The Early Church: Challenges, Sacrifices and Problems

Part Two: Being Christians

This is part two in a series of studies of the ‘Acts of the Apostles,’ looking at some challenges and problems the early church went through: challenges to their thinking; sacrifices they made to maintain their faith; problems they encountered because of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus. Along the way we consider what those problems, and the Church’s response, say to us.

One note to consider: these studies aren’t necessarily to be completed in one go. Take as long as you like, answer as many questions as you like. But the main point is, talk about it.

**Overall text: Acts 11 verses 19 to 30**

**Opener:** Imagine you heard of a city across the sea. It’s a loud, garish city. They say that, if you’re feeling weighed down by life’s responsibilities, and want to rebel; if your marriage seems dry and you want a fling; if you want to self-indulge; if you want somewhere to sin, where no one will know, that’s the place to be.

**Question: Does anywhere fit the bill today? If you felt really at rock-bottom, would you be tempted to go?**

In the time of the early Church, the place that fitted that description was Antioch. Antioch was the 1st century Las Vegas. It’s where you went for self-indulgence. You could say, ‘What happens in Antioch, stays in Antioch.’ Indulgence, especially sexual, was woven into their religion and culture.

**Background:** Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire, with between 300,000 and 500,000 people. That’s huge for an ancient city. It was a cosmopolitan centre for trading, sports and entertainment. Remember Ben Hur chariot racing? That was Antioch.

It was a mosaic of cultures - Persian, Greek, Jewish, Roman, blended together - and was called ‘Antioch the Beautiful,’ ‘Antioch the Great,’ ‘The Queen of the East.’ It was also called ‘Antioch by Daphne.’ That’s because Antioch had the Hippodrome, entertainment, chariot races. But Daphne was just outside, and had the Temple of Apollo, the religious centre. That was where it was woven into their religion that sex was the primary way you connected with the gods. So, a man would have sex with a temple prostitute, whose job was to make sure you felt good enough that you considered it a divine experience.

**Question: Think of the downside. What does that do to women?**

It objectifies and victimises those who were simply used as gateways for men to say they’re having a spiritual experience. Their religion validated and encouraged this manipulation.

It’s a challenge for us; because we hear preachers say, ‘Our country’s going to hell. It’s so secular and difficult to evangelise. Things are getting so worldly.’ But this is just as bad.

**Imagine:** You live in Antioch, and have become Christian. What would you do to call people to the righteousness of following Jesus as Lord?

Yet, it is in this city where one of the strongest 1st century churches emerges. It becomes a sending church, for centuries, for mission to the Gentiles. All from Antioch.

## Verse Study, Part One

**Read Acts 11 verses 19 to 24.**

Acts 11 verse 19 says:

‘Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.’

**Question: Who were these people who were scattered?**

These were Christians, running for their lives. Yet notice, they decided, ‘Whilst we’re going, we’ll tell people about the gospel.’

**Imagine:** You are fleeing from some persecution. Soldiers are killing your friends, maybe your family. You fear for your life. Would you stop to tell people about God’s grace in Jesus? In fact, as Christians, should you flee from persecution anyway, or trust in God?

Look at the context. In Acts 7, Stephen was killed. He highlighted the irreligious cutting edge of the gospel, to the religious leaders. He pointed out that they had been addicted to their Torah, their territory, and their temple as their means to find forgiveness. They turned it into a religious system that Jesus destroyed. They charged Stephen with blasphemy, because to challenge their religion is to blaspheme God. Infuriated, they stoned him to death. Overseeing this was Saul of Tarsus. Then:

Acts 8 verses 1 to 4 says:

‘On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. 2 Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. 3 But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison.’

**Think:** Our verse 19 in Acts 11 picks up that story. Without looking, can you remember what stories Luke, writing Acts, relates in-between? If you can’t remember everything, have a quick look.

Luke deviated to tell about Philip and Samaritans, and also told of Peter learning it’s okay to witness to Gentiles. They happened simultaneously. Now Luke jumps back and tells the story of this group that fled persecution and spoke to Jews.

Perhaps this verse tells us it’s okay to run from persecution. We don’t have to WANT to suffer in order to show godliness. But, when suffering comes, we say, ‘How is this an opportunity to spread the word.’ Look for the positive side.

Acts 11 verse 20 says:

‘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. 21 The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.’

So, in Antioch (remember, it is a sin-soaked city, where they expect to be ridiculed) these Christians courageously tell of a new way of living, a new Messiah, and that the good news is for Gentiles as well. And people respond.

