

STUDIES IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

STUDY 2

THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH JERUSALEM TO ANTIOCH

From the first—and Jewish—great centre of Christianity in Jerusalem to the second—and Gentile—centre in Antioch there were a number of important steps (**Acts 8:1–12:25**). Time. About **35–46 A.D.**

The Scattering Abroad of the Members of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 8:1–4)—

This dispersion, which led to such large results, took place between five and six years (35 or 36 A.D.) after the descent of the Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost and the formal organization of the Jerusalem church.

The immediate cause was the persecution which arose after the martyrdom of Stephen. This was an exclusively Jewish matter. Undoubtedly the leaders of the Jews took advantage of the unsettled state of the Roman empire at this time—and the summons, to Rome, of Pilate to meet the charges against him—to press their case against the Christians. The searching nature and merciless severity of this persecution are seen in the case of Saul who made **“havoc of the church, entering into every house and haling men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:3)**. “No man’s house was safe from the persecutor.” The Christian church was laid waste.

While the immediate effect of the activity of the enemies of the church seemed very bad, yet in reality it was a blessing and marked a new epoch in the extension of the gospel. The great effort put forth to stamp out the new religion caused it to be spread abroad and to increase with wonderful rapidity. **“Therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the gospel” (Acts 8:4) “and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1)**. The way for this new campaign had been prepared for by Jesus Christ, when, in bodily form He passed through this territory. It may seem strange that the apostles remained in Jerusalem while the deacons were compelled to flee, yet the deacons had lately come very largely and quickly into the public view by their intense earnestness and zeal in the new cause and they, after Stephen’s speech and martyrdom, were doubtless singled out as special subjects of persecution.

The men who had been selected by the church, like Stephen and Philip, to perform a social service for the new community (**Acts 6:2, 3, 5**) we now find in the forefront of the new preaching cause of Christ (**Acts 6:8–15; 8:5, 6, 26, 40**). This shows, for one thing, that the Spirit would not have men seek only the social welfare of their fellow men, but

also the higher spiritual good. Social good to the individual or community always follows spiritual regeneration, but social elevation alone does not always bring in spiritual good.

The Organization of the Church in Samaria (Acts 8:5–25)—Possibly we should read in **Acts 8:5** that **“Philip went down to a—rather than the—city of Samaria”** in which case the city might be Sychar or Shechem, but the matter of the particular locality is unimportant as the gospel was preached at this time in many places in Samaria (**Acts 8:25**).

This region was the first district into which the word was carried beyond the immediate Jewish pale. It is interesting to note that while fleeing from persecution the disciples did not hide, but proclaimed everywhere their message.

The cause of the organization of the church in Samaria was the preaching of Christ. The effect was that the people gave heed to what they heard. There were numbers of manifestations of divine power in the casting out of unclean spirits and the healing of the sick.

The one spurious convert mentioned is Simon Magus (**Acts 8:9–13, 18–24**) and he has received large attention from writers, upon this period, as he is the type of a man who in all ages has sought to make gain out of the church by joining it as a member, and because he is also a typical representative of **“the travelling impostors who swarmed over Greece and Rome, at this time, pretending to magical powers derived from the spirit world; they were readers of the stars, interpreters of dreams, fortune-tellers, medicine men—in brief they exercised the same arts as the modern fortune-teller and by much the same methods.”** Philip in his preaching seems to have paid little or no attention to Simon but the falling away of the multitude from the latter led him to pretend a conversion and to seek to buy the gift of the Holy Ghost (**Acts 8:18, 19**).

The chief effort of Philip was to convince men of their sins, lead them to repentance, point them to their Saviour and reconcile them to God he endeavoured to do good to men in their bodies and souls. Simon sought to do wonders that he might attach the people to himself and to get large money by working upon their credulity and “giving out that himself was some great one.” There is the same contrast between the false and the true to-day.

