

***The Great Stories of the Early Church***  
***35 - Barnabas and Paul***  
***and the Church at Antioch***  
***Acts 11:19-26***

- 19 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.
- 20 And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.
- 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.
- 22 Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch.
- 23 Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.
- 24 For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord.
- 25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:
- 26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch. KJV

**Historical Background:**

It is interesting that Luke gave us a peek into the actual time frame of these events, during the reign of Claudius, 41-54, who was the Emperor before Nero and Nero's uncle. In addition to giving us the general time frame Luke revealed that he was writing from some time after these events, probably during the time of Nero. History also records that there were very serious famines during the reign of Claudius, beginning around 46. It may be that the Holy Spirit grouped a series of famines together into one since they ultimately affected the whole empire and one of them was particularly widespread.

The events caught the Roman government ill prepared to move food around quickly and effectively so Claudius received a lot of blame for the inefficiency, something he labored to correct through the remainder of his time in office. A new port was built and other improvements were added to avoid a repeat of the circumstances in the case of future famines.

Claudius was believed to have been poisoned by one of his wives who was also his niece and the mother of Nero.

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The passage before us contains a number of issues and some important information that we would be remiss to ignore:

The Rise of the first major Christian community outside of Jerusalem,

The coining of the name 'Christian'  
Prophets and their role in the early church,  
Christian generosity as it developed in the First Century

We see here in our text that there were three initial waves of growth of the Christian church at Antioch:

The arrival of the original evangelists, vs. 19-21

The ministry of Barnabus, vs. 22-24

And, the growth after the arrival of Paul, vs. 25-26

We can only guess at what kind of numbers Luke had in mind when he wrote, 'much people,' but we do know that he was accustomed to thinking in terms of thousands in those early days: 3000 at Pentecost and then 5000 a few days later. So it would not be a stretch to think that the church at Antioch also quickly number in the thousands as well.

You should know that this church figured significantly and powerfully in church history until the rise of Islam which essentially drove Christianity out of Syria in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. One of the things that made it significant was that Jerusalem was destroyed in 70, which made the Antiochan church the largest and most powerful in the Christian world.

As Christianity spread into Egypt and into Italy and beyond heresies began to arise but Antioch and the churches of Syria remained true to the faith. Over 200 years after its founding, as the Councils of the Church were called to deal with the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, it was the elders and bishops from Antioch and Syria who championed the Orthodox Faith and resisted the heresies from Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The fact that they were in the majority saved the early church from being overwhelmed by false doctrine and established documents which affirm the orthodox faith even until now.

So, this work begun by persecuted souls from Jerusalem and Judea, the established by Barnabus and Paul, was one of the most important influences in early Christianity.

As we shall see, this will be the sending church for Paul and Barnabus for the missionary work which will ultimately reach Rome, and some say far beyond Rome. This is the place from which the evangelization of Europe will be supported. At the same time, this church will stand as a pillar of truth for the Christian world.

We think of the church as originating from Jerusalem and indeed it did but Antioch was the next, and very huge, stepping stone in the church's development.

Even though the Antioch church was begun by Jews testifying the gospel only to other Jews, 11:19,20, Gentiles were soon being received as members and equals. We know this from what happened when Paul and Barnabus returned from the First Missionary Journey.

Acts 14:24-15:2

24 And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.

25 And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:

26 And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.

27 And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.

28 And there they abode long time with the disciples.

Acts 15

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. KJV

When we get to our study of Chapter 15 we shall see that the real question here was over how to handle the Gentile believers.

So, Antioch became the first real test of how Jewish and Gentile believers would relate to one another as well as whether the apostles would fully embrace the truths that were revealed to Peter at Cornelius' house.

Interestingly the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans some few years later and their treatment of the Jews in Judea would force the believers out into the world and their home would become such churches as this one in which they would be dealing with Gentiles as full brothers under the New Covenant.

Another interesting element of this passage is our introduction to prophets within the New Testament Church. We tend to associate the office of prophet almost exclusively with the Old Testament because we have so many of them there and the references to prophets in the NT are relatively few. But there were prophets and they were an important part of the First Century Church.