**Question: Are there certain people, groups, colours, tribes, ages, we find ourselves afraid to talk to, especially about our faith? Why?**

See these fleeing Christians. Verse 19 says they started by only telling the gospel to Jews. Now, these ones find courage to talk to Gentiles (non-Jews). They’re not addicted to religious conservatism. They just say, ‘If Jesus is Lord of Lords, then he is master of all and this is for everyone.’

Acts 11 verse 22 says:

‘News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.’

**Question: What do you remember about Barnabas?**

Barnabas was one of the first to say, ‘I will sell my possessions so that I can give money to the church, to help others.’ Later, when Saul came to faith, and became Paul, Barnabas spoke up for him with the apostles in Jerusalem. He said, ‘Get to know him, and you’ll see it’s genuine.’ Barnabas always seemed to look at people with hope of something to celebrate. Here the church in Jerusalem trusted him and said, ‘Go and see if this story of Gentiles in Antioch coming to faith is true.’

Acts 11 verse 23 says:

‘When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done…’

Notice this doesn’t say the power of God did this, but the grace of God did this.

**Question: Could you say you have experienced God’s grace? If so, how?**

The Greek word used for grace is ‘*charis’*. That’s where the word ‘charismatic’ comes from. ‘Charis’ means a gift of empowerment, freely given by God. It’s God’s recreative energy in our lives. He freely gives this, because he loves us. You don’t have to work for it. He wants to do something beautiful in your life.

It’s not just forgiveness. That’s mercy. Mercy says ‘You won’t get the punishment you deserve.’ Grace goes further and says, ‘You will be blessed with divine power, to refashion you, give you a new mission, to share that grace with others.’

Later, Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said, ‘I suffered a thorn in the flesh. I prayed to God again and again to take it from me. And God said, “No. My GRACE is sufficient for you. My power is perfected in weakness.”’ Grace appears to be that active power that helps you move forward, even in suffering. Grace is powerful, sustaining, recreative and missional.

The first thing Barnabas noticed in Antioch was God’s grace at work. Not just people saying, ‘Great, we’re forgiven.’ They’re doing something with that forgiveness. God’s power moves through them and they want to share that.

Acts 11 verse 23 continues:

‘…he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith…’

**Question: Barnabas is the only person that the book of Acts calls good. Why do you think this is?**

Others people are called righteous or zealous. Only Barnabas is called good. He is frequently trusted by church leaders to represent them and make a balanced assessment. Behind that seems to be the realisation: ’You look into people’s hearts. You want what’s best in others.’

‘…a great number of people were brought to the Lord.’

So Luke. writing this, seems to use Barnabas to say, ‘Goodness is beautiful.’ It’s later listed as a fruit of the Spirit. The Spirit wants to bring goodness into us all.

**Think:** Can our example be Barnabas: always looking for the best in others, always sharing well-being. We are messed up, but there is good to be celebrated in all of us. Should we want to see what God is doing in other people’s lives?

In this world of image, and competition, everyone trying to outdo each other, just being with a good person is beautiful. The bible calls us to allow the Holy Spirit to bear fruit that leads to, among other things, the goodness Barnabas shows.

**Review verses 19 to 24. Has anything surprised you?**

## Verse Study Part Two:

**Read Acts 11 verses 25 to 30**

Our last section ended with Barnabas - the only person in the bible called good. He seemed very capable. Yet when Barnabas saw many people brought to the Lord, he said, ‘I need help. I know who this is perfect for - Paul.’

**Question: Why do you think Barnabas saw Saul as the right person for this task?**

Remember, when Saul was converted, his evangelism was so aggressive the Jews tried to kill him. So he went home to Tarsus and had been there for ten years. But through that period it became clear to Paul that the message could be brought to Gentiles. So Barnabas may well have thought, ‘Paul is perfect, because he has a heart for Gentiles.’

Acts 11 verse 25 says:

‘Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.’

Imagine the meeting. What did Barnabas say to Paul to persuade him to leave Tarsus? All we can imagine from the result is that Barnabas said, ‘Gentiles are coming to faith. I know that’s your heart’s passion. Let’s do this together.’

Acts 11 verse 26 continues:

‘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.’

Remember, until now, this NT movement was flexible in what they called themselves. Sometimes ‘The Way,’ ‘Disciples of the Lord,’ ‘God’s people,’ ‘The holy ones.’ Now they are called Christians.

**Question: Do you call yourself ‘Christian’? What does that word mean to you?**

The trouble is, labels can cause false realities. The reality was more organic. The first followers of Jesus were a subset of Judaism. They had different opinions, but were all Jewish. What seemed to have caused this new self-awareness - this new desire to have a title - was the Antioch Gentiles coming into the church, not being forced to convert to Judaism to follow the Jewish Messiah. The Gentile inflow caused them to think, ‘Maybe we are now more than traditional Judaism.’ Their self-understanding still wanted to say, ‘We continue Israel’s story.’ Yet, Gentiles are not becoming Jews, so they are branded as a NEW spiritual movement.

