

The Church in Antioch: The first “Christians”

The conclusion reached by the very conservative Jewish leaders of the church in Jerusalem was groundbreaking. After hearing Peter’s account of what had happened at the household of Cornelius, there was silence and then this statement, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.” This conclusion is found in Acts 11:18. In Acts 11:19-30 we will see the unfolding and outworking of this realization, that God saves even Gentiles, just as Jews, through faith in the message of Jesus. We see it beginning at Antioch.

There were Greeks or Gentiles in Antioch who heard and believed those who came and preached the Lord Jesus. Those who came with this message had traveled a long way to escape the persecution that arose over Stephen. The majority of those who went as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, spoke about Jesus to only those who were Jews. But, there were some who came to Antioch and began preaching “to Hellenists also.” Notice the parallel “to the Gentiles also...” (11:18) and “to the Hellenists also...” (11:20) There were some who preached Jesus to Greek-speaking non-Jews (Gentiles). This was how the church in Antioch started. Today we will focus on the disciples of Jesus who made up the church in Antioch. They were the first to be called Christians. This is certainly the most common term used today for those who are disciples of Jesus.

The disciples at Antioch were numerous. We see this in v21- “a great number”, and in v24 & 26- “a great many people”. The growth of the Christian faith and church is repeatedly referenced in Acts. The emphasis on numerical growth in many American churches, however, has led to decisional-ism and consumerism. Decisional-ism is the practice of assuring people that they are saved if they make a decision to receive salvation by saying “the sinners prayer” or walking an aisle, giving many people who are not converted false assurance of their salvation. Consumerism has infiltrated many churches that look at what self-serving consumers want and seek to draw people by offering the best product by presenting Christianity as primarily something that will serve their self-interest. Many churches grow through bringing in false converts and gaining a larger share of the “church-attending” market by tickling itching ears. This doesn’t mean a church shouldn’t care about true church growth through true conversion growth. Churches should care about true church growth through true conversion growth. So, what are the indicators of genuine conversion? What are the evidences of converting grace? We see as we continue to learn about the disciples in Antioch.

In addition to being numerous these believers were also zealous. They demonstrated a devotion to the gospel. This is how Barnabas saw the grace of God. This was seen as an evidence of God’s saving, gracious work in them. Seeing the grace of God in this way he exhorted them to continue in this way. They were fervent in their faith and were exhorted to be persistent in the faith. Time would tell whether or not the grace he believed he saw was indeed evidence of the grace of conversion.

As we come to v25 and 26, we see that these disciples were also studious. “For a whole year they (Barnabas and Saul) met with the church and taught a great many people.” This demonstrates that there is an appetite for gospel teaching among those who are converted. They remained faithful to the Lord through being present whenever the church would meet to be taught by Barnabas and Saul for a whole year.

At the end of v26, we are told that these disciples were the first to be called “Christians”. This probably means that they were notorious. They were evidently well-known and had a reputation for being “Christ-ones”. The name “Christians” was probably given by those on the outside of the church and possibly derogatory. It was likely given to these disciples because to outsiders they seemed to be people who were obsessed with Christ.

Last, the disciples in Antioch were also generous. Why were they generous? Because they had been taught about God’s great gift of his only Son. Saul later said this about God’s gift, “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift”. The sacrificial generosity of God the Father and God the Son was being revealed and reflected in their generosity. This was another evidence that the grace of the gospel of Christ was at work in their lives.