Acts 2024 Juan Seo (June 30, 2024)

**THE ANTIOCH CHURCH: THE FIRST CHRISTIANS**

Acts 11:19-26

Key Verse 11:26

***And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.***

The Antioch church is recognized as one of the most exemplary churches in Christian history. So, many church leaders envision their churches to be like the Antioch church, including 'Antioch' in their church names. For example, there are churches like Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, Antioch Community Church, Antioch African Methodist Episcopal Church, Antioch Christian Church, and others. In fact, the Antioch church can be defined as the first multi-ethnic and multicultural church, the first church where believers were called Christians, and the first missionary-sending church in Christian history. Through the Antioch church, the gospel of Jesus Christ spread to the Gentile world of Asia Minor and Europe. The world mission command of Jesus is recorded in Acts 1:8: ***“But 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”*** was practically fulfilled by the Antioch church. What kind of church was the Antioch church as depicted in today's passage? What are the characteristics of the church in Antioch?

***First, the Antioch church broke through cultural barriers and passionately preached the gospel of Jesus Christ.***

Please look at verse 19. ***"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews."*** The story of the Antioch church unfolds in relation to the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of believers in Jerusalem. We have learned that all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). And those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (8:4). Now, verse 19 says that they traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. The Phoenician region was located in modern-day Lebanon and included prominent cities such as Sidon and Tyre. Cyprus was a large island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea dominated by Hellenistic culture. At that time, Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. It was referred to as Antioch of Syria or Syrian Antioch to distinguish it from the similarly named Antioch in Pisidia. Syrian Antioch was a maritime city with its own seaport, thriving in trade and commerce. It was home to many Jews of the diaspora. Consequently, many Gentiles in Antioch were attracted to Judaism.

In verse 19, we find the interesting expression ***"spreading the word only among Jews."*** The scattered believers preached the word wherever they went, but only among Jews. Why did they preach the gospel only to Jews? These believers were predominantly Jews, and it was very challenging for them to overcome their Jewish values and culture. Last week, we learned that even the apostle Peter struggled to overcome Jewish values and culture. God showed him a vision and commanded him to kill and eat all kinds of animals. However, even though he was starving, he strongly refused, saying, "Surely not, Lord! I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." This is a typical Jewish response. At that time, it was almost unimaginable for Jews to speak to and preach the gospel to Gentiles.

However, there were people who transcended these ethnic, cultural, and religious barriers. Some men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks as well, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. Here, "some men from Cyprus and Cyrene" refers to Jewish believers. And "Greeks" refers to Greek-speaking Gentiles. These Jews proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ to Gentiles as well. We do not know exactly how they could overcome these barriers. Perhaps they were more open to Hellenistic culture because they were Hellenistic Jews. Perhaps some of these Jews had business relationships with Gentiles and naturally spoke about Jesus. Perhaps an angel appeared and told them to proclaim the gospel to Gentiles. But above all, I believe that they understood God's heart: ***"God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right''*** (Acts 10:34-35). Deeply understanding the love of Jesus for the world, they would have realized that Jesus is the Lord of all and that Gentiles also needed the gospel of salvation. They were filled with passion for preaching the gospel because of Jesus’ love.

Verse 21 says, ***"The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*** When they understood God's heart, overcame their own barriers, and actively participated in God's mission, God was pleased with their courageous actions and blessed them remarkably. Through these individuals who transcended ethnic, cultural, and religious barriers, the church of Jesus Christ was established in Antioch. This church became a community where Jews and Gentiles were mixed together, not just a Jewish-only church. In Acts 13:1, among the prophets and teachers of the Antioch church, there was a man named Simeon called Niger, who was likely of dark skin and possibly from North Africa. Therefore, the Antioch church was the first multi-ethnic and multicultural church in Christian history, with a mix of diverse races and cultures.

