

# Antioch: Multi-Cultural Mission

Thomas Robinson, Cities of Hope 3, June 5, 2016

## Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3

<sup>19</sup> Now those who were **scattered** because of the **persecution/tribulation** that arose over **Stephen** (6:8-8:3) traveled as far as **Phoenicia** and **Cyprus** and **Antioch**, speaking the word to no one except **Jews**. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of **Cyprus** and **Cyrene**, who on coming to **Antioch** spoke to the **Hellenists** (Greek-speaking Gentiles) also, announcing good news that **the Lord is Jesus**. <sup>21</sup> And the **Lord's hand** was with them, and a great number who **believed turned to the Lord**. <sup>22</sup> The report of this came to the ears of the church in **Jerusalem**, and they sent **Barnabas** to **Antioch**.

<sup>23</sup> When he came and **saw the grace of God**, he rejoiced, and he encouraged them all with a purposeful heart to remain faithful to the Lord, <sup>24</sup> for he was a **good man**, full of the **Holy Spirit** and of **faith**. And a **great many people** were **added to the Lord**.

<sup>25</sup> So **Barnabas** went to **Tarsus** to look for **Saul**, <sup>26</sup> 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.'**

13:<sup>1</sup> Now there were in **the church at Antioch** prophets and teachers, **Barnabas**, **Simeon** who was called **Niger**, **Lucius** of **Cyrene**, **Manaen** (**Menahem**) a lifelong friend of **Herod the tetrarch**, and **Saul**. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the **Holy Spirit said**, "Set apart for me **Barnabas and Saul** for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> Then after **fasting** and **praying** they **laid their hands on them and sent them off**.

## Acts 4:36-37 Barnabas from Cyprus

<sup>36</sup> **Joseph**, who was called by the apostles '**Barnabas**' (which means son of encouragement), a **Levite**, a native of **Cyprus**, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

## Acts 6:8-9 Stephen's debates

<sup>6</sup> And **Stephen**, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the **Freedmen** (as it was called), and of the **Cyrenians**, and of the **Alexandrians**, and of those from **Cilicia** and **Asia**, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

## Acts 8:1-4 Saul | Paul of Tarsus: Persecution

<sup>1</sup> And **Saul** approved of the killing of **Stephen**. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in **Jerusalem**, and everybody was scattered throughout the regions of **Judea** and **Samaria**, except the apostles. <sup>2</sup> Devout men buried **Stephen** and made great lamentation over him. <sup>3</sup> But **Saul** was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to jail. <sup>4</sup> Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.

## Acts 14:26-15:3

<sup>26</sup> (Paul and Barnabas) sailed to **Antioch**, where they had been given to the grace of God for the work that they fulfilled. <sup>27</sup> And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ...

15:<sup>1</sup> But some people came from **Judea** and began teaching the church, "Unless you are circumcised in the custom of **Moses**, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup> And after Paul and Barnabas had no small ... debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go to Jerusalem to the apostles and the



elders about this question.<sup>3</sup> So, being sent ... by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers and sisters.

## Antioch – History, Pain, and Hope

Antioch was capital of Roman Syria, founded in 300 bc after Alexander Gt. By Seleucus I, named for his father Antiochus. On the Orontes River controlling trade from south and east into Asia Minor and Europe. Fortress, 2 sq miles, 150,000 people in 1<sup>st</sup> cent. ad. (nearly 2x as dense as modern Manhattan). Had Jewish community from beginning with some rights, conflicts.

Ant. was important in NT times as the place where inclusion of Gentiles became substantial and mission to Gentiles began. It was also the place where the Latin name 'Christian' was first given to the mixed community.

When we imagine ancient cities, we often think of monumental ruins and place ourselves among the elite. But most people lived in tiny 1-room wooden 5-story tenements. No sewage, fire-places, windows, or building codes. Stench! Always dangerous. Night deadly. No police. Antioch was often (13x) conquered or besieged, 4 city-destroying fires, many smaller, 10 great earthquakes; 3 major epidemics; 5 famines. On average, a major disaster every 15 yrs. Continual influx of people was required to maintain population. Diverse, conflicting ethnic groups. Riots common. Walled areas. Antioch's patron goddess was Tyché (Fortune, Chance). Still people kept coming.\*

## People of Vision and Experience

Antioch was a center of realization of the new vision of God's purposes embodied in the Gospel – fulfilling the promise to Abraham by including all those conflicting people in one new humanity.

The name Christian crossed boundaries and embodied a vision of God of inclusive hope and love. It began with Stephen's debates with Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem. His death set off persecution led by Saul/Paul that scattered many. Philip with Samaritans and an Ethiopian. But Paul was called by God to go to Gentiles and brought into the church in Jerusalem by Barnabas from Cyprus. Then Peter with Cornelius the Roman in Caesarea. The Greek-speaking Jews, at home in the Diaspora travel widely: Alexandria, Cyrene, Antioch. They don't hold back but take this Jewish message of the crucified Messiah/King to Greek-speaking Gentiles. Surprisingly they believe!

A mixed community takes shape crossing the hard boundaries of hate and conflict between Jews and various ethnic groups, between slave and free. Barnabas is sent and sees "the Grace of God."

He gets Paul (Jewish Pharisee, Roman, Greek, called to the Gentiles). God builds the community. Luke calls attention to the leaders in Antioch (13:1). Barnabas from Cyprus, Simeon called "Black" (Latin, Niger, like the Ethiopian?), Lucius (Latin name, perhaps Luke) from Cyrene in N. Africa, Manaen (Menahem) from the court of Herod Antipas, and Saul/Paul from Tarsus in Cilicia. All had deep Jewish roots but also shared the language and life of Greco-Roman culture. They knew and interacted with people from radically different backgrounds, saw them as inherently valuable.

## The Great Debate – The Spirit, Scripture, God's Grace, People's Lives

The Spirit intervenes, calling Barnabas and Paul to an expanding mission. They return with news of faith among Gentiles. But that set off intensified debate about scriptures (circumcision as sign of the people of God). It required discernment & boldness in re-reading the ancient story in ways that shifted traditional, long-struggled-for interpretations. What defines God's people?

The whole future of this movement was at stake. Would it continue in an ethnic identity? Would the "God's Grace" among Gentiles be discounted. How does Jesus affect scripture and a vision of God?

[\*Rodney Stark, "Urban Chaos and Crisis: The Case of Antioch" in *The Rise of Christianity*. HarperCollins, 1996, pp. 147-161.]

