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First published in Food for the Flock (Food for the Flock, Inc., Ontario, Canada).

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The Church At Antioch (July 1955)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 1 No. 7, July 1955.

Many saints have found a special charm in reading the account of the Church at Antioch, as given in Acts, chapters 11, 13, and 15. That Syrian city, where first the Gospel was proclaimed and where ministry was then brought to the young converts, is very distinctive. It was the first assembly where Jews and Gentiles are seen together in church fellowship. Moreover, Antioch became the new centre of Gospel activity and missionary enterprise. Not the least, it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

There seems a link between the great persecution that arose against the church at Jerusalem after Stephen's death (Acts 8:1) and the work that began in Antioch some years later (Acts 11:19, 20). The persecution was long and severe, a great test to the endurance of the saints, but was used of God to the furtherance of the Gospel. "Therefore, they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word." (Acts 8:4).

Although no record is given of their origin, churches sprang up in Palestine that shared the fury of the persecution, but when Saul of Tarsus was saved, it is written, "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." (Acts 9:31).

In chapter eleven, mention is made again of the persecution that arose about the death of Stephen and was still raging. In those days, God was using the

apostles mightily to publish the gospel of His grace. But it was banished wanderers, who travelled from Cyprus and Cyrene, that came to Antioch preaching the Lord Jesus. Without any evident introduction, these wayfaring evangelists began their ministry in the city, preaching the Word, concerning the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow, as testified by the prophets of old. This message was spoken by them in the energy of the Holy Ghost and the hand of the Lord was with them. This was the secret of their power and success. A precious attainment! The Gospel preacher still needs this holy unction in his ministry: without it he is helpless, and with it he becomes a soul-winner, as these men were.

In those days the multitude was so moved by the preaching that a great number believed and turned unto the Lord. A new atmosphere must have prevailed through the city, as genuine converts from among the Jews and also the Greeks mingled together, praising God and delighting in His salvation. A mighty change internally and externally was wrought in them, for they opened their hearts to the Word and abandoned their sinful habits and religious formalities. The Jews and Gentiles, formerly so far apart, are thus bound together, taught and enlightened by the Holy Spirit of God.

It is very cheering to note the practical sympathy of the church in Jerusalem when tidings of this amazing movement in distant Antioch reached their ears. They might have treated the new work with cold, critical suspicion and so missed the golden opportunity of being in fellowship with God in this glorious work.

The contribution from the Jerusalem assembly was the sending to Antioch of Barnabas, once known as Joses, a Levite of Cyprus, but surnamed by the apostles, Barnabas, “son of consolation.” His new name reflects his character and also the high esteem in which he was held by the apostles. His liberality in the balmy pentecostal days is also left on record.

In coming to Antioch at such a time, Barnabas was not disappointed, for his spiritual perception was keen. He was made glad by the labors of other brethren and, in that multitude of converts, he saw and recognized the grace of God.

His ministry among these young saints began with the wholesome exhortation, “that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord.” Young believers who have the privilege of such teaching are highly favored. His gospel preaching in Antioch also bore precious fruit, for “a large crowd of people was added unto the Lord” (verse 24, Darby). Moreover, it was said of Barnabas, “He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.”

However, in the midst of that great revival, Barnabas departed from Antioch, though he did not return to Jerusalem to report to the elders, or to receive authority from them to establish an assembly in that new place. Rather, his object was to visit Tarsus in search of Saul. This was the young man who, when newly converted, had filled the disciples in Jerusalem with great fear, for they had known him only as a persecutor of the saints. On that occasion, Barnabas took him, as we learn from Acts 9:27, and brought him unto the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the

way, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. We can visualize these friends meeting again in Tarsus and considering the importance of going to Antioch together.

What joy was brought to the disciples as Barnabas returned, accompanied by this able minister of Christ. Their united ministry is summed up in a few words, “A whole year they assembled themselves with the church and taught much people.” This is the first mention of the church in Antioch. The fruit of their ministry is seen in a healthy church being established with abundance of gift and with a high tone of spirituality, as seen in chapter thirteen.

The believers were known as disciples, but a new name (that had no connection with Jewish titles nor Gentile forms) was given to them by divine order, “called Christians first at Antioch.” Peter endorsed that title, “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed.” (1 Peter 3:14). That name brought reproach and suffering to the saints, such as was witnessed by the cruel tortures in the arenas of Rome and in the gardens of Nero the Emperor in the years that followed.

It is interesting to note that this church at Antioch, founded by men saved at Jerusalem, and helped by Barnabas sent from Jerusalem, eventually, after having received through the Jewish believers spiritual benefits, reciprocated, and sent as relief from the great dearth that was predicted, carnal things to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

The Church in Antioch (Aug 1955)

From Food for the Flock, Vol. 1 No. 8, Aug 1955.

Barnabas and Saul were chosen by the assembly in Antioch to carry the loving contribution to the brethren in Judea. They thus sought to relieve the brethren who were suffering due to the dearth which had been foretold in their midst by Agabus the prophet. (Acts 11:28).

