

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21)

Thus far the focus of the development of the messianic movement centering in Jesus of Nazareth has been in Palestine proper (Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, Samaria, the Judean desert), then the eastern coastal area of Palestine (Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea). Now, the focus shifts to areas where the culture is primarily Hellenistic and Greek is the primary language.

This movement was the result of the scattering of those Christians from the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem as a result of the rampage of Saul of Tarsus. Those that scattered were from the synagogues specifically mentioned in Acts 6:8-10, consisting of Diaspora Jews from Cyrene (in North Africa, current Libya), Alexandria in Egypt, Cilicia (the home of Saul of Tarsus), and Asia [Minor], the location of the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Saul.

Antioch of Syria has long been held as the cradle of the gentile contingent of the church. As a result of the teaching activity of the Hellenistic Jewish believers who had fled Jerusalem, a significant community of believers developed in Antioch, which eventually

rivalled and surpassed the church in Jerusalem in size and evangelistic activity. It became the church from which most of the evangelization of the Greco-Roman world outside of Palestine occurred. Chrysostom, a fourth century churchman of Antioch, says that by the fourth century well over 100,000 Christians could be found in Antioch

Antioch was approximately 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the third largest city of the Greco-Roman world next to Rome and Alexandria. The population was over half a million, and was a major center of culture and trade. The main street running through the center of Antioch was over four miles long, paved with marble and lined with marble colonnades. It was well known for the architectural beauty of its many buildings: theaters, gymnasiums, temples, and public baths (swimming pools).

It was also a center for schools of Greek learning in rhetoric, philosophy, and medicine, etc. It had one of the largest libraries of the ancient world, second only to Alexandria. This would suggest that it had a good number of well-educated inhabitants, and among these were a significant number of Jews, as was the case in Alexandria in Egypt. According to Josephus there was a large community of Jews and Jewish synagogues located in Antioch (*Jewish Wars* 7.3.3 and *Antiquities* 12:3.1).

The Jews of the Diaspora were located more in the large cities rather than in towns and villages. In the large cities they could find a grater market for their trade-goods and tradesman skills. This was especially so of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch of Syria, all of which had a very large Jewish population and many synagogues.

Antioch was also filled with temples to the gods and goddesses of the Greeks, Romans, and the Syrians. The primary deities of the Syrians were Isis and Osiris (whom they called "Serapis") of Egyptian origin. One of the most popular deities was **Daphne** (the nymph pursued by Apollo), whose mythological beauty and loose morals were celebrated all over the Mediterranean world.

This is the cultural context of these converts of Antioch, and from this church the gentile world would hear the good news that God had come into the world and walked among men in order to lead man back to who he was when he was created, a being created in the image of God.

The Jerusalem Church Sends Barnabas (11:22-24)

Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord (11:22-24).

Barnabas was of the tribe of Levi. Even though he was Jewish, he was born in Cyprus, an island off the coast of Palestine with a predominantly Greek culture; thus, he was considered a Hellenistic Jew. He spoke Greek, read from the Greek Septuagint, and was, no doubt, a part of the same circle of Diaspora Jews associated with the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem (mentioned in Acts 6:8-14), of which Saul of Tarsus was a part. This raises the question of whether Saul and Barnabas knew one another before Saul returned to Jerusalem from Damascus (three years after his conversion), and was befriended by Barnabas and introduced to the elders of the Jerusalem church.

Barnabas was a part of the earliest disciples making up the Jerusalem church and became an exemplary figure within the community of believers. Barnabas was, as his name suggests, a person of very strong social intellect, with an openness that easily embraced others.

When he arrived in Antioch he found the Christians located in the city and soon became aware that the challenges of working with these converts were greater than he could handle alone. This adds to the speculation that Barnabas and Saul were acquainted early on,

perhaps through the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem since both were Hellenistic Jews. With Saul's reputation as a Jewish scholar, his skills in rabbinic argumentation and knowledge of Greco-Roman culture, Barnabas could have thought of no one more fit to help him in Antioch. This would also help explain why Barnabas went so far to find Saul and bring him back to Antioch. It is of no little significance that when Barnabas returned to Antioch with Saul, they spent a whole next year with the church teaching a great number of people who came to be called "Christians" first there in Antioch.

