

EXPANDING HORIZONS

by Ray C. Stedman

Let us resume our studies in Acts.

Here we learn afresh of the movement of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit at work is like a great river, cutting a fresh channel, going wherever it wishes. Sometimes we Christian flood control experts are disturbed by that. We do not like the way the Holy Spirit moves. We like to dig a channel, line it with concrete, and say, "Come, O River of God. We have dug the channel. Flow through it now according to our desire." But God does not work that way. He makes his own channels. We build dikes and dams and attempt to direct the Spirit's flow. But, as the Lord Jesus said, the Spirit is like the wind; he blows wherever he wishes. No one can tell where he comes from or where he is going. It is refreshing to recognize that.

The Holy Spirit has cut new channels repeatedly throughout twenty centuries of church history. Every now and then he breaks out in a fresh way. Unfortunately we Christians consider that to be some special kind of activity. We view it as emergency procedure on God's part when we ought to recognize that it is the normal pattern of God at work. As the book of Acts makes perfectly clear, God expects to act this way all the time, and he will, if we are ready to move with him.

Beginning with Verse 19 of Chapter 11, we find an interesting account of the moving of the Holy Spirit in fresh and vital ways. There are a number of "firsts" in this section. A question often asked about the book of Acts is, "Just where is it recorded that the gospel first goes out to the Gentiles?" Where does it first break through this rigid racial barrier, this prejudice of Jew toward Gentile (what Paul later calls "this middle wall of partition") which stood like a Berlin Wall, dividing them and keeping them from any vital contact?

Some say it was when the Ethiopian eunuch was converted, as recorded in Chapter 8. Others say, "No, it was when the gospel went to the centurion Cornelius in Chapter 10, this is the first break-through to the Gentile world." But in this passage we have the clear, unequivocal answer:

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 none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. {Acts 11:19-20 RSV}

It amazes me how often, in commenting on this point, people read Verse 19 but never Verse 20. They stop with the words "speaking to none except Jews" and say they prove that the gospel did not go out to the Gentiles until much later. Yet the very next words say that some, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Greeks, to the Gentiles, preaching the Lord Jesus. And notice when: It was at the time of the persecution that broke out over Stephen, the first martyr of the church. That carries you all the way back to the seventh chapter, just a few months after Pentecost.

So, the gospel began to penetrate the Gentile world almost from the very beginning. The wonderful thing is that it was carried by obscure, unknown men and women. We do not know their names. When the persecution arose they were scattered abroad. They were Jews who had been converted to Christianity. Some were Hebrew-speaking Jews who preached only to the Jews. Others were Greek-speaking Jews, men of Cyprus, and of Cyrene on the north coast of Africa. When they came to Antioch they began to preach to the Gentiles there who spoke Greek.

In many ways this is one of the greatest events in all history. And amazingly, the evangelization was conducted by obscure men and women, laymen like most of you here. They made no headlines on earth, but extra editions were published in heaven because this was such a fantastic event. At last the gospel broke through the Jewish barriers that had held it in and was now reaching out to the Gentiles.

Soon we have the natural consequence, the beginning of a new church:

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord. News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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; for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a large company was added to the Lord. {Acts 11:21-24 RSV}

The result of this first preaching was that a great many Gentile converts came to Christ. This news was a bit disconcerting to the disciples at Jerusalem. They did not know what to do about this movement of the Holy Spirit. Since they were themselves Jews, raised in the tradition that they were God's chosen people, you can imagine what happened. They never thought that God would move to reach the Gentile world and so they hardly knew what to make of it. When word came to them that Gentiles were becoming converts of Jesus Christ, they were utterly astounded. Were these real Christians? Was it possible that Gentiles could actually come to Christ just as a Jew could? These thoughts came to their minds.

To settle the issue, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. What a great choice they made! Barnabas is a great individual. He had one of the largest hearts recorded in all of the New Testament. He did not come to attempt to control this new thrust by the Holy Spirit; he came down to investigate it, to see what God had been doing. He was a Greek-speaking Jew, having come from Cyprus himself, so he could identify with those from Cyprus and Cyrene who did the preaching here.

Antioch was a strategic city, the third largest in the Roman empire. It was noted all over the empire as a sports center. Chariot races were a specialty. If you have read Ben Hur, or have seen the movie, you know that it is in Antioch that Lew Wallace places the exciting chariot race which is the prominent feature of that novel. Antioch was also a place of culture. And sex was worshipped there. About five miles outside the city was the temple of Daphne, where sex was enthroned and worshipped through priestesses who were really religious prostitutes. So Antioch was important in every way. Yet in the midst of its corruption this new church had arisen, and Barnabas was sent to discover what was going on.

