

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH

Acts 11:19-30

The establishment of a church in Antioch in Syria was a momentous event. The city is said to have had a population of 500,000. It was mighty in influence and magnificence, fabulous in wealth, strategic in position, cosmopolitan in atmosphere, corrupt in morals and idolatrous in practice. It is one of the three largest cities in the Roman Empire and was famous for its commerce, art, and literature, and it was infamous for its vice and frivolity. It was just the place for a church. The founding of this church was in three stages.

I. The Arrival of Traveling Preachers. Acts 11:19-21.

There were two groups of evangelists who traveled to Antioch at the time of the persecution that arose on the death of Stephen. The one group confined their ministrations to their fellow-countrymen, the Jews. The other company was gifted with a wider outlook and exercised a broader ministry. Following Apostolic example and the impulses of Christian benevolence, when they came to Antioch, they "spake unto the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus." Verse 20. The success of this second group is described in verse 21. "And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord." Tidings of these triumphs of grace speedily went abroad and soon came to the ears of the brotherhood of believers in Jerusalem.

II. The Arrival of Barnabas. Acts 11:22-24.

Greatly stirred and quickened by the news, the church in Jerusalem decided to send a friendly deputation along the track of these zealous evangelists, to note the character of their work, and to confirm the faith of believers. These evangelists were doing only what the apostle Peter had already done in Caesarea, a procedure which the Jerusalem church had approved. Barnabas was selected because he seems to have had an unusual power of doing the right thing at the right time. This is something we should all covet and cultivate. Barnabas was broad-minded and conciliatory in disposition. His advice to those people we well may take to ourselves—with purpose of heart to cleave unto the Lord.

That the testimony of Barnabas was generous and sympathetic might be inferred from the character of the man. The record is a very suggestive one, he "came," and "saw the grace of God," and "was glad." Barnabas went to Antioch expecting to see wonderful manifestations of the grace of God and he was not disappointed. It filled his heart with gratitude and thanksgiving. The work immediately received his hearty and sympathetic support. With what joy he testified to the glory of the risen Redeemer and proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God.

That such a testimony would be vastly influential we may well believe. "Much people was added to the Lord." Two things explain the rapid growth of the rising faith. One was the preaching of a person rather than a religion or system of belief. The other was the character of the preacher by whom the message was brought. From verse 24 we would learn that character is more than gifts in building the kingdom of God. His message was vastly important, but the personality behind the message gave it weight and made it mightily influential. The character of Barnabas was in keeping with his benign mission.

It is doubtful if any tribute is greater than that paid to Barnabas, "For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith." You may think me daring to attempt to interest you by talking about a virtue so prosaic as goodness. Who is complimented by being called "good"? Bad company has wrecked this word "good." However, it is not used here in the common acceptation of the term, but in the divine. If a man lives morally; if he pays that which he owes; if he bestows his goods to feed the poor; if he conforms to the rules of society and the forms of religion; whatever his

motives for so doing, by universal consent he is considered "a good man." Now the goodness of Barnabas included these things, but this quality in his life was divine, or the creation of the Holy Spirit.

1. The fact of his goodness.
 - (1) Men recognized it.
 - (2) Angels admired it.
 - (3) God appreciated it.
 - (4) The Bible stated it.

2. The features of his goodness.
 - (1) He was a genuine believer in Christ.
Because of his faith in the Saviour a wonderful transformation was wrought in him.
 - (2) He was full of the Holy Spirit.
For this reason he had right views, principles, desires and purposes.
 - (3) He was full of faith.
Faith is the foundation of Christian character and service. Because of his strong grip on the gospel truth, he was not troubled with weakening and depressing doubts. His faith kept him strong in the assurance that "we never test the resources of God until we attempt the impossible."
 - (4) He had strong convictions.
 - a. Regarding Christ.
 - (a) As the revealer of God to man.
 - (b) As the redeemer of man from sin.
 - (c) As the reconciler of man to God.
 - b. Regarding himself.
 - (a) His responsibility to Christ.
 - (b) His responsibility to the world.
 - (5) He was sympathetic.
He specialized in the work of comforting the sorrowful, cheering the discouraged, and strengthening the weak. Where there were tears and sorrows, broken hearts and crushed hopes, lives bowed down and souls in despair, Barnabas was there to help.
 - (6) He was unselfish.
He rejoiced in the work done by others, and in the successes that were granted to them. There was no sign of resentment when he saw Paul take the lead. He was glad to take second place for the good of the cause of Christ.

Unselfishness marked the course of the great-minded Barnabas. Before he had been in Antioch long, he saw a mighty field opening out to the followers of Christ. It was a field preeminently fitted for the working of a master mind. There was just one man to fill the place. That man was Saul of Tarsus. So Barnabas started out to find him.

III. The Arrival of Saul. Acts 11:25-26.

Although Barnabas bore the commission of the church at Jerusalem, and was well qualified to do the work himself, he thought of the work, and then he thought of Saul. He knew that Saul possessed super-eminent qualifications for the field, and so, without delay, he went for him. In doing this Barnabas could hardly have been blind to the probability that Saul would speedily overshadow him and that from the first place he must soon descend to the second. But this contingency was nothing to him. The great thought in his mind was not the place of Barnabas in the church but the work before the church, and the best way most speedily to accomplish it.

Through the faithful testimony of Barnabas and Saul the young and growing church at Antioch was quick to grasp the opportunity to minister in loving service to the mother-church in her time of need. Having received from her so abundantly in spiritual things, it was fitting that they should minister to her in carnal things. And this

they did, sending the gifts to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Life is energetic, and love is sacrificial, and so a collection was taken up. Out of dire calamity came a loving united and co-working church of both Jews and Gentiles. Every man gave in this service of relief. Every man gave with spontaneous decision. And every man gave according to his ability.