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Acts 11:19-30

Seventeenth Message

Gary Vanderet

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THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

We return this morning to a series in the book of Acts, *The Spreading Flame*, which we left off two years ago. Acts is the story of the spreading flame of the Holy Spirit, recording the birth, infancy and adolescence of the church.

The theme of the book is found in 1:8. Speaking to the apostles, the Lord said, “*but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.*” These were Jesus’ final words before he left this earth, laying down in the clearest terms the mission for those who were to follow him. These words also set out a cursory outline for the book, a rough table of contents, if you will. The first seven chapters describe the growth of the church in Jerusalem. At the beginning of chapter 8, the disciples are scattered. Chapters 8-12 describe the expansion of the church throughout Judea, the province around Jerusalem, and into Samaria, the Roman province just to the north. The final part of Acts, chapters 13-28, describe the expansion of the church into the rest of Asia and Europe, “the remotest part of the earth.”

We pick up our study in the middle of chapter 11. We will look at a description of the birth of one of the most exciting, dynamic, mission minded, multicultural churches in the pages of the New Testament, the church at Antioch, in Syria. I believe this serves as a wonderful model for us here at PBCC of what a church in a major metropolis ought to look like.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. (Acts 11:19-24 NASB)

In this account, Luke goes back to the scattering of the Christians following the persecution that began after the stoning of Stephen, recorded in chapter 8. As they traveled north

along the coast, some of these persecuted people went first to Phoenicia, the notoriously wicked Canaanite region; they then sailed to Cyprus, an island off the coast, and then up to Antioch. Because they were Jews, and somewhat limited in their outlook at this time, they preached only to Jews in synagogues.

But Luke records that among those who were scattered were men from Cyprus, and from Cyrene, in North Africa. These men were probably a bit more cosmopolitan in their outlook and not as restricted as those from Jerusalem. When they arrived in Antioch, they began to proclaim their message to the Greeks as well. Scholars debate as to who these people actually were, but what is obvious is that they were Greek speakers and Greek lovers, and thus very different from Jewish followers of Jesus.

This is not merely an historical observation, but the revelation of a crossroads in the history of the church, an enormous step that had never happened before. There had been Gentile conversions already, and vast numbers of Samaritans had turned to the Lord. Luke records Philip’s contact with the Ethiopian eunuch and Peter’s meeting with Cornelius. But all of these events involved Gentiles who had a Jewish outlook, people who were looking to the Jews and the Jewish religion for salvation. But this was a new thing. The people of Antioch were utterly and absolutely pagan in the sense that they had no particular religious outlook.

Antioch was an interesting and strategic city. At this time it was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria, with a population of 300,000. Situated on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem, it was a vast, cosmopolitan city. Antioch was the melting pot for at least five cultures: Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arab, and Persian. Its sports center was famous for chariot racing. With all of this came a deliberate pursuit of pleasure. In fact, the city itself became a byword for decadent living. About five miles outside Antioch stood a temple dedicated to Daphne, the counterpart to Ashra, the Canaanite goddess of love. This temple housed a number of prostitutes who plied their trade in the name of religion. It was a way of life for men stop off on their way home from work at the laurel grove where the temple was located.

In this city then with all its sensuality and immorality this group of venturesome people began to proclaim Christ. What strikes me is that these were not apostles who were sharing the gospel. They were ordinary people breaking the mold. They

were “gossiping” the gospel in their daily routines. Notice they did this wherever they happened to be. They did not choose to be in Antioch; they were pushed there. These people who had lost everything told the Greeks about Jesus. No clergy were involved. In fact, we aren’t even given the names of the people who initiated one of the greatest events in history—the first general attempt to take the gospel directly to Gentiles. These were common, ordinary believers like you and me, not particularly sophisticated, but with a daring faith and a big heart.

