



## **First Called Christians**

*Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ*

Acts 11:19-30

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Pastor Nick Shaffer

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The text that we are looking at this morning connects us to the scattering of Jewish believers from Jerusalem that arose after the martyrdom of Stephen. You remember that with Stephen's death, the persecution of the church became so intense that many of the believers scattered to the ends of the Roman Empire. While these believers were fleeing for their lives, they also demonstrated a faithfulness and a boldness to preach the gospel, to tell all who would listen about the Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator, the Judge, the Savior of the lost and the Lord of the universe. Even as the persecution of Christians increased, they preached faithfully the gospel because the truth of God cannot be contained, because they had experienced the joy of forgiveness and eternal life, because they were filled with joy and could not be silenced.

Now some of the Jews who fled Jerusalem focused their efforts on the Jews alone. As far as they knew, the gospel was for the Jews alone. They were not aware of the way that Peter had taken the gospel to the Gentiles in Caesarea and so they confined their evangelistic efforts to the Jews in Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. But there were other believers, Hellenistic Jews, Jews that had been born outside of Judea who had become believers in Christ while in Jerusalem, who took the gospel to the Gentiles in Antioch. And as a result of their daring and courage, a church was born and that is what we are looking at today.

The founding and growth of the church at Antioch was one of the most significant events in the history of Western civilization. It led to the distinctiveness of the Christian church apart from the Jewish synagogue, blending together in one body both Jews and Gentiles. It would be from Antioch that the church would embark on the worldwide missionary thrust of the gospel and the center of operations of the early church would move from Jerusalem, the Jewish city, to Antioch in Syria. What we have today is an historic moment in the history of Christianity, so let's look and see together how

A Church is Born (19-21) Luke writes: “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” (Acts 11:19–21, ESV)

You need to know a little about Antioch. Antioch was one of the ancient melting pots of the world. During the first century it was the third-largest city in the world, behind only Rome and Alexandria. It was a city that boasted vast business enterprises, higher education, fine architecture, theatre groups and cultural entertainment in its mixed population of Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs and Persians. But it was also famous for debauchery, moral laxity, decadence and idolatrous worship, especially of the goddess Daphne and the god Apollo. The Temple of Daphne, located in laurel grove just outside of the town, was the daily and nightly scene of ritual prostitution and sexual depravity where the story of Apollo’s fabled pursuit of Daphne was acted out day and night.

Into this city, unnamed believers, some of the Hellenistic believers, Greek speaking saved Jews, came preaching Jesus as Lord. With no official mandate, with no instruction from the home church in Jerusalem, with only a passionate love for Jesus and a longing to make his name known, they took the gospel to all of the people of Antioch, to the pagan Gentiles there, and they did it without a sense of the huge, landmark thing they were doing. These unnamed believers, known only to heaven, were the first to reach a decidedly pagan people with the light of the gospel of Christ.

Some things stand out here that I want you to see. First, I want you to notice that it was not the Apostles, not designated missionaries, but everyday Christians like you and me who took the gospel to Antioch and turned this pagan city upside down. See the wisdom in the fact that Holy Spirit leaves them unnamed. If Luke had recorded the names of these brothers and sisters who faithfully proclaimed the name of Christ, we would have immediately regarded them in the light that we do, say Paul or Peter, as someone specially chosen in the plan of God. But he does not do so, specifically so that we will see the power and the faithfulness of God to work through everyday believers like you and me. The truth is this. Were the spreading of the gospel dependent upon the efforts of the Apostles and missionaries alone, the growth of the church would have come to a grinding halt. But that is not the plan of God for His church. Every

person who has been saved by Christ is under divine obligation to make the name and the worth of our Savior and Lord known – all under the obligation to be part of the worldwide witness to the worth of Jesus Christ.

Notice too that we see that these early believers did not see the gospel and their faith as private issues. We live in a culture that tells us that Christian beliefs are to be a “private” thing not to be tolerated in open discourse whereas such things like sexual immorality and the homosexual agenda, for instance, are public issues and are to be given the utmost respect and consideration. These early believers were not intimidated into silence. They spoke openly and candidly about Christ.

Notice something else, the emphasis of their preaching – it is on Jesus as Lord, not Christ. That’s important. In this pagan environment that had no expectation of a Messiah – Jewish King who fulfilled Jewish prophecy, the focus of the disciples message was not Jesus as Messiah but Jesus as Lord. The idea of a Lord, of a God who would save from calamity, who would call people to allegiance, who would demand worship, a God who would give life after death – this resonated with the pagans. It was not that the disciples changed the gospel or omitted the Jewish part of it. On the contrary, they began with what they would have understood – Jesus as Lord, as Creator, as God over all, as King of eternity and then they preached to them the fullness of the gospel.

