

# THE FIRST GREAT GENTILE CHURCH: GOD'S PATTERN FOR ALL CHURCHES

## ACTS 11:19–30

### *Introduction*

There is no question — this passage covers one of the most significant events in history. It is the founding of the first great Gentile church. The church was founded under God's sovereignty, control and will. The church is set forth very simply, yet as a dynamic pattern for all churches and believers to copy.

- I. The church was born (vv. 19-21).
- II. The church was followed up and taught (vv. 22-24).
- III. The church sought after additional teaching staff (vv. 25-26).
- IV. The church met consistently for intensive training (v. 26).
- V. The church developed an unbelievable heritage — for itself and for Christ: believers were called Christians (v. 26).
- VI. The church launched its own worldwide mission (vv. 27-30).

### ACTS 11:19–30 ANTIOCH

Antioch was the third greatest city of the Roman world, following only Rome and Alexandria in size and importance. The city had over a half-million citizens.

1. Note the secular history and nature of the city. The city...
  - was founded by Seleucius Nicator around 300 BC. He named the city after his father Antiochus.
  - became the capital of Syria when Rome conquered Syria.
  - was dominated by Greek culture and language; however it had a large Syrian and Jewish population.
  - was about fifteen miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea, lying on the mouth of the Orontes river. The seaport that supplied the city was Seleucia (see Acts 13:4).
  - was the third major commercial and cosmopolitan centre of the world, always active with the hustle and bustle of worldwide trade and an influx of salesmen, businessmen, labourers and visitors.
  - was tolerant of all religions, forbidding none. But it was the home of the great temple of Daphne, which was the worship of an immoral god. The prophetesses of the temple were sacred prostitutes.

- was a great centre for sport and the pursuit of pleasure. It was known as a city *gone mad* over sport and pleasure. It was a cesspool of license and pleasure, and because of this the name of Antioch became a byword around the world for sensual pleasure. It was *bustling* day and night with whatever pleasure man desired.

2. Note the importance of the city to Christian history.

=> Antioch was the city of the first great Christian church among Gentiles (Acts 11:19-30).

=> Antioch was the city and church from which the first worldwide missionaries were sent (Acts 13:1-3). It was the city from which the great mission thrust of Christianity was launched.

=> Antioch was the church where believers were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26). ■

### ACTS 11:19–30

#### PREACHING, WITNESSING, EXHORTATION, TEACHING

In this passage there are three different Greek words used for witnessing and sharing the Word. They show the ministry of the church, just how believers are to go about sharing Christ.

1. There is the word *speak* (*lalountes*, v. 20). This word really means speaking and should be translated *speaking*. It is the simple sharing of conversation among people. As the believers scattered and travelled about, they "spoke the Word," shared Christ in ordinary conversation. The picture is that of witnessing one on one, of scattering the *seed* wherever they went. Christ was the topic of their conversation. They were saved and had received life, both abundant and eternal, and were rejoicing in the glory of the greatest hope imaginable. Their salvation, the presence and power of Christ in their lives, was what was upon their mind; therefore, they were talking about Christ and sharing Him, scattering the glorious message of the gospel everywhere they went.

*Acts 8:5 Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there.*

*Acts 8:35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.*

*Acts 9:20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*

*Acts 10:36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.*

**1 Cor 1:23** *But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.*

2. There is the word *telling* [euaggelizomenoi] them the good news about the Lord Jesus (v. 20). This word means to declare and proclaim the gospel; to preach the glad tidings of Jesus Christ; to proclaim the Word, the truth about Jesus Christ. It means that the believers who went to Antioch actually entered the city preaching and proclaiming the Lord Jesus. The picture is...
  - that of their entering the city to *bring* the Lord Jesus to its residents. The believers were set on reaching the city for God, and their method was preaching the Lord Jesus.
  - that of facing a person or persons, of standing before people and preaching Christ.
3. There is the word *encouraged* (parekalei, v. 23). This word means to admonish, advise, challenge, entreat, call upon, beseech, urge, warn and comfort.
  - a. Note what the message of exhortation concerns: that people “would remain true to the Lord.” The very focus of encouragement is to challenge, encourage and warn believers to “remain true to the Lord.”
  - b. Note how closely the Greek word is associated with the Greek word for the Holy Spirit (paraclete, see Jn. 14:16). The very ministry of the Holy Spirit is encouragement. His very presence and power within the genuine believer is for the purpose of urging, comforting, helping and warning believers to “remain true to the Lord” and to bear testimony to His glorious salvation.
  - c. Note that the minister's ministry was that of encouragement. Even as the Holy Spirit stood within the church as Another Helper to Christ, so Barnabas was to stand as *another helper* to Christ. Barnabas was to challenge and encourage and warn the people: they must “remain true to the Lord.”