The three reasons they chose Barnabas are given: (1) he was a good man, (2) full of the Spirit, (3) full of faith.

"Good man" means more than simply that he behaved himself. This is a reference to his disposition. He was an easy-going, cheerful, open-hearted, gracious individual. He has appeared this way to us already in the pages of Acts. Remember that he defended Paul when he came back from Damascus, disillusioned and defeated. The other apostles would have nothing to do with him because he was still suspect. But Barnabas brought him in and championed his cause. He was that kind of man -- big-hearted, easy to get along with, delightful, without a censorious or harsh spirit, not inflexible, but open and ready to investigate anything new.

He was "full of the Holy Spirit." That, of course, is the supreme qualification. In other words, he was a man to whom were imparted continually the wisdom, understanding, and love of God. Being full of the Holy Spirit meant that the fruits of the Spirit were evident in his life. He was filled with love, joy, longsuffering, patience, and gentleness. He lived this way not by virtue of his own easy-going character but because he was drawing upon the power of an indwelling Holy Spirit.

Third, he was a man "of faith." That means he acted upon what God said. He did not wait for his feelings. He did not depend upon whether or not he woke up in a blue mood. He did not even need a cup of coffee to get him started in the morning. A man of faith simply believes God and expects him to act. He doesn't even think about how he feels himself.

A very false idea of faith is popular today. Many people feel that they are filled with faith only when they have a tremendous sense of expectation or excitement within them. If they do not have that feeling then they say, "Well, I'm sorry, I don't have any faith." But that is a dead giveaway that they do not understand what faith is. Faith is not a feeling. Faith has nothing to do with your feelings. Faith is simply a recognition that God has promised something, and, since he is God, to expect him to do it, and therefore to act on that basis. A man of

faith does. And that is the kind of man who gets something done.

When Barnabas came to Antioch, a man of faith, he came expecting to be led of God, expecting his eyes to be opened to what God wanted him to see, expecting God to give him the wisdom to handle whatever situation developed. It was no surprise therefore when things began to work out immediately.

What did he find when he got there? There are many things hidden in this little section which you can read between the lines.

First, he found a group of men and women who were undoubtedly Christians. When Barnabas saw them, we are told, he was glad. "When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad." What did he see? What convinced him that these men and women were genuine? That is what he had been sent to discover. Well, he saw the grace of God. Now, how do you see grace? It is an invisible quality. Grace, of course, means the graciousness, the goodness of God poured out into a life. How do you see that?

It is interesting that in the original language this word is *charis*, from which we get the English word, *charisma*. It is the same word that the Apostle Paul employs in Ephesians 4 where he speaks about the gifts of the Holy Spirit: "But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift," {Eph 4:7 RSV}. The grace referred to is a gift of the Spirit, one of the gifts mentioned in Romans 12 and First Corinthians 12: the gift of love, the gift of wisdom, of knowledge, of faith, discernment, prophecy, teaching, etc. In Ephesians 3 Paul speaks concerning himself, "To me ... this grace was given," {Eph 3:8a RSV}. What grace? "... to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,," {Eph 3:8b RSV}. He had the gift of preaching.

When Barnabas saw the gifts of the Holy Spirit in evidence he knew these were real Christians. In Hebrews 2 we are told that the gospel "was first declared by the Lord, then was preached by those who knew him, and it was confirmed by signs and wonders and by the distribution of the gifts of the Holy Spirit," {cf, Heb 2:3b-4 RSV}. So the possession of one or more of these gifts is the sign that somebody is a real Christian. That is what Barnabas saw when he came; therefore he was glad.

He saw also that they were a church. They shared together the common life of Jesus Christ. Every one of them had in him the life of Jesus. That is what makes a body -- the sharing of life by each individual cell. We could all be gathered here as an ordinary assembly of people -- perhaps as members of the Democratic Party, or the Republican, or whatever -- but we would not be a body. But because we all share the life of Jesus we are a body. (That is, presumably we all do. There may be some here who do not; if so, they are not a part of this body, the body of Christ.) It is the life of Jesus that makes us a body.

