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THE GEOGRAPHICAL EXPANSION OF THE EARLY CHURCH

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 43
ACTS 11:19-24

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The Jerusalem church lost her opportunity to give the Gospel to the whole earth-- because of legalism and selfishness. The Jerusalem church operated on legalism instead of God's grace. Legalism says that man does the work and God is supposed to receive the result of man's work. Grace says that God does the work and man receives the blessing as a result. Because of the selfishness and legalistic attitude of the Jerusalem church, God passed Jerusalem by and moved the center of missionary activity to Antioch. Antioch was a "GRACE" church, built on Bible doctrine and the Jerusalem church was phased out because of legalism. So here we are to see how the center of the church program moved from Jerusalem to Antioch, and while Jerusalem remained the sentimental and social capitol, the church at Jerusalem lost her leadership and world-wide evangelism was conducted from Antioch. Through the remainder of the Book of the Acts, Antioch will be the great missionary center, until the very end of the book, the center will swing to Ephesus.

from about ACTS 11:19 "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose ~~about~~ Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only." This should read, "Persecution that arose from Stephen". In these chapters we are discovering that everything changed with the death of Stephen. With the death of Stephen the church entered a new missionary era. Stephen's death brought the Samaritan Pentecost in Acts 8. It, in a very definite way, led to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus in Acts 9. It was the foundation for the Gentile Pentecost in Acts 10. Here in Acts 11 we find that the death of Stephen was the beginning of the expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem to Antioch. So the death of Stephen became the focal hub from which all these things happened. Believers were forced out of Jerusalem. Many believers were persecuted and their business failed and it was necessary for them to leave Jerusalem. They could sit in Jerusalem and starve or get out and move to a new locality and start a new life. This is exactly what many thousands did. They went mainly in three directions. They went north to Phenice, and out to the Island of Cyprus. When the Hittites came to have a great empire, they furnished iron weapons and chariots for all the rest of the world, and they used the Island of Cyprus as their station of distribution. Cyrene in North Africa was half way between Carthage and Egypt and became a great Christian center. Antioch was the third city in the Roman Empire, had over a half million population, had a beautiful central avenue four miles long, and in some ways was the most beautiful city in the world. Here was the greatest concentration of Roman wealth in the world. It was the great "good-time" city of the Roman Empire. Being a new city, it was clean and beautiful and attracted tourists from all over the world. The believers who journeyed to Antioch were the "grace" believers and they left the legalistic believers behind in Jerusalem. In this phrase "Preaching the word" the real meaning is conversational evangelism rather than preaching from a formal pulpit. So here in Antioch and in these other centers, there believers talked in daily conversation about Jesus and salvation. But notice--they spoke to Jews only. There were large numbers of Jews in all these localities and they would find thousands with whom they could share the Gospel.

ACTS 11:20-21 "And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord." But something unusual happened in these centers of Antioch and Cyprus and Cyrene. We read that they also witnessed to Greeks. The word used here is "hellenas" and it means a Greek without any Jewish blood. So here we have a group of Jewish business men, speaking to Greeks about the Lord Jesus. "Preaching" in this verse means "Announcing the good news". You recall that Barnabas owned great estates in Cyprus.

But without knowing anything about the Gentile Pentecost which had just taken place in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea, they began to witness to Greeks and other Gentiles. Now notice the impact of a thing like this--without the assistance of an apostle or any authority from Jerusalem, they just struck out on their own and preached Christ to the Gentiles. They were in no way connected with what I am going to call "The Establishment". "The Establishment" had gone legalistic, and later on when Simon Peter came to Antioch and drew back from eating and associating with Gentiles, Paul will brace him openly to his face before the Christian congregation. (This is in Galatians 2 which is eleven years after this time.)

Paul says in Galatians 2, "I braced and chewed him out publically--for he was to be blamed". When Peter first arrived he ate and talked with Gentiles, but when some of the legalistic Jews criticized him for doing this, he withdrew from them and confined his activity to Jews only. Other Jews began to follow the example of Peter and this is when Paul publically braced him and showed him that he was wrong. You see, Barnabas and Paul learned doctrine quickly and they were grace men, and relied only on the grace of God. But even though Simon Peter had witnessed the Gentile Pentecost in the house of Cornelius, and though God had given him the vision at Joppa that he was not to call any man common or unclean, it just took Simon Peter longer to learn doctrine. What Paul learned in three years, it took Simon Peter twenty-five years to learn. Soon now we are going to begin to read the names "Barnabas and Paul" for these are the grace men and these are the men God is going to use in the great missionary expansion. So the Jerusalem church was still living on spirituality by works, and the grace of God just passed them by.

