

CHRISTIANS FIRST AT ANTIOCH

– ACTS 11:19-30; 12:25. – APRIL 25. –

Golden Text: – "The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." – Acts 11:26.

ANTIOCH, on the sea coast north of Jerusalem, was once a very prominent city – the third city in the Roman Empire, only Rome and Alexandria taking precedence. Our Lord narrates the introduction of the Gospel there, giving us a glimpse of the simplicity of the early Church under the guidance of the holy Spirit and the instruction of two of the ablest teachers of the Gospel. From it, therefore, we may advantageously gather suggestions and helpful lessons respecting what the Church of Christ should ever be in faith, simplicity, love and zeal.

First we notice the hand of providence. The stoning of Stephen spread to a general spirit of opposition to Christianity amongst the Jews. So far from this being accidental, it was the Divine purpose that thus messengers of the Gospel might be scattered in every quarter, carrying with them the message of good tidings on their lips and its spirit in their hearts and lives. Remembering our Lord's words, When they persecute you in one city or place, depart for another, his persecuted followers obeyed, and thus a blessing was carried beyond the boundaries of Palestine. Knowledge of the fact that "the middle-wall of partition," separating the Gentiles from the blessings and privileges of the Jews, had been broken down, had not yet become general. Hence the earliest preaching of the Cross of Christ was to the Jews only, and this was of Divine intention also; as St. Paul points out, It was necessary that the Gospel should be preached first unto you – the Jews – the natural seed of Abraham, to whom the promise was made. However, in the Lord's providence, some of these Antioch believers were Jews of Cyrene

and Cypress, converts to Christianity; these being more familiar with the Greek language and less familiar with the Hebrew, overflowed the joy of their hearts, the good tidings of the Gospel message, upon their Gentile neighbors, who, to their joy, responded in a remarkable manner. "A great number believed, and turned unto the Lord." – Acts 11:21.

The secret of their success lay in the fact stated, "The hand of the Lord was with them." The word hand, as a symbol, signifies power and direction. Here we have the true secret of all successful Christian work which will have the Divine approval. Each individual Christian, so to speak, is a finger of the Lord; as our dear Redeemer expressed the matter, "I, as the finger of God, cast out demons." (Luke 11:20.) If we would be used and useful as God's agencies, ambassadors, we should seek to be impelled and guided by him. We are to hear his voice through the Scriptures and we are to realize his energizing power in the spirit of the Truth. As it is written, "I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him; but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you." (John 14:16,17.) Whoever forgets this, to that extent fails to render acceptable service, which will bring forth the proper results. Nor are we always to gauge the success of our endeavors by the "great numbers," as in this case, which was quite exceptional. We should, however, expect some fruitage to our labors, and if, **[R4357 : page 91]** peradventure, by unwisdom in our methods of presenting the message we have lost our influence as "ambassadors for God," we should seek to appreciate the lesson of greater wisdom and should look to the Lord for an open door to service along some other lines or in some other place, where our lessons of experience could be put to practical effect.

"THE EARS OF THE CHURCH"

The oneness of the Body of Christ, the Church, is illustrated by the fact that this progress of the Truth at Antioch speedily became known to "the ears of the Church at Jerusalem." This reminds us of the Apostle's illustration in I Cor. 12th Chap., where he likens the Church to a human body, whose active members are hands, feet, eyes, mouth, etc. The Apostles at Jerusalem were on the lookout to help, to encourage, to assist in forwarding the Gospel in every quarter, just as we of the WATCH TOWER today feel an interest in and give attention to the progress of the Truth in every quarter. Christianity is not selfish, but the reverse. When selfishness is seen – avarice, self-seeking – it is so much of the Antichrist spirit creeping in. "To do good and to communicate, forget not," writes the Apostle.