**Mat 5:2** *And he began to teach them, saying:*

**Acts 18:26** *He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.*

**2 Tim 4:2** *Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction.*

**Titus 1:9** *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*

**Titus 2:11-15** *For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live*

*self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope — the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you. □*

## **I. Acts 11:19–21 Church Founded**

The church was born. This passage tells what happened to the believers who were forced to flee Jerusalem after the death of Stephen. Saul had launched a terrible persecution against them, attempting to stamp out the name of Christ (see Acts 8:1-4; 9:1-9). They scattered all over...

- Phoenicia, which included the important cities of Tyre and Sidon.
- Cyprus (see *Cyprus*, Acts 13:4).
- Antioch (see *Antioch*, Acts 11:19-30)

The point is striking: as the believers scattered, they preached Christ. The picture is that there was not an area left untouched by the gospel. Wherever the believers went, they shared Christ. However, the focus is upon Antioch, the great church that was founded there. Note what it was that gave birth to the great church. There were three essentials.

1. The church was born through lay believers, through their witnessing (v. 19) and sharing (v. 20). (See *Preaching*, pts. 1 and 2, Acts 11:19-30.)
2. The church was born by lay believers sharing Christ with everyone, no matter who they were, both Gentile and Jew. Note that some believers witnessed to the Jews only (v. 19), but other believers witnessed to the Gentiles in Antioch (v. 20). The gospel of Christ is for the whole world. It may have begun with the Jew, but God is the God of the universe, of all men. Therefore, He longs for all men to know about the coming of His Son into the world and to be saved through Him. Note also the message preached: the Lord Jesus.

**Isa 45:22** “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”

**Isa 55:1** “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

**Mat 22:9** ‘Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.’

**John 7:37** On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.”

**Rom 10:12** For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile — the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.

**1 Tim 2:4** *Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

**Rev 22:17** *The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*

3. The church was born through the Lord's hand, by His sovereignty and control. God overruled all the trials and opposition and caused the church to be born.

⇒ God overruled the persecution.

⇒ God overruled the fear and trauma of the believers who were having to flee for their lives, to leave their homes and friends and businesses. Discouragement, questioning, unbelief, desertion, denial, silence and failure to witness — all could have set in upon the persecuted believers who were losing all they had. But God overruled and held them dear to His heart, giving them a very special grace to endure and march through all triumphantly, proclaiming the name of the Lord Jesus.

⇒ God overruled the pleasure-madness and sins of Antioch.

⇒ God overruled and stirred the believers to witness and preach Christ despite all the trials and opposition. God caused the church to be born. His sovereignty. His control. His power — "the Lord's hand was with them." The result: "a great number of people *believed and turned to the Lord.*" The first great Gentile church was born, and it was born through God's sovereignty.

**Luke 1:79** *"To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."*

**Psa 25:9** *He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.*

**Isa 42:6** *"I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles."*

## II. **Acts 11:22–24** *Follow-up in the Church*

The church was followed up and taught. Note three significant events that happened.

1. The mother church heard about the witness of the scattered believers. Remember, both the apostles and the first leaders of the church were still in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was still considered the mother church, the one to whom the scattered churches looked for leadership. The church and its leaders wanted to help the new churches springing up all around. The purpose is clearly seen in what Barnabas did. The mother church wanted the new churches...
  - to have ministerial help (v. 22)
  - to be exhorted or encouraged (v. 23)
  - to be taught (v. 26)

2. A missionary disciple was commissioned to help the new churches. Again, the focus is upon Antioch. Note three things about the missionary Barnabas.
  - a. His ministry was encouragement (see *Preaching*, pt. 3, Acts 11:19-30). The message was...
    - “with all their hearts”: a determined, set, focused, resolute, steady, purposed heart.
    - to “remain true to the Lord”: to continue, be constant, loyal, steadfast, persistent, persevering, faithful.

**Josh 23:8** *But you are to hold fast to the Lord your God, as you have until now.*

**1 Cor 15:58** *Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

**Gal 5:1** *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

**Phil 1:27** *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.*

**1 Pet 5:9** *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

**2 Pet 3:17** *Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.*

- b. His character was striking.

⇒ *Good (agathos)*: upright, just, moral, honourable and pleasing to God. He was what he should be inwardly and outwardly.

⇒ Full of the Holy Spirit: conscious and aware of the spirit's presence and power, control and discipline, will and purpose, guidance and direction — all the fruit of the Spirit.

**Gal 5:22-23** *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (see Rom. 8:1)*

**Eph 5:18** *Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.*

⇒ Full of faith: believing both in the Lord and in His purpose and power to do whatever He willed and led one to do.

**Mat 21:22** *“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”*

**Rom 4:24** *but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*

**Heb 11:6** *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

**Thought 1.** No disciple of the Lord, certainly no minister of the gospel, should be any less than Barnabas.

3. A tremendous result was experienced. Many were added to the Lord (see vv. 21, 24, 26).

**Thought 1.** New churches will reach people — in fact any church will reach people...

- when believers are witnessing faithfully.
- when churches are showing interest in the witnessing of believers elsewhere.
- when disciples and ministers are encouraging and demonstrating such godly character.

