

"THE DISCIPLES WERE FIRST CALLED CHRISTIANS AT ANTIOCH."

– ACTS 11:9-30. – MAY 4. –

"The hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord."

ANTIOCH, at the time of our lesson, was the third city in the world in rank of commercial importance and population, the latter being estimated at 500,000. Its situation was about 300 miles north from Jerusalem, – a long distance in those days of foot and camel and sailboat traveling. It is noted as being the first city outside of Palestine in which a Christian church assembly was formed; and indeed, we might say that as Jerusalem was the center of influence in Palestine, so Antioch became a center of influence as respected the gospel amongst the Gentiles. It seems that the start of the work of the Lord at Antioch, the little spark of light and truth which started that important work, resulted from the persecution at the time of Stephen's death. Some of those forced out of Jerusalem by the persecution settled in Antioch, and, of course, they could not live and walk in the light of the gospel without letting the light shine out for others. This at first was done only toward those who were of the Jewish faith, for in a large commercial city such as Antioch there were sure to be large numbers of Jews. We know not how many of these were reached with the gospel; but it was confined to them, surely, until the end of Israel's seventy symbolical weeks – until A.D. 37. At the same time that the Lord was sending Philip to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch, and opening the door to the Gentiles through the Apostle Peter, he was ready to open the door to the Gentiles everywhere; and under the leading of divine providence some of the Christian Hebrews got the proper thought at the proper time, – that a Gentile who would receive the Lord Jesus, and conform his life to his teachings, could be classed as a disciple equally as tho he had been born a Jew. The work thus started amongst the Gentiles at Antioch spread considerably, the

Gentiles seeming to take more notice of it than had the Jews to whom the gospel was first preached, and, as our Golden Text assures us, large numbers believed. There is a lesson here, to the effect that while the Lord made clear to the apostles first the matter of receiving the Gentiles into the Church, he, nevertheless, did not confine his message to them, but was willing to use any convenient disciple, no matter how humble, as a mouthpiece for the truth, and was pleased to bless the consecrated ambassadors and their service. So today let each and all of the Lord's people be alert to notice opportunities for service, and let those who occupy a position as teachers in the Church emulate the example of the apostles, who manifested no spirit of jealousy in respect to this broadening of the work – rejoicing, rather, at the spread of the good news by whatever instrumentality the Lord might be pleased to use. This is the true spirit of discipleship, the spirit of humility. It is in accord with the Apostle's words, "In honor preferring one another;" "Rejoice not in iniquity, but rejoice in the truth."

The news of the gospel going to the Gentiles at Antioch, and that large numbers were turning to the Lord, reached the Church at Jerusalem – the head-center of the Christian work, so to speak. The apostles and all of the brethren had already been prepared by the Lord's manifest dealing in the case of Cornelius, and this, undoubtedly, would take away from their surprise and largely correct any prejudice on the subject of the Gentiles as fellow-heirs of the promises which had previously pertained to them alone. Nevertheless, we note that the record does not say that this news caused rejoicing in the Jerusalem Church. We may infer, therefore, that they heard with some considerable trepidation that large numbers of the Gentiles were attaching themselves to the faith, and may have reasoned that this would have an injurious effect upon the cause they loved to serve – inasmuch as the Jews would say, Yes, your message is good enough for the barbarians or the Gentiles; it takes hold of the non-religious; but it attracts very few of the deeply pious of God's chosen people, to whom belong the promises and the covenants of the Lord, etc. It would appear, then, that the original motive in sending Barnabas to Antioch

(visiting other intermediate churches en route) was that he might see and judge of the true condition of things, and give some report as to whether the new converts were worthy in their lives and characters to be recognized as fellow-heirs with the saints. Barnabas, when he had come, took note of "the *grace of God*," manifested amongst the believers at Antioch – it must have been manifested not only in their faith in the Lord as their Redeemer and Master, but also in their conduct as disciples or followers of Jesus. It is written, [R2998 : page 124] "He that hath this hope in him purifieth himself even as he is pure," and we may suppose that Barnabas quickly discerned the cleansing and sanctifying power of the truth amongst these believers at Antioch, and thus realized that the cause, instead of being hindered by such accessions, would be honored. We read that he was glad; and we may assume, altho it is not stated, that he promptly made a report to the brethren at Jerusalem, and that they were glad also. A good man, out of the good treasure of his heart, is always made glad by evidences of God's grace operating in himself and in others. It is one evidence of the possession of the holy spirit, and that in good measure, when we rejoice in all good things – "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." – Phil. 4:8.

The apostles evidently made an excellent choice when they sent Barnabas. We remember that he was a Levite by birth, and this, unquestionably, would make him very careful of every Jewish interest connected with the faith, and, undoubtedly, he was well learned in the Law. We remember, too, that he was a native of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, near Antioch. Born thus at a distance from Jerusalem, amongst Gentiles, he was probably a broadminded man, as well as familiar with the dialect of the people of Antioch, and added to these good reasons for sending him, was a fourth; namely, his beautiful character, his helpfulness as a brother and a teacher in the Church. We remember that he sold a part of his property in the interest

of the poor in Jerusalem. We remember, too, that he received the name Barnabas as a title of love and respect in the Church, which thus designated him "a son of consolation," a "helper." The fact that this good man was glad, is an assurance to us that the conditions he found in the Antioch Church were good conditions, for a good man "rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth."

