

CRUCIAL MARKS OF THE CHRISTIAN

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

Antioch was a pivotal place for the early church. It was at Antioch that disciples of Jesus were first called Christians. "Christian" became best known of all designations for God's children. At first, they did not call themselves by that designation. In fact, being called "Christian" was typically used derogatorily as an insult. Christians usually identified themselves as disciples, believers, or saints. However, derision and scorn ruled the day in Antioch.

Later, being called "Christian" became a great compliment, a title of honor, faithfulness, holiness, and loyalty to Jesus Christ. No question was raised about the believer's faith who humbly accepted the designation "Christian." At times, people were arrested just because they accepted the identity given them. Being found guilty, they were sentenced to death.

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? That question will be key in understanding Acts 11. In this chapter, we discover crucial marks of the Christian church. Though other identifying marks of the ancient church are easily observed throughout the book of Acts, today we'll focus on three marks which are crucial in identifying the Christian church found in Acts 11. Let's follow the brief outline below as we discover these marks together:

- I. The Christian Church is a Converted Church (vv. 19-21)**
- II. The Christian Church is a Charming Church (vv. 22-26)**
- III. The Christian Church is a Concerned Church (vv. 27-30)**

I. The Christian Church is a Converted Church (vv. 1-21)

The founding of the first church at Antioch is fascinating. The city itself was ripe for conversion. Over half a million people lived in this metropolis, which made Antioch the third largest city in the Roman Empire. Antioch was a byword for luxury and immorality. The sporting events infested the city almost like a disease. Chariot racing, gambling, night life, was all a part of the Antioch atmosphere. The pursuit of hedonistic pleasure which Antioch displayed sounds much like any modern American metropolis.

Religious life in Antioch was typical of Greco-Roman culture. In Antioch stood the Temple of Daphne, a symbol of laxity in sexual morals and loose, lustful living. Thus, the religious life, rather than uplifting, contributed to its impurity.

Nonetheless, even in Antioch, God made sure a church worthy of the name Christian was planted! The church at Antioch became an exemplar model for the missionary enterprise. People converted to the Gospel of Jesus, banded together into a New Testament church, and became ambassadors for Christ to pagan Antioch. As a result, multitudes were converted to Christ. The church was simply overrun with new converts.

As Luke described the Antioch phenomenon, he revealed *three elements* which aptly describe Christian conversion. Let's look at those three elements.

First, conversion is reflected in the conversation of the disciples. Luke recorded it this way, "Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose

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about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only" (v. 19). Recalling the persecution begun under Saul of Tarsus, the scattering of the disciples from Jerusalem resulted in Antioch being invaded by Christian witnesses (cp. 8:4).

Word had spread everywhere not only about the persecution in Jerusalem, but also about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles (v. 1). After experiencing the "other" Pentecost, Peter headed back to Jerusalem, explaining to those of the "circumcision party" both his vision, and what happened as he preached Christ to the Gentiles (vv. 2-17). The result sealed the inclusion of Gentiles as Christians just as the Jews, "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (v. 18).

Reflection Connection

The early church depended upon word of mouth to publicize what was taking place in the church. What are the most common means today to publicize the positive workings of the Holy Spirit? What are the most common means your church uses? Are there additional ways for your church to explore to positively promote the work of the Kingdom? Explain.

The people went everywhere talking about Jesus. Such an approach is the core of conversational evangelism. The first step in taking a city for Christ is to catch the vision of personal witnessing. No local church has ever successfully evangelized their city or community without possessing a passion for personal soul winning.

The disciples who began the work at Antioch were anonymous (vv. 20-21). It's not too much to suggest that perhaps the greatest soul winners in the local church will never be known by name this side of heaven. God is not looking for celebrities; rather He's looking for people converted and committed to Him.

Second, conversion is reflected in the co-operation of the Lord. All energy we expend is useless apart from the Lord. Christ promised unequivocally He would both help and be present with His disciples (Matt. 28:20; Mark 16:20). There's just something about our talking about Jesus: when we do it, God always gets involved! (1 Thess.1:5).

Third, conversion is reflected in the commitment of the people. Multitudes were saved and joined the church. Luke emphasizes, "And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (v. 21). Turning from a life of sin, they turned to a life with Christ. Note: turning is two dimensional. On the one hand, when one is converted, one turns from his old life (cp. 1 Thess.1:9). And, on the other hand, turning from an old life means turning to a new life in Christ by faith (cp. Rom. 10:9).

In the end, Antioch took notice! The people known as Christians were different, changed, and converted. Thus, we ask, when is a church Christian? When the church is a converted church, a community bound together in the Lord through mutual conversion.

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II. The Christian Church is a Charming Church (vv. 22-26)

Word reached Jerusalem about what God was doing in Antioch. Jerusalem needed to gauge whether or not it was a real move of God. Thus, they met to explore how to proceed. The decision was unanimous; Barnabas would be the one to go, "Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch" (v. 22).