About a month ago, I shared with you the vision for New York UBF Church to become a multicultural and multigenerational community. This vision came from the Holy Spirit in light of our surrounding context, the multi-ethnic and multicultural city of New York, where our church is located, and God’s leading for New York UBF to become a multigenerational congregation over the past 50 years. Therefore, we need to understand God's heart toward the whole world, break through our personal, cultural, and ethnic prejudices, and actively participate in God’s mission. We should proclaim the gospel to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, skin color, language, and culture. We need intentional efforts to transcend our cultural preferences so that our church can have a multicultural environment. When considering the special calling from God and the gifts of the Holy Spirit to our faith community, I believe that we need to further develop and grow in college ministry. After the upcoming Summer Bible Conference, I plan to discuss and study college ministry together. We will prepare for the fall semester for evangelism and discipleship ministries among college students. Additionally, we need to remember that our families, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and friends all need the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must actively share the gospel with them. When each of us lives as the light of the world in our respective places, the fragrance of Christ will spread, and those who do not know Jesus will accept the gospel of salvation. May God bless us to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to anyone who needs to meet our Savior, and to become a multicultural and multigenerational congregation.

***Second, the Antioch church had mature spiritual leaders like Barnabas and Paul.***

The news that Gentiles in Antioch had accepted the gospel of Jesus reached the Jerusalem church, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch to understand the situation more closely. Barnabas was the most suitable person for this important task. He was a man of encouragement. He was a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus, so he understood the Hellenistic culture as well as the Jewish culture very well. Barnabas would have known people among the Jewish believers who had traveled from Cyprus to Antioch. Verse 24 describes Barnabas as ***"a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith."*** Do you remember anyone else who received such great recognition? In Acts 6:5, Stephen was described as ***"a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."*** Stephen, as the first martyr, was a highly respected spiritual leader. The author Luke gives similar recognition to Barnabas. In fact, Barnabas was the right person to properly discern God’s work in Antioch.

After arriving at the Antioch church and observing the situation, what was Barnabas' reaction? He saw what the grace of God had done. He did not see the Gentile church through the eyes of legalism but through the eyes of God's grace. If a legalistic leader had gone to Antioch, what might have happened? He might have instructed them to follow Jewish laws and customs. If that had happened, the Gentile believers in Antioch would have faced significant spiritual challenges, and the church in Antioch could have lost God's grace and faded away. However, Barnabas was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He embraced the Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ, warmly welcoming them with holy kisses. Recognizing that they were new believers in Jesus with much to learn, Barnabas encouraged them to remain faithful to the Lord with all their hearts. As a result, a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Furthermore, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Paul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. The distance from Antioch to Tarsus was approximately 160-180 miles, a journey that would have taken 4-5 days by horse or on foot. Barnabas must have been very busy attending to many believers in Antioch. He could have sent someone else from the church to Tarsus to bring Paul. But why did Barnabas personally travel to Tarsus to bring Paul? It was because Barnabas acknowledged the importance of having a spiritually mature co-worker when serving God’s work. Barnabas seemed to have met Paul when Paul visited Jerusalem after his conversion. At that time, the Jerusalem believers did not trust that Paul had become a disciple of Jesus and avoided meeting him. However, Barnabas met with Paul and had a conversation with him, learning about how Paul had encountered Jesus and the plans Jesus had for calling him. Barnabas, with spiritual insight, believed in God’s work in Paul and introduced him to the apostles. With Barnabas' help, Paul was accepted by the Jerusalem church and began to speak boldly in the name of the Lord.

But Paul had to go to Tarsus to escape the Jews who wanted to kill him and spent about ten years there. We do not have any records in the Bible of what Paul did in Tarsus. He likely engaged in gospel ministry in Tarsus. Barnabas recognized that Paul was a prepared servant for God’s mission. When many Gentile believers began gathering in Antioch, Barnabas realized that the ministry was too overwhelming for him to handle alone. While praying, he would have remembered Paul. Barnabas believed that Paul was the right person who could work with the Gentile believers in Antioch. Therefore, he went to Tarsus to find Paul. Tarsus was the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia. It would not have been easy to find Paul in a big city. But Barnabas inquired and eventually found him. When Barnabas met Paul, he would have explained to Paul about the work of God in Antioch and respectfully and humbly invited him to join. They would have prayed together. Ultimately, Paul joined the Antioch church ministry. Think about it. How powerful would the ministry of Barnabas and Paul have been working together?

