

I. Introduction

Good morning! If you look at a modern map of Turkey, it is easy to find Hatay Province in the south, near the border with Syria. The ancient town of Antioch, now called Antakya, is located there. In Roman times, Antioch was an important center of trade and it had a population of about a half a million, but the modern city is much smaller.



In the early days of the church, Antioch became a major center of Christian activity. The Book of Acts shows that the Church at Antioch was the base from which Paul departed on his missionary journeys. And, according to church tradition, Peter lived in Antioch from 47-54 AD and preached in a cave which is now known as St. Peter's Grotto Church. Here are a couple of photos of the inside. Can you imagine listening to the messages of Peter and Paul in this place and then singing praise songs together with them? I think it must have been an amazing experience.



Now, take a look at this map from the Silk Road Game. As you can see on this map, the main route of the Silk Road ran from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Antioch. From about 200 BC for more than a thousand years, the Silk Road was the primary trade route from Asia to Africa and Europe. Trade goods and ideas were exchanged all along this route for centuries until the road became too dangerous to travel after the Mongolian Empire fell apart around 1400 AD.



The church in Antioch was ideally located to be a missionary sending center and, starting with Paul and Barnabas, countless missionaries were sent out from Antioch. Christianity spread east along the Silk Road to India and China and many Chinese became Christians. A monument erected in Chang'an in 781 AD commemorated the mission activities of one group of Christians called the Nestorians. Although some aspects of Nestorian doctrine are controversial, this monument provides clear proof that Christianity was widespread and officially recognized by the Chinese emperors by the 7th century. Christianity was later persecuted in China and much of the history has been lost, but it is slowly being rediscovered.



Some people are firmly convinced that there were also many Christians in Japan in that time, but it has been difficult to find clear proof and most historians remain skeptical. However, it is certain that there was Christian influence in ancient Japan, either directly, or through Buddhist monks who studied in Chang'an (Xi'an), and learned from Christians there. In 1911, the leaders of the Shingon Buddhist sect recognized the influence of Nestorian Christianity on their founder, Kukai, by erecting this copy of the Nestorian Monument on Mount Koya at the request of E.A. Gordon.



A moment ago, I mentioned that the main route of the Silk Road ran from Chang'an (Xi'an) in China to Antioch, but there were also many branches and extensions of the Silk Road. If you look at this map, you can see that one branch of the Silk Road extended all the way to Kyoto.



I have spent a lot of time on history and background information this morning because it is important for us to realize that although we are separated by 2,000 years and 5,000 miles, we have a connection and

unity with the ancient church in Antioch. In fact, Christians everywhere, and across all of history, are one in Jesus Christ. Let's keep these things in mind as we read about the first days of the church in Antioch in today's Scripture, **Acts 11:19-30**.

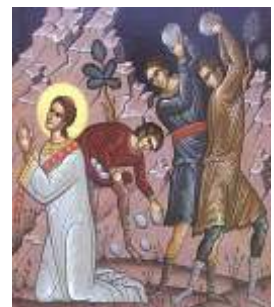
II. Scripture Reading Acts 11:19-30, (NIV, 1984)

19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. 22 News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. 27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) 29 The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. 30 This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

III. Teaching

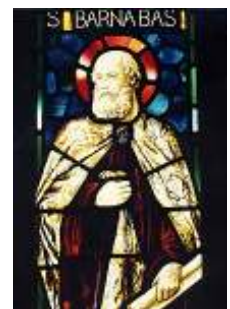
Back in Acts 7, we read about the stoning of Stephen. To refresh our memory, let's look at **Acts 7:59-60**, "**While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.**" After the death of Stephen, there came a time of severe persecution and most of the church was scattered. But everywhere they went they spoke the Name of Jesus and told people of His death and resurrection.



Today, in **Acts 11:19**, we read, "**Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.**" At first they proclaimed the Good News of Jesus only to the Jews, probably visiting every synagogue they came to as they travelled. But in the story of the conversion of Cornelius and his household in Acts 10, God revealed to Peter and the church that the Good News of salvation through faith in Jesus is for all people.



Acts 11:20-21 tells us, "**Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.**" In Antioch, a few bold disciples decided to preach outside of the synagogues and the Jewish community and they proclaimed the Name of Jesus to the gentiles. Their boldness was rewarded with a great harvest as they discovered that men and women of Greek heritage and culture were far more open to Jesus than the Jews.



Acts 11:22, "**News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.**" I think you probably remember Barnabas. He was the one who took Saul and introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem after Paul's conversion on the Damascus Road. At the time, all of the disciples were afraid of Saul because he had ruthlessly persecuted the church. But somehow Barnabas was already

able to see in Saul the man who would become Paul the apostle. Barnabas went to Antioch and saw how God had poured out His grace on the people there and he rejoiced and encouraged them in their faith. This is very appropriate because we know that the name Barnabas means, “son of encouragement.”

