

**Armagh Baptist Church**  
**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December 2009 - 11:00am**  
**Acts 11:19-30 – ‘The Church in Antioch’**

**Introduction**

In Acts ch.11:19, Dr Luke makes a link with the beginning of ch.8 to tell us that those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out after the martyrdom of Stephen had travelled as far as Phoenicia (modern Lebanon). But they also got as far as the Mediterranean island of Cyprus, and to the cosmopolitan city of Antioch - up in the northeast corner of the Mediterranean. Antioch was at that time the Roman Capital of Syria, and it was just on the border of Cilicia – the most southern point of what we today know as Turkey. Antioch was 300 miles north of Jerusalem. This was really Gentile territory. There would have been a Jewish population living in the city, but Antioch was very much hostile territory for the Gospel. This was completely cross-cultural as far as the Gospel was concerned. If a church was going to take root in this soil, it was going to be a very different kind of church to the mother church back in Jerusalem, which was still predominantly Jewish in nature.

This point is borne out by what Luke says next at the end of v.19: Those who were scattered because of the persecution under Saul of Tarsus told the message of the Gospel **‘only to Jews’** in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.  
- Yes, they were gossiping the Gospel wherever they went - that was good.  
- Yes, they were helping with the spread of the Gospel in obedience to Christ’s command – but sadly they were *‘keeping it to themselves’* at the same time! They were only sharing it with fellow Jews! The Gospel was sadly still being withheld from the Gentile nations and people-groups of the world! Really the Church, up until this point, could just have been regarded as a deviant sect within Judaism, and by and large that’s how the Roman authorities treated them at that time.

But following Stephen’s martyrdom at the beginning of Acts ch.8, and the persecution which followed, Luke has since recorded for us the conversion of the Samaritans, and the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch from Africa in ch.8, he has told us of the miraculous conversion of Saul of Tarsus himself in ch.9, and then the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family in ch.10. Peter has been involved in the key stages in the onward march of the Gospel, and in the early part of ch.11 he has managed to convince the Jewish believers back in Jerusalem that it’s OK for Gentiles to believe the gospel, it’s OK for Gentiles to receive the Holy Spirit, and it’s OK for them as Jewish background believers to now accept Gentile background believers into the fellowship of their Church.  
But that’s OK at leadership level; what was actually happening on the ground? Well, the good news is that while all of this was going on in the limelight, quietly behind the scenes, **some** of the believers who had been scattered by

the persecution back in ch.8 - particularly those who had originally come from places like the island of Cyprus and Cyrene (modern day Libya) – **some** of these people had taken it upon themselves to share the good news about the Lord Jesus to Greeks in Antioch also! And they met with the same success as Peter had done in Cornelius’ home! We read in v.20:

***‘The Lord’s hand was with them,  
and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.’***

These people weren’t doing anything wrong, in fact they were doing it right – and God was pleased to bless them and their witness for him. They were doing exactly what the Lord wanted them to do, they were witnessing to Gentiles, even before they got it sanctioned by the leadership in Jerusalem!

Here Dr Luke is setting the scene for the next part of the Acts of the Apostles. He is introducing us here to a New Church in Antioch - a church that was going to play a major role in the rest of the story of the spread of the Gospel around the Roman Empire. Yes, the Church in Jerusalem was *slowly* coming round to the idea that Gentiles could get saved as well as Jews; that Gentiles didn’t have to become Jews by being circumcised or by keeping the Law of Moses in order to get right with God; that it was OK for believing Jews and believing Gentiles to have fellowship with one another – even to eat with each other. But that was just it – they were only **slowly** coming round to the idea!

As I said last Sunday, this whole Jewish-Gentile thing was going to continue to hold the Jerusalem Church back, as far as their boldness to share the Gospel was concerned, for many years to come. But God had a whole world to reach with the Gospel. He had already appointed his Apostle to the Gentiles when he saved Saul of Tarsus in ch.9. It was now time to get on with that task, but to do that, the Lord needed a Church that Saul could work out from in the years to come, and that Church was going to be Antioch; not Jerusalem!

