

IN ANTIOCH THE DISCIPLES WERE FIRST CALLED CHRISTIANS

Acts 11:19–30

Key Verses: 11:25–26

“So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”

“Who do you think you *are*?” At first, this question can sound challenging, even insulting. But it’s an important question. So many things that seem to give us an identity actually don’t. Not our abilities or interests, not our family, not our school or occupation or ethnicity or race. Where does our real identity come from? The Bible says it comes from Christ our Lord. In today’s passage, a new church at Antioch is born. We get a rare look at how this church starts, how it grows, and how it matures. We especially see how these diverse people come to have a new shared identity in Jesus. What is this shared identity? How can we have it? And why do we need it? May God speak to us through his word today.

First, “*some . . . spoke to the Hellenists also*” (19–21). Look at verse 19. The persecution that arose over Stephen continues to have an effect. Scattered believers travel to more unreached places: Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (see a map). Phoenicia has two famous coastal cities, Tyre and Sidon, where later we find disciples (21:7; 27:3). Cyprus is an island 100 miles off the coast. These scattering believers might have family or businesses in these places. But mainly, they’re fleeing persecution. Still, they speak “the word,” the good news about Jesus, wherever they go. The good news keeps on spreading. But verse 19b says they speak “to no one except Jews.” Why? Maybe they think only Jews will accept the message. Or maybe they’re too afraid to talk with Gentiles.

Look at verse 20. Originally these men were Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene, and while in Jerusalem they’d heard the gospel, repented, and joined the Christian community. But to flee persecution, now they’ve come to Antioch, 300 miles to the north. As the capital of Syria, Antioch is actually the third largest city in the Roman Empire (see drawing), on the Orontes River, just east of the Mediterranean, and near the famous merchant roads used to transport products

from far away. Antioch is very cosmopolitan, with people from as far east as India and Persia and as far west as Greece and Rome. Syrians are there, too, as is a large Jewish community. It was founded over 300 years earlier by thousands of Greek immigrants. It had been built up by Julius Caesar, and recently by the Emperor Tiberius. Antioch is now a center of Roman government, trade and tourism. Its Roman buildings and streets are impressive. Most of its people speak Greek, the international language at that time. It's an ideal place to reach the world. But nobody seems to be planning that. It just happens.

Look at verse 20 again. Unlike traditional Jews, when these men from Cyprus and Cyrene arrive in Antioch, they don't isolate themselves; they speak "to the Hellenists also." Who are the "Hellenists"? They're contrasted with the Jews in verse 19, so they must be non-Jews living in Antioch—all the ethnicities there who speak Greek. Some of them might attend local Jewish synagogues, curious about the Jewish Scriptures. But why do these men who've just arrived go out of their way to speak to these non-Jews? Being from Cyprus and Cyrene, where Greek is the official language, Greek is their mother tongue, so they're comfortable speaking Greek. Still, they're Jews, so to start talking to non-Jews, they've got to be bold. They've got to have compassion. Basically, because of the Holy Spirit in them, they really want all human beings to know Jesus. Until now, famous people like Peter and Philip have been the evangelists. We don't even know the names of these men. Probably they don't think they're doing anything special. But it's another historic moment: nameless, ordinary believers cross the racial divide and begin sharing the good news of Jesus with diverse people. With the Holy Spirit, we too can share the good news of Jesus with anyone, anywhere.

What happens? Look at verse 21. God blesses their act of faith more than anyone could imagine. It shows how eager God is to spread the good news of Jesus to all kinds of people, through anyone who will step out in faith. It seems more and more people begin doing so, until eventually, a great number of people believe and turn to Jesus as their Lord. This "great number" in Antioch is similar to what happened in Jerusalem at first. Like the birth of the Jerusalem church, this is not a human work; it's the work of God, done by the Holy Spirit. But this time it happens through nameless, persecuted believers. In Acts, this new church in Antioch takes center stage to become the first missionary church, spreading the gospel of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. Soon, Antioch produces a

spiritual leader for all the churches, St. Ignatius (AD 30–110). The Antioch church is *born* in mission, the mission of ordinary people actively sharing about Jesus.