When Barnabas found all these Christians sharing the same life he knew that here was a real church. They were sharing the gifts of the Spirit and operating as a church. That is what makes a church. It is not the fact that people gather together on Sunday that makes them a church. It is not that they meet and celebrate the Lord's table, or are baptized. That is not what makes them a church. It is the fact that they have the same life and that they manifest the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I was in Southern California two weeks ago and spent an evening with Hal Lindsey and his group, in a private home just off the UCLA campus. We had a meeting led by Jack Sparks and about twelve of his people from the Christian World Liberation Front in Berkeley. The meeting was held in a large living room that had no chairs -- just wall-to-wall people. We all sat on the floor. That is the way a new church starts. When you get old you move to pews, but when you're a young church you start on the floor.

We had a wonderful meeting. I had never met these people before and some of them had never met each other, but it was not long before it was evident that we all shared the same life. We knew and loved the same Lord. His Spirit was imparted to each one of us and we each had an intimate experience of knowledge of the Lord Jesus. We sang about it and clapped our hands together and praised his name. Some stood up and gave a little testimony. Some shared a need, while others led in prayer. We had a wonderful time together.

When someone introduced me and I got up and talked for about fifteen minutes on the nature of the body.

When I had finished everybody clapped and said, "Right on! Right on!" That's modern for "Amen!" Then they took an offering; some gave, and some took. We had a wonderful Christian meeting.

I knew that I was in a new church the minute I saw it, and I told the leaders so. (They did not know they had a church; they wondered what they had.) When I met with them afterward, I said, "You may not realize it, but what you have here is a church, and you have to treat it as such, to think of it as such, and be able to move with the Holy Spirit." Because that is what the Holy Spirit does -- he builds churches. That is what he has come for, and everything he does is related to that purpose.

That is what he had been doing in Antioch. Barnabas spoke to the church there, and what he said is very significant. He gave them a message designed for a new church. It had just two points, but both are extremely important. He exhorted them first to remain faithful to the Lord. He did not say, "Look, you have started out in the Christian life, but there is so much more that you haven't yet received. You need a second blessing. There is a new crisis you haven't come to yet, a new provision from God still ahead that you haven't yet received. I want you to strive on now and seek that."

He did not say anything like that. You hear that all too often today. But Barnabas was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith, and he would not say a thing like that.

What he said was, "Look, you have received the Lord. You have received therefore all that he is ever going to give you once you have received him. You have all there is; there is nothing more for him to give you. It is true you have not laid hold of it all yet. You need, through the years, to develop what you have. But there is nothing to be added. It is all there when you have received Jesus Christ." As Peter puts it, "His divine power has granted us [*has* granted us] all that pertains to life and godliness," {cf, 2 Pet 1:3a RSV}. You do not need anything else.

So Barnabas says, "Remain faithful to what you have. Don't go after anything else. You don't need anything new. You have received the Holy Spirit, all that God will give you. You will never be able to use up what you already have, you will never run dry, never touch bottom, as you develop the resources in Christ already yours. Remain faithful to the Lord."

But, second, do it intelligently and with purpose. "Remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose." The Greek here means, "according to a set plan." They were not simply to come to church and enjoy the fellowship, and the feelings of glory and excitement that knowing the Lord gave them. They were to remember that they needed to learn more of him. They had to seek the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ intelligently, through the Word of God. That is his provision. Already they had the Old Testament Scriptures which were full of Christ. And the New Testament Scriptures were gradually beginning to come into being. They were to gather and learn to understand what God was doing in Jesus Christ. They were to seek, and read, and study, because the Scriptures reveal Christ. That is what they needed to do. They did not need more beyond him; they needed to know more of him.

So Barnabas exhorted them to work intelligently at learning about Jesus. That means reading the Scriptures. It means prayer, seeking his face, learning to pray all through the day in every situation. New Christians need to learn this more than anything else. That is why Barnabas so wisely instructed them along this line.

You see, many Christians make a fatal mistake at this point. They come to Christ and enjoy the fellowship and excitement of being a Christian. At first they have their face fixed on Jesus, and it is wonderful. They sense immediately the joy that fills their heart as they come to know this glorious living Lord. But gradually their focus shifts. Instead of seeing Jesus they begin to look at themselves. They start examining how they are enjoying this relationship and how much it is doing for them. They start feeling of their feelings. Did you ever try to grope around inside and feel of your feelings? And, of course, they are like Peter, walking on the water, who, whenever he took his eyes off Jesus and put them on the circumstances, began to go down. This is the story of many, many young Christians. They fail to concentrate on the Lord, to find joy in him and to glory in his presence. They get all occupied with what the Lord does for them. They lose the sense of his presence and fail to seek his face. That is why they sink and oftentimes disappear for awhile from Christian fellowship. That is what Barnabas is trying to help them to avoid. He urges them to remain faithful to the Lord with a steadfast

purpose.

