

Lurgan Baptist 4:10:2011

Reading: Acts 11:1-30

## THE CHURCH ABLAZE

### 21. THE CHURCH AS IT WAS MEANT TO BE

Mahatma Gandhi shares in his autobiography that in his student days in England he was deeply touched by reading the Gospels and seriously considered becoming a convert to Christianity, which seemed to offer a real solution to the caste system that divided the people of India. One Sunday he attended the church services and decided to ask the minister for enlightenment on salvation and other doctrines. But when Gandhi entered the church building, the ushers refused to give him a seat and suggested that he elsewhere to worship with his own people. He left and never came back. “ *If Christians have caste differences also,*” he said to himself, “ *I might as well remain a Hindu.*” My ... our attitude toward the world, those who do not know the Lord is supremely important. Is this not the thrust of the book of Jonah ? It was the prophet’s bad attitude toward the world that landed him in the belly of the great fish.

God was saying to him, “ *Jonah, this is what I think of your self-will, your prejudice, your elitism. Take a good look.*” Do you recall that James in his epistle deals with the problem of discrimination ? There is no

doubt that there must have been social problems in the early church. You see, the church was the only place in the ancient world where social distinctions did not exist. There must have been a certain initial awkwardness when a master found himself sitting next his slave, or perhaps when his slave was actually leading a service or distributing the bread and wine at the Lords Supper. Remember also, that in the early days, the church was predominantly poor and humble and therefore if a rich man got saved and came to the fellowship there must have been the temptation to make a fuss of him.

Is this not one of the issues that James addresses ? And James was saying in effect, “ *Stop it: do not show favouritism.*” ( James 2:1 ) The church of the Lord Jesus ought to be one place where discrimination is a dirty word. “ *My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory with respect of persons.*” ( 2:1 ) If only there had been more love and less bias in that ushers heart when he met Gandhi. The future world leader had read the New Testament and had even seriously considered Christianity, but his conclusion was, “ *I like the New Testament, I like your Christianity, but I do not like your Christians.*” My ... Peter’s story reminds us that God wants to instil in us His attitude toward the world. And what a world it was in Peter’s day.

Ancient Egypt was known for its pyramids, ancient Greece was known for its temples, and ancient Rome was known for its roads. Roman roads was covered a total of 53,000 miles, extending through the outermost

frontiers of the empire like so many arms from the mother city. They traversed wastelands, forded ravines and crossed over mountains. They were engineering marvels, enduring reminders of Rome's passion to spread its empire throughout the world. Now the book of Acts is also patterned with roads to the world, God's roads. But instead of stemming from Rome, His highways rolled out from Jerusalem, carrying the good news of the gospel to earth's most distant corners. Do you recall that in ( 1:8 ) the Risen Lord marked out the construction plans for the early believers to follow ? He said, "*But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*" Now the rest of Acts traces this blueprint. In chapter's 1 to 7, the roads of witness are paved in Jerusalem, in chapters 8 to 12 they extend into Judea and Samaria, and in chapters 13 to 28, they course their way through the far- flung corners of the ancient world.

Today, though the writing of the book of Acts has ended, these roads are still expanding into new territory, as believers continue to clear more paths for the advance of the gospel. How exciting to realise that we can be as useful to the Lord as those early believers. And what a privilege, to stand in their company. Now ( Acts Ch 11 ) brings before us **The Church As It was Meant to Be.** It sets before us **The First Gentile Church.** I want us to look at 4 aspects of this church.

