

Journey with Jesus – Part 3

By Tom and Alberta Ecker (via Dan Rogers' Sermon)

As we brought out in Part 1, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and disciples who were in Jerusalem to empower and enable them to testify and witness to the good news of his life, his death, his resurrection and the message of salvation and the gift of eternal life. The good news was to begin at Jerusalem, then go out to the rest of Judea then Samaria then to the ends of the earth.

We brought out in Part 2, beginning in **Acts 6**, the continuing story of the early church. **Acts 6:3** introduced us to Stephen, the first Christian martyr. He is named first in the list of seven men **chosen to distribute food**. The Apostles had instructed the brethren to choose men who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. **Stephen also did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.**

It would certainly follow that opposition would arise. Stephen is arrested due to false accusations. But this opposition and arrest would lead to a mighty and powerful testimony before the Sanhedrin.

In **Acts 7** Stephen rehearses the history of Israel in all its glory and pathos. But then he comes down to the reality and hypocrisy of those who are sitting before him. He continues to speak the truth but now it is the truth about them and it makes them furious.

Acts 7:58

⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

Acts 8:1

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.

Acts 8:4

4 Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

Here the scripture reveals that the disciples are preaching and spreading the word throughout Judea and Samaria **even before and ahead of the Apostles**. It is apparent that all disciples share the gospel news of Jesus to others where ever they are.

Acts 9:31

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit; it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

Acts 11:19-20

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus.

These scattered believers went out but some of them only gave the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to Jews. But some went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks let's remember that these Greeks in Antioch would have been uncircumcised gentiles. **So it is uncircumcised gentiles who are first called "Christians."**

The leaders in Jerusalem did not rush off to Antioch, so who was leading the way? It was those scattered disciples who were full of the Spirit and faith in the Lord Jesus. They were being led by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in **Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch**. Did these disciples have to send to Jerusalem to get a license first? Did they have to check with HQ to be sure they could **witness to the love and salvation** given to them through the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ? No!

Antioch became a significant Christian church for the early Christians. It was very diverse in its culture. Christianity was breaking loose and spreading out from there, going out to the farthest lands of the gentiles. And Saul (who becomes Paul in Chapter 13) becomes the main Apostle and teacher to

the gentile world; he will be the one who keeps them grounded in the Old Testament scriptures as he himself is inspired by the Holy Spirit to write New Testament scripture.

Now we come to our third and final sermon in this series from Dan Rogers' notes, we will focus on the church at Antioch. We will bring out the **characteristics** of Antioch and **the work** among the gentiles that went out from there **and why** it became the Headquarters church for the gentile work.

What were some of the **characteristics** of the Antioch church?

God was sending out the gospel from an area that was just as diverse culturally as the areas to which he was sending the gospel. The Apostles (who were still in Jerusalem) would look like Jews, they would still act like Jews; they were still observing the Jewish days of worship and did not have the diverse cultural understanding that was needed by the diverse cultures of that day. Someone with the background and the diverse cultural understanding of Paul the Apostle would be needed to spread the gospel throughout the nations of that time.

What was **the work** that went out from Antioch?

Why did God choose Antioch to spearhead the New Testament spreading of the Gospel? Why did the Holy Spirit pick Antioch? A little history to help us from Harpers Bible Dictionary:

Antioch (an-tee-ahk) (Syrian), a city (modern Antakya in Turkey) founded by Seleucus Nicator in 300 B. C. and conquered by Rome in 64 B. C. Located on the Orontes River in the northwestern corner of the Roman province of Syria, it was the province's capital, the third largest city of the empire, a center of Greek culture, and a commercial hub. Jews inhabited Antioch from its foundation and enjoyed the right to observe their own customs. The various synagogues of the city sent representatives to a council of elders presided over by a 'ruler.' Large numbers of Antiochene Gentiles were attracted to Jewish worship. Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven Hellenist leaders in Jerusalem (**Acts 6:5**), was among those Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes. The first Jewish war (A. D. 66-73) occasioned anti-Jewish riots in Antioch, but on the whole Judaism enjoyed a peaceful life at Antioch and thus provided early Christians a stable matrix. Public order, a prosperous urban culture, a Judaism used to [having] contacts with Gentiles, an intellectual and religious milieu open to many currents, interest in

mystery cults, fine roads and lines of communication—all these factors favored Antioch as an energetic center for Christian missionary outreach.

Christianity at Antioch: Christianity was brought to Antioch by Hellenists Jews who fled from Jerusalem after the martyrdom of Stephen (**Acts 11:19-20**). Thus began the first Christian generation at Antioch (A. D. 40-70). At Antioch Hellenists from Cyprus and Cyrene made the momentous decision to begin, as a matter of policy, to convert Gentiles without circumcision [because the Holy Spirit had been given to the Gentiles by this time]. This striking difference from Jewish proselytism set these believers apart, and so it was at Antioch that they received a new name, 'Christians' (**Acts 11:26**). The Jerusalem church sought to develop this new direction of the church by sending Barnabas, a fellow Cypriote, to guide the Antiochene community. To aid him in teaching this 'large company' of believers, Barnabas brought Saul (Paul) from Tarsus to Antioch, where 'for a whole year they met with the church' (**Acts 11:22-26**). Along with Symeon Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen (a childhood companion of Herod Antipas), they formed a leadership group of 'prophets and teachers' (**Acts 13:1**). This group sent Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey (**Acts 13:2-14:28**).

Acts 1 to 13 is de-emphasized today yet these are chapters that tell the earliest history of the church, beginning from Jerusalem and going out to the ends of the earth. These chapters show how the worship of God moved from Judaism to Christianity, from an exclusive Judean worship of God to an inclusive plan of salvation in Christ alone. Can we, as Christians, be as enthusiastic about this history story as Stephen was about the history of Israel? Can we rehearse this story about us with the same profound inspiration? In our Christ centered life with God, in Jesus, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit let's not de-emphasize these chapters but rather let's embrace them as the foundation of our story as Christians.

Acts 13:1-4 *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 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."* ³ *So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.* ⁴ *The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.*

There were prophets (proclaimer's) and teachers. We would call Saul an intern. In the past we would call Saul a ministerial assistant. The Holy Spirit sets aside Barnabas and Saul to do the work he had chosen for

them. This point of church history clearly shows that the Holy Spirit is the person who talks and chooses and gives spiritual gifts to the church. It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the leadership to pray over Barnabas and Saul. The church in Antioch was a spirit filled church. The church in Antioch, led by the Holy Spirit, sent out their very best to win the lost.

The Antioch church was generous with money and they were generous with their personnel. Antioch became the new headquarters church because they were generous, because they had good teachers, because the disciples shared their experience of salvation with friends, family, and neighbors, and the church had prophets. Let's not miss the point: they were an incredible church because they were first generous and then had good teachers and prophets who were discipling.

In digesting all that we have learned, the Antioch church is a good positive model for us today: our churches want to be diverse, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and generous. We want to have team leadership, and grow to the point where we can be sending out gifted leadership teams to the rest of the community and the world.

In GCI, we want our churches to be viral churches, which are churches that spread out all over the area, like a virus from a central location. Let's pray and ask God to make us be an Antioch like church, on a mission with God. We are moving on to Antioch and out from there to enjoy the journey with Jesus. So as we go let's remember to ***enjoy the journey with Jesus.***