

Church – The Beginnings, Part 29

Stephen's Persecution & the Spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles

Acts 11:19-26 | 05/14/2017

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Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. (11:19-21)

Observation: God used the Persecution of Stephen to reach more people with His Salvation in Christ, both Jews and Gentiles (Hellenists = Greek Speaking Gentiles in this context).

Flashback:

Acts 8:1 - Now Saul was consenting to his death (i.e. To Stephen's Death / Stoning)

At that time a **GREAT PERSECUTION** arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were **ALL SCATTERED** throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, **EXCEPT** the apostles.

...

Except for those that were with the Apostles (native born Jews who were born and grew up in Israel with the apostles – who were followers of Jesus Christ, the Messiah) – everyone else of the Church in Jerusalem were scattered. All those folks that came to Jerusalem in Acts 2, for the celebration of Shavuot (Pentecost) – Jews from all those nations listed there in Acts 2:8-11 – this includes genetic descendants of Jacob and his 12 sons, as well as, Gentiles who converted to Judaism (and that means for a Gentile to become a Jew).

All those that visited in Acts 2 and never left, but came to Salvation, in the New Covenant in the Messiah of Israel ... those folks were the one who were scattered in Acts 8 – they made their way back home. Some of those born again disciples of Jesus, the Messiah – those who were from Phoenicia, Cyprus, Cyrene, and Antioch – proclaimed, shared, told others about Jesus, the Messiah – some only to fellow Jews – and others shared this Good News to Gentiles, as well – thus fulfilling what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission to make disciples among all nations (panta ta ethne – all ethnic groups – peoples, nations, tongues and tribes) – **Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8. That is God's Goal → Gospel to the Gentiles**

No one put a gun to the head of these disciples of Jesus to share the Gospel to the lost around them. They just did it. They were being **Obedient to the Great Commission.**

We have our best affinity with those of us who are of us – same interests, look like us, live like us, talk like us, we consider to be one of us – our culture, our tribe, our people. **Folks that travel and hang out in the "same circles", so to speak.** So, some of those scattered **ONLY** shared the Good News of Jesus, the Messiah, with their fellow Jews – those who were like themselves. **It is much easier, most of the time to do this.** Since they were reached in their own culture, they'd know how to do this with others just like them. And, there is **NOTHING Wrong with this.** **BUT** if we just stay there, **we miss out on the Blessings of the Fullness of the Great Commission being fulfilled through us.** We must reach out further and beyond our comfort zone and beyond any boundaries that hold us back.

The others that reached out to the Gentiles – this was something that took **courage and boldness, along with prayerful skill.** None of what they did was without prayer, I am sure of that. They had **compassion on the lost** around them, including Gentiles. And because of that compassion, they proclaimed the Gospel to them. **The greatest love, the greatest compassion a Christian can show to a lost person is sharing the Gospel with them.**

Antioch → ²⁰ But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. (Acts 11:20-21)

Because God's Hand was with those **Born-Again Jews** – the Gentiles responded to the Gospel. These Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene were led by Jesus to preach the Gospel all along the way up the coast of Lebanon and Syria – ending up in Antioch.

Geography and History:

Phoenicia → Lebanon (Tyre and Sidon), Cyprus (Island in the Med. Sea), Cyrene (North Africa that includes Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia) ... these were all populated by the Phoenicians (who were seafaring Canaanites from Tyre and Sidon, originally, today is modern Lebanon). They all had links to each other. And Barnabas, was from Cyprus. Jews, Israeli Jews, also lived in all those areas, as well. Thus, they somewhat had some cultural affinity with those that they were preaching the Gospel to.

News Reaches the church in Jerusalem (notice that the church in Jerusalem was not scattered)

²² Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. ²³ When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and ENCOURAGED them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. ²⁴ For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

Sending Barnabas made perfect, cultural sense. But, understand, the church in Jerusalem was being led by the Holy Spirit in this decision. We look back at it and then we can see that sending Barnabas made perfect sense, since the folks who originally preached the Gospel to those Gentiles in Antioch were from Cyprus and Cyrene, and **Barnabas was from Cyprus**. So, this made perfect sense. Yet, Barnabas was no scholar, nor was he a pastor, preacher, teacher – he was an **ENCOURAGER**. His name was Joses (like Moses, but with a J) but his nickname was **Son of Encouragement** or **Son of Consolation**. Encouragement is a better translation. He would be a great, encouraging, inspirational speaker, if he was a speaker (we find out later, he wasn't). He Encouraged the people to stay true to their surrendered commitment to Christ Jesus the Lord, etc. His character says it all: **he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith (Acts 11:24)**.

