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### **THE ANTIOCH DIMENSION**

#### **Acts 11: 19-30**

By David Hilton

How did it come about that the followers of Jesus Christ became known as ‘Christians’?

Our Lord did not instruct his disciples to use any descriptive label for their group, except to refer to his followers as an ‘ecclesia’, an assembled church consisting of those who believed in him and his message, determined to follow his teaching in practice. Unlike today’s business executives, our Lord did not form his disciples into a focus group, asking them to settle on a name for their movement.

Our Lord was more concerned with substance, and not with spin; with spiritual reality, rather than corporate labelling or branding.

When the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles at Pentecost, and their evangelistic mission to Jewish people in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria began, no agreed name was given to the growing Christian community. It was only after the gospel was preached to non-Jews that the name ‘Christian’ emerged. Until then, Jesus’ followers were known by various names such as ‘disciples’, ‘believers’, ‘saints’, ‘brethren’, ‘those being saved’ and ‘the people of the Way.’

Following the persecution that arose after the martyrdom of Stephen, Greek-speaking Jewish Christians preached the Christian message to Jewish communities in Cyprus, Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) and Antioch in Syria.

#### **Antioch: The Hub of World Mission**

Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria. It had a population of about 500,000 with a large Jewish community, estimated at 70,000. The city had been founded in 300BC by Seleucus Nicator, one of Alexander the Great’s generals. Because of its many fine buildings, it was known as ‘Antioch the Beautiful.’ It was a cosmopolitan city having peoples not only from all parts of the Roman Empire, but also Oriental people from Persia, India, and even China. It was a central point of trading routes, and these were to be used for both the westward and eastern expansion of the church.

Some unnamed Christians were the originators of Christian world-wide mission. These Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene (modern Libya) took the initiative of preaching the gospel to the many people-groups in Antioch, outside the Jewish community. By God’s blessing, there were many conversions: ‘And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.’ (ch 11 v21)

#### **Consolidating and uniting the Church**

The news of this remarkable church growth was reported by travelling Christians to the church in Jerusalem. They held a church meeting, which appointed the spiritually-minded encourager and teacher, Barnabas, to pay a pastoral visit to Antioch, and to establish the new converts in the faith.

On his arrival in Antioch, Barnabas was amazed to witness not only the vast number of converts, but also their growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ. Being himself encouraged by the extent of the spiritual revival in Antioch, Barnabas exhorted these zealous, dedicated converts ‘to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose.’ (v23)

Being the spiritual realist that he was, Barnabas realized that he needed assistance in instructing and helping the many new Christian believers in Antioch. Having already met the newly converted Saul of Tarsus several years earlier in Jerusalem, and being aware that God was calling Saul to be an apostle to the Gentiles, Barnabas had the spiritual insight, wisdom and determination to travel to Tarsus, the university town of Cilicia, and invite Saul to return with him to Antioch, so they could minister together to the multi-national, multi-cultural church which was developing there.

Before they ever did any church planting work together, Barnabas and Saul, for ‘a whole year’ did some church consolidating work in Antioch. ‘They met with the church and taught a great many people.’ (v26) In the context of community fellowship, they TAUGHT the Christian faith to many converts.

If there is to be long-term church growth today, there must be a regular, considerable amount of Christian teaching, as well as extensive evangelism. How else can the Lord’s commission of Matthew 28:19, 20 be fulfilled, if there is not a comprehensive explanation and application of the Lord’s doctrinal and moral teaching? Why are so many churches today so unfit for the Lord’s purpose?

### **Naming, but not shaming**

The people of Antioch had a habit of giving nicknames to individuals and groups whom they observed. They must have looked on perplexed as they saw this new religious movement expand rapidly. The church could no longer be regarded as a sect within the Jewish community, since people of so many nationalities could be observed attending their instruction meetings. What did these people have in common, which distinguished them from other religious groups?

It was non-Christians in Antioch who decided to brand the church community as ‘Christians.’ Presumably, it was because ‘Christ’ was always being talked about in their conversations with relatives, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. The people of Antioch observed a church in their city, who put Jesus Christ at the centre of their lives: believing in Christ, and living for Christ. That is why, ‘in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.’

Since the early 40s AD, we followers of Christ have been known as ‘Christians.’ However, if this name of ‘Christian’ had not described the church over the centuries, would non-Christians today, observing our church communities call us by this honourable name of ‘Christian’? Or would the subject of our conversation, and the priorities of our lives, warrant a different name?

Serious Christians in late sixteenth century England were nicknamed ‘Puritans’, and in the 1730s were nicknamed ‘Methodists.’ There also are honourable, but secondary names. Primarily, we need today to manifest the character of those first Christians in Antioch. We need to recover the Antioch dimension.

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Note: Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version. Helpful commentaries on the Book of Acts to me are those by John Stott (IVP), Simon Kistemaker (Baker), William J. Larkin Jr (IVP), I. Howard Marshall (IVP), F. F. Bruce (Eerdmans) and John Calvin (St Andrews Press).