

Barnabas Encourages Christians in Antioch

Acts 11:19-26

In the chapters leading up to today's passage, God revealed to Peter that the message of Christ is not only for Jews but for non-Jews as well. Peter then took that message to the household of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and God poured out the Holy Spirit on these non-Jews who came to faith in Christ. The Jerusalem church had a hard time accepting that non-Jews could become believers in Christ, but after Peter explained everything that had happened, they praised God that he had granted even the Gentiles eternal life through Jesus (Acts 10:1–11:18).

In today's passage, we see that the early followers of Christ had been scattered from Jerusalem because of the persecution that began after Stephen was killed by stoning. The Jews had stoned him after he accused them of killing the Messiah, Jesus. Everywhere the scattered followers went, they told people about Jesus (Acts 7:1–8:4).

It's no surprise, then, that the believers who were scattered to Antioch, the world's third largest city at the time, began sharing the message of Christ not only with the many Jews who lived there but also with the non-Jews. When the Jerusalem church heard that a great number of people had turned to the Lord, they were ready to accept these non-Jewish believers, and they sent Barnabas (whose name means "son of encouragement") to see what was happening and to contribute to the spreading of the gospel message. Barnabas invited Saul to Antioch for a year to help teach because the church was expanding so quickly. Saul is the same man later known as the Apostle Paul. His name according to Jewish tradition was Saul, but following Graeco-Roman tradition, he was called Paul. Barnabas had befriended Saul and defended him before the apostles in Jerusalem after Saul had met Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–30).

What happened in Antioch was significant in that it apparently was the first time Jewish and non-Jewish Christians joined together in fellowship. People there were accustomed to rubbing shoulders with people of different backgrounds and of different ethnic groups. The church in Antioch set a wonderful example for churches to follow in centuries to come.

As the text tells us, Jesus' followers were first called Christians in Antioch. Prior to that they had been referred to as believers, brethren, saints, and, of course, disciples. It's significant that in Antioch this diverse group of followers took on a name that means "like Christ." As they lived out Jesus' example and encouraged others in the faith, people noticed. What a compliment it would be for others to consider *us* to be like Jesus!

Devotion for Teachers

The One Thing: Barnabas knew that faith doesn't grow in isolation. We all need encouragement from other Christians. Strong Christian friendships will help your relationship with Jesus flourish!

Weaving Faith Into Your Life: Encouragement is essential to spiritual growth. Who is like Barnabas in your life? Someone you turn to for encouragement and spiritual accountability? Write the person's name here: _____ . To whom are you a Barnabas? Someone you're regularly cheering on and challenging? Write the person's name here: _____ . If you've left either of the lines blank, commit to fill them in this week.