Even if we are NOT gifted as an Evangelist, Pastor, Teacher, Apostle, etc. we can still use the gift(s) God gave us after we became Born Again in Christ to be an Encouragement and Build up others in Christ. Do you want your fellow Christians to be Encouraged in Christ? Do you want your fellow Christians to be Built Up, to Be Edified in Christ? Then use your gifts accordingly (see **1 Peter 4:7-11**)

⁷ But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. ⁸ And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." ⁹ Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. ¹¹ If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Why wasn't Peter sent? What about John? Peter was the first to reach Gentiles, would he be the best pick? We might think so, but God wanted Barnabas. And we will see God wanted Saul of Tarsus (Paul the Apostle), as well. **God is the one who chooses. Let Him.**

Barnabas Sought Saul ...

²⁵ Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. ²⁶ And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were FIRST called CHRISTIANS in Antioch.

Barnabas recognized that he needed help with this brand new church of Gentiles that had no Bible background. They needed to be discipled and Barnabas knew the perfect person for this – Saul of Tarsus. Why? Saul was not only a Biblical Scholar, the best of his time, short of Gamaliel, but he was also from Tarsus, one of the few University cities within the Roman Empire. Saul was schooled in all the ancient works of the Greeks, etc. as well as within God’s Word. He was the perfect person to bridge the Gentile to the Faith in the God of the Bible. Saul, who was also called Paul, knew both worlds and could help the Gentile understand the Bible.

Those Gentiles that came to faith in Christ in Antioch had no Biblical background. They just knew about as much as those who originally shared with them, along with what Barnabas shared. But it seems, that none of these Born Again Jews had the skills necessary to help that new Gentile church to grow deeper and stronger in the Lord without the help from someone else. So, Saul was chosen to help.

We find out that Barnabas, Saul, and those that originally shared (all Born Again Jews) stayed there for quite a while discipling that brand new church. We also find out that God sent other leaders in the Faith to help them out, as well ...
we read in **Acts 13:1 - Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.**

So, God brought together the folks needed to take care of, disciples, and grow (spiritually and numerically) the kind of leaders needed for this (also see Ephesians 4:11-16)

This is the IDEAL of what God wants regarding Church Planting. Understand, this is the IDEAL Model – the Antioch Model. God’s Hand was with them.

Also, understand, that throughout history, Church Planting has not always fit this model, but folks continued to share the Gospel and plant churches as God led them, as well. Again, we should avoid **Antioch Envy**. It is an IDEAL MODEL.

- 1. Prayer, Courage, Boldness, Sharing the Gospel, Disciple those that get Saved.**
- 2. Bring in Leaders (as needed), and then raise up Leaders from within (1 Peter 5:1-5; Ephesians 4:11-16)**
- 3. When they can support themselves →
send out missionaries , prayerfully, as God leads → to plant more churches**

That is God’s IDEAL – We should Pray for this to become a reality for us, as well.

Christian – the word only occurs 3 times, and only in the New Testament in the following passages: Acts 11:26, 26:28, and 1 Peter 4:16.

It was originally meant as a derogatory title – “little Christs” ... or “little cult followers of Christ” ... in that category.

It has become to mean so many other things.

But, we want to use the Biblical sense of the word → we want to use it in the sense of what we see in Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16 → a Born Again, Disciple, Follower of Jesus Christ – in which Jesus Christ is Lord, King, God and Savior to the one who is saved, the follower of Christ. Are you a fully surrendered disciples of Jesus Christ? Would others around you accuse you of such a thing? Would you, as those first Antioch Christians, be called such a derogatory title? If being a Christian was illegal, would you be found guilty of such a crime? That's what it takes to be a church, outlaws of the world, accused of following Christ and spreading their rebellion against the world system ... spawning a revolution – turning the world upside down for Christ.

So, related to this passage ... regarding the Growth of the Church and the Spread of the Gospel ...

What is your part in this?

Are you a Saul?

Are you a Barnabas?

Are you one of those original “preachers of the Gospel to the Gentiles”?

Are you one of those “other leaders” (ref. Acts 13:1)?