

Antioch

The Jerusalem church was the centre of Christian witness in the earliest days and, as you have seen over the past couple of weeks, they had realised that the gospel was for Jew and Gentile alike, as was the gift of the Holy Spirit. So, Luke shifts his focus to the establishing of a church in Antioch and the witness to Gentiles there.

Antioch is now Antakya, which was badly affected in the recent earthquake. In Luke's day, it was the third most populous city in the Roman Empire and the largest city and capital of the Roman province of Syria. It was an important city with all the leisure facilities and mod-cons of the empire. It had been devastated by an earthquake a decade earlier, but had been rebuilt by the Emperor, Gaius/ Caligula. It was in a Greek speaking area, hence the reference to Hellenists, which means Greek-speaking or from Greece.

If you think of the map of the Eastern Mediterranean – at the eastern end you have three sides of a square with the coast of Israel, Lebanon, Syria and the Island of Cyprus off-shore. Near the top corner of the square was Antioch on the Orontes River and about 100 miles round the corner was Tarsus.

The persecution of believers in Jerusalem, birth-Jews and proselyte-Jews from other countries, who had been saved following Pentecost, led to a dispersion to other cities, including Antioch, taking the Good News of Jesus Christ and salvation with them.

V 19, 20 **Dispersion** It seems that the birth-Jews headed for the Jewish community already in Antioch and told them about the Messiah Jesus, but the proselyte-Jewish believers went also to the Hellenist – who were not necessarily from Greece but were Greek-speaking and not of Jewish heritage.

Although the birth-Jews knew that the gospel was for all mankind, they were slow in coming to terms with this fact and it did make a lot of sense for them to head for the community which was of the same background as them. Similarly, the believers from Cyprus and Cyrene perhaps had more in common with the Hellenists and so were able to relate to them.

While we should be able and willing to share the Good News of Jesus with anyone, it is probably easier to share with people like ourselves. Having said that, sometimes God calls His people to go to a people and society totally different to their own, having to learn a new language and adapt to new customs.

V 20 **They preached the Lord Jesus**

This is the heart of the matter. It's easier to talk about church, or charitable works, or social justice or prayer. All these things are good, but people need to hear about Jesus:

that He is God;

that, in order to overcome the problem of our sin separating us from God forever, He took our sin in His body as He died on the cross;

that He was raised from death and lives forever;

that He, the Father and Holy Spirit are One God, Creator and ruler of all.

People don't necessarily like that.

They don't want to admit to sin. Since the 1960s the answer to sin and guilt has been to say there is no such thing as sin – if you like it and want it, it's OK, and no one should feel guilty about anything. Of course, these rules don't apply to anyone who hurts me or mine, or who does something I judge to be atrocious.

Having ditched God's law, the new religion in the 21st Century, has new draconian 'laws' regarding speech, attitude, belief and even thoughts.

Generally, people don't want to hear about a God who wants them to walk in righteousness in fellowship with Him.

v. 21 **The hand of the Lord** We can work, pray, witness, preach, give of our time and money, but unless the hand of the Lord is with us, we will achieve nothing.

As our nation becomes increasingly Godless and dark, worshipping false gods and welcoming the demonic, we yearn and cry out for a sovereign move of the Holy Spirit, as has been seen in all or parts of the UK in the past, when the church was revived and the hand of the Lord was on preaching and witnessing, and multitudes turned to Him and were saved and society was changed for the better.

V.22 **The response of the Jerusalem church**

The church in Jerusalem was the hub of the early church and the elders there heard about what was happening in Antioch so they sent Barnabas to check it out – Just as they had wanted a report from Peter about what happened in Caesarea at Cornelius's house.

They were wise to check these things out. Jesus had warned about false prophets (Mt. 7) who would harm the believers and even that there would be people doing amazing signs and miracles in order to deceive true believers.

There are people among us today, doing counterfeit miracles, preaching a false gospel, leading people astray. And these things will increase and Satan will continue to deceive and draw many people by his counterfeit signs and blasphemies. Do not believe all you hear or even see. Check reports out if you can and always see if teaching aligns with Scripture. Watch and pray!

v.22 – 24 **Barnabas**

So, Barnabas was sent to check out what was happening in Antioch.

Acts 4 v 36 '... Joseph, who was also called by the apostles, Barnabas (which means 'Son of encouragement') a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet.'

So, in a couple of brief mentions we learn a great deal about this man:

He was of the tribe of Levi so, what I'm calling, a birth Jew.

He was born in Cyprus, so he was probably of the earlier diaspora.

He gave generously and freely to the church.

The apostles gave him the nickname 'Son of encouragement'. What a wonderful nickname to be given! What a testimonial to his character!

I imagine James and the other elders having a conversation:

'Who shall we send to suss out what's happening in Antioch and encourage the believers there? Oh, I know let's send old Son of Encouragement himself! We can trust him to weigh up what's happening and to help the believers there with all the new converts.'

V24 Tells us that he was 'a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.' This was the story of his life as a believer, not just a one-off experience.

V 23 When he arrived in Antioch 'he saw the grace of God' – he met with people whose lives had been turned around by an encounter with the Living God. Jew and Gentile together worshipping in the Name of

Jesus. 'And he was glad!' Of course he was! He didn't have any jealousy, that this had happened away from Jerusalem, nor without his input. He rejoiced and exhorted them to remain faithful to the Lord!

So many people were getting saved that it was stretching the original group. If/when the Lord moves in this nation and we start to get hundreds of new believers all coming with baggage from their life so far; all needing encouragement, teaching, nurturing. It will be challenging and costly in terms of time and energy! As I'm sure it was for the Antioch church.

