

## THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

### (6) A Watershed for Christianity.

**Acts 11:19-26.** By this time, about 10 years after Christ's ascension and Pentecost, Christianity had come to be accepted among Jews and Christ-followers as a reformed Judaism, but it was never imagined as Judaism's successor. But with the conversion and infilling of the Holy Spirit evidenced by Cornelius and his friends, the Church doors had now been opened cautiously to Gentiles who had accepted Christ, just as the Jews had tolerated Gentiles who had embraced the laws of Judaism. We may be amused today, but it was difficult for Jewish believers to abandon the thought that their unique national destiny was about to be fulfilled with Jesus' imminent return and a purified national worship of God. In light of this belief it was okay to tolerate a few Gentile believers on the edge of the Church: it was envisaged that their number would be insignificant, anyway! We understand today that the Old Testament prophecies had a spiritual fulfilment, but it was a high step to take in tight skirts for deep-rooted Israelites to envisage Israel losing her identity and privilege and just melding into the Church. We see later that even Paul and Peter had their struggles with this, and we should sympathise with, and admire, the greatness of Christianity's leaders who rose to the occasion with insight, faith, big-heartedness and a self-denying willingness to let go of treasured beliefs.

And so we come to the Syrian city of Antioch, the third city of the Roman empire, the Roman headquarters for Syria and Cilicia, the location of the imperial mint, and a meeting-place of Jew, Greek, Roman and Syrian. We see in **verse 19** that the refugees from the persecution in Jerusalem preached the message faithfully – but only to Jews! But in **verse 20**, something new happens – men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who were used to mingling amicably with Gentiles in their homeland, spoke naturally and fearlessly to any Gentiles they met, joyfully bringing them the Good News. These "Greeks" – meaning Gentiles here, not Grecian Jews – were different from Cornelius and company because they had no experience of the laws of Judaism and came straight from a pagan background into the light of the Gospel. And what a wonderful difference it made to them! **Verse 21** – "The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." So was born the first predominantly Gentile church!

***Can you imagine what it would have been like to be true to your childhood faith in those days of upheaval? How hard would it be to figure out if this new Christian way was heretical or the ultimate truth? Do we sometimes have the same struggle with conflicting streams of belief?***

### **Big Brother is Watching!**

The church in Jerusalem, conscious of its responsibility as senior partner and general supervisor, heard this startling news and was quick to investigate. They were sensible enough to send the right man for the job - Barnabas, whom we already know to be fair-minded, far-sighted and of a loving, generous nature. Being a Levite, his mind would be steeped in the Law while at the same time, being from Cyprus himself, his heart would be reaching out to the Gentiles, who also needed God. Far from any rebuke, Barnabas was only too delighted to acknowledge the grace of God, and urged these new, raw believers to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was open to change and could accept the fact that, through the working of the Holy Spirit, these Gentile believers were his brothers in Christ. It is ironic that today, it is we Gentiles who are apt to despise the Jews – "they had their chance, and they blew it!" Where would any of us be, without the grace of God?!

**Verse 24** says that Barnabas, a good man and full of the Holy Spirit, could use his brains as well as his heart. A great number of people had come to the Lord, among them a mixture of Jews with the rich background of the Old Testament, and Greeks who had a highly educated but pagan view of the world and ignorance of the workings of God through the ages. It was difficult for one line of teaching to enlighten all. Barnabas must have thought about this problem and decided there was one man who, with his unique education and background, would be able to cope with the diversity of need. That man was Saul.

## **Out of the Closet.**

When we last heard of Saul he was being packed off to Tarsus with threats on his life ringing in his ears, his fearless preaching no doubt quite setting the cat among the pigeons. Defeated by the constant rejection of his ardent message, he was unlikely to put himself forward again. There was only one thing to do, and the compassionate Barnabas did it. His search took him around the corner of the Mediterranean to Tarsus, where his diligence soon found out the apostle. If we look at **Galatians 2:1** it seems likely that 14 years had elapsed since Saul's retreat, and we might think that was a waste of time when the Church had so much urgent evangelising to do. We don't know whether or not he was active in local evangelism during that time, but in **2 Corinthians 12:2-4** he refers to "a man" which many conclude to be himself, who 14 years earlier was given an outstanding revelation of inexpressible, heavenly things. Saul made good use of that vision and, with his highly intelligent mind, had time to reason things out and piece together all the aspects of the workings of God through the centuries: it was a time that prepared him for the writing of his incomparable letters to the various churches which remain the authentic guide for churches today.

We can only guess how persuasive Barnabas had to be, but he succeeded in bringing Saul back to the exciting work going on in Antioch. Indeed, we wonder what would have happened to Saul without the gracious, loving touch of this "Son of Encouragement!" Christianity may have lost one of its strongest pillars. Barnabas apparently saw no need to report back to Jerusalem immediately, for he and Saul spent a wonderful year in Antioch discipling the burgeoning church. And it was here that there was a new name found for this sect – they could not be called Jews (most were not) nor even proselytes, for they were not: the only suitable name for these Christ-followers was simply, "Christ ones" – or Christians.