Barnabas at once overflowed toward the Antioch brethren, and in the same comforting and helpful manner as at Jerusalem he *exhorted* them all. The Greek word here is from the same root as his name, and signifies comfort, stimulation, assistance. No doubt he saw various things needing to be corrected; but instead of beginning with fault-finding, instead of lacerating their feelings and chiding them, he began, properly, by acknowledgment of what he saw in them as a cause for rejoicing. His comforting message was to the effect that they should cleave unto the Lord with purpose of heart. The word "cleave" here in the Greek signifies to glue, to adhere. He wished the dear brethren, new in the truth, to see to it that their hearts were firmly united unto the Lord, that their minds were fully made up, that their consecration to him was complete. This was the matter of first importance. Later on he might show them kindly, gently, certain weaknesses of the flesh to which they were addicted; or their hearts being more firmly united to the Lord they might very speedily see these inconsistencies of themselves, without a word being said. The point we would impress is that it was not a restraining of the flesh, nor a perfecting of it, that was sought, but a much deeper work of grace than this; a purity of heart, of intention, a heart-adhesion to the Lord. We today cannot do better than follow this same course in our endeavors to do good unto others as we have opportunity. The brethren needed strengthening rather than tearing. They needed building up in the most holy faith and love. They needed encouraging in heart-adhesion to the Lord, and that criticisms of the flesh come in afterward gradually and very carefully and kindly. There were three elements co-operating which made Barnabas so suitable a person for this service, and the same three elements in any of us today will surely

make us able ministers of the truth. Those elements are stated here; viz., "He was a good man [moral, upright, reverential] full of the holy spirit [he had not received the grace of God in vain; it was in him a living power, the new mind guiding and controlling in all of his affairs] and of faith." However good a man may be, and however much of the Lord's character and spirit he may have, faith is essential. "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Let us strive to have all of these qualifications in our ministry, that we may be true sons of consolation, helpful in the Lord's service, and to his people wherever we may be. No wonder we read that as a result of his labors at Antioch much people was added unto the Lord!

The last we heard of Saul of Tarsus ([Acts 9:30](#)) was that after the opening of the eyes of his understanding, after he became the disciple of the Lord Jesus, and had preached in Damascus, and then in Jerusalem, his life being endangered the brethren sent him down to Caesarea, and then probably by ship to his native city, Tarsus. We are not informed regarding the nature of his work in his home city, but can readily suppose that one of his character and disposition would not long remain idle. And if the sphere of outward activities was a narrow one we may be sure that his mind was active in the study of the divine plan, and that his great heart was active too, in comprehending the divine grace and considering ways of service. He was in Tarsus while Barnabas was at Antioch, and the latter now had in mind the talents, the force, the logic, of Brother Saul, whom he had met in Jerusalem, and he concluded that Tarsus being not very far from Antioch he would look him up, interest him in the service of the Antioch Church, etc. He probably remembered that Saul's ideas were extremely broad in respect to the gospel – too broad, perhaps, for the brethren at Jerusalem to fully appreciate him when he was amongst them. But by this time all the brethren, and especially large-hearted Barnabas, had come to see the divine plan in a broader light – more nearly as Saul of Tarsus had comprehended it. Barnabas concluded that the conditions at Antioch were just such as would deeply interest Saul, and that the brethren there would be greatly profited by his assistance. He found

him; he brought him to the Church at Antioch, where his influence was no doubt great for the good of all. We rejoice in noting the heart nobility of Barnabas. Many Christian men of smaller caliber would have [R2998 : page 125] reasoned themselves into a different course, and a wrong one; saying, As it is, I am the chief one amongst the brethren here, having had larger opportunities than the others, and having had close contact with the apostles at Jerusalem; but if I bring Saul into our midst his superior abilities as a logician, as an expounder of the Scriptures, will cast me quite into the shade, etc. Brethren who reason thus are misguided by their own selfishness. They forget that the Lord's work is in his own hands, and with such a spirit they could neither please him nor be prospered in his service, and that the reactionary effect upon their own hearts would be a serious one. All of the Lord's people should be noble and unselfish; and the closer any of us approximate this character the more will we be loved of the Lord, the more will we be loved of the brethren, and the more useful will be our sphere of influence for righteousness, for truth, for the Lord.

DISCIPLES WERE FIRST CALLED CHRISTIANS.

