

# First Contact

## 3. Being an Antioch Church (*Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-2*)

In the past few weeks we have looked at the early leadership of the Church and saw how they had to cope with new experiences as they reached out further and further from Jerusalem, through Samaria and to the Gentiles.

If we looked at this from an earthly perspective, one may have thought that those leading the way would have been those personally closest to Jesus. To a certain extent that was true in the early part of Acts. But think carefully of your knowledge of Acts. We know of Peter and John's involvement in Acts. We know that James the brother of John was martyred. We know that Peter, John, Matthew and Jude wrote letters. James the brother of Jesus is also recorded as well as his letter? But what happened to the rest of them?

We'll see this evening that while they were getting used to the idea of dealing with Gentile converts like Cornelius, there were others that had already caught the vision for the Gentiles and that God was raising up new people who were going to have a profound impact on the development of the Church.

*Acts 11: 19 Some of the believers who were scattered by the persecution which took place when Stephen was killed went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, telling the message to Jews only. 20 But other believers, who were from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and proclaimed the message to Gentiles also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's power was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 The news about this reached the church in Jerusalem, so they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*

Luke goes to pains to point out that for most Jewish believers fleeing persecution, the gospel was aimed at Jews, not Gentiles. But there were some from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to a Gentile city - Antioch which was in Syria. Why from Cyprus and Cyrene? Remember, these people were still Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene. First of all, there were large Jewish groups in both Cyprus and Cyrene - remember that Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry His cross? Simon wasn't a Gentile. He was a Jew in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Secondly, the Jews of Cyprus and Cyrene sat far more comfortably with Gentiles than those in Judea and Galilee. Jews of the Diaspora did because they had to so they didn't have to be convinced in the same way that Peter had to that Gentiles could be saved. The wording of Acts 11:19 tend to suggest that the people in Antioch were seeing conversion of Gentiles about the same time as Philip was seeing conversion of the Samaritans. They were ahead of the game in Antioch. Whilst Peter was wrestling with the notion of Cornelius being saved, the believers from Cyprus and Cyrene were establishing a local church in Antioch.

And who were being saved? This time it wasn't God-fearing Gentiles like Cornelius, but Gentiles - Greek speakers from a pluralistic society who did not start from a God-fearing position. It was another first - another new experience for the growing Church to deal with.

As in the other situations we saw, the apostles sent someone trusted to check out that these believers were genuine. It's interesting that they didn't choose one of

the Twelve, but instead sent one of the Deacons - Barnabas. Why Barnabas? That isn't difficult to figure out. Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew (or more precisely a Levite *Acts 4:36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement, 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet*) and it was Cypriot evangelists active in Antioch. He was the logical choice to work out what was going on.

Like we saw before, Barnabas was convinced by what he saw. Barnabas had no problem in affirming that a work of God was going on and he was used in the salvation of people too.

*23 When he arrived and saw how God had blessed the people, he was glad and urged them all to be faithful and true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and many people were brought to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. 26 When he found him, he took him to Antioch, and for a whole year the two met with the people of the church and taught a large group. It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.*

And what does Barnabas do when he sees all this. He realises they need to be taught. Does he send to Jerusalem for an apostle or two? No. He goes all the way to Tarsus to see Saul. Why Saul? We could say - it was a work of the Spirit. Well, it was.

I'd like to suggest to you that the Jerusalem apostles weren't equipped to deal with the church at Antioch. In fact if you look at Galatians 2: 8 (*For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles*) you'll see with the wisdom of hindsight that this was not Peter's call and by implication the others in Jerusalem Paul mentions in that chapter. The Gentiles of Antioch knew nothing about the things of God, and no-one had ever taught Gentile people from scratch before. They had no experience of the culture of the people in Antioch. They knew Greek but they couldn't move in their circles. We saw how last time Peter agonised over Cornelius. By the time we get to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 many still agonising about it. Here were Gentile converts and God was raising up someone who had the right background and gifts to minister to them. Barnabas as one from a Cypriot society knew this only too well.

Unlike the Jerusalem apostles, Saul was well placed to teach Gentile Christians. He was from Tarsus. He moved in Gentile society, he was a Roman citizen, he spoke Greek fluently, probably as his first language. He understood them and their culture. But he was also a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He knew the scriptures and could teach. But most of all Saul was **called**. Look at Gal 2:8. His call was to the Gentiles and he knew it and Barnabas recognised that in giving Saul leadership in Antioch.

We need to see in this an important principle. God raises people for ministry in the church. It's an important principle we should observe as we move forward with the Lord as a church. When we are a small church it is easy to become frustrated that we cannot do this ministry or that ministry and we struggle with it. Unfortunately it often ends up that tasks are done by a small number of overworked people. And worse, they are doing so many things that they are in danger of doing few of them well. When we want to expand our ministries, we look to the "usual suspects" to do something about it. Many churches struggle with ministries run by people unsuitable and not gifted or called for the task.

But I believe as God takes us forward, he will raise us up the Saul of Tarsus needed for the ministry of the church. We are at that point and we need to pray

as a church that God will raise up those people and open a way that His purposes will be served here in Swaffham. Perhaps we need to “go to Tarsus” and find one.

Peter and the others did get to move around the Roman world eventually but their learning curve was slower than Paul’s and besides as we have seen Peter and co had a ministry to Jews - at least at the start. They had to adapt and change. There’s a lesson here too. When we have been used to doing church one way for so long, it’s difficult to take on new ideas and ways of doing things. But let’s not inhibit the gospel by deprecating those that move more easily with them.