**1. Antioch became the Centre for Cross-Cultural Mission! (vs.19-20)**

Antioch was a city of about 500,000 people by this stage in its history. It was the third most important city in the Roman Empire – after Rome in Europe and Alexandria in North Africa. It was a very important centre for business and travel around the Roman world, with links into Asia as well. It was a place where many cultures met, and where different people groups rubbed shoulders with each other on a daily basis. This was an ideal place for a missionary minded church to spring into life, and that’s exactly what was about to happen.

Antioch has already been mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles. If you go back to Acts 6:5, you will discover that the last of the 7 deacons was a man

called Nicolas, **who came from Antioch**, and it's interesting to note that he was 'a convert to Judaism'! So he wasn't a Jew by birth - he was in fact a gentile convert – so if truth be told Cornelius wasn't the first Gentile to be saved, but he was the first to come straight from being a Gentile to being a follower of Christ, without converting to the Jewish faith first! That was the issue that Peter was trying to deal with in Acts ch.11:1-18, and that would need to be addressed again in Acts ch.15 at the Jerusalem Council: Could a Gentile become a true follower of Christ without becoming a Jew first?

Here in Acts 11:19-20 we have the second mention of Antioch in the NT. On this occasion we are seeing Gentiles, in great numbers, believing the Gospel and turning to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith.

By Acts 13:1-3 we will see this Church in Antioch sending out its first cross-cultural missionaries – Barnabas & Saul. And by the end of Acts 14 we'll see this same church receiving their missionaries back home again in vs.26-28. So Antioch becomes the main sending church as far as mission is concerned for the rest of the Acts of the Apostles. So we can learn a lot from them... But for this morning, I just want to highlight a phrase that occurs 3 times in this passage: 'A great number of people'. It appears in v.21, v.24 and v.26. This phrase appears in connection with 3 different groups of people. First of all in connection with...

## 2. The Witnesses:

**'A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord' (v.21)**

As we have seen already this morning, it was the ordinary 5'8" believers who had been scattered as a result of the persecution under Saul of Tarsus, who first had the courage of their convictions to open their mouths and share their faith one to one with people who were from a Greek or Gentile background. They didn't wait until their church leadership told them to do it. They just got on with it. They simply knew that they had been saved by God's grace themselves, and they had received the Holy Spirit themselves, away back on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. They had come from every nation under heaven then, so they had seen that God was no respecter of persons. So they simply concluded that God had a big heart and a big vision to see people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation saved, and they realised they could be a part of that, by simply opening their mouths where they were and sharing the Gospel with those around them.

You know, sometimes we wait until evangelism is **organised** by our church before we go out and share our faith with others. This sometimes gives the impression that evangelism is something we **do**. It's not, it's something we **are**! Away back in Acts ch.1:8 Jesus said...

*'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will **be my witnesses** in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'*

So evangelism is not a matter of *doing*, it's a matter of **being** 'his witnesses'. We are witnesses every day as we go about our business, whether we like it or not – either we are good witnesses, attracting people to the Gospel; or we are bad witnesses, putting people off the Gospel.

Don't get the idea that evangelism is something we do, it's something that we are – we are witnesses for Jesus. As we go about with that attitude, then 'the Lord's hand' will be 'with us' and we will keep praying until we see 'a great number of people believing and turning to the Lord.' (v.21).

As we look back over the last 8 months since we came to Armagh, it has been a real joy to see at least 6 people that I know of, that the Lord has saved and brought in among us. But wouldn't it be great to believe that that's only the beginning? Wouldn't it be great to believe that in 2010 we'll see even more – that we'd see 'a great number of people believing and turning to the Lord!'

So the first time this phrase appears, it's in connection with the witnesses who were scattered because of the persecution in Jerusalem. They ended up 300 miles away! The second time this phrase is mentioned is in connection with...