Second, “...*he came and saw the grace of God*” (22–24). What happens next? Look at verse 22. So many people in Antioch believe, the believers in Jerusalem hear about it. When they first heard about the conversion of Gentiles through Peter, they were negative. But now, they respond to this much larger group of new Gentile believers differently. They send Barnabas. Why Barnabas? In Acts, we’ve seen Barnabas before. The first time was when he sold a field he owned and donated the proceeds to the needy. At that time he got his new name “Barnabas,” meaning “Son of Encouragement” (4:34–37). The second time was when Saul, who’d been persecuting Christians, suddenly showed up in Jerusalem preaching Jesus, and nobody trusted him. Barnabas took Saul and brought him to the apostles and verified that he really had encountered the Lord Jesus and was preaching fearlessly in his name (9:26–27). Barnabas is now well-known for his gift of encouragement. He’s also originally from Cyprus, meaning he’s fluent in Greek and familiar with Greek culture. Choosing Barnabas to go to Antioch shows how positive the Jerusalem church has become about Gentile evangelism. It happened through Peter’s recent testimony (1–18).

In Antioch, what does Barnabas find? Read verse 23. “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.” Barnabas could have seen these people in many ways: their outward appearance, or their many weaknesses. But Barnabas sees that these people have truly received the grace of God in Jesus. How can he see that? Basically, these people are not just talking about it; they’re living in this grace of Jesus. And because Barnabas knows this grace personally, he can immediately see it in others. When he sees it, it says he’s “glad.” He’s not critical, suspicious, or cynical, but “glad.” His gladness is so simple, and so beautiful.

But his response doesn’t stop with a superficial emotion. It says, “...and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.” In Greek the word “exhorted” is the same as the word “encouraged.” Barnabas is again living up to his name: “Son of Encouragement.” He doesn’t just observe; he encourages these new believers even more. How? He urges them not to go back to their old lives, but forward in faithfulness to Jesus, “with steadfast purpose.” It means they need to make up their minds and have a clear plan to keep following

Jesus. Why? Because their old habits and the world will surely try to pull them away. Still, we wonder how Barnabas can respond like this. These multiethnic people are so different from him. They've just left their idolatrous cultures. How can Barnabas see God's grace and encourage them? Look at verse 24a: "...for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Like Barnabas, if we're full of the Holy Spirit and faith, we too can have spiritual insight to see God's grace in people today. Through the encouragement of Barnabas, what happens? Look at verse 24b: "And a great many people were added to the Lord." Barnabas gives them just the right words to help deepen their commitment to Jesus. Instead of discouraging God's work, he blesses it even more. At crucial moments, we too really need the Holy Spirit and faith to encourage what God is doing.

Third, "*For a whole year they...taught a great many people*" (25–26a). Still, there is so much more to do to build up all these new believers. It's way more than just one person can handle. What can be done? Look at verse 25. When he sees all these new Gentile believers, Barnabas recalls Saul's gift as a Bible teacher when he was in Jerusalem. He also remembers how Jesus had called Saul to bring the good news of salvation to the Gentiles. Barnabas concludes that Saul is just the right person to help these new Gentile believers deepen their faith in Jesus based on God's word. Barnabas is humble enough to go and search for Saul and ask his help. This one request may seem like a small matter. But in spreading the gospel, it's a game-changer. Barnabas doesn't even go back to Jerusalem. What do these two men do together in Antioch? Verse 26 tells us that "For a whole year they met with the church and taught great numbers of people." This work requires full concentration, full devotion. It also requires partnership. Barnabas and Saul have to work together daily as a team, explaining the Christian faith to both new converts and newcomers. And as the senior member of the team, Barnabas seems to be the mentor, making a space for Saul to use his gifts.