## (1) THE BACKGROUND TO THIS CHURCH

Bad news travels fast, and soon the Christians in Jerusalem called Peter on the carpet for fraternising with the Gentiles. With the smell of ham still on his breath, Peter no sooner steps foot in the city before the Jewish Christians there begin pointing fingers and wagging tongues. "*Shame on you, Peter.*" "*How could you Peter ?*" "*You've gone, liberal, Peter.*" You see,

### (a) **THERE WAS A RESISTANCE TO GOD'S PURPOSES:**

Do you see that phrase in ( 11:2 ) ? "*They .... contended with him.*" It comes from the same word translated "*doubting nothing,*" in ( 10:20 ) and in ( 11:12 ) It means "*to make a difference.*" The legalists in the church at Jerusalem had closed minds and they contended with Peter. We don't know how long after Peter's visit to Caesarea this took place, or how the Jerusalem believers heard what Peter had done, but when Peter went up to Jerusalem they were ready for him. It's interesting that Peter was accused of his fellow Christians of the same thing the Lord Jesus was accused of by the Pharisees, eating with sinners. ( Lk 15:2 ) At least Peter was in good company. You see, these legalists were making a difference between the Gentiles and the Jews after Peter had demonstrated that "*there is no difference,*" God had declared the Gentiles "*clean,*" that is, accepted before God on the same basis as the Jews, through faith in Christ.

Startled by the obvious social implications, many no doubt held that if Gentiles were really to live as Christians, they would first have to become Jewish proselytes ( Acts 15:5 ) Many were still zealous for the law and Jewish customs. The temple was their main meeting place. Not surprisingly therefore, they took issue with Peter. Peter had broken the religious taboo, he had ceremonially defiled himself and he deserved to be excommunicated. Here were Jewish Christian leaders facing change in the first century and they were found wanting. None of us like change, sure we don't ? But we must realise that some changes are inevitable. One ancient philosopher observed, "***There is nothing permanent except change.***" Change requires adjustment. Changes test our flexibility. And each change must be examined in the light of Gods Word. Did you notice how Peter dealt with their charges ? Instead of entering into a heated debate,

***(b) THERE WAS A REHEARSAL OF GOD'S PURPOSES:***

Peter simply recounted the remarkable events leading to the conversion of the Gentiles. ( 10:1-48 ) Now its interesting to notice that in his personal defence, Peter presented three pieces of evidence. There was ***the vision from God:*** ( 11:5-11 ) ***the witness of the Spirit:*** ( 11:12-15 ) ***and again, there was the witness of the Word.*** ( 11: 16-18 ) Of course, none of these men had seen the vision, but they trusted Peters report, for they knew that he had been as orthodox as they in his personal life. ( 10:14 ) He was not likely to go to the Gentiles on his own and then invent a story to back it

up. The witness of the Spirit was crucial, for this was Gods own testimony that He had indeed saved the Gentiles. It's interesting that **Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost** to find an example of what happened in the home of Cornelius. This suggests that the "**baptism of the Spirit,**" ( 11:16 ) accompanied by speaking in tongues was not an everyday occurrence in the early church. My .... what had happened in the home of Cornelius was the same as had happened in the upper room. And Peter had "**six brethren,**" ( 11:12 ) to confirm his testimony. Finally, there was the witness of the Word for what happened in the home of Cornelius squared with Scripture. ( 11:16 ) The Scripture was being fulfilled just as the Lord Jesus had said. ( 1:5 ) So the vision from God, the witness of the Holy Spirit, corroborating testimony by unsympathetic but trustworthy witnesses, and the promise of the Lord Jesus Himself was enough evidence to squelch the protests. Did you notice that Peter ended his story with two conclusions ?

**1. The Gentiles Had Received the Same Spirit as the Jews:**

Acts ( Ch 2 ) was repeated in ( Acts Ch 10 ) The Holy Spirit came upon those who believed. Only this time it was Gentiles, not Jews who received the Spirit, and the upper room in Jerusalem was replaced by Cornelius house in Caesarea. Peter was simply saying to the leaders in Jerusalem, "*I know this doesn't fit in our theological box, but it looks like the Lord is doing something new.*"

## **2. The Gentiles Had Received the Same Salvation as the Jews:**

Look if you will at ( 11:18 ) You see, not only had they received the same Spirit as the Jews, but the Gentiles had received the same salvation as well. Indeed when Peter's accusers heard this,

### ***(c) THERE WAS A REJOICING IN GODS PURPOSES:***

Look at ( 11:18 ) Thus a giant step in enlarging the church's attitude was now accomplished. They could now begin evangelising the Gentiles. Now this was (1) to the first Gentile church. At least seven years elapsed from Pentecost until,

