

**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Easter**  
**Acts 11:19-26**  
**Sermon #687**  
**May 3, 2015**  
**Erich Jonathan Hoeft**

<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled 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.

In the name of our Risen Lord dear Friends and fellow redeemed,

Of the three Scripture lessons we read each week, the first is usually taken from the Old Testament. But for the last several Sundays (the Sundays of the “Easter season”) you may have noticed they have been from the New Testament book of Acts.

These lessons have been tracing the beginning and development of the early Christian Church. That’s what the Book of Acts is all about. In these readings we’ve watched the Holy Spirit do wonderful things as He empowered the disciples to perform miracles and worked through their preaching to bring great numbers of people to faith in Jesus Christ.

There is a lot of interesting history in the Book of Acts, as well as a lot we can learn from the teaching and example of the disciples. With this in mind, we’d like to turn our attention to the portion of the Book of Acts serving as today’s first lesson and consider

## WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

1. About spreading the Gospel

2. About the power of encouragement
3. About the significance of the name “Christian”

If you are in the habit of following the readings in the Bible or read the lessons beforehand, you noticed that today’s text is divided into three paragraphs. We’ll work through it a paragraph at a time giving a few historical details and then drawing from each one a timeless lesson that applies to us today.

**<sup>19</sup> Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled 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.**

Among the many things Jesus told His disciples on the night before His death (Maundy Thursday) was that no servant is above his master, and that if the world hated and persecuted Him, it would also hate and persecute those who followed Him. The believer Stephen is a fulfillment of Jesus’ words. He is the first martyr recorded in the Book of Acts. With his death – for no other cause than his profession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and his personal Savior – a wider persecution of Christians began.

As a result, many believers at that time fled to regions where they could enjoy some measure of safety. The places mentioned were well outside the borders of the Holy Land. But we’ll note that the believers didn’t go into some sort of self-imposed witness protection program or try to fade into the woodwork. Wherever they landed, they willingly spoke of their personal faith and the Gospel message of Jesus Christ.

At first they reached out to people like themselves, i.e., those with a Jewish background. But soon their outreach was expanded to people of all cultures. So the Great Commission given by Jesus was being carried out. The result: The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

The first lesson we can learn from the early church and apply today is the importance of “lay people” for spread of the Gospel. To the best of our knowledge none of those who were scattered abroad were “professional” clergy or church workers. They were simply believers who were deeply committed to Jesus Christ; those who understood what He had provided them now and eternally through His life, death and resurrection.

Nor are we told about the “strategies” they used. It appears they were simply willing to share the hope within them with others as the opportunities presented themselves. It doesn’t seem to be a case of them having mastered certain truths; the Truth mastered them. From the fullness of their hearts they witnessed. They were “Great Commission” Christians. And God blessed their efforts.

It’s not hard to make an application here. However, let’s be clear: We know that God the Holy Spirit is the One responsible for bringing people to faith. (When we lived in the Florida it bothered me when traveling evangelists would put an ad in the paper for a “tent meeting” and then as a selling point talk about how many souls they had won for Christ. Truth is, they hadn’t won a single soul. That’s the Holy Spirit’s work.)

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit often uses Christians as His *instruments* to convey the truth. The data to back that statement up is right in front of us...

Most of us are here today because we were raised in the church. But the fact that we were raised in the church only means that at some time in the past someone brought the Gospel to our descendants. Others of us are here because someone, at sometime in our lifetime either introduced us to Christianity or invited us to church so we could gain a fuller understanding of it. In both cases, God used human agents to proclaim the Gospel, and the Holy Spirit took it from there.

So the first lesson we can draw from this text is the importance each Christian plays in spreading the Gospel. In the 1st Century God “grew” the church through the activity of 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. That’s us. Therefore let us ask God to

give us boldness and open our eyes to the opportunities before us. Let us ask that He use us for His purposes in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century as mightily as He used those in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century.

Let's move on to the second lesson. **22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 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, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.**

The key figure here is Barnabus. Our text tells us **he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.** Along with the Apostle Paul, he was also one of the great early missionaries of the Church. Actually his real name was Joseph. Yet, apparently for character reasons, people referred to him as Barnabus. Literally this means "Son of Encouragement." That tells us a lot. In Romans 12 "encouragement" is listed as a special spiritual gift God gives to some of His people. Barnabus had it. He used it. And it helped his 1<sup>st</sup> Century brothers and sisters in Christ.

If we generalize that just a bit, the second lesson we can learn from the early church is the power and the importance of Christian encouragement.

Have you ever gone through hard times? Ever lost your confidence? Ever experienced periods when you felt down? In the allegorical book "Pilgrim's Progress" the main character, Christian, had to make his way through the "slough of despond" and the "pit of despair" and had to contend with a giant named "Doubt."

Ever been there? Most of us have at one time or another.

What helped you through those times? Certainly God's Word and prayer. But perhaps accompanying that was the encouraging presence or an encouraging word from a fellow Christian. Perhaps you've been at the receiving end of the five most encouraging words I can think of: "You are in my prayers."

The rise of support groups in our country over the last few decades would seem to be an indication that we are a society in need of encouragement. Christians need it as well. Bolstered by the knowledge of God, His Gospel and His promises, we have everything necessary to form our own support group. So ask God to provide you with the opportunity to in some way, form or fashion be a source of encouragement for a fellow Christian. Ask God to infuse each of us with the spirit of Barnabus.

**<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.**

In this final paragraph we see Barnabus finding Paul. Together they go to Antioch, a large and important city in the Roman Empire. The final piece of information we are given is significant. We are told the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. According to Acts chapter nine, before this time believers in Jesus Christ were called “the Way.” Now they are referred to as Christians. Was this a name they took upon themselves, or was it some form of contempt given to them? We don’t know, and it doesn’t really matter. What is important is the name itself...

...So the last lesson we can learn from our text has to do with the significance of the name Christian.

What does it mean to be a Christian? Common usage of the word has watered down its meaning. I would contend that most people equate being “Christian” with being a “good” or a “moral” person.

That certainly will be a result, but at its core to be a Christian means to belong to and believe in Jesus Christ. What, in particular, does a Christian believe about Jesus Christ? That He is the almighty Son of God who came down to this planet to rescue sinful human beings like us from the eternity in hell that our sins and disobedience to God deserve.

To be a Christian means to proudly bear His name before a watching world. To be a Christian means, out of love for what He has done for me

through His perfect life and sacrificial death, to honor Him with my life and conduct.

To be a Christian means to suffer for Him, if need be, rather than forsake Him, recognizing that whatever hardships He asks me to endure is but a mild reflection of what He suffered for me. It means to never leave Him or forsake Him, just as He promises to never leave us or forsake us.

But above all, to be a Christian means to experience joy, hope, contentment, and confidence. In the words of Paul, to be a Christian means to possess **“the peace of God that passes all understanding.”** And God in His amazing grace has called *us* to be Christians, a name we bear gratefully and joyfully – just as the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Christians did.

So what can we learn from these early Christians and the history of the early Christian Church as it is recorded for us in the Book of Acts? A lot. But today let us go home mindful of ... the importance of God’s people in spreading the Gospel message... the power and need for Christian encouragement... the significance and privilege and joy that is ours in bearing the name “Christian.” God grant it. Amen.