So great was the work in Samaria that when the apostles heard of it in Jerusalem they sent unto them Peter and John (**Acts 8:14**), **“Who when they were come down prayed that they might receive the Holy Ghost”** (**Acts 8:15–17**) It is to be noted that now, as at the beginning, the Holy Ghost is unceasingly active in building up the church. The apostles taught that it was not only necessary to turn from sin to righteousness but it was also necessary to be born into the kingdom by a divine power, as Jesus had taught before them (**John 3:5–8**).

The Mission to Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–40)—This is the Greek and Roman word for the Hebrew name Cush. In its widest significance it included Nubia, Sennar, Kordofan and Northern Abyssinia, but in its more limited application it included only that portion of

territory from the junction of the White and Blue branches of the Nile to the south border of Egypt and known as the kingdom of Meroe. The name Candace, mentioned as queen of the Ethiopians in the narrative, is a dynastic title.

In the establishment of this mission the course of events is plainly marked out. The divine element comes to the front in the speaking to Philip by an angel of the Lord. He is told to go to the “South unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza.” Obeying the divine command he meets the treasurer of the queen of Ethiopia who reading from the Old Testament, a prophecy concerning Christ, asks an explanation of it from Philip. This gives Philip an opportunity to present the crucified and risen Christ. The eunuch believes, is baptized and proceeds on his way carrying the gospel to his country. Here the curtain shuts down, but we know this much that ever since that time Abyssinia has been, and now is, a Christian kingdom.

In this brief narrative we get a glimpse of how the church was enlarging her borders in these early days of primitive Christianity.

*****February 07

The Conversion of Saul (Acts 9:1–22)—This is another epoch making event. The arch persecutor who “**made havoc of the church**” now becomes its chief advocate. The infant church had good cause to remember Saul. He took care of the clothes of the witnesses who killed Stephen (**Acts 7:58**) and he left no stone unturned to drive the believers in Christ out of Jerusalem. In carrying his persecuting zeal to Damascus he must have been informed of a somewhat considerable body of Christians in that city, which was finely situated and had a large population. We have no account of how the gospel was carried to Damascus.

Saul was born in the university town of Tarsus in Cilicia, but at the proper age he was sent to Jerusalem to study the law under the celebrated Jewish teacher Gamaliel. He had a singularly acute mind combined with a boundless enthusiasm for the cause which he espoused.

It was on the way to Damascus that his conversion took place, when his mind was full of plans to put an end to Christianity. This marvelous event, which in the changes it has wrought in the world is greater than any decisive battle ever fought between nations, is related in very few words (**Acts 9:1–8**). It is very evident that, after he had fallen to the earth from the effect of a blinding light, his mind was perfectly clear and he understood what was taking place for he asks the question, “**Who art thou, Lord?**” He shows here the character of a man who is perfectly collected and cool in his mind under all circumstances. The Lord whom he persecuted convinced him that he was wrong in his attack upon His church and won him to Himself. His beliefs and his whole life plan were in consequence of his conversion, radically changed. Besides the report by Luke of his conversion, in **Acts 9:1–8**, Paul gives two other accounts, one to the Jews in the Temple court (**Acts 22:6–11**) and the other before Agrippa at Cæsarea (**Acts 26:12–20**). He stoutly maintains in his Epistle to the Galatians that he received (**Galatians 1:11, 12, 8–**

24) his revelation of the Gospel from Christ. It was the real appearance of the risen Christ to Paul which made him a Christian, Christianity's most efficient missionary and next to Christ, its greatest thinker, preacher and teacher.

Paul at once began to preach Christ in the synagogues that **"He is the Son of God"** (**Acts 9:20**), but he found now that the Jews, while they were confounded and amazed, sought to kill him (**Acts 9:21–25**), and when he had escaped and had come to Jerusalem the disciples were afraid of him (**Acts 9:26–30**), so he returns to Tarsus.

From this time **35** or **36 A.D.** until Barnabas seeks him to take up the work in Antioch (**Acts 11:25**), in **42** or **43 A.D.** Paul dwells in comparative obscurity, but God is really preparing him for his great missionary work. In **Galatians (1:17–24)** he declares that these years of retirement were spent in Arabia, Syria and Cilicia.

