

Features of the early church

Part 2

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Note: This text is a computer generated transcript of the sermon. In some cases it may contain errors.

[00:00:01] In chapter 15, but first of all, chapter 11.

I begin reading with verse 19.

Now they which were scattered abroad, upon the persecution that arose about Stephen, travelled as far as Penaecea, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto Jews only.

[00:01:02] And some of them were men of Cyprus, and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the law of Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number fled, and turned unto the Lord.

Then tidings of these things came unto the ear of the church, which was in Jerusalem, and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch, who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all that with purpose and heart they would plead unto the Lord.

[00:02:01] For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith, and much of evil was added unto the Lord.

Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul.

And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch, and they 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.

Now I turn over this page, do you have the Bible? There's a page or two in yours, and I come to chapter 15. Where I read, it's still Antioch, you see.

[00:03:01] And certain men which came down from Judea, taught the brethren, and said, except ye be circumcised after the man of the Moses, ye cannot say. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas should, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem, unto the apostles' elders, about this question. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Philae and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles. And they brought great joy unto all the brethren. And when they were

come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there stood up certain of the sect of the Pharisees, [00:04:03] which believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider this matter. And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said unto them, Brethren, ye know how that it would not go, God made choice among us, that the Gentiles, by my mouth, should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as He did unto us, and put no distance between us and them, purify their hearts by faith.

Now therefore, why can't He God put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, [00:05:01] which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we shall descend even as they.

Now I'm turning over my Bible another page, just to read a verse or two, in the latter part of the chapter. When the decision is reached in this solemn assembly in Jerusalem, they send a letter to Antioch. And the gist of it is this, in verse 28 and 29.

It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, [00:06:02] to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things, that ye abstain from least offer to idols, and from love, and from being strangled, and from fornication, from which, if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well, fare ye well.

It occurs to me that possibly, in several of your minds, there may have been the thought, when I was speaking here last evening, somewhat to this effect. Well, yes, that is a very remarkable, very inspiring picture [00:07:05] of the priestly church in Jerusalem.

You were drawing our attention to it, and certainly it is profitable to conclude on this, but one very prominent detail connected with God's present work is calling out the church for nothing.

It isn't there.

What is that?

Well, I'm talking to those, of course, I'm very glad I am, who know their Bibles.

You have read the Epistles of Revelation, Adonai, Ephesians. You have read in Chapter 2, I have no doubt. And you know that what God is doing today is forming, [00:08:03] in fact, I am told, you can verify this if you've turned up what we often speak of as the Gnostic translation, in Chapter 2, twice, the word create is used.

You remember it says, we Christians are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus, yes?

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5, if any man be in Christ, it's new creation.

It agrees with what he said to these dear folk at Ephesus. He said, now we are his workmanship, and we have been created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them. [00:09:01] But further down in the chapter, he reminds that the great mass of those at Ephesus were of Gentile origin.

Ephesus, you remember, was the great city where Diana was worshipped. There were Jews there, but in the assembly, evidently there was a majority of Gentile converts.

And he reminds them that they who had been in the distance, without Christ and without God in the world, and draw into this place of favour.

And he says, look, God has abolished by death, the flesh of our Lord Jesus, he's been up in death, the breach that there was between Jew on the one hand and Gentile on the other, because at the present time, God is, in our version, [00:10:04] making, to make.

But actually the word there is create, to create in himself, again in Christ Jesus, one new man.

Those Jew and Gentile brought on equal terms, and they live in the same way, into a new position which God creates.

And which that God, of course, is as valid today, near the end of the Church's history, as it was when Paul wrote those words very near the beginning of the Church's history. One of the great features of the present moment is this. God is creating something in which this age-long partition, [00:11:01] this war of partition, is broken down.

And the Gentile, or rather an election from the Gentiles, is brought into this new position equally and exactly on the same footing as an election which God is making from the Jews.

Now that, of course, was absent in the fourth chapter of Acts.

God began the work in the midst of Israel. The masses who were gathered on the day of Pentecost were, of course, Jews, perhaps a sprinkling of proselytes, as they would have been called, Gentile originally acknowledging that they had attached themselves to the Jews' synagogue or elsewhere. And the Gospel was preached, and three thousand souls were converted. And then God began working, and then the apostles were apprehended, [00:12:03] and then these troubles came to pass, and then we are given this lovely little picture of an assembly. But I suppose if we had been there, we could have examined the thousands who were found in what we read as their own company, we should have found them practically to a man or a woman, of Jewish extraction. So Acts gives us what we sometimes call the transition period, when God doesn't do things in a hurry, no, quietly, the divine thought was worked out. Now that's why I read these verses about the work of Antioch, because it was at Antioch that strikingly God began this remarkable work in a very obvious way of gathering out from the Gentiles [00:13:07] a people for his name.