The immediate result in Antioch was that a large company was added to the Lord. When you get people looking to the Lord and not to themselves, not trying to add to the church, you will find people are added to the Lord. That is the way the church increases. You never increase church membership by trying to add to the church. This is the mistake that many churches make, and the result is that today there are churches which are virtually empty. All the efforts that men have made to build up their membership -- by all kinds of planning and programs, drives and campaigns -- have resulted in the steady declension of church attendance. That is because the true means of adding to the church is to add people to the Lord.

After this evening's service some people will meet with our elders to express their identification with this local body. All we ask of them is to tell us, in their own way, how they know that they belong to the Lord. Because if they belong to the Lord, they already belong to the church. Being added to the Lord makes the difference. In Antioch a great many people from throughout the city were added to the Lord, and thus they became added to the church.

The phrase, "a large company," leads to the next new thing that happened in Antioch. We read:

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; {Acts 11:25 RSV}

"So" means, "because of this large company." There were so many new people to teach; such an overwhelming number of new converts had come in, that Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul;

and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a large company of people; {Acts 11:26a RSV}

It has been as much as ten years since we have seen Saul. Ten years ago he left Jerusalem with his tail between his legs and went to Tarsus, his home town, defeated and disillusioned because he had been trying to serve God in his own eager zeal. He had not yet learned the process of dependence upon the Holy Spirit, upon the life of Jesus within. But in those ten years he has learned a lot. He was not entirely idle, as he tells us in Galatians. He preached the word throughout the regions of Syria, and of Cilicia, the area around Tarsus. And probably during this time occurred many of those visions and revelations from the Lord which he mentions in several places.

But he has learned one great secret. He has discovered that what he had regarded as his credentials for activity, all that he had previously reckoned upon as useful in his life -- his ancestry, his orthodoxy, his morality, his zeal -- all has been wiped out. He has learned that they are not what make you an effective worker for Jesus Christ, but that only your dependence upon Jesus at work in you makes the difference. As he tells us in Philippians 3, "he learned to count as manure all this other stuff, in order that he might gain Christ" {cf, Phil 3:8 RSV}, and reckon upon his power at work.

When he had learned that, the Lord sent Barnabas over to Tarsus to find him. Now God had his address all the time. Barnabas didn't; he had to look for him. But when he found him he brought him to Antioch, ready to begin his great worldwide ministry, that marvelous ministry of the Apostle Paul that shook the world and has changed the course of human history time after time.

In connection with this we learn of another first:

and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians. {Acts 11:26b RSV}

It is clear from this brief statement that it was not the Christians themselves, but the people of Antioch who called them that. The word means, "those belonging to Christ," or "Christ's men." As these Christians talked about Jesus to men everywhere -- Jesus the Christ, the Messiah -- the Gentiles around them labeled them "Christ's men." (You can tell from this that they didn't talk about the church; they talked about Jesus.)

At first it was a contemptuous term, a term of reproach. "Look at these crazy people! They come into our city, they don't worship our idols, don't observe our moral (or immoral) standards, they live lives entirely different from ours." So, contemptuously they called them "Christ's men," Christians. But the disciples thought it was wonderful to be called Christ's men, so they adopted the name and called themselves *Christians*. That is why yet today we are called Christians.

Again, I saw a wonderful incidence of this type at the meeting I spoke of in Southern California. The large home just off the UCLA campus had a sun porch that ran the length of the house. On the porch when I came in was a group of Christian World Liberation Front people who had set up an assembly line. They were all working diligently at producing something. I saw, hanging on a clothesline they had rigged up, a lot of blue denim work shirts. Then I saw that they were printing something in white paint on the backs of the shirts, using a silk-screen process. They were printing these words:

I AM ANOTHER JESUS FREAK

I understood then what had happened. On the Berkeley campus they had been witnessing for Christ. Others, observing them, called them "Jesus freaks." Freak, a common word in the hippy culture, denotes someone who is a devotee of a certain practice or power or drug. There are heroin freaks, speed freaks, and various other kinds of freaks. It means that someone is intimately associated with the subject of the label. So when they were heard witnessing about Jesus, they were called "Jesus freaks." These Christians were not offended in the least. They thought it was a great compliment. And now they parade the avenues with this proudly emblazoned across their backs: "I am another Jesus Freak."