‘Christians’ means ‘followers of the Christ.’ ‘Christ’ in one sense means ‘The One.’ The chosen, anointed one; he who rescues us; the one we should follow. Moses was ‘The One’ who delivered Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Now Jesus is ‘The One’ who delivers all people out of slavery to sin and selfishness.

So, to say they are Christians means they are trying to follow, belonging to, trying to be like, Christ. This group is held up as a model church. And others notice that they are really into Jesus. He is the centre of everything.

**Imagine:** You are in this group of new followers. Ignore the title ‘Christian’ for a moment. What would you have called yourselves to represent you?

I mean, they could have been into the charismatic movement, and be called ‘People of the Holy Spirit - the Spiritians.’ They could have been into God in general, and been called ‘Godians.’ They could have been, ‘Our church is best,’ and people would say, ‘You’re Churchians.’ Yet when people labelled this new movement, they said, ‘These people are into Jesus - the Christ.’ The mark of the healthy church at Antioch is that they are christo-centric to the core.

**Question: Are there problems with being called ‘Christian’ today? If so, why?**

These people now had a problem with being called Christians. That label competed with their understanding of being Jewish, or a continuation of Judaism. They resisted at first. Christians never called themselves Christians throughout the bible. Others called them that, but they resisted until the second century.

**Question: Why would they not want to be seen as different to being Jewish?**

There were several problems. Rome recognised some religions, with roots in the culture, as ‘Legitimate Religions.’ If Christianity is now seen as a NEW religion, rather than Judaism, it’s no longer legitimate. It’s a cult, open to persecution.

Secondly, Jews were less likely to consider the claims of Christ once the label made it sound like you’re joining a separate religion. Jews don’t want to leave Judaism. They want to find their Messiah.

**Think:** We live in that today. If you say to a Jew ‘Do you want to consider Jesus,’ they may answer, ‘No. I’m Jewish.’ Language separates us. So, there’s something good about being called Christians, but also problematic. How can we approach that problem?

Acts 11 verses 27 to 28 say:

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28**One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

That famine really happened. Roman historians tell us multiple famines happened during the reign of Claudius - Jerusalem and Judea being hardest hit.

**Question: Should churches respond to disasters anywhere, or only help fellow Christians?**

Acts 11 verses 29 to 30 say:

The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. **30**This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

The Antioch church responded by saying, ‘Let’s change our lifestyle, sell what we can, raise money, and send it to Jerusalem.’

They worked towards compassion. **Is this a lesson for us today?** They did what they could to sell more, live more simply, raise money to have ready to send to Jerusalem when famine strikes. Then the church could help those in need.

**Notice: Of all the good things Luke could have used about this church, what is the proof that they are maturing?**

Luke seemed to decide the proof is that they responded with compassion when there was suffering. This is spiritual maturity.

**What does this teach us? Discuss these:**

**One:** Don’t whine. Don’t say, ‘We can’t evangelise. The world is so worldly. Satan is winning. How can we…?’ If those Christians in Antioch saw how good we have it today, what would they say? Do we complain too much when culture and society doesn’t make it easy for us to be Christian.

We should be excited about our faith. As we proclaim the message of freedom in Christ, if others persecute us, turn against us, make it difficult, then we - like Antioch - should say, ‘Suffering is an opportunity to display the grace of God in our lives even more.’

**Two:** Here, and throughout Acts, dedication to teaching is central to a healthy, growing church. Before there is strong outreach, there is strong in-reach. Paul and Barnabas, for a whole year, gave them teaching.

As we get educated in our faith, things happen. We’re more equipped to answer questions and communicate the gospel. We have greater passion, because, as we learn about the depth and riches of the gospel, we get more excited about this message. As we grow in faith, we want to tell others.

**Three:** Compassion is a mark of spiritual maturity. Paul says, in Galatians 2, that he took the money to Jerusalem and gave it to the disciples. Then he asked if they had words of encouragement for this Gentile church in Antioch. They answered, ‘Just one thing: remember the poor.’ In other words, ‘What you’re doing - raising money and giving it away - keep doing that.’

Remember, this happened when suffering broke out, and their attitude was, ‘Wherever we go, we will use this to proclaim more of Jesus.’ In one sense, suffering doesn’t matter. It is simply more opportunity to display the grace of Christ. We shouldn’t be afraid. We often can’t stop suffering. But can we be prepared when it comes?