We read, I began reading at that point, how there were many who went forth scattered abroad because of the persecution that arose after Stephen was martyred, and that many of them still had the Jew only in their thoughts.

They preached the Messiah, who was crucified, risen from the dead, and they preached him to Jews only.

But there were some who went beyond that. These men of Cyprus and Cyrene who spoke to the Grecians or Greeks, Gentiles, pretty clearly, looked, preaching the Lord Jesus.

[00:14:03] You would notice, in fact you did notice, as I read down those verses, how each time the apostle emphasizes the lordship of Christ.

If you didn't notice it, notice it now. Preaching the Lord Jesus, verse 21, and the hand of the Lord with wisdom. And a great number believed that, turn to the Lord. And Barnabas exhorts them in verse 23 that they would cleave unto the Lord. And in verse 24, much to prove an act unto the Lord.

You may remember we had that phrase in the scripture we were considering last night. When, owing to the drastic case of discipline, discipline finds its place, as we saw, in the assembly circle. [00:15:02] Because it is the house of God, and it is to be a place of holiness and truth. The first disciplinary action was purely the action of the Holy Ghost. In Corinthians you find the apostle saying, in effect, now brethren, you have to exercise this. And that's a very shocking case. The immorality of your midst worsened much more. Now, the college was a brilliant place, you know. They tell us in that book, hey, you're to put away from yourselves that wicked person. He may not, he did not die, but he was removed from actual practical heraldry amongst the saints of God. Their discipline.

And we noticed how it had a salutary effect.

In this way, it put a stop to what might easily have happened. People say, oh, isn't it lovely? These people, you know, jolly good things, they get joined up with them, look at it, [00:16:04] they're all putting out their money, and everybody's having enough to eat and enough to wear. It would be a good thing to get in amongst those people, wouldn't it? Yes. But on the road, yes, no man joined himself. They uprooted, they waited. Yes, it stopped an inrush of being promptly unconverted people into the bosom of the Church. But it didn't stop the genuine work of God. You'll remember, we noticed this, I'm only reminding you, because he goes on to say that much people was not added to the Church, added to the Lord. Lovely days.

Those men and women, no doubt, they were added to the Church. But the important thing was, they were added to the Lord. To get a person added to the Church who isn't added to the Lord, well, it's a disaster. [00:17:01] Those were the first to be added to the Church. The first thing is, added to the Lord, and that's exactly what happened here. I think we've got that very expression, haven't we? Yes, at the end of verse 24, the last of the cases I cite in is, again, much people was added unto the Lord.

Now, there was then a very powerful work among Gentiles at Antioch, and the Lordship of Christ was very much evidently pressed and made plain.

You remember elsewhere, you have the Apostle flowing into the Sacred of Assyria. I think it's when Peter was talking to Cornelius, he said, Peace by Jesus Christ, he is Lord of all.

[00:18:05] Oh, really? Yes.

Not of the Jews only.

His Lordship.

Yes, his Messiahship. Certainly, more particularly, applied to the Jews who had got the holy writings, prophetic announcements of the coming of the Messiah. But when we consider him, not from that point of view so much as his Lordship.

Now then, all other distinctions. Yes, he's Lord of the Jews, but he's equally Lord of the Gentiles. Because as Peter said, he's Lord of all.

And evidently, he was preached in his Lordship amongst these people.

[00:19:01] With what effect? Well, they preached the Lord Jesus and people turned to the Lord.

You can't turn to the Lord on any other terms but that of subjection.

If I turn to the Lord, well, I shall at once admit myself to be under his authority.

Likewise is subjection beneath his mighty Word.

There was therefore a very remarkable work among the Gentiles in Antioch, almost parallel to that which had taken place amongst the Jews on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem.

When Barnabas came down, he saw the grace of God and he was glad.

[00:20:05] Somebody said, he must have been a good man. You say, why? Well, because it takes something you know to come down and see something done, some wonderful work of God, in which personally you had no share. It didn't cost any credit upon Barnabas. Barnabas hadn't been there. But he came down and saw how greatly God had blessed the labours of somebody else. And he was glad. Why was he glad? Because he saw the Lord was being exalted. And he said to them, all these converts, look if I may have a couple of words to say to you, I haven't been used to your conversion. I've come down here and I'm so delighted to see what God has done through other servants of his than me. But if I've got any word to say to you, it's this. They preach to you the law.