### III. *Acts 11:25–26 Paul Brought to Antioch*

The church sought additional staff — to have an adequate teaching staff. Barnabas is the one who is the focus of attention in this point, but the church was bound to have sensed the need for additional staff and given its approval. The point is this: the need was sensed and the decision was made to seek for help. The only question was who should be secured. A unique person was needed, a person who not only had a Jewish background, but who knew the Greek language and culture and could relate to both Gentile and Jew alike. The person also needed to be fearless and bold in his witness for Christ because of the godless, immoral society of Antioch.

Barnabas knew such a man: Saul of Tarsus. So he set out to find him. The word *look* (*anazeteo*) means to search for, to search back and forth, up and down; to make a thorough search. Paul had been busy throughout Syria and Cilicia preaching Christ (Gal. 1:21). Apparently Barnabas had difficulty finding him. But note: he knew God's will, so he did not give up the search. He kept searching until he found God's choice.

**Thought 1.** What a dynamic lesson for all churches in seeking help and in building a church staff!

**Mat 4:19** *“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”*

**John 1:41-42** *The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas” (which, when translated, is Peter).*

**John 1:45** *Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”*

**Acts 11:25-26** *Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.*

#### **IV. Acts 11:26 Training of Believers**

The church — many of the believers — met consistently for intensive training (see *Preaching*, pt. 4, Acts 11:19-30). Note three facts that are self-explanatory.

1. The purpose for the church meeting together was to be taught about the Lord...
  - His death according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3).
  - His resurrection according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:4).
  - His teachings, doctrines, and instructions (Mt. 28:19-20; see Acts 17:11).
2. “A great number of people” were taught, not just a few. The believers hungered to learn the truth.
3. The church met together consistently for a *whole year*.

#### **V. Acts 11:26 The Name: “Christian”**

The church developed an unbelievable heritage for itself and for Christ. The believers at Antioch were the first to be called “Christians.” Note:

- => The name was a nickname given to believers by the unsaved people at Antioch.
- => The title was a name for people belonging to Christ, for the followers of Christ.
- => The title is used only two other times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16).
- => Believers took the name *Christian* and began applying it to themselves. It was to become the name adopted by the whole world for the followers of Christ.

**Thought 1.** What a heritage the believers of Antioch left to the world, the very name of being *followers of Christ*.

**Thought 2.** Every person who calls himself a Christian should be a true follower of Christ. How tragic that so many are not (Col. 2:6; 1 Jn. 2:6)!

**Col 2:6** *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.*

**1 Pet 2:21** *To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*

**1 John 2:6** *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

#### **VI. Acts 11:27–30 Church's Worldwide Mission**

The church launched its own worldwide mission. Very simply, some prophets from Jerusalem came to help in the ministry of Antioch. We do not know what led them to come: an invitation from Antioch or a commissioning by the Jerusalem church or some direction from the Holy Spirit. Neither do we know how many came, but this one thing is sure: it was God's will that they came. This is known by what follows.

1. There was a prophecy of great need. One of the prophets, Agabus, predicted a worldwide famine. (See Acts 21:10 for another reference to Agabus.)



- => The prophecy was not a deduction, not of the reasoning ability of Agabus. The prophecy was of the Spirit.
- => The famine took place during the reign of Claudius Caesar who ruled between A.D. 41-54.
2. There was a sharing of money and supplies. Everyone sent relief to Jerusalem "according to his ability." The point to note is this: the newly born church at Antioch was now seen launching its own mission project. They were now helping the mother church, the church that had originally helped them (vv. 22-24).
  3. There was the sharing of ministers. Note who was sent by the church: their two chief ministers, Barnabas and Saul. They delivered the offering to the elders at the Jerusalem church (see *Elders*, Tit. 1:5-9). Paul was later to encourage constant giving to the needs of God's people (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-27; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; Gal. 2:10).

**Gal 6:10** *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

**1 Tim 6:18** *Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.*

**Heb 13:16** *And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

**Psa 37:3** *Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.* ■

## ACTS 11: 27 PROPHETS

*During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.*  
**Acts 11:27**

This is the first time the title *prophets* is mentioned in the early church. The function of a New Testament prophet was primarily threefold: to edify, exhort, encourage and comfort (1 Cor. 14:3; see Acts 15:32). However, he was also given the grace to foretell the future as God willed to reveal it. In the list of New Testament gifts, prophets are listed in order of priority next to apostles (1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11).

=> Some early prophets are named (Acts 13:1; 15:32; 11:28; see 21:10).

=> Prophets were given the spiritual gift of teaching (Acts 13:1).

=> The gift of prophecy can be exercised at will by the prophets (1 Cor. 15:32).

=> Prophets face a great danger: super-spirituality or pride (1 Cor. 15:37).

=> The early prophets were considered as part of the foundation of the church — right along with the apostles (Eph. 2:20).

=> The understanding of the mysteries of the church was given to the early prophets by special revelation from the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:5-6). ■