiritual identity. We have the Spirit of Christ and His images in our hearts. We no longer belong to the world. We belong to Christ and his kingdom. We live our lives to serve our King Jesus and reveal his glory. Galatians 6:17 says, **“From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.”** Yes! Christians carry the marks of Jesus in their hearts. Now, all they had in common among the young church members at Antioch was Christ, not race, culture or even language. Soon, the Antioch church grew to be a headquarter for world mission through missionary journeys. It was from Antioch that St. Paul started on his missionary journeys. Paul used this city as his home base during his missionary journeys. Antioch church received spiritual support from the Jerusalem church. One of the prophets named Agabus stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world.

Especially Judea was hit hardest between A.D. 45 and 48. Antioch church decided to provide help for the brothers in Judea. They sent their gifts to Jerusalem church through Barnabas and Paul. They had the Spirit of Christ that is a spirit of giving. I found the word “church” twice in this passage. The first one was the church in Jerusalem in verse 22. The second was Antioch church in verse 26. When people talk about a church, they usually imagine a building with steeple or a religious denomination. The Greek term for church in the New Testament is ekklesia while Jewish people were more familiar with the term like “assembly”(Dt 18:16) or “congregation.” Church is more than a building. It is a community of believers who believe in Jesus and obey his words.

It is grateful for to study Antioch church as a role model to follow. God also gathered our members in the name of Jesus. May we work together to build up a spiritual community like that of Antioch church that had diligent bible studies, humble co-working, many encouraging words and giving spirit. Most of all, let us engage in faithful bible studies that we may prepare ourselves for future ministry like Saul who served quiet Arabia and Tarsus ministries. May we make a progress while building up our church together this year and strive to keep our identity as Christians.