Peaceful Times (Acts 9:31–43)—"Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified and walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied." After the conversion of Saul the persecution doubtless soon burned itself out. There were few men with his fiery zeal to keep it alive. Then too the Jews soon had large troubles of their own which gave them little time to keep up the persecution against the Christians. When Caius Caesar Caligula became Emperor of Rome in **37 A.D.** he claimed that divine honors should be paid to him. He commanded that his statue be set up in the Temple at Jerusalem with this inscription, "Caius the New Incarnation of Jupiter." When this command became known to the Jews they assembled in a vast throng before the palace of the Roman proconsul and, uttering wild and piteous cries, declared they would die rather than have this sacrilege committed. The most however that the Jews could accomplish was to have the Temple remain unoccupied by the statue, but many altars, where divine honors were paid to the emperor, were erected outside its gates. Troublous times continued for the Jews until **January 24th, 41 A.D.**, when Caligula was murdered.

During these few years of freedom from persecution the church had time not only to engage in new work, but to strengthen that which had already been accomplished. We have an account in **Acts 9:32–44** of how one Apostle (Peter) was occupied during this time in passing through "all quarters" and some things that he did at Lydda, Saron and Joppa. Doubtless the other workers were similarly occupied.

The Vision of Peter and the circumstances attending it (**Acts 10:9–16, 1–48; 11:1–18**). The time had come when Gentiles were to be received into the church and it was to be broadened from a Jewish to a universal church. The Gentiles at this time were forbidden to enter the most sacred places of the Jewish worship. The Jews by the Mosaic law were interdicted from articles of food in common use by the Gentiles. There were other barriers.

Was it necessary or not for a Gentile to become a Jew before he became a Christian? This was shortly to become a burning question.

Peter is taught, by his vision of the great sheet let down full of all manner of four footed beasts and creeping things which he is to use in disregard of the Levitical law

([Leviticus 11:2–25](#)), that a new era is about to dawn. The teaching is that God, who made the old law, has replaced it with a new law and that the wall of partition is broken down between Jew and Gentile. The story is here told of Cornelius who seeks instruction in the Christian way at the hands of Peter. The apostle goes to Cornelius in Cæsarea, after seeing his vision, and says **“of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons. But in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness, is accepted with Him.”** Then he presents Christ as the chosen of God ([Acts 10:34–48](#)), and baptizes and receives into the church not only Cornelius, but many of his friends, who accepted Christ as their Saviour.

When Peter returned to Jerusalem, he was remonstrated with by the Jewish Christians for eating with Gentiles, but when he had told them of the whole matter, **“they held their peace and glorified God, saying, then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life”** ([Acts 11:18, 1–18](#)).

*****03/07

THE CITY AND THE WORK

The church was growing in all directions. Judea, Samaria, Gaza, Ethiopia, Azotus, Cæsarea, Damascus, Tarsus, Lydda, Joppa, Phenice, and Cyprus are some of the regions and places where Christ found many followers in the first twelve years after His resurrection.

At length what was to be the second great centre of Christianity, and from which were to go forth the most momentous influences, the city of Antioch is reached ([Acts 11:19–30](#)).

The Importance of this City—Antioch was the third city in population (500,000) and influence in the Roman Empire, ranking next to Rome and Alexandria. Seleucus Nicator, Alexander’s greatest general, built the city in 300 B.C., and gave to it his father’s name, Antiochus. It was the capital of Syria, at the time Christianity entered its gates. It was situated about 300 miles north of Jerusalem, on the Orontes River, with Selucia as its seaport at the mouth of the river and sixteen miles distant. It traded with all parts of the world; caravans coming to it even from India and Persia; its ships sailed to every seaport on the Mediterranean Sea. This trade brought great gain to the city. The population was of all kinds and all nationalities, Romans, Greeks, Syrians, Jews, freemen, slaves, the ignorant and the cultured. It was a centre of art and literature. “The principal street traversed the entire length of the city from east to west, a distance of about four miles, having four parallel rows of columns, forming a broad road in the middle, open to the sky, and on each side a narrow covered way or portico. The road in the middle was laid with granite in the time of Antoninus Pius.”

