

CONVERSION STUDIES

CONVERSIONS IN ANTIOCH

Example eight of thirteen

The city of Antioch began around 300 B.C. At the time of our study it was the third largest city in the world. It was the gateway to the East. It was a logical place for a church; not only for its size, but because of its location on the great trade routes. "They therefore that were scattered abroad upon the tribulation that arose about Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, and Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to none save only the Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:19,20).

All conversions begin with learning. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard, and how shall they hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). No one is ever converted without learning the truth. There is no such thing as an accidental disciple of Jesus. Apparently those who brought the gospel to Antioch were not apostles and evangelists, but disciples who had been driven from Jerusalem (Acts 8:4). The same circumstances that led Philip to Samaria. Many churches in the world have been established, not by regular preachers, but by other Christians who have taken the story of Jesus with them in their travels. Good was still coming from the evil of Saul's persecution. We might think the persecution was bad, and in one sense it was; but in another, it was good as it resulted in what we see here. Christians going everywhere preaching Christ.

The news of Cornelius' conversion spread rapidly. When the news reached Antioch the men began to speak to all who would listen without making any distinction. They realized that the gospel "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16). The truth first proclaimed by Peter is becoming a reality. God is no respecter of persons. In any nation those who fear God are acceptable (Acts 10:34,35). The rest of Acts shows the gospel going through the Roman world, and

finding a foothold in many of the great cities of the world.

The theme of the preaching in Antioch was "the Lord Jesus." Each description of Jesus stresses a different lesson. "Lord" signifies power or authority. Jesus applied the term to Himself. After He healed the demon possessed man, He bade him, "Go to thy house unto thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee; and how he had mercy on thee" (Mark 5:19). He claimed to have all authority (Mt. 28:18). Peter's conclusion on Pentecost was, "God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified" (Acts 2:36). This aspect of the Lord is often not stressed as much as His being Savior. We must not become lop-sided in our teaching.

The Lord Jesus is the theme of all New Testament preaching. "And Philip opened his mouth and...preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The only way to convert is to preach Christ. We are not trying to convert people to the church, or to our beliefs, or practices, but to Christ. "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13). In Acts the situations may vary, but the message is constant. It is the same message whether preached in houses, synagogues, chariots, cities, by the riverside, or in prisons. They did not preach finely thought theories about Jesus' philosophy of life. They simply preached His story. They told of His life, death, burial, resurrection, commission, commands, ascension, and His present reign at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33). They made clear His promise of forgiveness, and His return to judge the world. The planting of the seed in Antioch resulted in the birth of one of the greatest churches in history. Yet the men who first brought the message are unnamed. Their identity is unimportant to us, but God knows. Too many of us want our names attached to work done in the name of Christ. Only His name should be glorified. "And in none other is there salvation; for neither is there any other name under heaven that is given among men, wherein we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

"And the hand of the Lord was with them; and a great number that believed turned unto the Lord" (Acts 11:21). The people heard and many believed. After believing they "turned unto the Lord." Common sense tells us that people cannot turn to the Lord until they believe in Him. People must first believe and then turn. What does it mean to turn to the Lord? From this verse we know that it is something done after believing. Thus believing is not turning to the Lord. Many confuse the two and make them identical. Sometimes turning to the Lord may be general and refer to the whole process of conversion (I Thess. 1:8). It may also be used specifically as Peter used it. "Repent ye therefore and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). This makes it clear that repentance is not turning, for turning comes afterward. Forgiveness follows turning. Turning does not come without faith and repentance. We can see what turning is by comparing two other passages. "Many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized" (Acts 18:8). "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins" (Acts 2:38). When these believers in Antioch "turned to the Lord," they did so by being baptized into Christ. When we are baptized into Him, we turn to the Lord for the remission of sins which is found only in Him. "In whom we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7).

There are several steps to heaven. It is not enough to take one or two. After baptism comes learning and doing. Those who are baptized into Christ must be taught to observe all that Jesus teaches (Mt. 28:20). This involves learning more and more of Him. Being persistent is surely needed.

Antioch was the place of numerous beginnings. It was the first known predominately Gentile church. It became a new center of interest. Jerusalem had been prominent before. Now Antioch comes forth. God's providence may be behind this as Jerusalem is to be destroyed in the years ahead, and Antioch will be a great center for Christ. It was at Antioch the name "Christian" was first used (Acts 11:26). Some claim this name was given by enemies as a term of derision, but there is no foundation for such an idea. Both Peter and Paul put divine sanction on the name by the references to it (Acts 26:28,29; I Pet. 4:16).

It is significant that the first Gentile church of which we have a record was a great evangelistic church. The Christians were so thankful for their blessings that they wished to share the good news with others. Each individual needs to follow the example of the Antiochans. Believing in Christ you need to turn to the Lord by repentance and baptism. Once you are baptized into Christ, you need to cleave to Him.

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