No doubt Barnabas learned this intensive teaching method from the Jerusalem church. When 3,000 men suddenly came together in community, it says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). "The apostles' teaching" is the teaching our Lord Jesus gave his apostles. "The fellowship" means regular spiritual encouragement. "The breaking of bread" means eating together, and maybe celebrating communion. "The prayers" are morning and evening prayers, most likely modeled on the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1–4). Barnabas works with

Saul to teach these things to the new believers, to help them grow practically as Christ-centered people. It's called "spiritual formation." Such intensive study is still the only way to grow deeper in inner maturity. There's no other way to be built up in Jesus and to resist the pressures and temptations of the world. Just a few days, weeks, or even months is not enough. Such intensive study helps us build a new life foundation and lifestyle, and truly makes us a church. Later, Paul will use this same method in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome.¹ Later he tells the Ephesian elders, "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (20:32). It's the word that sanctifies us with Christ as our head (Eph.5:26–27). So Acts urges us to be "devoted" to the ministry of God's word.²

Fourth, *"the disciples were first called Christians" (26b)*. After a year of intensive Bible study, what happens? Read verse 26b. "And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." It's likely the label "Christians" comes from the Roman elite. It's hard for them to ignore so many new believers in their city. But for them to figure out who they are isn't easy. Are they a Jewish sect? No, most of them are Gentiles. They have many ethnicities but one thing in common: they all believe Jesus is the Christ. So the secular leaders call these new disciples "Christians." It's a kind of mockery, since Jesus was crucified. But the believers welcome this name, because it has such a deep meaning of being "in Christ."³

What's going on? Through intensive Bible studies, God has given these new believers in Antioch a new identity. They no longer focus on being Indians, Iranians, Syrians, Jews, Greeks or Romans. Now they see themselves primarily as Christians—they belong to Christ and to each other as part of the family of God. They're now living together "in Christ." This new identity also changes their lifestyle. Though they still have their own cultures, they all share the same lifestyle. What's the lifestyle of a real Christian? Our Lord Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Christian lifestyle is not one of self-indulgence; its trademark is self-denial and suffering for Jesus' sake. In this new life, we're crucified with Christ to our old sinful nature and walk in newness of life (Rom.6:4–6). In this new life we're all encouraged in Christ, comforted from love, and participate in

¹ 18:5; 19:9–10; 28:30–31.

² 2:42; 6:4; cf. 1 Tim.4:13.

³ In his letters, Paul stresses how living "in Christ" makes us spiritually "alive" and part of his body (e.g. Rom.6:11,23; 8:1–2,9–11; 12:5; 15:5,17; 16:3,7,9–10; 1 Cor.1:2,4,9,30; 4:17; 6:11; 15:18–19,22).

the Spirit, with affection and sympathy. Though we're so different humanly, we have the same mind, the same love, and real unity. We become humble, unselfish, and interested in one another (Phil.2:1–5). In this new life, we're all unashamed to suffer for the name of Jesus (1 Pet.4:16). Today, how can people tell if we're a Christian? It's not by our talk but by our character and the way we live. This Antioch church is not about big numbers or even about being a diverse community; it's about deep inner change and growing in maturity in Christ.

In light of verse 26, we need to evaluate how we personally study the Bible. Is it superficial or deep? Are we really dedicated to it? Are we actually learning anything? Are we applying what we learn to our inner person and practical life? This past year from May through August we had daily Romans Bible studies. It strengthened and inspired those who participated. The evidence is a new, active outreach and vibrant Bible teaching ministry among us. God himself blesses such dedication and obedience to his word. So, this holiday season, instead of giving our minds and hearts to futile things, let's pray to devote ourselves to the word of God about Jesus, starting with our personal morning devotions and reflection writing. May God bless each of us to grow in this new Christian identity and lifestyle and truly mature in Christ. In verses 27–30 we also see how God helps this new Antioch church join together to give back to the mother church in Jerusalem, out of love. Giving to the needy in Christ, out of love, is another tell-tale sign of real Christian identity and maturity.

Today we learned how God works. God uses those who dare to share about Jesus. God uses those who encourage instead of criticize. God uses those humble enough to ask help and cowork. God uses those who devote themselves to his word. And God uses those who join together to give back, out of love. Let's read verses 25–26 again. Through deep Bible study, may God grant each one of us a clear identity and lifestyle in Christ.