## 3. Barnabas:

**'A great number of people were brought to the Lord' (v.24)**

As we saw in the first half of this chapter, news of the conversion of the Gentiles in Cornelius' house in Caesarea got back to the church in Jerusalem, and caused a bit of a stir. Likewise news of this new development in Antioch got back the 300 miles to Jerusalem as well!

This time they sent Barnabas to check it out, and no better man for the job! We have already seen twice in Acts that Barnabas always lives up to his name – 'The Son of Encouragement' - he was always a great 'encourager'! He sold a piece of land in Acts 4:36-37 and brought the proceeds to the Apostles – that was a great encouragement to the church in Jerusalem. Then in Acts 9:27 it was Barnabas who was the first to accept that the hated Saul of Tarsus was genuinely converted, and should be welcomed into the Jerusalem Church. It was Barnabas who gave Saul a reference if you like. And yet again, here in Acts 11:23 he goes to Antioch with the right attitude: **'When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.'**

Just think about it for a minute. Someone from the Jerusalem Church, from a staunch Jewish background, could have come down to Antioch, and looked for very different evidence in order to decide whether or not these people were

believers. He could have asked if they were circumcised, he could have asked if they were keeping the OT food laws, he could have asked if they were strict in their observance of the Sabbath. He could have asked all kinds of things! But not Barnabas – what was he looking for? He was looking for evidence of the grace of God in their lives, and when he saw it, he was glad and rejoiced at what God had done for these people. He wasn't concerned about their past anymore, he was simply concerned about their future, and that's why he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all of their hearts. And I'm sure he promised to pray for them. Barnabas was the right man for the job.

It's at this point that Luke puts in a little footnote about Barnabas in v.24:

***'He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.'***

Obviously Barnabas's attitude towards these new believers from all kinds of backgrounds was an encouragement to everyone in the church in Antioch to redouble their efforts in outreach and witness. He seems to have inspired them to keep at it – so much so that we're told that a great number of people **were brought to the Lord**. This is something the believers were doing – they were *bringing* people under the sound of the Gospel, and doing all in their power to bring people to the Lord. Barnabas had been a great encouragement in that task.

Again can I remind you that tonight we'll be having our Carol Service, and on Christmas morning we'll be having a Christmas Day Family Service. These are occasions for you to bring your family and friends under the sound of the Gospel, and maybe at this time of the year, they might be more open to come. I know we can't save anyone, that is God's work, but let's do all in our power to at least bring people in under the sound of God's Word, so that He might work in their hearts. Let's be full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith just like Barnabas was, and let's pray that *a great number of people might be brought to the Lord* this Christmas time.

So the first time this phrase was mentioned it was in connection with the many ordinary witnesses who had been scattered throughout Judea and Samaria as a result of the persecution.

The second time it was in connection with Barnabas and the way he accepted these new believers and encouraged them in their outreach and evangelism so much so that many more were brought to the Lord.

The third time that this phrase is mentioned is in connection with...

#### **4. Barnabas & Saul together:**

In v.25 Barnabas, with his big heart, realises that there was so much going on in Antioch, and there was so much scope for more to be done, that he goes to

Tarsus (just round the corner of the Mediterranean) in Cilicia, to search for Saul. Saul had been a believer for some time now, probably for at least 3 years by this stage. He has been growing in grace and in his knowledge of the Lord and His Word, and he has been actively sharing his faith and preaching the Gospel in his home town of Tarsus, ever since the believers in Jerusalem got him off-side and sent him there for his own safety in Acts 9:29.

So Barnabas goes in search of Saul, and when he finds him he brings him back to Antioch, and that's when we read in v.26...