They Were First Called Christians in Antioch (11:25-26)

Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they gathered together with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (11:25-26).

This is a very unique text of Scripture, primarily because of the presence of so many terms used to identify these followers of Jesus of Nazareth. They are packed into the text as in a chest from which each term may be taken out and considered individually, and then collectively, for an understanding of how the church was thought of in this early stage of its existence.

In 11:26, we are told that for a whole year Barnabas and Saul assembled (or gathered) with this community of believers here in Antioch. The word for "**assembled**" is *sunago*, the verb form of the word *sunagoge*, from which the word "synagogue" derives, it means, "to gather together." The word for "**church**" is *ekklesia*, which means, "those called out to an assembly," and was one of the terms used in the Greek Septuagint to identify the "congregation of Israel." We also read that they taught "**large crowds of people**" (which is how the Greek text for "many people" actually reads), thus, implying that the concept of the church was essentially associated with people not edifices or buildings.

We are told that these "disciples" were called "Christians" first here in Antioch. The word "**disciples**" was the earliest designation for the followers of Jesus; this is especially true in Acts of Apostles. That those converted here in Antioch soon became "disciples" is evident from the text. To be a disciple is to be a follower of a teacher and his teaching as was the case with the great teachers of Classical Greece, but here the association of those desiring to learn more of this Messiah would have been those who came out of the synagogue, so the disciples would have become the *talmidim* of the teacher who sat before them, which suggests a more serious leaning endeavor than simple discussion.

Upon his arrival in Antioch Barnabas set about to teach these new Hellenistic Jewish Christians, but soon realized that these newly converted disciples needed a teacher *par excellence*, a witness of the risen Messiah/Christ with significant ability in showing that Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of the Scriptures. The teacher Barnabas would seek out was Saul of Tarsus, who had seen the risen Jesus; and what made his witness so significant is that Saul of Tarsus did not want to see Jesus of Nazareth alive. What happened to him on the road to Damascus meant that everything he had wanted for himself, as an established Jewish scholar, was now impossible. He would, however, become something far greater as a spokesman for the one he had seen resurrected from death.

The fact that it was here, in this Greek speaking culture, that the term Christian was first introduced is not hard to understand. The term "Christians" is from the Greek "*Christanous*." It literally means, "of or associated with Christ." Since Antioch was a Hellenistic culture and Greek was the primary language of Antioch, the Greek word *Christos* was used in the place of the Hebrew *Mashiach* (Messiah).

The word "Christian" is unique to the Greek language; it does not have an exact Hebrew equivalent. The Hebrew word for Christ (someone who is anointed) is *Mashiach* (anointed one), so the Hebrew equivalent of "the Christians" would have been something negative

like “the followers of the Nazarene,” which occurs in some of the rabbinic literature. How the believers identified themselves would likely have been where the term *christianous* developed. That Jesus or *Yeshua* was believed by these followers to be the *Mashiach*, it is very likely that they called themselves as the Jewish Christians in modern Israel today; as the case with brother Joseph Shulam, of the Nativity [the Way] Ministry in Jerusalem. He calls himself a Messianic Jew, a follower of *Yeshua Ha Mashiach* – Jesus the Messiah. To the Jewish believers of the early church, this was probably the way they spoke of themselves.

There is another word here in this text that warrants comment; it is the word "called." We are told that the disciples "were called" Christians. The Greek word translated "were called" is *chrematizo*, a word that is used in the NT exclusively for "to be divinely called," in fulfillment of Isaiah 62:2, where God declares that there will come a time when he will call his people by a new name.