Thus in verse 21 we have the results--great numbers turned to Christ and a great revival swept through Antioch.

ACTS 11:22 "Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch." Down in Jerusalem the legalistic saints heard about the great revival which was going on in Antioch and they sent Barnabas up to investigate the big revival. (You see Barnabas was a grace man, and the church in Jerusalem wanted to get Barnabas out of town and this was a good excuse to send him away. You see, the Jerusalem church hadn't sent any apostles up to Antioch and they hadn't given their approval of any revival up there and they just couldn't understand how anything like this could happen. Since they hadn't sent any apostles up there and hadn't laid their hands on anyone, the Jerusalem church was just astonished that anything like this could happen.)

Look at Barnabas Under Four Concepts

1. Barnabas was a great giver. Acts 4:36-37 says that Barnabas made one of the greatest gifts ever made to the work of God.
2. Barnabas sponsored Saul of Tarsus when he returned to Jerusalem after his conversion. Acts 9:26-27. You see Barnabas was a grace man and he saw in Saul of Tarsus the making of a great grace man, a great missionary.
3. When once Barnabas got to Antioch and saw the great revival, he realized that these new converts needed a great doctrinal teacher and he went to Tarsus to seek Saul. Here is a very important point. Barnabas knew that he couldn't meet the need in Antioch and he wasn't jealous and was quite willing to go and get Saul and turn the work over to him.
4. Later on we will see Barnabas sponsor John Mark when Paul refused to do so. Barnabas probably saved the life and influence of this young man, and we might never have had the Gospel of Mark had it not been for Barnabas.

So Barnabas was one of the great "grace" men in the history of the Christian church. Please notice that Barnabas was sent instead of Simon Peter. The church in Jerusalem didn't trust Simon Peter any more because of his part in the Gentile Pentecost in Caesarea, so they turned to Barnabas.

ACTS 11:23-24 "Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord." Here we see Barnabas in Antioch. He saw "The grace of God". You see, it takes a grace man to recognize grace. These words used here mean that Barnabas rejoiced and received inner happiness when he saw what was happening in Antioch. The word "Exhorted" really means encouraged. Barnabas encouraged them to learn doctrine. Barnabas was the man of the hour. He represented the grace of God by communicating doctrine to them. He urged them to cleave unto the Lord and the word cleave is "Prosmeno" and means to abide face to face. In other words, Barnabas urged them to walk face to face with God and learn doctrine.

In verse 24 we read a statement that is rarely seen in the Bible. We read, "He was a good man". God never flatters people and few men are called good in the Bible. The word for good is "Agathos" and means intrinsically good. Let us remember that morality is for the entire human race. Overt morality is not Christianity.

ROMANS 8:2-4 "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Please notice these two phrases--"The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" and "The law of sin and death". Now, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" is the Antioch church, and the "Law of sin and death" is the Jerusalem church. One is the grace church, the other is the legalistic church. In the Antioch church they were learning Bible doctrine and this meant that all were relaxed, no one was trying to play king of the mountain, no one was trying to be bigger and better than another, and they were all happy. This is the way it should be in a church. So Barnabas didn't arrive in Antioch and begin to tell them what they had to do and the habits they had to form and the things they had to give up. Rather, he emphasized the positive and he saw that a genuine work of God's grace was in progress at Antioch.

So the result was that many people were added to the church. Antioch is to be the great missionary church. Before it is over they will send missionaries out to the whole earth, and it is because they were founded on grace and not on legalism. Expansion in a church must always be based on grace. God has a man waiting in Tarsus to lead this missionary movement, and we will see next time how he will be invited to come to Antioch and guide the work there.

Please notice these principles in this study

1. God always works on the basis of grace and not legalism.
2. God wants to use us all, but if we grow indifferent and legalistic and cold, he will move on to someone else.
3. God always has a man ready when his work needs a leader. God is never confined to one man or to one city.
4. The missionary movement is ordained in the mind and heart of God and he is going to accomplish it whether we are faithful or not.