### **(2) THE BIRTH OF THIS CHURCH**

At Antioch. ( 11:20 ) Now Antioch was situated on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles east of the Mediterranean, at the convergence of the Taurus and Lebanon mountains where the Orontes breaks through on its way to the sea. During the first century it was the third-largest city in the world, behind Rome and Alexandria, with a population of at least half a million people. It was the melting pot for at least five cultures, the Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arab, and Persian. The Jews made up one-seventh of the city's population and had legal sanction to follow their own laws in their own neighbourhoods. Antioch was famous for its chariot racing and for its deliberate

pursuit of pleasure. *It was the Las Vegas on the Orontes.* But Antioch was most famous for its worship of Daphne, whose temple stood 5 miles outside the town in a laurel grove. Apollo's famous pursuit of Daphne there was re-enacted night and day by the men of the city and by the priestesses, who were in fact ritual prostitutes. My ... throughout the world, "*the morals of Daphne,*" was an expression of depravity. And yet it was in this city, with all its sensuality and immorality that "*the disciples were called Christians first.*" ( 11:26 ) How was this church born ?

### ***(a) THROUGH GREAT PERSECUTION:***

You see ( 11:19 ) picks up where ( 8:4 ) left off. You see persecution thrust two kinds of believers into the other parts of the world. The first shared the good news only with fellow Jews. ( 11:19 ) The second was willing to share the gospel with both Jews and Gentiles, because they were Hellenized ( Greek speaking Jews ) ( 11:20 ) and were not so attached to Jewish prejudice. So these unnamed Jews from the island of Cyprus and Cyrene in North Africa, with no official direction, no human instruction, no precedent to follow, nothing but a burning love for Christ, took the message to Antioch without realising the revolutionary greatness of their act. But it all began with persecution. Isn't our God wonderful ? You see God used that which the Devil intended to Hinder the church to Help the church. You say, "*Nothing good can ever come out of persecution.*" No. Will here God turned **Members into missionaries.** (a)

**(b) IN GREAT POWER:**

Look if you will at ( 11:21 ) My .... Antioch was not evangelised by the apostles but by the average members of Christ's body willing to share their faith. Wherever these fugitives landed, they kindled a blaze. Sharing Christ was to them as natural as tears to sorrow or a smile to happiness. Everyday believers empowered by the Holy Spirit of God blew away the hold of paganism on needy souls. The result ? A great harvest in Antioch.

Now the word "*preaching*," there does not mean the kind of preaching that I'm doing tonight. It is not the public proclamation of the gospel that we do when we have our public services. There are several words that are translated in the New Testament "*preaching*." One of the words is a word that means public proclamation, declaring the Word of God, announcing the good news of the gospel. The word that's used here is a different word. It is really a picture of what we would call lifestyle evangelism, conversational evangelism. It doesn't mean they were having revival meetings and tent crusades. What it means is that just everywhere these people went they were talking about Jesus Christ, they were sharing the Lord Jesus, they were telling people about Jesus Christ. My .... what we could we expect to happen if we got back to this kind of New Testament evangelism ?

I mean, where did these early Christians do their evangelism ? In a building or in the day to day business of life ? Where do we do our evangelism ?

You say, "*I leave that to the preacher*." Well, these early believers didn't. Ordinary Christians empowered by the Holy Spirit of God went everywhere gossiping the gospel.

The result ? "*A great number believed and turned unto the Lord*," ( 11:21 ) Why ? "*The hand of the Lord was with them*." ( 11:21 ) In the Old Testament the phrase, "*the hand of the Lord*," meant two things. (1) It spoke of Gods power expressed in judgement: ( Exod 9:33 Deut 2:15 ) (2) It spoke of Gods power expressed in blessing: ( Ezra 7:9 Neh 2:8 ) In this case it was related to the blessing of the Lord. My .... is this not what we need more than anything else ? The blessing of the Lord, the power of the Lord ? I tell you there were no apostles, no pastor/teachers, no elders and no deacons . no ecclesiastical structure. Just "*the Lord's hand*," and a tremendous number of new believers. My .... this church was born (a) (b)

