

THE ANTIOCH CHURCH

Acts 11:19-39 (Key Verse: 26c)

"The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch."

In last week's message we learnt that God does not show favoritism, but rather is filled with a strong desire and willingness to save all people from all corners, regardless of race, gender, social status. We learnt about God's heart towards the Gentiles, his desire to save them and raise them as his disciples. We were encouraged to obey God's command to go out, "**Kill and Eat**" by revealing Jesus to all people, campus students, our communities, and in our work environments. Now in today's passage we are going to witness how God uses scattered believers to preach the gospel (Kill and Eat) to gentiles in Antioch, a land filled with moral depravity. The result of this, is mind blowing. In the Key verse it says, "*The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*" How incredible is that? Therefore, we are going to learn in detail how the gentiles in Antioch could be transformed and raised as Jesus' disciples, the first to be called Christians. May God have mercy on us, to receive one word and learn how we can raise campus students into great disciples like the gentile believers in the Antioch Church.

The passage today begins by taking us aback to the events following Stephen martyrdom, where great violence emerged, and many believers were scattered by persecution. We previously learnt that instead of silencing the gospel, the persecution became fuel for the gospel ministry to grow. The scattered believers spread the gospel in Judea and Samaria resulting in many followers of Jesus in those regions, more and more believers were added to the number. Now in today's passage we are told that the scattered believers travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch spreading the word only among Jews. The attitude of the scattered believers was indeed amazing, they were on foreign lands and had so much to figure out, and still they did not put aside preaching the gospel, to figure things out in their lives. While they were scattered, something even more amazing happened, God planted in their hearts the spirit of "**Kill and Eat**". Let us look at **verse 20**: "*Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.*" The scattered believers went to Antioch preached the gospel to the gentiles there.

Now Antioch was a large city, ranking third in the world at that time after Rome and Alexandria, the city's location was at a great trade location, intersection between Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece, Italy and Mesopotamia. It was a cosmopolitan city full of Romans, Arabs, Jews and Greeks. Most of all, as a mega city Antioch was filled with a lot of immorality, all kinds of belief systems. Just like Johannesburg, many people went there to pursue their dreams and success. However, when the believers told them about the good news about the Lord Jesus something amazing happened. Let us look at **verse 21**: "*The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*" Firstly, the people believed and turned to the Lord when they heard the message. This revealed that what the people needed most, was to hear the message of Jesus. Many came to this city hoping for success, but God did something more amazing in their lives by giving them the good news of the Lord Jesus. This is what the people were yearning for, the good news about the Lord Jesus. And glory to God who was with the men from Cyprus and Cyrene and enabled them to tell the good news about the Lord Jesus to the gentiles. When the gentiles heard this, a great number, believed, and turned to the Lord.

Now Wits campus is not different from the City of Antioch, Johannesburg is no different, Gauteng is no different. Yes, people are ambitious here and want to succeed and do great things in their various professions. But deep down, their greatest desire is to hear the good news of the Lord Jesus. Let us go out, Kill and Eat, the Lord's hand will be with us and do its great work.

The work of God in Antioch was indeed quite amazing, and the news about it reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas. When Barnabas came, he indeed saw the great work God as it was told. Now why did the church in Jerusalem send Barnabas to Antioch? Was it just to witness the great work of God and return? Or was it to go and verify and give an accurate report to the church in Jerusalem? No, sending Barnabas to Antioch was much more meaningful, it was not just to witness and report back. Barnabas was sent to Antioch because God had a much greater plan for the gentile believers in Antioch. In the key **verse 26c** it says: *“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”* God wanted to raise the gentile believers as Jesus’ disciples. Indeed, it is great news that the gentiles in Antioch had believed and turned to the Lord, it is good news that they could surrender to Jesus and receive the forgiveness of their sins. However, God had a much greater plan for them, God wanted to transform their lives and give it much greater meaning and purpose by raising them as Jesus’ disciples. God wanted to use the Antioch gentiles who were once immoral, selfish, depressed, wondering beings, into great men and women of God. God wanted to raise them as great followers of Jesus Christ.

And indeed, God transformed the lives of the gentiles in Antioch, He transformed them into Jesus disciples, the first to be called Christians. The Antioch church had a publicly known characteristic of following and imitating Christ Jesus. And this gave the Antioch church its unique identity and character as Christians, they were full of affection for Christ. They were crazy for Jesus Christ. To them, Jesus Christ was the way and the truth and the life.

