

The First Christians

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Date: 17 January 1999

Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of January 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled The First Christians and is from Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 30. Please be seated.

You may like to open your Bibles at Acts chapter 11 which was the reading read to us this morning. And we're looking at verses 19 through to the end of the chapter. And it can be found on page 895 of the Black Bibles in the pews there.

Well the early years of the church would have been exhilarating times for those who witnessed and were involved in it. God's people witnessed miracles before their very eyes as well as acts of atrocities as well.

Now despite their persecutions, the followers of Jesus were convinced and they were utterly convinced that Jesus was worth following.

[1 : 11] And more than that, that he was worth telling others about as well. In the passage that was read to us this morning by Talitha, we read perhaps unwittingly about one of the greatest events in history.

Because now for the first time, the gospel of Jesus Christ is deliberately preached to the Gentiles. That is to those who were other than Jews, people other than Jews.

And everything that we have looked at in the opening chapters of the book of Acts, the first ten chapters, has been, I think, working up to this point. We've seen, if you've read recently, we've been preaching through Acts, we've seen that Peter has preached the gospel in Jerusalem, starting off with the Jews, and how in chapter 8, a guy called Philip, a great guy, has preached the gospel to the Samaritans.

Now the Samaritans were only half Jews. And in chapter 10, the last two weeks, we've seen how Peter again has proclaimed the gospel to a guy called Cornelius.

Now Cornelius was a God-fearing Gentile. He wasn't a Jew. But in chapter 10, it was Cornelius who took the initiative. It wasn't the Christian church.

[2 : 33] For example, who sought Cornelius. Now of course, it's important for us to realise that God is involved in the whole process of the gospel proclamation.

And we'll see more of this as we look through this passage this morning. Well, we start off in verse 19 where it says, Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch.

We see that the people here are scattered far and wide to Cyprus, Phoenicia and Cyrene and so on. They went far away.

And what they did is they spoke the word. That is, they preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it says that they preached it to no one except the Jews.

But in verse 20 we read a truly amazing thing. The church here has now taken the most epoch-making of all steps. And we don't even know the names of the people who took that step.

[3 : 41] All we know is that these people came from a place called Cyprus and Cyrene and on their arrival in the city of Antioch they spoke to the Hellenists.

That is, the Gentile residents or the Greek residents of the city. And what they did when they got there was they proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it is these people from Cyprus and Cyrene who go down in history as the nameless pioneers of Christ.

That's always been, I think, one of the tragedies of the church that people have wished to be noticed and named when they did something worthwhile.

But what the church has always needed is people who never care who gains the credit for whatever it is that they do so long as the work is done. And these people who came from Cyprus and Cyrene may not have their names recorded in history books but they have their names written in the book of life, in God's book of life forever, for eternity.

If we look at verse 18, go back a little step. We read that Peter's report to the church in Jerusalem leads them to the conclusion that God has given even to the Gentiles, that is, people who aren't Jews, the repentance that leads to life.

[5 : 13] Now the people from Cyprus and Cyrene and the city of Antioch are proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ to Gentiles. And we see in verse 21 that the hand of the Lord was with them as they did this.

The hand of the Lord was with them as they did this. And the result, a great number became believers and turned to the Lord, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ. Where God is involved, people's lives are changed.

And similarly, churches that grow are churches that have the hand of the Lord upon them as well. Now you can have as many programs in places you would like for your church and even people may attend those sorts of programs for a time and that might be really exciting because our church is growing and we have great numerical growth.

But without God's hand upon them spiritual growth will not succeed. And this is the danger that I, as a minister, have to face all the time.

Of course, I think it's a good and necessary thing to have programs in place for a church. We have to have all those sorts of things happening. But if the program is only in place for numerical growth then its purpose is fruitless.

[6 : 41] For us to continue seeing real growth we need to continue together as a church praying. We need to continue reading God's word and more importantly seeking to proclaim Jesus' name.

Jesus' name. Rather than seeking to make a name for ourselves. And that's what the people from Cyprus and Cyrene did. And a great many people turned to the Lord in Antioch.

Now Antioch is not a squeaky clean city. It was far from it. It was a very cosmopolitan city. It was very multicultural. It was a seaport. So you would have had lots of people coming in and out of the place. And it was the third largest city in the Roman world. And it was a city famous for its chariot racing and for a kind of deliberate pursuit of pleasure which went on literally night and day. And it was a place which was known for its loose living. Orgiastic rites were celebrated there in the name of religion. And if you think about it, it really doesn't sound all that different to our own city of Melbourne.