[00:21:02] You turn to the law.

Now, don't be diverted.

Cling to the law.

Stick.

That would be a very ordinary word to use. Stick to him.

My dear brethren, you know we couldn't have much better advice than that, could we? Let there be a living link between my soul and the Lord, and your soul and the Lord. And don't let anything come in to divert you from the Lord. Cling, said this good man Barnabas, cling unto the law.

He came as a pastor amongst them. And that was his message. And, of course, it gave a further impetus to the conversion work. Because the next verse, verse 24 says, when he said he was a good man, full of the Holy Ghost and faith, and much people was added unto him. [00:22:04] It furthered, even yet, this remarkable work of God.

And what happened?

Well, I think it's very significant that, thrown in here, he goes away, of course, and he finds Saul, who becomes the Apostle Paul. He brings him to Antioch. Oh, here they are, ministering and teaching.

And the disciples are called Christians. First, in Antioch.

What were they called, do you think, in Jewish circles? Well, I think we find an answer to that in chapter 24 of the Acts of the Apostles. I'd better perhaps just turn it up, let my memory lead me to this quote. [00:23:03] But when they were accusing the Apostle Paul, yes, here comes this Tertullus, and he's going to accuse Paul in the presence of the Roman power.

And what does he say? He says of Paul, we are told, that man had a pestilent health, and a woman of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a free leader of the sect of the Nazarenes.

That was the way these early folk were viewed in Jewish circles. We've got a new sect in our religion. We've had these Pharisees, and we've had these Sadducees. The Pharisees were terrific sticklers for the Lord, [00:24:04] and full of themselves. And the Sadducees were very, very scientific and critical, and don't believe this, and don't believe that. Very learned people. The Pharisees, and we've had the Sadducees, and we've got the Chorobians, who don't bother their heads so much about all these things. They're practical folk, who know that if they go along with the ruling power, it will be profitable for them in worldly matters. And now we've got the Nazarenes. The father of this remarkable person is Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Christian. Yes, but another thing now arises.

And here, in this spot of Gentile work, and where these people, where I lay my limbs, in my own mind, I think you must too, on tackling the Lord's message. [00:25:01] They turned to the Lord. They pleaded to the Lord. Others were added to the Lord, and the Lord dominated their hearts and minds. He put the stamp of Christ on them. And folks looking at these people say, look here, you've got to, we can't talk about these people with long rigmaroles of explanations. We should have to have something short and crisp and to the point. Well, they're Christ's ones. They're Christians. The stamp of Christ was upon them.

It's often been pointed out, that word only occurs three times in the New Testament. And Gripper, it was, who knew it, because it had travelled into high circles. It was a gripper who said to Paul, not you persuade me to be a Nazarene. No, he said, you persuade me to be a Christian. [00:26:01] And it is endorsed by the Spirit of God. Because in the epistle of Peter, you have the Spirit of God saying, now if any of you suffer as a Christian, you needn't be ashamed, you can glorify God. As has been said, the Spirit of God, so to speak, accepts this, has a very good designation of those who are swept into this new and mighty work of the Spirit of God.

So that here we see, God working among the Gentiles and gathering out of them a people named men. Now of course, the adversary gets busy. And there were these, we sometimes speak of them as Judaizing teachers, men who wished to make all men, [00:27:02] especially the Gentiles, conform to a certain Jewish pattern.

And they came down to Antioch. That's why I turned on the chapter 15 and read you that incident. They came down to Antioch, did not appear except to a circumcised, which of course was a kind of ceremony that attached to Judaism.

And up to the level of Moses, according to the law, by whom you can't be saved, they sought to bring

this in so as to Judaize, to bring in the middle wall of partition that God had, I think the Ephesians 2, of course, that God had shut out. He'd broken down that in the church. There's no such partition exists. [00:28:03] No, we're on a new basis. We who belong to the church, whether Jew or Gentile, we are one new man. We are brought together. And the answer, of course, is act to mar the work of God.

And so these men came down and said, in fact, no, you have to make these people kind of second-rate Jews. You have to incorporate them in our legal system or you'll never succeed. Salvation is a privilege. But it isn't.

It was an effort of the adversary to mar the work of God. Now, if you read that chapter carefully, you will notice that after a good deal of disputation, I think it may be random discussion, it doesn't mean they were all flying into each other's throats [00:29:02] and arguing in a very noisy way, but the whole matter was being crashed out in discussion. Peter was out.