God established this great work in Antioch, by sending Barnabas. God used Barnabas to transform the Antioch gentile believers, into great disciples, the first to be called Christians. Now what technique did Barnabas use to transform and raise the Antioch gentile believers into great disciples of Jesus? **Firstly, he encouraged the gentile believers.** What kind of encouragement did Barnabas give them? Let us look at **verse 23b**: *“...he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.”* The gentile were wearied down by many things in Antioch, competitive environment with many people flooding into the city gunning for success like we have in here Joburg and university campuses. They were wearied down by guilt from their sins, imperfections, their background situation in their family. Today as well, many people, many young people have so many on their shoulders. Broken family issues, passing on campus, fear of not making it in Johannesburg and having to return home. This thing can really affect us greatly, it can affect our life of faith. To help the Antioch gentile believers, Barnabas encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Now what does it mean he encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts? This means he encouraged them to always put God first, to always surrender their lives to Jesus as the Lord. There are many things in this world that God has blessed us with, jobs, opportunities to study a university like Wits (World class), our parents, children, and friends. Barnabas encouraged the Antioch believers to not put these things in their hearts as their Lord, but only put Jesus as their Lord in their hearts, and devote their lives to Jesus. In this way the Antioch gentiles could be raised as Jesus’ disciples.

When we were introduced to Barnabas, we were told that his name is Joseph a Levite from Cyprus whom the Apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). This means there was something special about his ability to encourage. An ability that was crucial for the transformation work in Antioch. Men like Barnabas are also very crucial today as well, our society is bleeding and yearning for such encouragement. What was Barnabas’ secret, how can we today become like him? In **verse 24** it says: *“He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”* Let us pray that God may raise us as good men, filled with the Holy spirit and faith so that we can take care of God’s sheep on campus and raise them as great disciples of Jesus. Raise them as great spiritual leaders of this generation.

Furthermore, Barnabas' technique in raising the gentile believers into Jesus's disciples was **teaching them the words of God**. Let us look at **verse 25-26**: *"Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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."* Barnabas went for Paul to co-work with him in teaching the gentile believers in Antioch. Barnabas and Paul taught the gentiles so that they can know who God is, the creator the heavens and the earth, they taught them to know the heart of God who does not show favoritism who loves all people and is willing to save all people. Further what stood out in their teaching was Jesus Christ, they taught them about Jesus Christ who came down into this world had compassion on all people and loved all people, even public sinners. The teachings about Jesus were magnificent that the gentile believers imitated Christ in their ways, to such an extent that they were even called Christians.

Through encouragement and teaching of the words of God, the Antioch Church grew, and was filled with many God-fearing disciples who imitated the life of Christ on daily basis. The once upon a time, immoral, depressed, selfish gentiles of Antioch were transformed into great disciples of Jesus with a big heart and great sense of world mission. In **verse 29-30** it says: *"The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. / This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul."* Through this we can indeed see the fruits of the work that God has been doing in their lives, they became active players of God's world mission, providing for the needs of other believers. The Antioch believers indeed became great examples for our Christian faith. Let us pray that we may go out, kill and eat, let us pray that God may raise among us good men like Barnabas, filled with the Holy Spirit and faith to encourage us and God's sheep on campus. Let us pray that we may have the Spirit of Barnabas and Paul, to go out and preach the gospel to campus students.

Conclusion

In today's passage we have learnt how God established the Antioch church. God did not only establish the Christian church by inviting gentiles to Jesus and revealing the good news of the Lord Jesus them, this is very important. However, God went further in establishing the Antioch church, he wanted to establish a church with great meaning and purpose, and so He raised the gentiles as disciples of Jesus. The work of God in the Antioch was so impressive that the disciples were first called Christians there. Through today's passage we have also learnt how God raised the gentiles into disciples of Jesus, first by encouraging them to always put Jesus as their Lord in their hearts, devote their lives unto him. Secondly, God raised the gentile believers as Jesus' disciples by teaching them the words of God so that they can be deeply rooted and have a firm foundation of who God is, and his heart revealed through Jesus Christ.

Therefore, let us pray that God may help us to not only invite campus students to our ministry but take care of them as well, by encouraging them and teaching them the words of God so that they too can grow as Jesus disciples for this generation.