So, Barnabas went off to find Saul/Paul in Tarsus.

Interesting! Why didn't he send to Jerusalem for reinforcements? Why travel (I expect by sea) to Tarsus to see if Paul was still back in his hometown? Why did his mind turn to **this** man?

- He was a diaspora Jew, coming from Tarsus, so he could relate to other diaspora Jews and to Gentiles from Syria and the Greek speaking world.
- He had a solid background in the scriptures
- and although he was notorious for his mission to rid the world of Believers in Jesus, he had been wonderfully saved in an encounter with Christ Himself.
- To start with the apostles were naturally wary of Saul, but **Barnabas** came and stood with him explaining how he had become a true believer, proclaiming Jesus. (Acts 9).
- After this, Saul preached boldly in Jerusalem in the name of the Lord, making enemies who sought to kill him, so the church had packed him off to his home town of Tarsus for his own safety.

I think Barnabas considered that it would encourage Saul/Paul to be involved in what was happening in Antioch and also help him to be better integrated into the existing church – especially in Jerusalem. Also, he knew that Saul/Paul preached Jesus and was a gifted evangelist and apologist for the gospel.

v.26 Barnabas and Saul/Paul spent a whole year establishing the church in Antioch.

V 27 **Prophets from Jerusalem**

Cruden's Systematic Theology:

'Old Testament Prophets had an amazing responsibility - they were able to speak and write words that had absolute divine authority. They could say 'Thus says the Lord' and the words that followed were the very words of God.'

'In the New Testament there were people who spoke and wrote God's very words and had them recorded in Scripture,' but Jesus didn't call them 'prophets' but 'Apostles'.

In the New Testament the words 'Prophet' and 'Prophecy' are generally used of ordinary Christians who spoke, not with divine authority, but simply to report something that God had placed on their minds either in words, or as an impression, or picture in their mind's eye. The gift of prophecy is still given to the church by the Holy Spirit in order to build up (edify) the believers or to challenge and convince unbelievers.

When someone thinks they have a word or picture from the Lord, it is best not to say, 'God says' or 'Thus says the Lord' but to lay it before the believers present and let them weigh it, as Paul says in his letter to the church at Corinth (1Cor. 15 v 29) This is a safety device because it's all too easy to be mistaken and the thought is actually your own, not God's, or for the prophecy to be mixed – it starts off with God's words and then one's own mind kicks in and adds or changes it. It seems to me that sometimes the prophetic words of godly people of an optimistic up-beat personality tend to be about revival just around the corner, and those of a pessimistic, gloomy personality tend to be about imminent judgement. Of course, they do not preclude each other: God's judgement on the nation may be intended to cause the people to turn to Him.

This shouldn't put us off if we think we have a word from the Lord, for the encouragement or warning of the church, but we should speak it or write it with humility, submitting it to godly brothers and sisters to be considered.

However embarrassing we might find it, if our 'prophecy' is thought to be not of the Lord, or mixed, we really don't want to put words in God's mouth, or to cause harm to the church.

There are many people calling themselves prophets today and many prophecies – especially on the internet. If you can, find out about the prophet's life – is this person living a godly life? Does he/she preach the true gospel?

Weigh every prophecy, whether on the internet, or spoken in your presence. How?

1st. Is it in line with Scripture?

2nd. Does it reflect the character of God as revealed in Scripture?

3rd Do other Spirit-filled believers witness to its authenticity?

4th, If it is predictive, does it happen?

Over the years, I have heard a few supposed prophetic words which circulated through the church nationally and internationally, which just haven't happened. I feel sure that the people who circulated them honestly thought they were of God, but it was wishful thinking.

v. 28 **Agabus**

the prophecy through Agabus evidently was of the Lord, because famines did indeed affect large areas of the Roman world in subsequent years.

v.29 **The disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief...**

What love and generosity. They must have been aware that they also would be affected by famine soon, but they sent aid to Judea. I wonder whether the Jerusalem church was in a more difficult position than Antioch, because of persecution.

I'm struck that they gave according to their personal financial situation. Paul wrote to Corinth later: 'Now concerning the collection for the saints ... On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.' (1 Cor. 16 v 2)

Presumably this was on top of their regular giving of a tithe (tenth) to the church and was earmarked as a relief fund for churches in other areas.

Even though the church was spreading out over the Roman world, there was a great sense of belonging to one another – Jewish and Gentile believers of different nationalities and backgrounds demonstrating practical love, one to another.

'By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.' (John 13 v 35) How will people know that we love one another? By seeing practical help and hearing positive words of one another – not carping and criticism.

Conclusion

So, we have covered a lot of ground and I hope you will remember and emulate dear Barnabas, a man full of faith and an encourager of others. I hope you will remember, not to despise prophecies, but to test them, and

if you feel you have a word from the Lord, be brave and share it, encouraging the listeners to test it for you. Support other believers locally, nationally and internationally, according to their need and your ability.

And let's speak of Jesus and the salvation He offers wherever and whenever we have the opportunity, praying that the hand of the Lord will be upon the work and that people will believe and turn to Him.

Finally, this passage is book-ended with difficult times: persecution leading to believers fleeing their homes and having to settle elsewhere, and famine – in fact there were several famines covering a large area.

A poem by 19C American Annie Johnson Flint says;

God has not promised us skies ever blue,
Flower-strewn pathways all our life through,
God has not promised sun without rain,
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.
But, God has promised strength for the day,
Rest for the labour, light for the way,
Grace for the trials, help from above,
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.

Saul/Paul wrote of his many trials and tribulations that he had learnt to be content whatever his circumstances because, he said, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' (Phil.4.13)

So, can we! Amen