They probably didn’t know how to approach these pagans. It was scary sharing Christ with bright, sophisticated people who didn’t know the Bible or indeed anything about the Jewish Messiah. Where do you begin with people like that? Luke says they simply preached the Lord Jesus, and “*the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed, and turned to the Lord.*” That is an apt description of what happens at conversion: they *turned to the Lord*. Paul wrote to the Thesalonians, “you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess 1:9). These educated, sophisticated pagans realized the futility of their lives. They were hungry for reality and truth. When these believers preached the good news, many of their hearers turned to the Lord who could give them the meaning and wholeness they were looking for. In Antioch there were no apostles, no elders, no pastors, no deacons, no ecclesiastical structure, just the Lord’s hand—and a tremendous number of new believers.

It wasn’t long before the Jerusalem church found out about what was going on. They didn’t know what to make of it, so they sent Barnabas to Antioch to check it out. They couldn’t have sent a better person. Barnabas is a marvelous character. We could devote an entire message to his life. His given name was Joseph, but he was nicknamed Barnabas, an Aramaic term that means “son of encouragement,” one who is characterized by encouragement. Barnabas was always encouraging people. He was behind the scenes much of the time, moving people into positions of leadership. A Hellenistic Jew, raised on the island of Cyprus, he may have had friends among those who were sharing Christ. Maybe he volunteered for the assignment. Earlier in Acts we learned that he sold his property in Cyprus and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles.

Arriving in Antioch, Barnabas witnessed what Luke describes as the grace of God in these people. He saw God at work in their lives, changing them. He listened to their accounts of what God was doing. Ray Stedman used to tell the story about a woman who was confronted by a skeptic who challenged the idea that Jesus could turn water into wine. Her comment was that she didn’t have any problem believing that Jesus could turn water into wine, because when her husband became a Christian, Jesus turned beer into groceries! I am sure Barnabas heard similar stories.

Verse 24 gives us tremendous insight into the kind of person Barnabas was. Unfortunately, the NIV doesn’t translate the first word of verse 24, “because.” It connects Barnabas’ ministry

of encouragement to his character. Luke says that Barnabas saw the grace of God in their lives and he rejoiced “**for** [or because] *he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.*” Barnabas’ behavior is explained by his character. These were new, untaught believers. They still carried the grime of Antioch with them. Their relationships and language and ethics had a long way to go. Barnabas saw those things as well, but he didn’t focus on them. There was something inside him that made him see others differently. Luke describes it as goodness. Barnabas was a good man.

There are two primary meanings for the word translated “good.” One emphasizes the ethical aspect of goodness, the sense of being proper and correct. The other emphasizes the aesthetic aspect of goodness, the quality of being “winsome or beautiful.” I believe Paul is stressing the second aspect here. The Septuagint uses this word to describe Moses when he was born. He is described as a “good” child. That didn’t mean that he slept all night, but that he was a beautiful child. That is what Luke is saying. There was beauty to Barnabas’ life. He was a gracious, kind, tolerant, loving and gentle man. He was not only righteous and upright, he was gentle and gracious as well. This is the sort of beauty that ought to characterize us. It’s one thing to be right and good and proper in the self-righteous sense; it’s another to be gentle and kind and understanding of other peoples’ weaknesses and failures. Barnabas was that kind of man. Barnabas, the encourager, was true to his name.

He encouraged them, Luke says in verse 23, “*with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord.*” That phrase is translated a number of ways in different versions. The NIV says, “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.” The phrase actually comes from only three main words in the Greek. The first is the word abide or remain, cling or cleave. The second has to do with purpose, resolution or determination. The third word is “to the Lord.” We could translate Barnabas’ exhortation to these new believers in Antioch this way: “Cling to the Lord resolutely.” They had turned to the Lord and entered into a living relationship with Jesus Christ; now Barnabas exhorted them to abide in the Lord. Cleave to the Lord. Cleave resolutely to the Lord. Don’t let him go. Don’t allow yourselves to get distanced from him. Don’t fall into a rut. Cleave to the Lord resolutely.