You were created by God and the Law of God has been written upon your heart. You broke His Law. Your conscience tells you that this is true. The penalty for breaking the Law of God is physical and spiritual death. There is no escape. God sent forth His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to die sin’s death in your place. He died and rose again from the dead and commands all men to repent and believe in Him and what He has done or to face the judgment of God, without mercy, for their sins. It’s that simple.

And what do we see? The “hand of the Lord was with them.” That is such a great phrase, primarily an OT one. It refers to the supernatural work of God, the invisible God making Himself known in a powerful way through His people. The “hand of God” was at work, a sovereign outpouring of Holy Spirit was going on in Antioch as God drew to Himself a great

number of “people for his own possession, that (they) may proclaim the excellencies of him who called (them) out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9, ESV)

But see this – that the “hand of the Lord” was with them was not something that came apart from their impassioned evangelism of the people in Antioch, but through their faithfulness. And that is important to see. Yes, God is the giver of salvation – salvation is from the Lord. It is God who saves – illuminating minds, granting the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, creating faith, granting repentance unto life -- a complex chain of events that Luke calls the “hand of the Lord.” But at the same time, God is also a God who uses means and His means are the Word of God preached and the true faith of His people displayed before the world. God “effectual calling” of sinners to salvation in Christ employs individual Christians engaged in vigorous evangelism.

As result of the hand of the Lord at work in their midst, great numbers believed in the Lord and turned from their sins, from their idols, to the Savior Christ. A church, very different from the one in Jerusalem, was born, a church consisting mainly of Gentiles, of former pagans. The great revival taking place in Antioch came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and so they determined to do some investigation.

Investigation and Confirmation (22-26) Luke continues: “The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.” (Acts 11:22, ESV) With this great turning of Gentiles to faith in Christ, the church in Jerusalem thought it their responsibility, and rightly so, to investigate and confirm what was taking place in Antioch. They needed to ensure that the gospel was not being watered down, that the true Christ was being preached and not an imitation, that the great number of converts being reported in Antioch was truly a work of the Holy Spirit and not the product of an accommodated gospel and empty emotional fervor or manipulation. So, taking counsel, they determined to assign the responsibility of investigating and confirming this move of God to Barnabas.

Luke says, “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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.” (Acts 11:23–24, ESV) Without question, Barnabas was the right choice to send to Antioch. The Holy Spirit, through Luke,

describes him as a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. Now, when we read something like that, our first instinct as good Reformed Baptists is to say, “Wait a minute, no-one is good.” And that would be the right response as far as it regards natural man, but what makes this statement about Barnabas true and right is that phrase “full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” Barnabas really was a good man in the sense that Spirit of Jesus Christ lived within Him, he lived by faith in Christ and so His life was acceptable to God. He was strong in grace. The fruit of the Spirit was bountiful in Barnabas’ life and one of the fruits of the Spirit is goodness. He was a good man.

What did he see when he got there? He saw the “grace of God” and “he was glad.” Now I want you to think about this for a moment. When Barnabas got to Antioch, what he found were new, untaught, untrained, unrefined, former pagans who still would have had some pagan baggage. These were saved men and women, who were giving evidence of grace, evidence of the budding fruit of the Spirit, but they still had much growth and renewing of their thinking in Christ ahead of them. But –and this is very important -- Barnabas was not spring loaded in the critical position. He saw, with eyes of faith, a fledgling church with much growth yet to come in their language, in their relationships, in their moral principles, and their beliefs, but he also saw a people who genuinely loved Christ, who had given up idols, who had given up the sexual immorality rampant in Antioch, who though they knew only the basics of the gospel, were truly trusting in Jesus as Lord. One of the remarkable proofs that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation is the real change that it makes in those who hear it and repent and receive Christ as Lord. True faith has visible fruit. Barnabas saw it. And it filled his heart with joy – not jealousy, not suspicion, not fear that the Gentiles may outnumber the Jews – but joy to see the hand of God at work.

So Barnabas did what came naturally to him, this good man – he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose. It was both an exhortation to perseverance and to wholeheartedness in following Christ. What he said is excellent encouragement for all who are followers of Christ, not just new converts. Remain faithful to Christ – to the person who saved you – it’s a personal exhortation to personal faithfulness. It is one we all need to hear. If we are not careful, what can begin as a personal faith in Christ, a personal devotion to Christ can subtly be displaced from the highest importance in our lives by good things – devotion to the church, devotion to our friends and families, devotion even to theology. These are good things, but they are given their worth by a primary faithfulness, a first love for Christ!