**(c) FOR GREAT PURPOSES:**

That they might labour for, and live like Christ. Now don't forget what Antioch was like. It was the Las Vegas of the ancient world. You name they had it. Idolatry it was at Antioch. Prostitution it was at Antioch. Pursuit of pleasure, it was at Antioch. Yet here in this cesspool of iniquity, "*the disciples were called Christians*." This was probably a nickname given to them by the Gentile townspeople. Believers would have been reticent to describe themselves with a term built on Christ's holy name. And Jews would never have called them, "*Christians*," because Christ

is the Greek word for Messiah, to call them Christians, followers of the Messiah would have been unthinkable. No, as the people of Antioch observed this vibrant, spiritual movement, they took what to them was a term of derision and called these believers Christ-ians .... followers of Christ. You see, Christ was so much on their lips, and Christ was so much in their lives, and Christ was so much in their language, that no other name would do. The word “ *Christian*,” is used only three times in the New Testament, ( Acts 11:26, 26:28, 1 Pet 4:16 ) and yet it has become a term of endearment today for those who follow the Lord Jesus. My .... is this not the great purpose for which we have been saved ? That we might be “ *conformed to the image of Christ* ?” ( Rom 8:29 ) Christ on our lips, Christ in our lives, Christ in our language. Is this you ? Dr. Harry Ironside one of the great preachers of another generation says that when he was travelling in China years ago, he was frequently introduced as “ *Yasu-yan*.” At first, he didn’t know what that term meant. They would introduce him and say, “ *And now we are going to hear from Yasu-yan*.” But when he asked about it, he learned that “ *Yasu*,” was Cantonese for the word “ *Jesus*,” and “ *Yan*,” was Cantonese for the word “ *man*.”

So he was being introduced as “ *the Jesus man*,” which was fine because that’s what a Christian is. There’s no better compliment than to say, “ *There goes a Jesus man*.” There goes a Christ-one. There goes a Christian. My .... this was the first Gentile Church. This was the Church as it was meant to be. (1) (2) but look at,

### (3) THE BELIEVERS IN THIS CHURCH

Undoubtedly there were a great number of them, and the church leaders in Jerusalem, the mother church, had a responsibility to “ *shepherd*,” this flock. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch, to find out what was going on among the Gentiles. This proved to be a wise choice, for Barnabas lived up to his name, “ *son of encouragement*.” ( 4:36 ) Is this not what these young converts needed ?

#### (a) *THEY NEEDED ENCOURAGEMENT:*

And who better to give it ? Than Barnabas. You see,

#### (1) Barnabas was A SENT MAN:

( 11:22 ) Do you recall that Barnabas first appeared in ( Ch 4 ) when he sold some property to meet the needs of other believers. And then through his influence Paul was finally accepted by the Jerusalem church. ( 9:27 ) Barnabas was a godly, cheerful, big-hearted, warm-hearted man, just the man for the job. Now remember this work had no apostolic support or authority, but the preaching of the gospel was an instant success and large numbers of Gentiles were saved. Reports of what was happening filtered down to Jerusalem and the apostles said, “ *Look, a lot of Greeks are getting saved in Antioch we wonder is this true fire or wild fire ? Is this of God ?*”

You see, the apostles has not initiated it or approved it

and they were wondering, “ *Should we approve it ? We had better send someone up to investigate this new and startling development.*” So “ *they sent forth Barnabas.*” ( 11:22 ) It was a wise choice because Cypriots and Cyrenians were spearheading the work in Antioch and Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew. My .... is there not a lesson for us here ? Do we not need God-given wisdom to send, to appoint, to place, a round peg in a round hole ? (1)