That’s what it means to be growing in the grace of God. Let me ask you a question as we begin a new year: Have you entered into a personal relationship with Jesus? If you have, I encourage you to cleave to him. Don’t let your worries, your ambitions, your successes, your achievements or anything else lure you away. Cleave to him. Or as he himself said, “Abide in me.” That’s what matters. Barnabas doesn’t come up with a whole list of requirements, a number of do’s and don’ts. He exhorts them to simply cleave to the Lord. Some of you have moved away from the Lord this past year. You’re no longer cleaving to him as you did previously. Barnabas would say, and I want to say with him, cleave to the Lord resolutely. That’s what it means to grow in grace. If you turn to the Lord it’s

because of his grace, and if you are going to cleave to the Lord it will be through his grace.

But Barnabas needed help in Antioch.

And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. (11:25-26)

The ministry in Antioch was going so well it was too much for Barnabas. He was a gifted man, but he knew his limitations. He soon recognized that he didn't have the gifts that could take these people to maturity. They were untaught. They knew nothing about the Scriptures. They needed someone who could expound the Scriptures. He knew the right man for the job. So he went off to Tarsus to look for Saul. It had been eight or ten years since Barnabas had last seen Saul. A lot had happened since then. It was perhaps during this period that Saul had experienced the "loss of all things" (Phil 3:8), and was disinherited by his family. The text actually implies that Barnabas had to search for Saul, but he found him and brought him back to Antioch and they taught the church there for a year.

Luke says it was there that the disciples were first called Christians. It is clear from Luke's wording that it wasn't the disciples who named themselves that. The name was given to them by non-Christians in Antioch. That is the interesting thing about our title. We didn't make it up. Christians never referred to themselves as Christians. The word occurs very rarely in the NT, actually only three times, twice in Acts and once in 1 Peter. In each case it is a reference to how the non-Christians referred to believers. Christians called themselves disciples, or believers, or brethren, or saints.

It was probably started out as a derogatory name. The people of Antioch saw this vibrant spiritual movement, though I'm sure it seemed narrow and suspicious to them. Looking for a new name to describe it they took the Greek word for Messiah and added a Latin suffix, producing a hybrid word that we pronounce in English, "Christian." The name was wonderfully true, though probably derogatory and costly. It was given because these believers continually talked about Christ. They didn't talk about their church or their pastors. They talked about Christ. They were constantly sharing the good news. They were gossiping the gospel. They were filled and flooded with Christ. His name was on their lips and his character was being formed in them. They were making visible the invisible Christ.

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders. (11:27-30)

Luke says that a group of prophets came up to Antioch from Jerusalem, and one of them, Agabus, revealed to the church that there was going to be a great famine in the world. As a historical footnote, Luke records that this actually happened during the reign of Claudius. We know from Roman writers of this period that from AD 41-44 there was a great famine throughout the Roman Empire. Before it occurred, Agabus told the church in Antioch that a need would exist in Jerusalem, and these people immediately responded by pooling their funds. As a result of hearing about what impact that would have on the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, they determined (and that's the key phrase) to send aid to those who were poorer than them. Notice that each determined, each according to his ability. Not just a few people gave. Every single person in that church got involved. They got involved across the fixed dividing lines, with people they had never met, who were very different from them. In spite of their differences they were filled with compassion for these needy believers. The gift was delivered there by Saul and Barnabas.

Over and over again in the NT we see that the real mark of a changed heart is a giving spirit. It is not correct theology. The real mark of a Christian is a changed heart, not someone who is perfect, but one who is growing, becoming more loving, more teachable, more winsome, more gentle.

As I reflect on this church at Antioch there are three qualities that I would love to be descriptive of us as a church as well. The first is that we are always sharing the good news. Whether God forces us out of this area, as will happen to some of you in the future, no matter where he sends you, you are gossiping the gospel. That is God's mandate to us. Secondly, that we be growing in grace, that we be gracious, winsome, attractive, kind, tenderhearted, forgiving people. And thirdly, that we be generous in our giving. I pray that as a church, these three qualities will be growing more and more among us.

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