In morals, so bad were they, that the Roman writer Juvenal complains that Antioch’s dissipation and corruption had corrupted even Rome’s corruption. About four miles from the city, was the famous pleasure grounds of Daphne, where was a temple dedicated to Apollo. Here, under the climate of Syria and the wealthy patronage of Rome, all that was beautiful in nature and art had created a sanctuary for a perpetual festival of vice. The

name of Daphne became proverbial for its luxurious festivals, unbridled debauchery and unnatural vices.”

The Founding of the First Gentile Church (about 42 or 43 A.D.)—The narrative in [Acts 11:19–21](#) turns back to [Acts 8:1–4](#) and shows another route along which the gospel was proclaimed by the disciples, who were scattered abroad upon the martyrdom of Stephen.

In this way we are told how the gospel came to Antioch and who were the organizers of the church. They were men of Cyprus—a large island about sixty miles from the coast of Palestine—and Cyrelie—an important city on the north coast of Africa. These were undoubtedly Greek speaking Jews and they spoke to Grecians; this word as here used in the New Testament means the Greeks, that is Gentiles, and the contrast is marked between the nineteenth verse where the Jews only were addressed and the twentieth verse where the disciples turn to the Greeks or Gentiles. The addressing of the Gentiles was a decidedly new departure.

The substance of their preaching was the Lord Jesus. In this city of wealth, fashion, luxury and vice, it would seem as if there could be no common ground upon which the people could be touched by the message of the disciples, but **“the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed, and turned to the Lord” (v. 21).**

The Visit of Barnabas (Acts 11:22–24)—The tidings of the great success of the Christian workers at Antioch speedily reached Jerusalem. It was natural that the mother church should desire to know about the new church at Antioch, how it was founded and what was being taught, especially if it was reported that the gospel was being preached to the Gentiles. After the receiving of Cornelius ([Acts 11:1–18](#)) into the church by Peter, and the action upon it, there must have been some anxiety lest in Antioch there should be a division between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles, for there were many Jews in the city and some doubtless were interested in the new movement. The differences, afterwards so manifest, between the Jew who accepted Christ as the Messiah and who still obeyed the law and the Gentile who accepted Christ as his Saviour and did not become a Jew and practice the law, had not yet reached the acute state.

In sending Barnabas to inquire into affairs, the church at Jerusalem made a wise selection. He was a native of Cyprus, a Greek speaking Jew and was well acquainted in Antioch and had the confidence of the Jews in Jerusalem. He was likely, as a Levite, to be true to the Jewish religion. When he came to the new church it is recorded:

1. What he saw, “the grace of God.”
2. What he felt, he “was glad.”
3. What he did—**“he exhorted them all with purpose of heart that they would cleave unto the Lord” (v.23).** He recognized that the main thing was to have these new converts be loyal to Jesus Christ. His visit was a great help to the church ([v.24](#))

The Bringing in of Paul (vv.25, 26)—Very soon, with the increase of the work and the many open doors, Barnabas saw that more and very efficient aid must be secured if any

work adequate to the size and importance of the city was to be accomplished. He then departed to Tarsus to seek Saul. A number of years had passed since the conversion of Saul and he had had no adequate place for the exercise of his remarkable gifts. Barnabas had introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem, but they seemed with the disciples not to take to him ([Acts 9:26–30](#)). Now however his opportunity had come and Barnabas when he had found him brought him unto Antioch. It is evident from the narrative that a multitude of people were taught in the new way, for Barnabas and Saul continued for some time in the city. A year is mentioned, but it seems plain that they preached and taught after the expiration of this period. Material aid was sent to Jerusalem by this young and vigorous church in a time of famine, showing that it very early exercised the benevolent spirit ([Acts 11:27–30](#)).