The term *chrematizo* is found in nine occurrences in the NT and in every text it describes a communication that has come from God (Matt 2:12, 22; Luke 2:26; Acts 11:26; 10:22; Heb 11:7; 8:5; 12:25), with the possible exception of Rom 7:3, and there it is God who has called the woman "an adulteress" if she is unfaithful to her husband, and in the same letter (Rom 11:4), Paul uses *chrematismos* for God's answer to Elijah, so he knew of this usage and the nuance of the word. One may not want to take a dogmatic stance here, but it is curiously tempting to see God's hand in the name by which the followers of Jesus have been called for centuries.

Learning from the First Christians

With whom would you most easily identify in this text or story? Or better, with whom would you most like to identify? The players in this text are Barnabas, the Hellenistic Jews who had to flee Jerusalem and came to Antioch in Syria with the story of Jesus. Then there are the new converts of this newly established church in Antioch, many of whom were gentiles who had been idolaters - worshipers of the gods and goddesses of the Greco-Roman

paganism. Finally, there's Saul of Tarsus, who had been converted to Christ ten years earlier and had come to Antioch at the request of Barnabas.

Barnabas

First, there's Barnabas, whose name was Joseph, but he had somehow come by a name that in Aramaic means, "son of encouragement," and this appears to be what he does when he comes to Antioch from Jerusalem. Acts 11:23 says, "When he came and had seen the grace of God [i.e. the effects of the grace of God since grace is an abstract that can only be seen by its effects], he was glad, **and encouraged them all** that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord."

What does the expression "with purpose of heart" mean? Most probably he encouraged them to purpose in their hearts that now that they had become new creations in Christ, they would remain "in Christ" and not return to their former way of life. Why would this be the case? Because encouraging them to remain in Christ would be of great importance to Barnabas, given their Greco-Roman enculturation. What they had been in the culture of this Greco-Roman city was going to have to change.

They would have to become a part of another culture distinct from the culture with which they had been identified. They could not think as idolaters thought, and could no longer believe the numerous myths concerning the gods and goddesses of Greco-Roman paganism. They could no longer behave as the culture they had been a part of had permitted them to behave. They had lived as people with no fixed moral standards and now they were new creations in Christ and they would have to learn how to act as beings created in the image of God - a concept they had probably never heard before. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians who were of the same culture as these new Christians of Antioch,

... you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the

kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient (Eph 2:1-2).

The Storytellers

. . . those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks, preaching the Lord Jesus (11:19-20).

Rather than run away and hide, the disciples who were scattered from Jerusalem went to areas where they had family or friends and began to tell everyone the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Those scattered were preaching only to the Jews, but the disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene decided to take the gospel to the Greeks of Antioch, as well as the Hellenistic Jews.

Without these disciples from Cyprus and Cyrene, we wouldn't have this story. Even though Saul of Tarsus was trying to silence the gospel through violence, these disciples who fled from Jerusalem continued to tell the story of Jesus to everyone who would listen.

Who would have thought that Saul's persecution of the Christians in Jerusalem would have resulted in the gospel being taken to the city of Antioch of Syria, and eventually would bring Saul back from Tarsus where he then began his marvelous career as "Paul the Apostle to the gentiles?"

The New Believers

Perhaps, we can identify with these new believers. There appears to have been a great demand for more knowledge of their newfound faith than Barnabas could handle alone. I can remember when I was converted to Christ; I kept three of the members of the Salem church consumed with my questions almost daily. A brother named Ronald White, another named Jack Hyder, and the minister of the Salem church, Roy Miller, whose example became my idea of

what a minister of Christ should be. He was truly "a scholar in the pulpit;" in fact, it was Roy Miller who introduced me to the Greek New Testament, which led to my desire to learn to read from the Greek NT myself, resulting in my moving to Atlanta, GA to attend Atlanta Christian College.

I must have been a little too obsessive for the brethren there at the Salem church because they started buying me books to keep me busy: a *Zondervan's Bible Dictionary*, *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, one of them loaned me a *Thompson's Chain Reference Bible*, until I could afford one myself.