God uses means – human means so far as possible. And so he wishes that we, as his representatives, should follow his example. The decision was to send the new converts the help which it was realized they would need, to encourage them, to forewarn them of dangers, and to assist to clearer knowledge of the Divine Plan, that thus they might become a force for good and not for evil under the Lord's banner. A disciple named Joseph was chosen, one who had shown great zeal for the Lord and for the Church and who had given considerable of his property for the assistance of others. They gave him a new name, Barnabas, which signifies Son of Consolation. How beautiful! This testimony of itself draws out our love to Barnabas in a manner that would have been impossible if the record had been to the contrary – that, although a follower of Jesus, he was quarrelsome, disputative, a stirrer-up of strife and contentions.

It may be said that none could have such discordant character and yet be a Christian at all. We agree that no matured Christian could be of such a character, yet we know of some who

naturally are very contentious, who, by the grace of God, have received the Truth. These need to be the more vigilant in cultivating amiability and humility. And assuredly the brethren should have considerable patience with such, especially if they note in them loyal-heartedness toward God, the Truth and the brethren – and particularly if they see evidences that they are striving to overcome their natural contentiousness. However, it would be mistaken kindness to encourage such or to fail to indicate to them the unloving manner wherein they injure the cause they wish to serve. Such should never be chosen to positions of leadership or otherwise encouraged until they show evidences of victory along this line. Assuredly such should never be chosen as missionaries or representatives of the Church to others, for they would misrepresent the Lord and his Spirit, which is one of humility, gentleness and patience, even while strong and resolute for the Truth.

THE SON OF CONSOLATION CHOSEN

Barnabas was evidently a most wise selection to be a representative of the brethren at Jerusalem, a Pilgrim to the newly interested brethren at Antioch. The narrative indicates that he stopped to visit other groups of the Lord's people enroute, Antioch being the end of his prescribed journey. On his arrival several things resulted:

(1) He himself received a blessing. "He perceived the grace of God and was glad."

(2) He exhorted them all that with purpose of heart they should cleave unto the Lord. They had already separated themselves from heathenism and Judaism, and by faith and obedience and acceptance of the holy Spirit had been joined to Christ. The exhortation was that they should thus abide, separated from further affiliations and bound unto the Lord – with purpose of heart – not temporarily nor because of mental conviction of the

logic of Christ's religion, but that their hearts should be fully given over to the Lord in the fulness of consecration.

Such consecration was the subject of Barnabas' preaching for quite a little while, and the result was "Much people were added unto the Lord." Now notice another beautiful tribute to Barnabas' character, and let us each see to what extent we can find these characteristics predominant in ourselves, and to what extent we can, by God's grace, have them still more abound. We read, "For he was a good man, and full of the holy Spirit and of faith." What more could be said to the credit of any child of God? This testimony is far richer than if we read, "For he was a learned man, or a brainy man, and [R4358 : page 91] full of self-confidence and a mighty collector of monies for the Church." His heart was full of the spirit of holiness and he was full of faith as respects God's power and God's Truth.

We remark that the usual signs of prosperity amongst nominal Christians are not here mentioned – Church building, collections, etc. The success of the early Church lay greatly in the fact that the money question was ignored, likewise the building of great temples for worship. The work was one of proclaiming Christ and turning the hearts of men from sin to righteousness, from ignorance to knowledge and unbelief to faith – from devilishness to saintship.

SAUL BROUGHT TO ANTIOCH

Barnabas perceived the largeness of the field of opportunity at Antioch and bethought him of Saul of Tarsus, whom he sought out and brought to the new field of labor. Evidently the Lord had allowed Saul to rest in quietness for a time to digest certain features of the Truth, to get himself properly gauged up. No doubt these lessons were needful for the development of humility and faith and obedience. Now, however, the time had come for Saul to be introduced into the Gospel work. Again God used

instrumentality. Barnabas did not trust to writing a letter, but went to see him personally, to urge upon him activities in the Master's service and to point out to him the open door of a still greater work at Antioch, where Saul's learning and talents would be an additional fortification to the Truth and inspiration to the brethren. For a year he assembled with the Church at Antioch and taught much people publicly and privately.