The importance of this gift is difficult for us to fully understand because it was doubtless the first of its kind made either by Jewish or Gentile Christians. “The middle wall of partition” was still a big issue among Jewish believers, and their acceptance or their rejection of this gift was of grave concern to Barnabas and Saul, for it could have far reaching effect among all the saints. To both of these brethren this service was a sacred trust, and one can well imagine the extent of their consolation when at the end of the long journey the fellowship which they had carried was accepted by the believers. Having completed this, their ministry, they returned to Antioch.

The thirteenth chapter of Acts opens before us like a fragrant breath of Spring. Here the Church is seen in the freshness of her youth, established by Divine order and furnished with gifts from the Risen Lord. Although they did not have an apostle permanently staying at Antioch, they had all the other gifts of Ephesians 4:11, and these were functioning under the Spirit’s guidance. These gifts were for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ, (Eph. 4:12).

While the Church in its usual course ministered to the Lord with fasting, the Holy Ghost said, “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them.” To this there was the prompt and godly action for we see them again fasting, praying, and laying their hands on these two brethren. The laying on of hands did not impart special power to them, both had been already mightly used of God, and this call was evidently no surprise to the elders, so that the laying on of their hands was like a hearty Amen to the will of the Lord. It also expressed the identification of the assembly with Barnabas and Saul in their call to this ministry, for which they were already trained and qualified. They were sent forth to the work by the Holy Ghost, but commended and sent away by their brethren.

The commendation of Barnabas and Saul, and also the call of Timothy to the work, give us important instructions regarding the responsibility of commending servants of Christ. In Acts 16, Timothy first is introduced to us as a disciple who was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystria and Iconium. He was well known for he had fellowshipped with both of these assemblies, and they had observed his godly walk and usefulness in the service of the Lord. In addition to his commendation by these assemblies we have the discernment of the apostle Paul who took Timothy with him to the work. He afterwards wrote of him, “As a son with a father he served with me in the gospel,” (Phil. 2:19-22). Timothy also developed a shepherd care for the state of the people of God.

A careful study of these two events by elders in the assemblies would be most helpful when it becomes their responsibility and privilege to commend evangelists or

missionaries to this noble work. It would enable them also to manifest judgment not to encourage those unfitted for such important service. No little sorrow and hindrance to the work has been caused, at home and abroad, by the lack of godly care in commending new workers who are unproven.

The last and very important point in our study of the church in Antioch is found in Acts 15. Men came down from Judea who were connected with the church at Jerusalem and taught the brethren, “Except ye be circumcised, ye cannot be saved.” They also commanded the necessity of keeping the law of Moses, and were very definite in their assertions. By appealing to the law they could produce a point of argument, and this teaching, as we read farther on, was aimed at disturbing the Gentile believers.

Barnabas and Saul were the first to challenge this evil and subtle doctrine, but even they were unable to stop the flood of pernicious teaching that was gaining ground and upsetting the saints. It was finally decided to send a number of brethren with Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem in order to confer with the apostles and the elders there about this question. This is the first account of a conference of leaders gathered to settle a doctrinal dispute that had gained large proportions. The purpose of the coming together of the apostles and elders was to consider this serious matter. In spite of so much gift and ability at the beginning of the Church era there was much disputing, and a full agreement seemed very far away until Peter’s address regarding the conversion of the Gentiles laid a foundation which stabilized the whole meeting.

The multitude sat silent while Barnabas and Saul declared the miracles and wonders which God by them had wrought among the Gentiles. After the conclusion of their message, James was eloquent in summing up and endorsing what these brethren had put before the council. The audience bowed to the judgement of these brethren who had spoken and the utmost Christian courtesy was maintained throughout the conference. Eventually it was decided to send chosen brethren with beloved Barnabas and Saul to convey the decision of the council by word of mouth, as well as by letter, to the Gentile believers in Antioch. The letter was very clear and explicit in expounding the mind of God in regard to Gentile believers, its statements brought great consolation to the church in Antioch.

It has been taught that the conference held by the elders at Jerusalem to adjust matters from a distance lends support to the theory that problems arising in the local assembly should be taken up and settled by brethren from other assemblies. Others have taught that it supports a central over-sight where matters of discipline should be adjusted by brethren forming that body. It is well for us here to remember that the New Testament was not then written, and that the revelation of any truth not given in the Old Testament was committed only to the apostles and the prophets, and that these truths were not placed in a permanent form until some time later.

While it is good to encourage fellowship with other assemblies, and with men of ability known for their piety, because advice through these channels is valuable, as has often been proven, nevertheless, brethren, though well taught in the Word, have nothing

more to impart than that which is in the Holy Scriptures at the disposal of all the brethren in the local assemblies. Local elders may be enlightened in all matters regarding the testimony of our Lord Jesus through the sacred pages of the New Testament; consequently, we see no reason for assuming that difficulties should be taken outside the local churches. According to the ministry of the risen Lord to the seven churches of Asia each assembly, as a lampstand, is responsible before the Lord as to teaching and conduct. In no way did the Lord charge any assembly as being defiled by the failure of any of the seven churches mentioned. Each of the seven churches are acknowledged as seven golden lamps and though much failure is seen in most of them, the Risen Lord walks in the midst of all seven, rebuking, correcting, and commending.

We trust this simple account of the beginning and testimony of the church at Antioch may prove helpful, especially to young believers.