

Cities of the New Testament: Antioch

This is the fourth in a continuing series on the important cities of the New Testament. Previous issues of *ET&N* in this series were [Laodicea](#), [Ephesus](#), and [Corinth](#). The topic for this issue was going to be "Gnosticism and Personal Revelation," but I need a little more research time for that one (which will probably be next).

Antioch was arguably the most important city in the New Testament. Certainly, Jerusalem could lay claim to that descriptor given the world-changing events that occurred there, but where might Christianity be today if not for the great missionary church of the first century? And, like Corinth, Antioch at the dawn of the Christian era looked a lot like America today in important ways. As such, the lesson of Antioch speaks loudly to us Americans.

Then

"So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord." (Acts 11:19-24)

What factors contributed to Antioch becoming the center of missionary Christianity in the middle of the first century? This was a proudly independent city of perhaps 250,000 residents, steeped in paganism and otherwise distinguished by its tendency to insult visiting dignitaries (both Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius later punished Antioch for such slights). Antioch had been founded in about 300 B.C. by Seleukos I, one of Alexander the Great's generals, and named for Antiochus, a Syrian king. It was referred to as "Antioch on the Orontes" (for the river it flanked), Syrian Antioch (its Roman province), or "Antioch of Daphne" (for the pagan resort shrine located just five miles down the river) to distinguish it from the many other cities of the same name. Because of its advantageous location along the great trade routes between east and west, it rapidly became a major trading center. Because of its wealth, Antioch attracted many settlers—first Greeks, then Jews, Macedonians, Syrians, Egyptians, Mesopotamians, and Persians.



The modern city of Antakya, Turkey, the site of ancient Antioch. Few ruins of the ancient city remain. Photo courtesy www.bibleplaces.com

Flavius Josephus, the first Century Jewish historian, calls Antioch "the metropolis of Syria, and without dispute deserves the place of the third city in the habitable earth that was under the Roman empire." (The Wars of the Jews 3.2.4)

There were probably three primary factors, and perhaps a fourth, for the success of Christianity in this wealthy pagan city:

1. There was a substantial Jewish community there, undoubtedly laying a foundation of monotheism and messianic expectation. Unlike some cities, Antiochian Jews enjoyed considerable freedom. Josephus reported "(f)or as the Jewish nation is widely dispersed over all the habitable earth among its inhabitants, so it is very much intermingled with Syria by reason of its neighborhood, and had the greatest multitudes in Antioch by reason of the largeness of the city, wherein the kings, after Antiochus, had afforded them a habitation with the most undisturbed tranquility..." (Wars 7.3.3)
2. The heterogeneity of the community fostered a climate of mutual respect (or at least tolerance).
3. The dispersion of Spirit-filled Christians to Antioch during intense persecutions in Judea (cf Acts 11:11-12). One of these Christians may well have been Nicolas, one of the original seven deacons in Jerusalem and described as a "*proselyte from Antioch.*" (Acts 6:5) It is certainly reasonable to imagine this convert from paganism to have returned to his home and energetically shared the Gospel.
4. Antioch suffered two major earthquakes in the years just prior to this Christian dispersion, leading some to suggest that the destruction accompanying these natural events may have led many Antiochians to be receptive to spiritual messages. It would not be the only time God used natural forces in support of His message.

Whatever the root causes, Antioch rapidly became a hotbed of Christianity—so much so that "(t)he news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem." The vast majority of the first Christians were Jews, and there were undoubtedly those

who believed only Jews could become Christians, and we know there were others who believed new believers had to first become Jews (i.e., get circumcised) before they could be disciples of Christ Jesus. Through his experience with the Roman Centurion Cornelius, Peter had learned and emphatically testified that Gentiles were being welcomed by God into His family: "*I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality.*" (Acts 10:34)

But one can easily envision some Jewish-Christians being quite skeptical about the reports out of Antioch, a pagan city not even in Judea!

So they sent Barnabas to check things out. While not one of the Apostles, Barnabas was part of the inner circle of the Jerusalem church, trusted partly because of his total commitment: "*Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*" (Acts 4:36-37). As soon as Barnabas confirmed the reports, he had a great vision for the church there.

"And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." (Acts 11:25-26)

Barnabas had been key in the Jerusalem church's acceptance of Saul/Paul when he came to Jerusalem from Damascus. Barnabas put two and two together—an enthusiastic young church needing further instruction and an enthusiastic, divinely-appointed preacher of the Gospel. How awesome it must have been to be in Antioch during that year Paul and Barnabas taught them. Sometime during that year, Peter came to visit:

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, 'If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" (Galatians 2:11-14)

In multi-cultural Antioch, there was no division between Jews and Gentiles in the church, and when Peter first arrived, he apparently readily ate with the mixed group. Some see hypocrisy in Peter's "withdrawal" but others see accommodation (not putting a "stumbling block" in a brother's path), but regardless of his motives, the actions were short-lived when Paul confronted him, and the church must have returned to its mutual acceptance. That the Antioch church continued to mature is evidenced by their generous response to the needs of their Judean brothers and sisters:

"Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And

this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders." (Acts 11:27-30)

God had now prepared the church at Antioch for its great mission. They had been introduced to the Gospel by Christians escaping Judean persecution, taught by Paul and Barnabas, and proven their love. Now, when they were asked to do a difficult thing, they apparently didn't hesitate.

"Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:1-3)

There are two notable elements in this brief passage:

1. The leaders of the Antioch church took time to fast and pray before sending Barnabas and Saul on their way. The use of these spiritual disciplines helped those leaders stay in touch with the Holy Spirit.
2. They sent their best! Losing these two great teachers from their midst represented a genuine threat to the church. Would it continue to grow in numbers and maturity without them? In faith, however, they responded to the Holy Spirit.

The passages relating their return after the missionary journey demonstrates two additional important aspects of the church in Antioch:

"From (Attalia) (Paul and Barnabas) sailed to Antioch, from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples." (Acts 14:25-28)

(1) They listened and (2) they allowed Paul and Barnabas to rest "*a long time*". The church was anxious to hear the outcomes of their sponsorship, and it is implied that the entire church gathered to listen to the encouraging news. Just as importantly, they recognized that their missionaries needed some time to recharge their batteries before going out again and provided the source of encouragement to Paul and Barnabas. During that time, some Judaizers came to Antioch teaching that salvation required circumcision, and again the Antioch church demonstrated its maturity—they decided to consult older Christians, the Apostles, and sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem. When they returned (along with Silas and Judas Barsabbas) with the Apostles' decision (that circumcision was unnecessary), the church listened again:

"So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brethren with a lengthy message. After they had spent time there, they were sent away from the brethren in peace to those who had sent them out. But it seemed good to Silas to remain there. But Paul

and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also, the word of the Lord." (Acts 15:30-35)

Having their rest in Antioch, the trip to Jerusalem for the council, and another period of teaching, Paul (joined by Silas), and Barnabas (joined by John Mark), left again on separate missions. At the end of that journey, Paul returned to Antioch, where he spoke and rested again:

"When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church, and went down to Antioch. And having spent some time there, he left..." (Acts 18:22-23a)

The New Testament testimony of the church in Antioch ends with Paul's departure on his third missionary journey, but the historical record goes on. The parents of Luke, the Greek physician and writer of the Gospel that bears his name and the *Acts of the Apostles*, were from Antioch. For nearly another five centuries, Antioch continued to be one of the three major centers of Christianity, contributing such notable leaders as Ignatius (author of seven major letters and martyred in 107), Theophilus (a mid-second century Christian apologist), Eusebius (the author of the major history of the early church), and John Chrysostom. A major school of theology thrived in Antioch, reaching its peak in the early fifth century.

In the first quarter of the third century, according to Eusebius, Mammaea, mother of then-Emperor Alexander, spent some time in Antioch and while there sent for Origen, the prodigious but sometimes controversial Christian writer. He "remained with her a while and shown her many things which were for the glory of the Lord and of the excellence of the divine teaching." (Church History VI.21)

A number of church synods were also held in Antioch. The first, in 251, was called primarily to address the views of Novatian, a priest who had set himself up as a rival pope when Cornelius was elected after the severe Decian persecutions in 250. Novatian insisted that those who lapsed during the persecution could in no way be restored to communion with the church. Following the synod, Novatian was excommunicated. Three synods between 264 and 268 addressed the heresy of Paul of Samosata, Bishop of Antioch, who claimed two Persons in Christ—Logos (the Word) who dwelt in Jesus the man. Several additional synods in the fourth century dealt with Arianism, a doctrine that held that Christ Jesus was a second, "inferior" god, created by God the Father to bring salvation to mankind. Eusebius also reports a number of martyrs from the church in Antioch, including two virgins "who served God in all things, and were true sisters, illustrious in family and distinguished in life, young and blooming, serious in mind, pious in deportment, and admirable for zeal. As if the earth could not bear such excellence, the worshipers of demons commanded to cast them into the sea. And this was done to them." (Church History VIII.12)

Major earthquakes in 526 and 528 devastated the city and after it was rebuilt by Emperor Justinian (527-565), it was sacked by Persians in about 600. Restored to the Byzantine Empire in 969, it was then reconquered by the Seljuks in 1084. A target of the First Crusade, it was taken by siege in 1097 but soon regained by Muslims.



The facade of St. Peter's grotto near modern Antakya
[Photo from www.bibleplaces.com]

Today, what was once the third most populous city in the Roman Empire lies under the modern Turkish town of Antakya (population 28,000). Few archaeological sites have been uncovered, although a Roman aqueduct still serves as a bridge. On the other hand, on a hillside above the town is a 12th century facade in front of a simple cave said to be the very place where the early Antioch Christians met. If so, it represents the oldest continuously occupied church site in Christendom.

But it is not the few ancient artifacts that keep Antioch alive today. Rather, it is the example it set that is ageless. In this wealthy, cultured place renowned for its art, sports, and industry (sound familiar?), an initially small group of Christians exhibited God's grace by:

- Enthusiastically sharing the Gospel, leading many to faith and salvation
- Giving liberally to their brothers and sisters in need
- Demonstrating the strength that lies in diversity
- Listening intently to the lessons of leaders
- Consulting others when they had questions
- Having a vision of the spread of the Gospel throughout the world
- Practicing spiritual disciplines to keep in touch with the Spirit
- Foregoing their own needs by sending out their best
- Receiving reports of their activities
- Providing comfort and rest

Antioch the place may be gone, but Antioch the spirit lives on. It is precisely this kind of spirit that led my wife and I to join the church at Newark when we moved to the Philadelphia area. We visited four churches and there were good things about all of them. But in Newark, we saw an ethnically-diverse congregation, a genuine love for and acceptance of one another, a consistent commitment to grow and mature, a safe haven for damaged sinners, and a real vision for what the church could mean in its broad area. I am grateful to be part of the work at Newark and pray that we can become the Antioch of the U.S. mid-Atlantic!



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Heresy, Power, and Personal Revelation

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