He tells them to remain faithful to Christ and do it with steadfast purpose. That is, be resolute in your devotion to Christ, unswerving, firmly fixed on Christ. Barnabas called them to a clear-cut, decisive, straightforward, unambiguous devotion to Christ – to live as one whose ultimate and most important pursuit is Jesus Christ. He was calling them to remain faithful to what they had in Christ, not to run after anything else or to look for something more. Stick with Christ because He is all you need. And Barnabas was committed to helping them to do just that.

See, we know that Barnabas was a good man, but what we will also see is that he was a man of humble wisdom as well. The church was growing at an astounding rate. What these people needed more than anything else was sound, strong, weighty, meaty, robust preaching and teaching. They needed to grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. Barnabas knew that this was not his strongest, not his greatest gift but he remembered someone who fit the bill perfectly – Saul of Tarsus, also called Paul. Barnabas made the bold and self-effacing decision that the church needed what he could not give to them.

“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.” (Acts 11:25–26, ESV) Though it seems like all of the events of the book of Acts that we are looking at all happen in the span of a few months, the truth is that, based upon the dating of contemporary events, the length of time between Pentecost and the founding of the church in Antioch was somewhere in the range of 8-10 years. In other words, to go and find Paul was no easy task. The last time that Barnabas had seen Paul was at least 7 or so years, when Paul had to flee Jerusalem to go to Tarsus for safety.

What had happened in that time? We know that Paul continued preaching the gospel in Syria and Cilicia from his own testimony in the book of Galatians. But most scholars believe that it was during this time that Paul received the five sets of 39 lashes and other persecutions that he speaks of in 2 Corinthians. It was the time when he was most likely disowned by his family, returning as he did having been disgraced among the Jews for deserting to Christ. It would have also been the time that the glorious theology and Christian bedrock truth that we have recorded for us in all of his letters would have been fully developed and matured in his understanding. At any rate, Paul was no longer a new believer but a man powerful in the faith, powerful in the Lord Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, as we will see beginning now and throughout the rest of the Book of Acts.

That being said, it would have been no easy feat to find Paul. It would have taken much endurance and fortitude, much earnest seeking and it would have taken much humility. God had chosen Paul be the Apostle to the Gentiles and now that time was here. And what that would mean is this. Though this partnership would have started out as being referred to as “Barnabas and Saul/Paul,” it would soon become “Paul/Saul and Barnabas” and Barnabas knew it. It gives us yet another window into Barnabas’ heart. He put the needs of the church of the church before his own advancement, his own prestige, or his own self-glorification. Barnabas’ heart was to see the glory of God, to build up the body of Christ His church, not so seek a name or prominence for himself. It was Christ and His glory alone and whatever He could do to make Christ glorious – nothing for his own name. That is a mark of true humility.

One other thing, the efforts of Barnabas were an exhausting enterprise. He had to leave his home, invest himself with people he did not know, engage in arduous journey to find Paul for the good of the church at Antioch. And that serves as a great lesson to us. We have to deal with the reality that we are oftentimes self-centered, short-sighted, having a view for what concerns us immediately or personally and not for the greater whole. There is a very real danger that we can become preoccupied with ourselves, or our family only, or our small circle of friends only, and fail to truly lay down our lives to serve others for he sake of the gospel and for the witness of Christ’s worth. Barnabas was not a self-centered man. There is a lesson there for us.

Returning to Antioch with Barnabas, he and Paul become a powerful team for the Lord’s work – Barnabas the encourager and Paul, the brilliant, faithful, powerful preacher of God’s word. They formed a powerful ministry team, facing and meeting the task of shepherding a large number of new believers in a hostile pagan environment. For a whole year, Barnabas and Paul met with the church, instructed them in truth, in doctrine, instructing them in the faith and saturating their minds with Christ. They understood that the one thing that this fledgling church needed above all else was to be instructed in the Word of God, to have it applied in their lives and to be exhorted to faithfulness, teaching them to obey, to pray, to worship in Spirit and truth, helping them to understand what being united by faith to Christ was all about – there is no growing gospel fruitfulness apart from that -- and they were the perfect team to do it – Paul the preacher and Barnabas the encourager. The result was the word of God bore fruit in their souls and they lived out the doctrine they had been taught. Not only did they talk about Christ and

worship Christ and live Christ, they lived like Him, too. It became evident to all that they belonged to Him.