DISCIPLES CALLED CHRISTIANS

The name "Christian" was first applied to the Lord's followers at Antioch. Such a name would not be given to them by the Jews, nor in any place where Judaism was paramount, because the Greek word Christ is the equivalent to the Hebrew word Messiah. And the Jews would be the last in any sense of the word to intimate that Jesus was the Messiah, or that his followers were Christians or Messiahans. We do not read that Christians first assumed this name at Antioch, but that they were first called it by others. Would that the custom had continued to prevail, and that still the only name by which the Lord's followers throughout the world would be known would be his name! Dr. A. McClaren correctly suggests, "If the men at Antioch had called Christ's followers 'Jesuits' that would have meant the followers of the mere man. They did not know how much deeper they had gone when they said, not 'followers of Jesus' but 'followers of Christ'; for it was not Jesus the man, but Jesus Christ, the man with his Office, that makes the center and bond of the Christian Church."

There is a forceful lesson in the following from the pen of Rev. Peloubet, D.D.: –

"John Wesley was said once to have dreamed that he saw a great throng entering hell and he asked whether any Methodists were among them. Yes, he was told, and plenty of them. And Baptists? Yes. And Presbyterians? Yes. Then in his dream he found himself suddenly at the gate of heaven and earnestly asked

the porter who were inside. Methodists? Not one. Presbyterians? Baptists? No, not one of these. Catholics? No. 'Then who are inside,' he asked. 'Only Christians,' was the reply."

We are not endorsing Brother Wesley's dream of the crowds entering heaven and hell; believing as we do, that all go to the Bible hell, the grave, the tomb, and that the First Resurrection will be composed only of the saints victorious. We do, however, feel sure that in that Resurrection of the Blessed and Holy, sectarianism and membership in sectarian institutions and worldly lodges will not be recognized as giving [R4358 : page 92] such members any priority, honor or glory, but possibly the reverse. The name that will stand will be Christians. They will all be that. Why should Messiah's Bride, after taking his name, confuse matters in any degree by adding to it the name of any human being or institution? We urge them all to stand free from all human titles and bondages in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. Our bondage is to the Head and under his direction, and by his Spirit we are firmly bounden by all the principles of righteousness and to all those who have his Spirit, his mind, his disposition, as living members of the one Body. To separate ourselves from these bonds of love and sympathy and fellowship and obedience would mean our starvation and death, even as a branch cannot abide itself, nor bear fruit, except it abide in the Vine, in fellowship with the other branches of the same Vine, and as a participant in the juices (the graces, the blessings) which come to all the true branches through the root.

THE FRUITAGE OF THE SPIRIT AT ANTIOCH

In the Lord's providence the Antioch brethren were advised in advance of impending famine throughout the civilized world. The scarcity would affect all parts and classes, but especially be severe upon the poor, by reason of the high prices. Immediately the Antioch brethren bethought them of the fact that the brethren

at Jerusalem, specially poor and persecuted, would be special sufferers from that famine and they desired to aid them and made a collection accordingly. They did not hesitate, because, not wealthy themselves, they would probably also feel the severity of the famine. The love of God shed abroad in our hearts overcomes much of our natural selfishness and tends to make us generous and thoughtful of others. How beautiful, how Christlike, the spirit! We must love these brethren for this and seek to emulate their example and to be of willing mind as respects any assistance to be rendered to any of the fellow-members of the Body of Christ, near and far.

The Apostle truly intimates that if any professed follower of Christ see his brother have need and close up his heart of compassion against him and refuse him aid, this would be an indication that he lacked the spirit of the Head, the spirit of love, the distinctive feature which our Lord said would indicate his disciples as different from all others in the world. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one for another." – John 13:35.

Whenever an opportunity for doing good comes to our attention it should not be slighted, but reasonably investigated with the thought that possibly the Lord has brought this matter to our attention as a test of love for him or for the brethren. Indeed it will profit us greatly if we can learn to look at all of life's affairs from this standpoint. If trials and difficulties, joys and pleasures, are all scrutinized with the thought of the Lord's oversight and guiding care in respect to our interests and affairs it will greatly increase our faith and our spiritual joy.

Paul and Barnabas were the chosen agents to see to the transportation of the food supply for the aid of the Jerusalem brethren in the approaching period of famine. In due course they

returned, bringing with them John Mark as a further helper in the good work.