In fact, they are listed among the offices in the early church right next to the apostles.

1 Cor 12:28-31

28 And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

29 Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles?

30 Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret?

31 But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. KJV

Eph 4:11-15

11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;

- 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:
- 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:
- 14 That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;
- 15 But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: KJV

They were called an enabled by God, set in the church for its growth and edification, and enabled to speak with authority. Things were revealed to them that were not revealed even to the apostles as we see in our text as well as in:

Acts 21:10-14

- 10 And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus.
- 11 And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.
- 12 And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.
- 13 Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.
- 14 And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. KJV

We notice, however, that the apostles did not feel that the prophecies of the prophets were authoritative over them to direct their movements. The prophecy of Agabus did come true as Paul was bound into Roman custody in Jerusalem and ultimately transported to Rome.

We really have little record of how the prophets functioned in the First Century other than these two examples but they were used by God for the profit and development of the early church. The office of prophet, like the office of apostle, did not outlast these original servants of God but we are sure that the churches were greatly benefitted by the present. They were specially called and enabled by God to teach and preach with authority.

There were even women who prophesied though we have no information as to what that ministry looked like or how it functioned.

Acts 21:8-9

- 8 And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him.
- 9 And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. KJV

The only other reference we have of people prophesying is found in Acts 19 as the Holy Spirit fell on the first converts at Ephesus.

Acts 19:1-7

- 1 And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples,
- 2 He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost.
- 3 And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism.
- 4 Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.
- 5 When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
- 6 And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied.
- 7 And all the men were about twelve. KJV

As the century grew to a close the church was set upon by false apostles and false prophets.

1 John 4:1

- 1 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. KJV

All that being said, Agabus prophesied of a famine in the days of Emperor Claudius and it did come to pass.

**Maybe the most important element to notice in this passage is that Antioch was the place where the next great development in Christian charity took place.**

We encounter here the functioning of one of the great principles of True Faith: Love Expresses Itself in Giving. The greatest manifestation of that principle is found, of course, in John 3:16, "God so loved....that He gave."

Short of giving one's life for others is the giving of one's self, effort, and resources when a brother or group of brothers needs help. John expressed that in considering the other side of that equation.

1 John 3:16-17

- 16 Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.
- 17 But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? KJV

Everyone knows that Jesus left serious instructions concerning the love which His disciples were to have for one another.

John 13:34-35

34 A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another.

35 By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another. KJV

John 15:12-17

12 This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you.

13 Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

14 Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you.

15 Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.

16 Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.

17 These things I command you, that ye love one another. KJV

The church at Jerusalem had, from the very beginning, been diligent to care for the needy among themselves, feeding the widows and designating deacons to make sure that their care was distributed equitably. The members had given generously, even selling their property, when converted widows and other had been abandoned by their Jewish families as they converted to Christianity. The church refused to allow them to starve.

But now the church at Antioch was present with a test of their love but how were they to understand how the admonitions of Christ were to work out in a situation like this where one church was doing well and another was suffering? No rules had been given specific to this exact situation, but these new Christians didn't have any problem figuring it out. They answered in the True Spirit of Christ. Each one, as he was able, gave for the relief of the saints, not just at Jerusalem but in all of Judea. John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, noticed that the funds were sent to the elders of the churches so that they might be distributed with equity and had been done at Jerusalem.

This apparently held them until the visit of Queen Helena, an Assyrian Queen, who had converted to Judaism with her son and came to Judea for a visit. The situation was so dire that she took pity on the starving Jews and provide them with food at her own expense until the famine was mostly over.

In a later journey, Paul again raised a sum of money for the care of the saints in Jerusalem from the Gentile churches of Macedonai, Greece, and Asia.

So the first and greatest of the churches outside of Judea, and the first church in which Jews and Gentiles mingled peacefully, set the standard and established the practice of churches helping other churches in times of need.

They were also used by God to establish the principle that God blesses those church that give generously and wisely to promote His Kingdom work on earth.