I pray that God will raise up many mature spiritual leaders in our church. I am thankful for many young leaders among us. We need to continue to pray for them and support them wholeheartedly. We also need to deeply embrace the truth that God’s ministry can be fruitful through our co-working. It may be easy for us to serve one Bible student, but it is very hard to serve one co-worker. Many mission fields suffer from challenges related to co-working. God’s ministry can flourish when we, like Barnabas, set aside our human ambitions and become Christ-centered, humbly serving and raising up our co-workers. May God make us a loving community that truly cares for and supports each other.

***Third, the Antioch church learned and imitated Jesus Christ.***

What did Barnabas and Paul do in Antioch? ***"So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."*** They spent a whole year teaching the words of God to a large number of people. Barnabas and Paul taught the teachings of Jesus. They helped the believers in Antioch to become true disciples of Jesus who learn and imitate Jesus. The believers examined themselves before the words of Jesus, repented, and changed their lives. They practiced the teachings of Jesus, gradually becoming true disciples who learned and imitated Jesus Christ more and more. What were the results?

Acts 11:26b says, ***"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."*** The identity of Christians is very familiar to us. However, the early church members being called Christians first happened at the Antioch church. The term ‘Christian’ comes from the Greek "Χριστιανός," where the suffix '-ianos' originally denoted slaves. Therefore, "Χριστιανός" means a slave of Christ. In the Bible, the term ‘Christian’ appears only three times, including Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. It is understood that non-believers distinguished followers of Jesus from Jews and non-believers and called them Christians. Initially, it was not easy to distinguish between Jews and Christians because both groups were primarily Jewish. However, the Antioch church was different. It had more Gentiles than Jews, and they did not adhere to Jewish laws and customs. They were a group who had accepted Jesus as their Savior and devoted themselves to learning from Him and preaching Him. Their values, way of life, behavior, speaking style, and so on were distinctly different from those of non-believers and Jews. Therefore, the people of Antioch began to call those who believed in Jesus "Χριστιανός," slaves of Christ.

Are you a Christian, Χριστιανός, a slave of Christ? We could easily answer "Yes" to this question. However, some among us might find it difficult to answer "Yes." In today's American society, identifying yourself as a Christian can lead to being treated like a fanatic, ignored, and even bullied. Consequently, some people hesitate to introduce themselves as Christians to avoid losing friends. Some Christians cannot confidently identify themselves as Christians because their lives do not reflect a Christian lifestyle. Others claim to be Christians, but they are not actually living a life following Christ. Apart from attending church on Sundays, their lives are not much different from non-Christians. We often refer to them as "Sunday Christians." However, being called a Christian is a great privilege because we bear the image of Jesus Christ within us. I believe we should confidently introduce ourselves by saying, "I am a Christian." If non-believers can recognize us as Christians because our values, way of life, and behaviors are different from those of this world, it is a great privilege for us. "Are you a Christian?" This question is equivalent to asking, "Are you a faithful disciple of Jesus?" I hope that we can boldly answer, "Yes, I am a Christian and a faithful disciple of Jesus." May we deeply learn from and imitate Jesus, proclaiming His gospel wherever we live and work.

Today, we learned three characteristics of the Antioch church. First, the Antioch church broke through cultural barriers and passionately preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, the Antioch church had mature spiritual leaders like Barnabas and Paul. Third, the Antioch church learned and imitated Jesus Christ. Additionally, the Antioch church was a mission-centered church. I will delve deeper into these themes when we study Acts chapter 13. I pray that our church becomes a Spirit-filled community, spreading the gospel and imitating Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.