Saul of Tarsus

In Acts 9:30, we read that some of the brethren of the Jerusalem church (probably Barnabas included), took Saul of Tarsus to the coast and put him on a ship for Tarsus because they learned that certain Jews of Jerusalem had planned to assassinate him. Then, between Act 9:30 and Acts 11:25, seven years pass.

Following his confrontation with the risen Jesus, Saul returned to his home in Tarsus, where he stayed for seven years. What do you suppose he was thinking as to why the Lord left him there so long? Jesus had told him that he had appeared to him to send him to the *ethnoi* - nations. As Paul retold Jesus' words to the court of Festus in Caesarea, Jesus had said to him:

. . . I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you. I will rescue you from your own people and from the gentiles. I am sending you to them [the gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me," (Acts 26:16-18).

What did Saul of Tarsus think Jesus meant by these words? For seven years he waited for the Lord to let him know what he was to

do. But, Saul wasn't just sitting around making tents; God was continuing to communicate with him through revelations.

In 2 Cor 12:1-10, Paul says that fourteen years prior to the time of the letter he was writing (2nd Corinthians), he had been given a revelation from God in which he was caught up into the third heaven. This letter was written around 56 or 57 AD; so, that would put this revelation around 42 or 43 AD, while he was still in Tarsus.

There was also a church in Cilicia (where Tarsus was located) mentioned in Acts 15. The letter sent out from the apostles and elders of the church in Jerusalem concerning the issue of circumcision for the gentiles was addressed to the gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:23).

During this seven year period, Saul would have very likely been in the synagogues of Tarsus searching through their scrolls of the Law and the prophets; especially, looking for a greater understanding of the identity of the Messiah and especially how he could have not known him when he came to Israel. Now, however, the veil that covered the eyes of those of Israel who could not see who Jesus was no longer covering his eyes, to use the analogy found in his own words in 2 Cor 4:3-4,

. . . even if our gospel is veiled it is veiled to those who are perishing [in the context of 3:12-4:6, this would be the Jew who refused to believe] 4The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Then, in verses 14 through 16, he writes:

We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. 14But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. 15Even to this day when Moses is read, a

veil covers their hearts. 16But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.

In these words Paul was very possibly speaking of his own blindness prior to his conversion the Christ. Paul seems to use the book of Isaiah more than any other OT writing. There are at least 104 references or quotes from Isaiah in the letters of Paul.

Perhaps the Lord was opening the Scriptures to Saul as he had done with the other apostles. In Luke 24 he said to the eleven following his resurrection, "This is what I told you while I was still with you, everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms," (cf. Luke 24:44-49). Luke tells us further that Jesus, "opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:46). Perhaps, this is what he was doing with Saul of Tarsus during these seven hidden years that he was in Tarsus.

Application

What does these seven years of waiting tell us about Saul's faith? He was there in Tarsus for seven years waiting for Jesus to come for him; and he does come for him, the one who shows up is Barnabas, who was, no doubt, sent by a revelation from Jesus. What does all this tell us? One thing is that God moves in his own good time. He does what he does in the way he chooses, not the way we think it should be done.

Barnabas is not the main player in the book of Acts of Apostles, but he is the main player here in this story. He comes to Antioch and becomes a minister to these newly converted Christians there. He went to Tarsus, a two hundred mile round trip, to find Saul and bring him to Antioch; and thus brings the main player of the second part of the story of Acts of Apostles back on stage.

Those who were scattered because of the persecution led by Saul of Tarsus went everywhere preaching the Lord Jesus. Who would have thought that Saul's persecution of the Christians in

Jerusalem would have resulted in the gospel being taken to the city of Antioch of Syria? But God does what he does in his own good time and in his own way, even if we don't understand what he is doing.

What do you remember about the period following your conversion to Christ? Did you pursue a greater knowledge of who Jesus was, as did these converts in Antioch? Were you privileged to have such a teacher as the Apostle Paul? Or, did you just fall into place with all the others who just go to church, faithfully, but that's what they do as Christians; they just go to church.

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