The church in Antioch was growing rapidly and there was a need for help with the teaching and preaching. Barnabas remembered Saul, a man trained in the Scriptures by the best Jewish teachers and a man whose faith in Jesus was unshakeable because he had met Jesus directly through a miracle. **Acts 11:25-26, “Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.”**

“The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.” To be a Christian means to be a follower of Christ. If you are not a follower of Jesus Christ, then you are not a Christian. I mention this because some people think, for example, that all Americans are Christians just because America has lots of churches. But being a Christian does not depend on where you were born; it depends on your relationship with Jesus. Other people think that getting baptized makes you a Christian. But if you have not made the decision to follow Jesus, then the only thing you get out of being baptized is wet. Still others think that you are a Christian if your parents are Christians, but faith is not hereditary, each person needs to make their own personal decision to follow Jesus.



Going to church gives you a good opportunity to hear about Jesus, but until you decide to believe in Jesus, you are a guest at church, you are not a Christian. Some of you here today are guests. I want you to know that you are very welcome here; we love to have guests. You are welcome to come as a guest for as long as you want so that you can learn about Jesus, and I hope you will make many friends here as well. We want all kinds of people to be very comfortable coming to OIC. But don't be deceived. Even if you have Christian parents, have been baptized, and have attended church for forty years, if you don't know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you are not a Christian.



Many people of all kinds come to church. But the day that you truly believe in Jesus, the day when you become a Christian, you are the church, together with your brothers and sisters in Christ. In English, the word, “church,” can refer to a religion, a building, a denomination, or a style of music. But in the Bible, the word church always refers to the congregation of the followers of Jesus. We are the church.



And, because we are the church, all of the things we think the church should do, those are things we should do. If we think the church should be more loving, then we should love more. If we think the church should do more evangelism, then we should reach out more. If we think the church should be more generous in giving, then we should give more. If we think the church should be more friendly, then we should make more friends. The day a brother or sister realizes he or she is the church, the attitude toward church changes. I suspect that you could have heard a similar message in Antioch two thousand years ago, but we still need to remind ourselves that we are the church.

Is the church a building? Yes, the church is a building, a dwelling in which God dwells. But it is not the kind of building that most people imagine when they hear the word building. It is a building that God is building up in us, His people. Is Jesus your Lord and Savior? Are you a Christian? Then Ephesians 2:19-22 is for you. **“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”**

Two thousand years ago, God built up the church in Antioch. God gave the gifts of the Spirit,

including the gift of prophecy, among the people and God used the gifts to strengthen the church. **Acts 11:27-28, “During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)”** Notice that Agabus gave a specific prophecy and it was fulfilled at a specific time.

There are many kinds of spiritual gifts. You can find a long list in 1 Corinthians 12 and some additional lists in other Bible passages. The Lord gives these gifts according to His sovereign purpose. Since the beginning of the church, the Lord has been giving spiritual gifts to His people and I am firmly convinced that He is still giving the same gifts in the church today. But the Lord alone decides when and where to give the gifts of the Holy Spirit and which gifts to give. And, every gift has a purpose.

Let’s take a look at **Ephesians 4:11-12, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”** The body of Christ is the church, and the purpose of the gifts is for the building up of the church. From this it is clear that spiritual gifts should never be used in a way that divides the church or tears it down. The proper use of spiritual gifts strengthens the church. Notice also that the gifts listed here are used to prepare God’s people for works of service.

For this verse, I like the NKJV translation even better. **Ephesians 4:11-12 (NKJV), “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,”** Where is the ministry of the church? Is it up here on the stage, at the pulpit? No. What I and others do up here on the stage is not the ministry of the church. It is teaching to equip the whole church to do the ministry. The work of the ministry is done by the whole church, all of us together. And 99% of the ministry of the church is not in this building. It is what you do when you go home and when you go to work or school. The ministry is not here in this room, it is out there on the streets and throughout the city.

Are you a follower of Jesus Christ? If your answer is, “yes,” then you are the church. And the work of the church belongs to you as you go out and share the love of Jesus with others. There is a lost and fallen world just beyond the door. When you go out that door, go out in the Name of Jesus and share His love, grace, and mercy. Is it easy? No. I am still trying to learn how to do it too, so let’s learn together. It is not easy, but it is good. It brings glory to God and He is worthy of all praise and honor.



Acts 11:29-30, “The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” On this particular occasion, the disciples in Antioch responded to the prophecy by taking an offering and sending a gift to their fellow believers in Judea. This was appropriate, because the church in Antioch was probably far more wealthy than the churches in Judea. The giving of the gift built up the church in Antioch as they learned to grow in love and generosity, and the receiving of the gift built up the churches in Judea as well.

IV. Conclusion

Two thousand years and five thousand miles separate us from the church in Antioch. But actually, their church is our church and our church is their church. For there is only one Body of Christ and therefore there is only one church. Today, we are being built up by the faithful witness of the church in Antioch. In years to come, I pray that many brothers and sisters here in Osaka and around the world will be able to say that they were built up and strengthened by the ministry of this church. Join with me in praying for the Lord to be glorified in this church, in this city, in this land, and around the world. Let’s pray.



V. Prayer