### **(2) Barnabas was A SENSIBLE MAN:**

( 11:23 ) He saw the grace of God. Wait a minute. How can you see grace ? Grace is a spiritual intangible you can't see grace. A young fellow says, “ *You can see Grace all right. She is 5 feet 2 inches. Eight stone, has blonde hair and blue eyes.*” No, grace is a spiritual intangible. What Barnabas saw was this. He saw the effects of God' grace. Now he could easily have seen the situation in a different light. My .... these people were new, untaught Christians. They still carried the mire of Antioch with them. Some of them had miles to go in their language, and relationships and ethics. But Barnabas saw evidence of the grace of God. He didn't say, “ *Well, this is a bit different in form from what's back in Jerusalem.*” No. He knows the old and he sees the new and he' used of God to mould it together. He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. My .... do you recognise the grace of God ? Especially in places where they don't do everything the way you like ? Oh, sometimes we think that God's grace and blessing is tied to our little circle don't we ? Do you know something ? God blesses people whom

you disagree with. (1) (2)

### **(3) Barnabas was A SPIRITUAL MAN:**

( 11:24 ) Barnabas saw the effects of God's grace, rejoiced, then tenderly encouraged God people. He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. How was he able to do this ? “ *For he was a good man ....,*” ( 11:24 ) You see, the refreshing water of the Spirit flowed from Barnabas' innermost being. Can you think of anyone like that ? Are you like that ? Have you discoverer that some people when they come around and talk with you they depress you. And when they are gone you say, “ *Well, thank goodness for that.*” They are fault finding, hard, critical and gloomy. Then there are others and you're not in their company five minutes till a shot of sunshine has permeated your whole being. Your hopes have been down, they've lifted them, your courage has gone but they've new heart into you. My .... this was Barnabas, forever the one to encourage, to refresh, to strengthen. Is this you ?

Do you know what it is to recognise the grace of God ?

Do you encourage those who are young in the faith ?

### **(4) Barnabas was A SELF-EFFACING MAN:**

Look if you will at ( 11:25 ) It was a few years ago, when they had last seen each other. ( 9:30 ) A lot of water had gone under the bridge since Paul's conversion, and he was now a well-seasoned servant of Christ. So Barnabas says, “ *This job is too big for*

*me. I'm perfectly willing to put my oar in and do what I can, but I need help. I know where there's a man who has got what this situation needs. I am going to go and get Paul. " Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus to seek Saul." ( 11:25 ) Do you know something ? A smaller man, a meaner man, would not have done that. Have you met preachers who have said, " I'm going to a big duck in the puddle. I've got all this to myself." But not Barney. He wanted to take a man who he knew was a first class scholar, steeped in the Old Testament, well read in philosophy, and now above all a disciple of the Lord Jesus. My ... Barnabas must have known that by bringing in Saul of Tarsus, he was bringing in a bigger man than he was, bigger in talent and genius, bigger in his grasp of truth, bigger in breadth of vision and boldness of action. But Barnabas was a self-effacing man. Are you ? Barnabas's willingness to invite Paul to share in the blessing of the work in Antioch reminds me of this statement by Dr. F. B. Meyer in 1907.*

**I find in my own ministry I suppose I pray for my one little flock, God bless me, God fill my pews, God sent me revival, I miss the blessing. But as I pray for big brother Mr. Spurgeon, on the right hand side of my church, God bless him, or my other big brother Campbell Morgan on the other side of my church, God bless him, I am sure to get a blessing without praying for it, for the overflow of their cups fills my little bucket**

Barnabas wasn't about trying to get the blessing only for himself. He was willing to share in the overflow of blessing on all. To quote Spurgeon, "**It takes more**

**grace than I can tell: to play the second fiddle well."** My ... is it not rare to find an older man, held high in the opinions of his brethren, who will allow himself to be eclipsed by a younger man. Now what did Barnabas do ? He enlisted and encouraged Saul in the service of the Lord. Now in every church there are folk like Paul. People who need to be found, encouraged and developed. Sure they have gifts, talents and abilities but it takes a Barnabas to find and foster them. I thank God for those who encouraged me when I started to preach.