***'For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.'***

Yet again we are reminded that the Great Commission does not just allow us to get decisions out of people, to get them to the point of believing in Jesus. No, the Great Commission commands us to **'make disciples.'** That takes time and it takes effort, and it involves an on-going teaching ministry in a local church. And it's more than one man can do. It involves a team of people making disciples. So here we see Barnabas and Saul coming together for the first time in a team ministry – it's based in this new local church in Antioch, where great numbers of people have recently come to faith in Christ, and there is so much discipling of new converts that needs to be done. But they get stuck in, and in the course of their first year they were involved in teaching or discipling great numbers of people! And that's what the Church should be all about! That's what our focus should be. And if we're busying ourselves doing what we're supposed to be doing, we'll have a lot less time to be falling out about silly things that really just don't matter at all. *'So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.'*

It has been a joy for me, in my first year here, to be involved directly in small group discipleship – discipling John & Lorraine almost from day one, back in May, and seeing that grow into a Friday morning discipleship group with Wesley and Michael and Andrew alongside John & Grace Cunningham. But I'm also grateful to Alan Abraham who has been discipling David and Jamie behind the scenes as well. And I know that Jonny & Irene have been involved in SALT groups with some of our young people too. And I'm sure there is other discipleship going on (formal and informal behind the scenes) that is not often talked about, and doesn't often hit the headlines. But I want to publicly acknowledge all that is going on, and I want like Barnabas to encourage you in that task this morning, and let's keep praying that we will have many more opportunities to disciple many more people in the New Year that lies ahead.

You know some people think this emphasis on discipleship is new-fangled! Let me tell you it's not – in fact if you look at the next phrase in v.26 you will discover that discipleship is older than Christianity itself! Because it says...

### **5. 'The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.' (v.26)**

In other words, the term 'disciple' is older than the term 'Christian'!  
In fact 'Christian' was a nick-name that the citizens of Antioch threw at these new believers in their City – and it stuck! It literally meant 'Christ-ones' or 'people who belonged to the party of Christ.' But these new believers were so in love with their Saviour, that they quite liked being called after their Lord, so they took the name gladly, and weren't ashamed to be called 'Christians'.

It might surprise you to know that the word 'Christian' only appears 3 times in our Bibles! Now isn't that amazing when it has now grown to be one of the largest religions in the world! But the word only appears 3 times in our Bibles, and each time it is in connection with persecution – or suffering for being a Christian! But before they were called Christians, they were called disciples: followers of Jesus. It has the idea of learning from someone, on the job training, apprentices of Jesus. That's what each one of us should be first and foremost: followers of Jesus – learning from Jesus, growing in grace and in our knowledge of Jesus and His Word. Let's make New Year's resolutions to be 'disciples' of Jesus first, and 'Christians' second, in the year that lies ahead. Let's make sure we keep our emphasis on 'discipleship' in this church.

The final thing I want you to notice this morning is what happened to the Jerusalem Church, now that the Antioch Church was going to be the new centre of cross-cultural missionary activity from now on in the Book of Acts:

### **6. The Jerusalem Church became a recipient of famine relief! (v.27-30)**

During the year that Barnabas and Saul were working with the new church in Antioch, some Prophets came down from Jerusalem to visit them (v.27). One of them was a man named Agabus, who stood up and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit made a prediction that a severe famine was going to spread throughout the Roman world - Judea would be particularly hard hit. Luke tells us that this did happen, during the reign of Claudius: (AD 41-54). Immediately the disciples in Antioch, each according to their ability, decided to provide help for their spiritual brothers living in Judea. So the Gentile believers in the new church in Antioch immediately saw that it was their responsibility to send practical help and relief to their fellow Jewish background believers, in Judea. So they gathered up their gifts and sent them to the elders in the church in Jerusalem for distribution to those in need. And it was Barnabas and Saul that they trusted to travel with their gifts and to make sure they were used properly in Jerusalem.  
So at a time when the two churches, Antioch and Jerusalem, could have pulled apart and lived separate lives, God had ordered circumstances to make them realise that they still needed each other. The Jewish church, that had given the spiritual blessing of the Gospel to the Gentiles, was now being helped materially by those who had been blessed. We should do likewise...