Antioch had no words to describe these people. What were they? They did not fit into any of their categories. They were like something they had never seen before. They weren't Jews and they weren't pagan Gentiles anymore – they were a third race of men – they were Christians, “Christ-ones.” They were those who belonged to the household of Christ. Now understand, this was not a compliment, not an endearing nickname, they simply did not know what else to call them. While it may have been meant as a term of derision, it really was a supreme compliment for the pagans to notice that these men were Christ-ones. They lived in obedience to Barnabas and Saul's teaching of God's Word. The Word of God brought in the power of the Spirit to believing hearts ought to change the way we think, our attitudes, the way we talk, and the way we live, and it did in these former pagans in Antioch. The unbelievers in Antioch had no category in which to put these men and women and so they invented a new one. Christians – Christ ones – little Christs.

We live in time where the word “Christian” has lost any real coherent or concrete meaning. We see so many people claiming to be Christians who truly know nothing of the biblical Christ or whose lives demonstrate no grasp of the gospel, especially in the Bible Belt. In our society as a whole, the spiritual capital and resources that were once a part of this nation have been completely spent and our country has become thoroughly secularized, if not downright pagan. We can be tempted to see that as a huge disadvantage, as a sign that God will no longer work in the people of this nation in a powerful sort of way. But I would say to you that, in light of this passage, we need to rethink that position.

Antioch was a thoroughly pagan city and in one way, there was a great advantage to being in a thoroughly pagan climate. Their devotion to Christ, their Christian lives, their Christian morals, their zeal were so obvious that the unbelievers in Antioch could see it and feel it despite the fact that they mocked them for it. More than that, their resistance to the pagan pressure in Antioch had the effect of setting them apart as thoroughly Christ's. Sooner or later, nominal Christianity accommodates itself to the age that it is in, to the culture that it is in, in order to blend in and to be acceptable and forfeits the plain preaching of the gospel and in the process makes itself look desperate – we have been seeing that for some time in America and in Salem, VA. Gift card, gas card, Easter egg drop, giveaways, paydays, coffee shop – what does that have to do with Christ. What the church displayed in Antioch was something entirely counter

cultural and as a result, the church and her Christ shone brightly and former pagans were converted to Christ. It wasn't long before this new church faced

A Test of Genuineness (27-30) Luke describes what happens next: "Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul." (Acts 11:29–30, ESV) By way of Agabus, comes a very clear test of the genuineness of the church in Antioch. He announces a famine that is going to take place in the very near future, a famine that would afflict and affect the whole known world – a famine that did in fact take place during the time of the reign of Claudius. The famine that he announced was still in the future and so you could expect that the church may have responded by hoarding food and resources for themselves, reasoning that it was necessary in order for the Christian mission in Antioch to survive, so that Christ would have a presence there. That would be the natural response, but these are natural men and women no longer. Instead they don't do what you would naturally expect, but they determine, everyone according to his own ability, to gather and send resources to the suffering church in Judea. Get this now, they determine to send relief to those who were once of a race that despised them – the Jews – but who were now, with the believers in Antioch, one race in Christ.

Do you see what they did? Faced with this prophecy, they asked themselves, "How do we take this word from God and apply it practically? How do we reflect Christ's love and compassion in this? How can we be a blessing to our brothers and sisters in Christ?" They took the Word of God and acted on it in real and tangible ways.

Agabus did not tell them what to do. They did what they did, led by the Spirit of God applying the Word of God to their eager hearts. Not only did they reflect their love by taking up this relief collection, they sent it to Jerusalem by means of their most valued blessings – the messengers of Christ's Word – Barnabas and Saul.

And they did that, why? Because they were Christians -- real, true Christians. Rightly were they called Christians first at Antioch, because they were Christians, first, before they were anything else. What a church this was. They were called Christians first in Antioch because they were Christians, first, before they were anything else.

## Are We Christians, First?

And that is where I want to stop this morning and where I want for us to put our thoughts as we come to the time of response to this message. Could the same be said of us? Are we Christians, first? Are you a Christian first, before you are anything else – before you are white, before you are a man or a woman, before you are a husband or wife, before you are a son or daughter, before your occupation, before you are a student or an athlete, before you are a conservative, before you are second amendment protector, before you are pro-life, before you are a republican or democrat, before you are a homeschooler or public schooler, before you are pro-family or pro-traditional marriage, before you are a patriot, before you are a southerner or a yankee, before you are a red-neck or blue collar or white collar, before you are a church member, before you are a theologian, before you are a seeker of social justice, before you are a pastor, before you're anything else – are you a Christian? See, that is the great question and it is one we need to really think about in serious reflection. Don't just ignore what I am saying to you by saying to yourself, "Of course I'm a Christian, what do you think I am?" In your thinking, in your love, in your practice, in your zeal, in your spending of your life, in reality are you a Christian first? Is that the defining element of your life?

The church in Antioch was and that is why the pagan world gave them the name. What would the pagans in our world call us today? But more importantly, what would Christ call us?

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