And if I may put very simply, because I understand Peter's central category here, you know, God made choice among us that I should be the person who first carries the gospel into Gentile circles.

When was that?

When he went to the house of Cornelius. God dealt with him, you remember? Three times he gave him a special vision to deliver him from preconceived notions that would have hindered him. And at last Peter went. You read about it in that magnificent chapter, the tenth chapter of Acts.

I wonder if it ever struck you, you said, [00:30:01] well, why did he not read it? Not only do we have in chapter 10 the account, if I may so say, of course by inspiration, but the account of Luke, the historian of what happened on that great occasion, but in the next chapter, before where I was reading in chapter 11, you find that Peter is challenged about it when he comes back to Jerusalem. And he tells the story. So it's all very repeated, but from a somewhat different angle. You've got the story of Cornelius again from the lips of Peter, recorded, of course, by Luke, by inspiration of the Spirit of God. And as of the third chapter, Cornelius is dragged into the question. It was an epoch-making event.

And Peter said, my dear brethren, now look what happened. When God made choice among us, [00:31:01] and I went among the Gentiles, what happened?

Why, the Holy Ghost decided that their hearts, you said, they are unclean Gentiles.

Forgetting perhaps they were unclean Jews, but he said they were purified. Not in their bodies. Oh, the paddocks were very great on that, you know, the washrooms, and all these things that God alluded to, and all they had, cups and pots and vessels, and those sails. Oh, they were tremendously big enough. But they didn't know much about their hearts. He said God has purified their hearts by faith.

And he knew their hearts. The God who knows the human heart did it. And he gave them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us. Now when you read that chapter, [00:32:02] you would be struck perhaps by the fact that no word was said as to their baptism until they had received the Holy Ghost. In the second of Acts, you remember, where Paul is speaking to the Jews, when they are

remembering, what shall we do? And he said, go and be baptized with the name of Jesus, and you will have the gift of baptism. Yes, baptism, of course, had a very special place in connection with you. If I were asked to give you one word of great significance, I could give you one word. Disconnection.

In view of a new association, cutting links.

They were part of the, I think of Acts 2, of the nation that had rejected the Messiah. And he said, now, if you want that, [00:33:01] cut your links with the nation that had killed their Messiah. Stand out from it.

Save yourself, and you will do well. He was unto all generations. And they were baptized. They cut their links. There was a disconnection from the apostate nation of that time.

Yes, but when you read Acts 10, you find that while Peter was speaking the word and pointing them to the risen Christ, in whom there is forgiveness of sins by him all that believe, there justified, this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. What happened?

Why, he said, the Holy Ghost fell on all men that heard the word. I have often said to myself, or perhaps said it in a meeting, has there ever been [00:34:01] again an occasion like that where you start with all their types, many of them God-fearing, but not down-to-earth, completely converted in the same way. And 100% they are converted.

I would not admit it. I was once in a meeting. There was a couple who was preaching. It was a very powerful time. I believed. I thought we were going to get home that night. Wish we had some more like it. I think there were about how many people was there? I say, oh, but there were about a hundred and something in all.

Very memorable.

But here, every little people, every little person, the Holy Ghost fell on all men, colonies, soldiers, friends, families, at any time.

Until we perhaps say, well, how can we refuse [00:35:01] to baptize these people? Let them cut their links with the old life and come amongst us as Christians. God has said to them. That's why they say, later in the chapter, I gave it to you, it seemed good unto the Holy Ghost and to us.

Of course, it seemed good to us. If it seems good to the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost decided the question of the reception of the dead passion. By calling upon them, just as they were, as the light of the gospel dawned in their souls.

And Peter had to turn to the other brethren and say, well, what can we do? How can we refuse to baptize these?

And thus bring them into the circle of the Church of God.

If the Holy Ghost has done in regard to them exactly what he did, on a larger scale, [00:36:02] it is true. On the day of Pentecost, on the day of Pentecost, there may have been 3,000. Here, there may have been 30, I don't know. A roomful.

But, the Holy Ghost fell on the law and they were all, I'm going to use the language of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 12.

They were all baptized by one spirit into the one body.

Yes. Can you see things taking shape according to what is doctrinally unfolded in the episode to the Ephesians?

God's present work calling out of the nations a people for his name and what he started to do [00:37:03] in that very remarkable way in the case of Cornelius and his apostle and continued to do in Antioch by the labors of these humble people.