[7 : 57] But the Christian's faith, however, within that city was able to make an impression on the city of Antioch because the hand of the Lord was with those who proclaim the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the Christian faith will always make an impression by those who proclaim it wherever they are. Not because of whom they are but because of what they have become in Christ.

and because of how Christ works through those who seek to serve him. The gospel will always be advanced where people seek to serve the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well in verse 22 we read that the news of what is happening here in the city of Antioch finally gets down to the church of Jerusalem which is hundreds of kilometres away.

And so this church of Jerusalem determined to send Barnabas to invest it to Antioch to investigate the situation of what's happening up there. And again we see that it is the hand of the Lord that makes the Jerusalem church decide to send a guy called Barnabas.

[9 : 10] I called him Barney early on last year at a series of Bible studies I gave. And the Jerusalem church would still have had a dominance of Jewish converts to it at the time which perhaps brought along with them their Jewish traditions.

All these Jewish converts in the church bring along all their baggage and all those sorts of things. Now had the Jerusalem church sent a person with a rigid mind who made a god of the Jewish law because that's what the Jews were known most for in some respect and had they sent a person who was rigid with that sort of thing and he was shackled by its rules and regulations it may have resulted in a different outcome on arrival in Antioch.

But the Jerusalem church sent a man with the biggest heart in the church and that was a guy called Barnabas. And Barnabas had already given proof of his Christian love by his generosity for his

needy brothers and sisters in Christ in earlier chapters in Acts.

So Barnabas goes, he goes off to Antioch and on arrival there, what he sees is the grace of God in verse 23. He sees the grace of God at work in the Gentile converts change lives and in this new international Christian community that's within the city of Antioch.

And the consequences of this is that firstly he rejoiced and secondly he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.

[10:48] It was an exhortation both to perseverance and to wholeheartedness. And similarly we ought always be exhorting one another to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion.

Now a fruit of our faithfulness and steadfastness to the Lord I think will be seen in people around us being converted. that certainly was the case for Barnabas as verse 24 says for he was a good man Barnabas was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith.

The result being that a great many people were brought or the word is literally added to the Lord. God. I must add here that it's not us who do the converting or bring about the change in people's lives.

It is God. It is always God. God is the subject and the object. He's the source and the goal of all evangelism. And only through him are people added to his kingdom.

kingdom. So as we daily give our lives to him in all that we do then he works through us to draw people to him. If we think that it is through us that people come into the kingdom of God then we need to repent of those attitudes.

[12:17] Once again that particular issue I think is an issue for many ministers and I struggle with it more than often. In verses 25 and 26 we see an example that God is the one who is responsible for bringing people back to himself.

We see firstly Barnabas' humility here in wanting to share the ministry of the proclamation of the gospel with a guy called Saul. Now Saul's been out of the picture for a couple of chapters but now until the end of Acts Saul is going to have a centre stage and we see his work going on.

So we see Barnabas' humility and we also see Barnabas' sense of strategy for what he does is he goes off to Tarsus to look for Saul to help share in the gospel proclamation.

He must have known of Saul's calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles as chapter 9 points out. It may well have been the Gentile conversions that he saw in Antioch when he got there which made him think of Saul.

At all events Barnabas goes off to Tarsus he finds Saul there and he brings him to Antioch and then for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people.

[13:46] John Stott who wrote a commentary on this book says of this they must have taught about Christ they must have taught about Jesus Christ making sure that the converts knew both the facts and the significance of his life death resurrection his exaltation and the gifts of the spirit and so on and about his present reign and future coming.

Now do we endeavour to disciple and nurture the people we know who have recently become Christians in the same way which John Stott has talked about there.

In the second part of verse 26 we read that it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians. It's clear from this statement that it wasn't the Christians themselves but the people of Antioch who called them that they called them Christians and the word means those belonging to Christ or Christ's men and as these Christians talked about Jesus to the people everywhere they went that is they talked about Jesus the Christ Jesus the Messiah his death his resurrection and so on the Gentiles that were around them labelled them Christ's men and you can tell from this that the people who labelled them that didn't talk about the church these Christians or Christ's men they talked about Jesus we need to talk about Jesus as we proclaim the gospel now at first it was a contemptuous term the word