My .... Do you know someone who needs to be fostered and developed ? Do you know someone who could be and should be promoted to a place of greater usefulness ? But right now they stand in need of your friendship ? How about someone who is better qualified than yourself ? Are you ready to step aside and play second fiddle ? My .... these new converts needed encouragement and Barnabas was the man. You see, an encourager is not necessarily the man who does it himself but God give us some Barnabas's in this church, some who say, "*There's a fellow named Saul down there, Saul here's a job you can do, I see it in you.*" These believers needed encouragement. But,

#### **(b) THEY NEEDED NOURISHMENT:**

Look if you will at ( 11:26 ) Can you imagine attending a church with these two as the co-teachers ? You see these two gifted men formed a powerful ministry team. They faced the daunting task of shepherding a large number of new believers in a hostile pagan environment. How did they do it ? Well,

for a year they met with the church and taught the Word. My ... unlike many in today's church, they knew the most urgent need of those new Christians was to be taught the Word of God. So in mass meetings of the Antioch believers, Barnabas and Saul did just that. Their example is an important one for the contemporary church to follow. For teaching the Word of God is at the heart of the church's ministry. Do you recall what the apostles said in ( Ch 6 ) ? “ *But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.* ” ( 6:4 ) Oh, I know there are churches and pastors who have all kinds of programmes and some of them are doing all kinds of things but are the sheep and lambs being fed ? My ... God's people need **encouragement**, will you be a **Barnabas to them ? God's people need nourishment, will you be a Paul to them ?** Even in the early days of this first Gentile church there was a beautiful balance to be seen. Sure, they were sound in doctrine, but this last section tells me they were strong in love. For notice,

#### **(4) THE BLESSING FROM THIS CHURCH**

Look if you will at ( 11:27-30 ) You see initially:

##### ***(a) THERE WAS HELP FROM JERUSALEM:***

Was it not the Jewish believers who had brought the gospel to Antioch ? ( 11:20 ) Was it not the Jerusalem church that had sent Barnabas to encourage these new converts ? ( 11:22 ) And now men with the gift of prophecy like Agabus had arrived in Antioch to help in

the ministry of the Word ( 11:28 ) Like the gift of tongues, the gift of prophecy as a means of foretelling the future was a temporary or transitional gift. Do you recall that Paul tells us that the foundation for the church was laid by the apostles and prophets and then both eventually moved off the scene. After all, you don't keep laying the foundation. ( Eph 2:20 ) In those days they did not have the completed Word of God and so the New Testament prophet received his message direct from the Lord and delivered it to the people.

On this occasion the Spirit told Agabus ( 21:10-11 ) that a great famine was soon to come, and it did come during the reign of Claudius Caesar ( AD 41 ... 54 ) when crops were poor for many years. My ... Agabus delivered his message to the church at Antioch, and they determined to help their fellow-believers in Judea. (a) But now,

##### ***(b) THERE WAS HELP FOR JERUSALEM:***

For here were a group of Greeks, Gentiles, if you please who had been saved by the grace of God. And they started sending relief back to the mother church at Jerusalem. And there were some Jews in the mother church who didn't think those Antiochan Gentiles could ever be saved ! Can you imagine what happened when a big package of food came to the church at Jerusalem ? Someone said, “ *My, my look at this food. Praise the Lord. Where did this come from ? Oh, it came from the church up there in Antioch ... from those Gentiles.* ” Do you see what love does ? It reaches out to those in need regardless of the

circumstances. My .... there's an important spiritual principle we need to grasp here. If people have been a spiritual blessing to us, we should minister to them of our material possessions.

Paul says, “ *Let him that is in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things.*” ( Gal 6:6 )  
Jerusalem had been a blessing to Antioch, now Antioch was a blessing to Jerusalem. For these saved Gentiles, now called Christians, were sincerely showing that they were truly the followers of Him, who said, “ *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” ( 20:35 )

Alexander the Great once learned that in his army was a namesake, another Alexander, who was a notorious coward. Alexander the Great, who conquered the world, when he was just twenty three, called the soldier before and said, “ *Is your name Alexander and are you named for me ?*” The trembling coward said, “ *Yes, sir. My name is Alexander and I was named for you.*” The great general said, “ *Then either be brave or change your name.*” Fortunately, Christ does not say that to us, but He does exhort to be who we are, Christians. Tell me, through life and lip does the world recognise that you belong to Christ ?