One of my first tasks at Woodberry Down was to establish a regular youth service. I was a dinosaur at that time and it was suggested that I visit a young Pentecostal Pastor called Sean O’Boyle who ran a church called Powerhouse in Wood Green. Yes, I thought it sounded like an electrical store too. Because it wasn’t called the something church, you might guess that they did things differently. Sean used to be a club DJ and his ministry was to reach twentysomethings. Going to Powerhouse on a Sunday was an experience. Their whole service was based around breakfast so we sat around (or stood around) tables to worship and had our breakfast when the speaker was sharing the Word. The music was all based on modern dance music.

You might be horrified by the whole thing and say how awful! But men and women who had never been near a church in their lives; who were into drugs and in broken relationships or dysfunctional families were getting to hear the gospel in language and music that they understand. Reaching twentysomethings was an area in which Woodberry Down failed to reach people, yet they were packed into Powerhouse. Woodberry had to catch up - and I still don’t think they really have.

The challenge for us as a church is that the people we need to reach in Swaffham are culturally different to us. We need to pray that God will raise up the Sauls and Barnabases to reach them and that he will give us the grace to support them. The apostles at Jerusalem may have had problems grappling with the idea of reaching the Gentiles initially, but they encouraged those like Barnabas and Saul who were doing it successfully.

Antioch in Syria was a watershed for the Church. From this point on we see the rapid transition of the Christian faith from being a Jewish group into being distinctive and consisting mostly of Gentiles - the majority of people in the world. Antioch set standards for others to follow. Let’s have a look at them because I believe that God wants the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be an Antioch church because it was Antioch that made the difference and from where the gospel found new vigour.

### 🍷 *Antioch was a cutting edge church*

The distinctive name of Christian came from the church at Antioch. The most enduring name for a follower of Jesus Christ found expression in Antioch. In their two years of ministry at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas established something that was not Jewish, it was new and vibrant and different and the hand of God was clearly in it all. We can see from Paul’s writings that even though he had a burden for his countrymen (look at Romans 9-11 for example), much of his analysis appealed to the Greek mind and logic. We’ll see later that he had an excellent grasp of Greek literature and philosophy and unashamedly used it for the sake of the Gospel.

It was new ground, leading edge stuff. It was church, but not the same as what had gone before.

I believe God is doing a new thing in Norfolk and it's not going to be the same as what has gone before. It may not even be the same as what other people are doing. If change and growth is of God, it will be distinctive and different because that's what Antioch was about.

At the EBA Assembly Paul Hills encouraged us to "Do Different". We need to do different because what we've done in the past doesn't work. That isn't a criticism that is just aimed at traditional ways. Many of the new ways of doing things can be equally as sterile if the church is not done in the will of God.

I believe that as a Church, we are being called to do something that has not happened for a long time in Swaffham. We are all being taken in a direction we have not gone before - to reach out and embrace the 97.5% of people in Swaffham who never darken our doorstep. To communicate with them. To bring them Jesus.

### 🕯️ *Antioch was a caring church*

Antioch also set standards in other ways. It didn't think itself divided from the Jerusalem church because it had different leaders, that it was cutting edge and was made up of Gentiles and looked on by suspicion by many Jewish believers outside Antioch. They cared for the church at Jerusalem as brothers. They didn't do their own thing and think suspiciously of Jerusalem and its Jewish Christians. That's another way we need to do different - to recognise that we don't do our own thing. Insularity and suspicion between churches - even of the same denomination or of an evangelical persuasion - are rife in Norfolk. Saul and Barnabas made sure that wasn't the case in Antioch by caring for them

*27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.*

If we are to be an Antioch church then we need to be a church that is happy to embrace other believers even if they aren't Baptists, and to recognise and help other parts of God's kingdom here in Norfolk - and to allow them to help us.

### 🕯️ *Antioch was a missionary church*

*13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.*

Where Antioch truly made the difference was in sending Saul and Barnabas out in mission. This was the world changing aspect of Antioch. Until this time we learnt that the church spread much by persecution. They were often pushed. It's true that we hear of individuals like Peter and Philip answering a call to go. But at Antioch the church was listening and set apart Saul and Barnabas. But it didn't stop at that - they continued to fast and pray for them once that commission was known. This takes me straight on to the fourth characteristic of an Antioch church.

🕊️ *Antioch was a praying church*

In retrospect, maybe I should have put this one first as the other things seem to have come out of it. Antioch was a church open to the voice of God. Listen again to these two incidents:

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Antioch was a church that listened to the voice of God. They listened to prophetic word. They spent time in prayer and fasting - waiting on God. In the situation in chapter 13, they continued to pray after they received the word. They tested it before God and when they found it was true, they went with it. How much do we as a church listen for the voice of God? This could be another sermon in itself

Is our desire as a church to be one that grows? Then we need to be an Antioch church, one that is prepared to listen to the voice of God and then do it, never mind how cutting edge it might be. Their act of obedience led to a revolution in mission and the gospel spread rapidly in the Eastern Mediterranean as Paul and Barnabas went forth.

What about us. Are we going to be an Antioch church? Or are we going to be something else? A Corinth, stricken by strife? Or worse a Loadicea? That's the challenge. I believe we have been called to be an Antioch church. Let's commit ourselves to it.



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