Christian was a contemptuous term it was a term of reproach look at these crazy people they come into our city they don't worship our idols they don't observe our moral or immoral standards if you like they live lives which are entirely different from ours so contemptuously they called these people Christ's men Christians but the disciples thought it was wonderful to be called Christ's men so they adopted the name and they called themselves Christians and that's why today we are called Christians Christians but it may be hard for us to understand and be able to get a handle on it because the word Christian is just used in our vocabulary quite a lot but just think back a little bit to the cultural revolution of the 60s and 70s many new words came out of the hippie movement dude cool and I heard someone say the word cool as they came into church this morning and now one of

the words which came out of that movement was the word freak freak you're a freak freak was a common word which was used in the hippie culture and what it does is denote someone who is a devotee of a certain practice or power or a drug so for example there are heroin freaks there are speed freaks and there are various other kinds of freaks it means that someone is intimately associated with the subject of the label so when Christians in the 70s were heard witnessing about Jesus they were all called Jesus freaks no doubt it offended some probably would have offended me but many would not have been offended in the least they probably thought that it was a great compliment even to the point of emblazoning their tie dyed orange t-shirts with the words I am another Jesus freak well that's exactly what the Christians first were labelled in Antioch and they counted it joy to suffer reproach for his name's sake so committed were they to the cause of Jesus Christ so far we've seen that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ has deliberately been preached to non-Jewish people for the first time in Antioch and we've also seen how the Lord's hand has been involved in the process as well as how the church in

[18:05] Jerusalem has investigated the conversion of the Gentiles to Christianity in Antioch and the Gentiles conversion to Christianity is brought about by the grace of God it is by God's undeserved favour shown towards the Gentiles that Christianity has come into the city of Antioch now as we read the last few verses of this chapter verses 27 to 30 we now see here the cooperation of the Jew and the Gentile relationships we witness first hand how the gospel unites cultures bringing people together to work in partnership for the gospel and for the well-being of others verse 27 at that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch one of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world and this took place during the reign of

Claudius now the nature of prophecy in the Old Testament is not so much there to predict the future but it is there to warn and stir people into action and the important thing to notice here with Agabus was not so much that he correctly foretold the future that's obvious there and it was the Holy Spirit who helped him to foretell the future but the other thing to notice here is that he encouraged and helped the Christians that were there when he predicted this prophecy to help each other they stirred them into action and there's also evidence here outside of the Bible to show that there were droughts during the reign of Claudius as well well I'm hearing the words of Abagus in verses 29 and 30 the disciples determined that according to their ability each would send relief to the believers living in Judea and this they did sending it to the elders by

Barnabas and Saul and please notice here that they gave each according to their ability to send relief to the believers in Judea now it looks very much like social justice that is going on here doesn't it and to an extent it is Christians are providing for other needy Christians in other parts of the Roman world as we read about here and there is no doubt action and compassion being displayed and we also as Christians need to think along those lines continually as well helping out our fellow brothers and sisters and the reason we do it is out of grateful thanks for what Christ has done for us but the other thing that is going on here which is more important is the unity which is being displayed here between both the Jewish and the Gentile believers the church of Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to Antioch and Barnabas had helped out the people in

Antioch and when Barnabas got there as I said earlier he rejoiced and he exhorted them to keep on with the faith and he sees the great need for the proclamation of the gospel there and so he sends to Tarsus and gets Saul and they stay in Antioch for a whole year preaching and proclaiming the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ so Jerusalem has sent the Jerusalem church has sent help up to Antioch to help out and now the Antioch church here is sending Barnabas and Saul back to Jerusalem with their relief effort and what we are seeing is a symbol of Gentile and Jewish solidarity in Christ the kind of terminology Gentile and Jews is kind of thrown out the door and the terminology of Christian I guess is brought in in some respects because Gentiles and Jews are working together in solidarity with Christ something unheard of really before

Jesus came along and today I don't think we realise the significance of what is going on in this chapter how important it is for us for each of us sitting here firstly there is the Jews helping Gentiles and the Gentiles helping Jews but they're not Jews and Gentiles they're Christians working together to make the name of Jesus known and secondly the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is going out to all the world just as Jesus Christ had foretold and we read about in the gospels on numerous occasions well it is because of Jesus that these barriers are broken down and it is because of their understanding of what he has done for them that these Jewish and Gentile Christians are able to

work together in partnership and they work in partnership for the sake of the gospel of the [23 : 29] Lord Jesus Christ the blessings are there for them now the blessings are there for us here and now and the rewards are eternal for all of us let's pray our Lord God we give you great thanks and praise that your hand was upon those people from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to Antioch Lord we thank you that your grace has been poured out upon the Gentiles we thank you Lord God that we can come to you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and have a living relationship with you help us to help out those who are in need help us to care for our other brothers and sisters in Christ help us never to be afraid of the proclamation of the gospel Lord we thank you that your Holy Spirit goes with us as we seek to make his name known give us great wisdom and discernment in our workplace at school at home wherever we may be in preaching boldly and living out actively the faith that we have in

Jesus Christ and help us to encourage one another in the fellowship that we have here and outside of church with other Christians to be spurred on and stirred into action to serve in you for we ask this in Jesus name and for his sake Amen