You see, they were not great preachers. They were just men of sight to St. Timothy what their names were we shall never know until I hope we shall be permitted to know in the coming day when the Lord assesses all his servants and rewards them for what they did. But these competitively humble unknown individuals who were driven abroad by the persecution and had to go perhaps for their lives they began talking to these Gentiles and it was the purpose of God to go out of the Gentiles and make a great claim at the outset of the apostles. Of course, the hand of the Lord was with them. [00:38:01] A great number believed in the covenant of the Lord and were brought into the church of God.

So that here we begin to see God's present work. Now, I have a few more moments. I might just say to you that if you read right on perhaps if the Lord permits I may read another chapter later in Acts if I'm permitted as I'm ready to come and speak once more here tomorrow evening. But when you get right to the end of the Acts of the Apostles you have the Apostle in Rome a prisoner.

He gathers the Jews together. They're bringing reasons.

They had mighty discussions among themselves.

It looks as if perhaps some few believed but a lot apparently [00:39:02] the great mass did not. They argued and all the rest of it and Paul expounded the Scriptures to them.

And finally he had to say a very solemn word to these poor Jews who in the name were rejecting the Gospel Testament. He had to say well now be it known unto you and for the third time we get be it known a lime announcement in the Acts be it known unto you that the Gospel of God is sent to the Gentiles and that they will hear it.

Hence there's no doubt I think through this long age in which our Lord is cast while Acts be to God still he works and gathers out of Jewish servants.

[00:40:02] The main work has been the outgathering from the Gentiles and hence it seems to me we get a Scripture that I was mentioning to say something about elsewhere quite recently when in the Ephesians epistle chapter 2 the foreword that I was trying to quote later down in chapter 2 you get the word in the ages to come God is going to show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus and you know that word exceeding they tell us might with equal propriety be translated surpassing that somehow [00:41:02] might be so used to me somehow that word has a little more meaning than exceeding surpassing something that surpasses everything else the grace of

God that is working today and gathering out of the nations the people for his name bringing them into this wonderful position of nearness and favour and ultimately of glory in association with Christ oh it's a very marvellous thing, it is a surpassing display of the grace of God you know holy angels are definitely here they must have looked down on the garden of Eden they must have seen the tragedy in fact they didn't know as God knew what the effects were going to be they saw the entrance of sin they saw the time of murder [00:42:02] they saw the awful evil of the antediluvian world they saw the failure of the chosen race the law giving Israel a wicked state now I'm quite sure that when God does as I believe he will bring back Israel nationally into blessing and fulfill his promises in a bright millennial age of like and favour here on earth I'm sure the holy angels do wonderful grace that our God who was clouded too through the ages by the Jewish people who continuously was faced by breakdown and failure and idolatry and finally the crucifixion of the Messiah [00:43:02] that he should bless with that wonderful grace but I think they have looked at the church and they have said well this beast will not get the Lord's wonderful display of grace I've been telling from memory I hope I didn't tell you in the early days of that congre work I think somebody somebody showed up he watered the fellow he was a black savage fear in his face, his hair all stuck into it he's got a bit of a rag round his nose, a spear in his hand water the man he said look I'd like to hang another look at that [00:44:02] and I saw a very pleasant looking black fellow, very black, fuzzy hair thinner, older of course than the other, but still pleasant looking chap yes he's got a little white kind of jacket on and knickers you know, you'll read much about that I think he had a bible in his hand in fact he was up in his arm, I forget but I said oh I suppose that's a Christian and my friend said it is but I want to tell you that's the same man I said what? the same man that's the same man well our brethren have seen things like that, the angels have seen such things animals, savages poor Israel was never there blessed on earth [00:45:02] these there are thousands and I don't know where you or whether we have anxiety to go back to the time of the Druids and the savages and Stonehenge and all the rest of it, perhaps but anyhow I don't know and God is gathering out of the nations and the South Sea Islands and the Congo and the Amazonian Crests they tell me that those poor outer Indians who killed the five men are nearly all inconvertible I'll do all that I can I'll do it one eagle one eagle and the only angels who say that these are prophecies and riches of the grace of God let us always remember and let us pray very lightly that God's present work [00:46:02] of grace until Jesus comes may be prospered in spite of all the errors of the earth now we'll just close in a welcome prayer 132 the person of the Christ in holy and grace once slain but now alive again in heaven in all our grace 132 the person of the Christ in holy and grace once slain but now alive again in heaven in all our grace [00:47:02] 133 and that we all be with thee be with thee