

**New Opportunities**  
Mark Heath, 9 Sept 2004  
Acts 11:19-26

*<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.*

*<sup>22</sup> The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.*

*<sup>25</sup> So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*

We tend to take it for granted that the gospel should be preached to people of all nationalities and cultures, but this was not immediately obvious to everyone in the early church. They very much thought of themselves as Jews being the specially chosen people of God and more than anything they wanted their fellow Jews to recognise Jesus as their Messiah and King. If Gentiles were to be saved, it would be because they had first converted to Judaism, so evangelism was concentrated on the synagogue attendees. Little by little, in the book of Acts, we see this idea being broken down and the church learning to accept non-Jews without requiring them to keep the Mosaic ceremonial laws (such as the dietary regulations and circumcision).

The method God used to get this message across to the early church was not perhaps what we might expect. It was not a result of theological studies and debates, but persecutions and outpourings of the Holy Spirit. The persecution scattered people all over the place and when the Spirit was poured out on the Samaritans (Acts 8:17) and Cornelius' Gentile household (Acts 10:44), the Christians were forced to accept that God was moving in ways they had not anticipated.

In verse 19 however, we see that the scattered believers were still sticking to what they felt comfortable with – evangelising only the Jews. To their credit, as Matthew Henry notes, though they fled persecution, they did not flee from the work and set about witnessing in their new locations. But we can see that even though the leaders of the early church had become theologically convinced of the need to evangelise the Gentiles, generally speaking, this way of thinking had not really sunk in at a popular level yet. Church leaders need to be aware that even though they teach something, it does not necessarily mean that people have taken it to heart.

### **Doing a new thing**

Fortunately there were some who were prepared to try a new thing – preaching to the “Hellenists”. This does not seem to be referring to the Jews who spoke Greek (as they were already being evangelised), but the pagan Greeks. This might not seem that radical to us, but for them it was a big step outside their comfort zones. Having churches full of Gentiles would raise all sorts of awkward practical and theological issues. This did not deter them, for they were convinced that the gospel was good news for all.

In our modern churches, we might think ourselves unlikely to exclude people from our evangelism on racial grounds, but there can be the temptation to just target the sort of people who would fit in easily at our church. As a result churches can very often contain a very narrow subset of the diversity of the communities in which they are located. There may be fields ripe for harvest right on our doorsteps that we are overlooking because of our natural prejudices.

If the target audience of these evangelists was novel, their message certainly wasn't. They were "preaching the Lord Jesus" (v20). Christianity centres on the person and work of Jesus. There are a surprising number of people in the church today who don't believe in Jesus' divinity or his resurrection. They doubt the historicity of almost all the gospel records. But if Jesus isn't acknowledged as Lord, then it isn't Christianity, and one wonders what on earth motivates these people to keep going to church.

There is perhaps a slight clue here that they were trying to make it easier for the Gentiles to comprehend the Christian message. "Jesus is Messiah" (or Christ) was meaningful to Jews, but not to Gentiles. "Jesus is Lord" was well understood in the Roman world, because there was someone else around who wanted the title of "Lord" for himself alone – Caesar. This is not to say that the concept of Jesus as the Christ was left out altogether. In fact, it was in Antioch that the believers were first referred to as "Christians" – the "Christ people".

Luke reports that the "hand of the Lord was with them" (v21), deducing this from the fact that many believed and turned to the Lord. Salvation is the greatest demonstration of the presence of the Spirit and the favour of God. When people are truly born again and added to the church, we know that God is with us.

### **The Gift of Encouragement**

When the Jerusalem church heard what was happening they sent Barnabas to investigate. Rather than making a judgement based on a second-hand report, they wanted someone they trusted to go and see whether this new venture was indeed of God. Barnabas was an excellent choice. His real name was in fact Joseph, but they called him Barnabas because of his gift of encouragement. He was not quick to judge others, evidenced by his willingness to accept Saul as a new believer.

This made him the ideal person to send to investigate. He believed that God can work in surprising and unexpected ways, so was not going to be prejudiced against this new Gentile church before he arrived. He was also himself from Cyprus, like many of the founders of the new church, which would also serve to help put them at their ease that this was a friend coming, not a hostile inspector.

When he arrived, he was delighted to witness the grace of God at work. The evidence of the growth of the church clearly convinced him of the blessing of God. True to his name, he took the opportunity to encourage them, reminding them of the need to remain faithful to the Lord and steadfast in purpose. Barnabas was aware of the danger of drifting away or losing heart for the work in difficult times, so he urged them on.

We are told here that Barnabas "was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Here was someone who was truly qualified to encourage others in the faith. As a result of his ministry, many more were added to the Lord. His exhortations and example will have helped the new believers to grow stronger in their faith and join in the task of evangelising their town.

## **Sharing the Work**

We know that Barnabas was a very generous man in every sense. He was liberal with his money, he warmly welcomed new people into his circle of friends and here in verse 25 we see that he unselfishly invited others to share in his ministry.

Barnabas had found himself in a very exciting situation. The church was growing rapidly and he was now a key member of the leadership team. If he had been the type of person who loves to be important and in charge, then he may have been tempted to try and elevate himself yet further to claim overall control of the church. Instead, he recognised that there were giftings that he was lacking that others could supply. Perhaps also, he knew that this would be an ideal situation for Saul to grow in his teaching gift.

Where had Saul been all this time? After his conversion he had begun some very bold preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem, engaging the Hellenists in debate (Acts 9:28-30). This stirred up so much controversy that the church sent him off to his home town of Tarsus to protect his life. As a result of his departure, the church in Jerusalem enjoyed a period of peace.

As Barnabas continued to work evangelising the Hellenists in Antioch, he doubtless remembered Saul's earlier debates with them. Perhaps Saul was feeling a bit discouraged that his evangelistic efforts had caused problems for the church. Probably others questioned the wisdom of bringing such a fiery character into the situation, but Barnabas knew that Saul had a gifting and a calling ideally suited to the Antioch church.

The Antioch church already had some gifted leaders beside Barnabas. There were prophets (see Acts 13:1) and evangelists, but there was still room for Saul to exercise a fruitful ministry. Here he developed his gift for teaching Christians, which when combined with his existing evangelistic zeal ideally prepared him for the missionary journeys he was about to embark on.

## **Conclusion**

This passage has lots of good examples of how people responded to new situations. The Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene had been displaced by persecution and could have been tempted to quietly meet and worship God, avoiding too much trouble. But with great faith and pioneer spirit, they embarked on a mission to an "unreached people group".

Barnabas too, coming to a new place immediately got on with using his gift of encouragement. It is a gift that we need to see more of in the church. Everyone will go through difficult periods of life, and there should be friendly and warm people like Barnabas on hand to see them through.

He was also aware that other people can benefit from being brought into new situations. Saul was not just brought along to observe, he grew by exercising his God-given gifts. Whenever we find ourselves in new places or with new opportunities, don't put limits on what God can do, but step out in faith, encouraging and inviting others to join you as you serve the Lord.