The New Name (v.26).—“The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.” It seems probable that this name was not assumed by the followers of Christ or given to them by the Jews, but that it was given to them by the inhabitants of Antioch because there was a necessity for a name for a community which was composed both of Jews and Gentiles. Some scholars, however, assert that the new name was applied at first only to Gentiles who accepted, Christ.

The Number of Christians—We have no means of estimating the number of believers, save through the expressions, “a great number” and “much people” (twice repeated), but we can safely say from the power exerted by this city over the Christian world later on that these expressions are of great significance.

If Christianity was able to gain so strong a foothold as it did in Antioch and have such a mighty influence go forth from it that the city’s ancient evil fame in morals is blotted out under its renown at the place where the disciples were first called Christians, and be known as the centre of a great missionary enterprise, we need not fear lest this faith shall not be able to solve any problems and conquer any set of adverse circumstances in any city where it is preached, with the zeal which animated Barnabas and Saul.

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RENEWED PERSECUTION

The Martyrdom of James ([Acts 12:1, 2](#))—The narrative now turns back to the state of the mother church. When the disciples were having such success in Antioch there was great trouble in Jerusalem.

The Jews, some time after the death of the Emperor Caligula in **41 A.D.**, turned their attention again to the rapidly increasing power of the Christian church. Herod Agrippa I—grandson of Herod the Great—had helped Claudius, the successor of Caligula, to become emperor. In return Herod Agrippa was made king by Claudius and had many favours showered upon him. Herod lived in Jerusalem and curried favour with the Jews in every way. It is this Herod who, desiring to please the Jews, put forth “his hands to afflict certain of the church and killed James, the brother of John, with the sword.” This took place in the spring of the year **44 A.D.** We can well imagine the stir that this act

aroused in the Christian community, who had for some years enjoyed immunity from persecution.

The Imprisonment of Peter (Acts 12:3–19)—Herod Agrippa I evidently was following a shrewd plan to strike at the Christian leaders, first, and to put them out of the way. When he saw that the execution of James pleased the Jews he proceeded to take Peter also and put him in prison. To make sure of him he was bound with two chains to two soldiers, one on either side. The intention was to have him executed after Easter. This was a crisis in the affairs of the church and prayer was made unceasing for the release of Peter. Prayer was the only weapon which could be used and so effective was it that Peter was released to the great joy of the disciples.

The Death of the Persecutor, Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:20–23)—Within about a month after the death of James, the king went to a magnificent festival, held in Honour of the Roman Emperor at Cæsarea. There before a vast throng he appeared “in all the pride of state in robes inwrought with silver thread. The time chosen was daybreak so that the rising sun shining on this grand mantle lighted it into dazzling splendour.” When Herod made an oration and the people shouted, “It is the voice of a god and not of a man” he did not rebuke them but drank in the shallow flattery. Luke tells us that he was smitten, because he gave not God the glory, by the angel of the Lord, was eaten of worms and died.

The Result of the Persecution—“The word of God grew and multiplied” (Acts 12:24). It is the same story repeated over and over again; attacks upon the church only cause it to increase in numbers and power.

QUESTIONS

Jerusalem to Antioch; what were the important steps from the first to the second great centre of Christianity? What can be said of the scattering abroad of the members of the Jerusalem church? The organization of the church in Samaria? The mission to Ethiopia? The conversion of Saul? Peaceful times? The vision of Peter? What can be said of the work in Antioch? The importance of this city? The founding of the church? The visit of Barnabas? The bringing in of Paul? The new name? The number of Christians? What can be said of the renewed persecution? The martyrdom of James? The imprisonment of Peter? The death of the persecutor? The result of the persecution?

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¹Sell, Henry Thorne: *Studies in Early Church History*. Willow Grove, PA : Woodlawn Electronic Publishing, 1998, c1906