It is noteworthy that our Lord never gave any name to his people; he called them disciples, which signifies pupils, learners. The apostles have applied to the Church various terms, "church of the living God;" "church of God;" "church of Christ;" "the church;" but gradually the name "Christians," identifying God's people with their Redeemer and leader, came to be the general name throughout the world. It is a pity that any have thought it necessary to adopt any other names than these, common to the entire church of Christ, or to use these names in a sectarian manner. Evidently the name Christian should represent one who trusts in Christ as the Messiah – one, therefore, who trusts in him also as the Redeemer, and who accepts all the fundamental doctrines of the Scriptures, based, as they are, upon these two declarations – (1) that men were sinners, needing to be redeemed before they could be acceptable to God, and that they were redeemed by the precious blood of Christ; (2) that they have accepted the name of their

Redeemer, and are seeking to walk in his footsteps. There was a start toward sectarianism in the early Church, some saying, I am a Christian, but of the order of Paul; others, I am a Christian, but of the order of Apollos; others, I am a Christian, but of the order of Peter, etc. But the Apostle promptly rebuked this spirit, assuring them that the relationship in Christ was all that was necessary; that neither Peter nor Paul had redeemed them, and that neither, therefore, could occupy the place of a head to the Church. The Apostle, furthermore, calls our attention to the fact that such a spirit on their part was an evidence of that much of carnality still remaining; that much of a worldly partisan spirit contrary to the thought and teaching of the holy spirit. It is to be regretted that ever since the Reformation times this spirit has prevailed to a large extent, some taking the name of Luther, others of Wesley, others of Calvin, others non-personal, but, nevertheless, sectarian or party names, as Methodist, Presbyterian, Congregational, Baptist, etc. We are not claiming that those who do these things are wholly carnal, without the Lord's spirit, but we do claim with the Apostle that a disposition to such a partisanship is contrary to the spirit of the Lord, and to that extent is carnal, fleshly, and should be overcome by all who would be recognized of the Lord as overcomers.

Let no one misunderstand us to advocate one sect or party as instead of many. On the contrary, we know that if there must be sects there is an advantage in having many, as they serve to keep each other within more reasonable bounds, serving to some extent to hinder gross arrogance and persecution. What we ought to have is one church, one household of faith, accepting the plain fundamentals of Scripture, and with limitations as to acceptance of more or less conjectural views outside of those fundamentals – all fraternizing, fellowshiping each other, and all known as Christians, and thus separated from all who deny the atonement, from all who deny the results of the atonement, in the resurrection, and from all who deny the propriety of a newness of life in the present time. In this view of the matter each individual Christian would have an independence as respected his own thought,

aside from fundamentals [R2999 : page 125] which are clearly stated in the Scriptures.

BENEVOLENCE A FEATURE OF PIETY.

In view of the fact that the condition of the Antioch Church made Barnabas glad, and in view of the instruction and assistance rendered it by Paul and Barnabas, we are not surprised that it was a living Church, instead of a dead one, and we are not surprised that, an opportunity offering through a famine especially affecting the vicinity of Jerusalem, this congregation of believers at Antioch was prompt to make up a relief fund and send it to the Church at Jerusalem, as an expression of its love and sympathy and oneness of spirit. It is more blessed to give than to receive, not only as respects the sentiment of the matter, but the results are still more blessed. No doubt the contributions sent were a comfort and a help to the Jerusalem brethren, but the blessing to the givers we may be sure was far greater. The Lord would reward them, and that in proportion as they had given, at some sacrifice as respects earthly things, luxuries, etc.

"Is thy cruse of comfort failing?
Rise and share it with another,
And through all the years of famine
It shall serve thee and thy brother.
Love divine will fill thy storehouse,
All thy handful still renew;
Scanty fare for one will often
Make a royal feast for two."

We do not mean to say that this principle could be worked out now, under present conditions, with the nominal church full of "tares," and thoroughly soaked in false doctrines. What we do mean to say is that had it not been for the sectarian spirit which early crept into the Church after the death of the apostles, there would not have been the present number of tares, professed Christians, nor the same amount of false doctrine discounting the true. Ambition for numbers and for

influence led to the formulation of doctrines which attracted the tares into the Church. Without these false ambitions, and with the fundamentals of the ransom and full restitution [R2999 : page 126] clearly recognized by all, the nominal Church today would be amazingly smaller than it is, but it would be comparatively pure, and it would be at one with itself, and there would be no desire for any other name than that of the one Lord and Head.

The question then may arise, In view of this what should we do? Should we join with those who are trying to form a federation of all the churches? We answer, No, for two reasons: First, because common sense tells us that such a union as is proposed is not along the principles which the Lord laid down, but is merely a human expedient. (Second) The Lord's Word shows us an illustration in the harvest time, and that it is not the time for organizing, etc., but a time for reaping, separating, threshing, winnowing, and gathering into the barn of the true wheat – the time also in which the tares will be bundled for the day of burning or great time of trouble with which this age shall close.

Our proper course is to separate ourselves from all the Babylonian systems and to "stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made free," and to own no other name than his, and to accept no other standards than those of his Word. Our duty, after coming ourselves into this position, is to help others into the same liberty, and to avoid putting restraints upon the brethren, or making tests of any kind, except such as are fundamental – faith in the ransom and full consecration to the Lord, which would include an honest desire to know the meaning of his Word. There can be no danger amongst such as are taking this position, and where only this class is recognized as the Church, and where this liberty wherewith Christ has made us free is strictly observed.