Their deliberations did not take long. All thoughts evidently turned to one man. Why? What was it about Barnabas that solicited such confidence from the apostles? The answer became clear only after Barnabas arrived in Antioch. Luke wrote, "Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord" (vv. 23-24). The church obviously sent the man of the biggest heart.

When Barnabas arrived at Antioch, three things immediately took place which demonstrated Antioch was a charming church. *First, Barnabas saw grace.* Recall once again Luke's description upon Barnabas' arrival, "when he came, and had seen the grace of God..." How fascinating to describe the visibility of God's grace. Grace is considered an intangible spiritual commodity. Yet, Barnabas saw grace.

All through my ministry, I've seen grace in people's lives. Men, who once served sin, are now serving Jesus. That's grace! That's grace you can see! I've seen grace in churches. Through warmth, tears, people loving one another, people forgiving one another, precious souls who walk the aisle forsaking their sin to join up with Jesus. That's grace! That's grace you can see!

Barnabas had a rare eye for grace. He saw it in Mark and Saul when the others did not. He saw it and was "glad." Unfortunately, too many times we look not for grace but for fault. I'm easily reminded of the Pharisees' attitude toward the disciples, "And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault" (Mark 7:2). What the Pharisees saw was not grace. Instead, "they found fault."

Second, Barnabas provided guidance. Churches need various ministries at different stages in their existence. Being a living organism, a one size fits all ministry is insufficient to support a thriving congregation. Barnabas was an encourager. He knew how to exhort and he knew how to build up. And, he also knew his limitations. A good lesson all of us should learn from Barnabas is this: know your strengths and how to supplement your weaknesses.

Reflection Connection

When your church searches for leaders, do you have a clear understanding about what you're looking for as a leader? Looking at the traits revealed about Barnabas, what do you think is the most outstanding characteristic listed? Explain.

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Reflection Connection

What do you look for in people? Do you think it's easier to "find fault" than "find favor" with other people? Why or why not?



At this point, Barnabas revealed the full strength of his leadership skill. He traveled toward Tarsus hoping to tap into the strength of God's apostle to the Gentiles. His journey was recorded, "Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (vv. 25-26). For Barnabas, teaching was not among his top 10 favorite things to do. However, this is where Paul shined as God's extraordinary star.

Paul stayed an entire year and taught them the Word of God. Actually, this is the best growth plan ever devised. God's method for disciplining Christians was to lead them into deeper life, and His tool for that was a Bible preacher.

III. The Christian Church is a Concerned Church (vv. 27-30)

No church is a New Testament church if it is not also a concerned church. The church Jesus builds is a church that consistently looks outward, not selfishly inward. According to Luke, prophets appeared with a word from God, "And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar" (vv. 27-28).

In the New Testament era, "prophets" were men gifted to literally speak the Word of God. Agabus was one of the few New Testament prophets. Note also, the Biblical record suggests that prophecy ceased upon the completion of the New Testament canon (1 Cor. 13:8-11). When we think about prophecy today, such exists only in the larger sense of proclaiming the written Word of God.

Prophets could foretell future events then. Having the Bible today, however, we need no one to tell us future events. The Bible already does! "To Agabus the Spirit revealed a great famine over the inhabited earth" (21:10). Consequently, a Jewish queen brought corn from Egypt and figs from Cyprus, feeding the starving people on the streets of Jerusalem. Thus, Agabus assisted the early Christians warning them of the desperate conditions to come.

Just as Agabus predicted the crisis to come, the church put in place a program of compassion. The prospect of famine moved the hearts of the church at Antioch. Christ calls us to allow the Holy Spirit to produce sympathetic hearts toward suffering people (Matt. 15:32). The moment the need was exposed, they acted. Can we do any less? We must not do any less!

Reflection Connection

When you think of Biblical exposition, do you connect it with Biblical prophecy? Why or why not? Assuming the proclamation of the written Word is equivalent to Biblical prophecy today, how much significance does your church place upon the Biblical preaching of the pastor? Explain.

Reflection Connection

No one doubts the deplorable conditions of many third world countries. Hunger and starvation are out of control. How sensitive do you think the church is toward the starving masses? Explain. What efforts personally involve you as well as your church in relieving world hunger?

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Golden Greek Nugget

The Greek term which translates as our English term “Christians” is used a mere three times in the New Testament (v. 26; cp. Acts 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). One would think the designation that “stuck” would have permeated the Scripture. Up until chapter 11, the most common designation for Christians was “disciples.” That term itself means, “little christs.” In a self explanatory way, being called a Christian is an honorable but humble experience.

Wrap Up

When is the church Christian? Acts 11 clearly tells us. A Christian church is a church absolutely converted to Jesus Christ. They are sold out to Him. Being so, it stands as no surprise that the Christian church charms the non-Christian community. Through their life, their lifestyle, their commitment, and their loyalty to the God of the Bible, others are won to the Gospel. In addition, true Christianity is a community of concern. They simply will not stand on the sidelines while the world, as wicked as it is, self-destructs. Christ leaves his church to redeem the lost, the hurting, and the hopeless until Jesus comes again.