***Can you think of a time when someone gave you some encouragement that helped to change your whole life? Do you make a practice of encouraging others in return?***

**Verses 27-30** show graphically how the "agape love" of the Church was reaching out far beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem. The prophet Agabus, being forewarned of an impending famine, came from Jerusalem to Antioch with his warning for the believers there – a prophecy fulfilled around about AD 46. By the way, Blaiklock has an interesting comment here. He says it is a historical fact that there were widespread shortages throughout the organized Roman world and in fact it was simply Nature hitting back. The whole Mediterranean area had been mined extensively for too many centuries and its hills had been denuded of a saving forest covering. Crises of infertility were arising, and there were noticeable encroachments of the desert on the sown field.<sup>1</sup> Nothing new under the sun!

And what was the response from these Christians in Antioch, newly converted from paganism? Having received through the Jewish evangelists eternal life for themselves, they now gladly gave something back in return – a practical gift of love to their brothers in Judea! What a cementing that must have brought about for Jew and Gentile! Barnabas, ever tactful, ever perceptive, must have deemed it important for Saul to go back to Jerusalem, and together they took the love offering there. Thus was forged a strong link between Saul, who was later to become known as the "apostle to the Gentiles" and the Church fathers still influenced by their background of Jerusalem Jewry.

***How hard is it to go back to a spot marred by failure? Yet psychologists tell us that is the only real cure for a phobia. It is helpful to remember that not everyone is thinking about us all the time – most people are too busy thinking about themselves! When God cleanses our sin He gives us the strength to start again, with Him.***

## **A Missional Church.**

It is interesting to imagine the reaction of the Jerusalem church to the offering presented by Barnabas and Saul! It would have put paid to any objection the Jews could have raised about their Gentile fellow-believers! The 2 ambassadors most likely would have stayed with Mary, the aunt of Barnabas, while in

Jerusalem, and maybe Barnabas took the opportunity to encourage her somewhat diffident son Mark. In any case, Mark was happy to go with them when they returned to Antioch. **(Chapter 12:25).**

And so we come to **Chapter 13:1-3**, where we are made conscious of the true worth of this pioneering church at Antioch. It was here that Christianity had encountered the full broad stream of the varied life pulsing through the Roman Empire, where the new faith had indeed first attracted pagan attention. Little wonder, then, that the members of the church should look beyond their own confines.

A look at the list of their preachers and teachers serves to emphasise their diversity. We start with Barnabas, seemingly the leader, a Levite from Cyprus: Simeon called Niger, a man with a Jewish background and most probably black: Lucius of Cyrene, his Latin name signifying he was probably a Gentile: Manaen, foster brother of the Herod who had beheaded John the Baptist, but obviously not a product of his background, who would be able to pass on useful information regarding the thoughts and actions of the hostile Herod: and lastly, Saul. These men, all with vastly different backgrounds, education and gifts, worked together to build and edify the church.

It was in the context of their earnest worship and fasting that the Holy Spirit made His will plain to these leaders. Maybe they were already conscious of the need to reach out to the unharvested fields of Gentiles all around them and were praying to this effect. However the revelation came, there was no mistaking the leading of the Holy Spirit and they promptly obeyed. This great church was willing to give up its successful leader and its brilliant theologian so that they might evangelise freely elsewhere, and signified their affirmation by praying over them with the laying on of their hands.

***What is the best strategy for making decisions in the life of our church? How can we be led by the Holy Spirit? What part does common sense play in our decisions?***

To finish off this study we might try to answer the above! Of course, the Holy Spirit has more “common sense” than the rest of us put together! There was certainly a lot of sense in choosing Saul. Up to this point he is called by his Jewish name, but once launched out on his significant mission to the Gentiles, it was appropriate and tactful to use his Latin name, given to him as a Roman citizen – a standing which rescued him from danger more than once! In **Ephesians 2:11-3:11** and in **Colossians 1:25,26** Paul tells us he received revelations regarding the nature and constitution of the Church, enabling him to give essential guidelines to this newly founded society. But he was also a great missionary strategist who saw the need of establishing centres of witness in busy ports and other centres of communication, so that the gospel might spread to all the areas round about them. His practice of starting his message in the local synagogues created in each place a nucleus of earnest believers who already knew the Old Testament scriptures. Never afraid to “pass on the baton”, Paul had many colleagues whom he entrusted with the supervision of the churches he had established, enabling him to journey ever farther with the Good News in the understanding that God had commissioned him to be a spiritual pioneer. Thus it was that in little more than a decade, a vast area was evangelized, stretching from Jerusalem to Rome. The Church was surely exploding, by the power and the grace of God.

<sup>1</sup>Acts, an Introduction and Commentary by E.M. Blaiklock, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press