That is exactly the way the Christians first were labeled in Antioch. They counted it joy to suffer reproach for his name's sake, so committed were they to the cause of Jesus Christ.

The last scene in this chapter brings before us still another fresh new first-time ministry:

Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world; and this took place in the days of Claudius. And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. {Acts 11:27-30 RSV}

Here is a ministry of one of the gifts of the Spirit -- that of prophecy. Who were these prophets who came down from Jerusalem? Unfortunately this word, and therefore the gift of prophecy, have become associated only with the ability to predict the future. But that is not the primary meaning. Primarily it means, "to cause to shine." It is the ability to illuminate the Word of God and to make it shine. Peter speaks of this: "We have a more sure word of prophecy which shines as a light in a dark place," {cf, 2 Pet 1:19 KJV}. These were men who could take the Word of God, the Old Testament -- or who were given the words by the Holy Spirit of what became the New Testament, before it was written -- and could make it shine. They illuminated the darkness in people's lives with the truth of God. Occasionally they were also able to illuminate the future and that is done here. This is not the whole gift of prophecy but it is a part of it.

On this specific occasion one of them named Agabus stood up and, by the Spirit, foretold that there would soon be a great famine throughout the world, and, although it is not stated here, that it would be especially severe in Judea. This came true just a few months later. This is one of the historical confirmations of the book of Acts. For not only does Josephus, the Jewish historian, record this famine, but two Roman historians speak of it as well. Suetonius and Tacitus both mention the great famine in the days of Claudius. We can positively date this event in A. D. 44-45.

The noteworthy fact here is that when these disciples heard from the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine, they believed him and began to prepare for it. They realized that it would be especially severe in Judea, and so they prepared already to send a gift to Judea when the famine would come. They had to begin before the famine came because they could not just take up an offering as we would today. Many of them were poor.

Very few had anything like what we would call a bank account. In order to send a gift they had to make some tents and sell them, or raise a crop, or make some pottery, and sell it. Whatever their trade was they had to produce something first, sell it, turn it into cash and then send the cash to Judea. So all this took some time and preparation.

The whole account is a beautiful picture of the concern of the body. They knew this was coming. They did not wait for it to happen, until they finally got heart-rending appeals from the brethren in Judea. "We don't have anything to eat, and we don't have any clothes to wear." They anticipated it by the Holy Spirit, and they had the gift all ready when the effects of the famine struck. They sent it by their favorite teachers, Barnabas and Saul, who had been teaching there in the church for a year.

What wonderful instruction in the Holy Spirit they must have had under the leadership of these two men! How clearly they understood the essential character of the church -- that it is a body that shares life, one member with another. You notice that there is no sense of hierarchy here, no priesthood. There is no super-spiritual class of saints called the clergy. There is just the body of Christians together, one group in Jerusalem and one in Antioch. One has need and the other has plenty. And so the body in Antioch sent to the body in Jerusalem what was required to meet their need and to share together in the life that is in Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful picture this is of the church. The essential characteristics of a church are all here:

- The gifts of the Spirit,
- The shared life in Jesus,
- The proclamation of the Word,
- The teaching of the Scripture,
- The sharing of the body;

it is all here.

Every now and then the Holy Spirit breaks out afresh and starts the pattern all over again, when men drift away from it. You and I are living in one of those days. What an exciting day this is, as God is renewing the pattern of the church once again in our own time! How we ought to rejoice in that great fact!

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, how grateful we are for the evidences we see around us today of this very pattern unfolding in our own time. Lord, this is the exciting development of this age, not the puerile programs of men who are trying to accomplish good, with whatever sincerity, but who do not even know what they are doing. But to link up with your plan, Lord, what a privilege! What excitement, that we may be a part of this fresh and sweeping moving of the Holy Spirit in our own day! Make us to be men and women available to you, Lord, filled with the Holy Spirit, people of faith, flexible, ready to move according to the steps that you outline. Make us willing to change and save us from being rigid, unbending, and inflexible in our outlooks, and in our attitudes one to another. We ask all this in Jesus' name, Amen.

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