

Would Our Community Call Us Christians?

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Date: 06 March 2022

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[0 : 00] Okay, so with Acts 11, those verses open in front of you. Thanks so much, Colin and Ellen, for reading them. Here's a thing that until last week I didn't know was a thing.

People leaving Google reviews of this church online. Intrigued? Want to see three of them? You want to see three of them, don't you?

Right, someone going by the name E.W. wrote, Nice interior architecture in a nice location. Okay, these people might be here today, I don't know if you see.

Dr. Whale Abdu said, We're a great venue for birthday parties. Give an amen to that one. Great venue for birthday parties. Local tour guide Chris Middleton said, We're a fantastic community hub. So you bring that together on Google, we're getting 4.8 out of 5 stars currently. Yeah? Now I'm going to give our building team a few seconds to enjoy that.

[1 : 01] And then I'm going to burst our bubble and say, That's not really what we're interested in. To nick a line from the rhyme, you might remember from when you were little, We're not interested in the church.

Not really all that interested in the steeple. But what we're really interested in is what people would see when they look inside and see all the people. Here's a question we're going to be challenged with today.

Would our community call us Christians? Sound a strange question? Would our community call us Christians? Come with me to Acts chapter 11.

I'll show you what I mean by that. If there was a lonely planet guide to the Roman Empire in the first century, three most biggest influential and biggest cities you would have.

Right? Number one, Rome. Number two, Alexandria. Number three, this place called Antioch. You'll find it in the map. It's kind of the top north one. What you see about Antioch is you're looking at something about half a million people.

[2 : 13] You see in the map, it's geographically a cracking location to be, isn't it? You can kind of go around the corner. You can go down. You can go into Asia. It's a good big city.

People even from China there. All sorts of different people. Jews, Greeks, Romans, Persians, Indians. People from far away as China. And the locals, and I think they're called Antiochians. I think that is the thing. Okay? Apparently, they are famous for loving a joke. Right? Loving a bit of banter. They love nothing more.

And this is what historians around the time will say. Nothing more than to dish out a witty nickname. That's what you do when you're from Antioch. And here's why that's significant.

Because when the local people in Antioch looked at these first disciples of Jesus, watching these people like dandelions in the sun, just cropping up everywhere, out of nowhere.

[3 : 12] We just cannot predict where the next one is going to come from. Here is what they called these early disciples. Verse 26. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Now, if you're here today and you're wondering, what is a Christian? You've come here with all sorts of ideas in your mind. Ideas, I imagine, from the media.

Ideas, I'd imagine, from your upbringing. Perhaps what you've seen in the place that you live. Perhaps from television. The Vicar of Dibley. What was that show on BBC a few years ago called Rev? If all these kind of things are in your mind.

You've picked a great Sunday to be with us. Because this is the origin of the name. Do you know what it means? Christian means literally many Jesus.

So when the locals saw Jesus at work in the lives of these people, when they heard Jesus being proclaimed and praised from their lips, they laughed and they teased and they said, ha-ha, you guys are just little Jesuses.

[4 : 28] You know the kind of thing? Here comes the God Squad. Look out. Here come the Jesus freaks. Way-oh. Here are the Bible bashers. Here are the Holy Joes. Okay? It's what people see in Antioch when they look at these early disciples.

You guys are just little Jesuses. Now that's a nickname worth having, isn't it? So the name Christian in its original context is a nickname.

And Luke lets us see in this passage, I think, what it was about the lives of these disciples in Antioch that caused the locals to say that. There's four of them. We're going to look at them in just a second.

But before we get there, see what's going on in the book of Acts. Here's the question. How did the gospel, how did the news of Jesus even get to a place like Antioch on the map?

Well, verse 19 in the text, if we get into it, it connects us back to the persecution that happened in Jerusalem, if you remember in chapter 8.

[5 : 31] The early followers of Jesus, they were chased out of Jerusalem. And they ran to Judea and Samaria. Now, of course, they are being pushed out of their city.

But what's going on, remember, Alistair took us there a number of weeks ago, is that Jesus' plan for the spread of the gospel is happening. Man's worst plays into God's plans and his best.

So Jesus said, you're going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, ends of the earth.

How is that going to happen? How are people going to go? In this case, it is persecution. It is driving out the people.

It's fulfilling Jesus' plan. And here in verse 11 of chapter 11, verse 19 of chapter 11, here's what we learn about those people who went. They went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.

And like bees carrying pollen. And notice, by the way, that these aren't apostles. The apostles are the guys who are staying in Jerusalem. These are just ordinary believers, ordinary disciples of Jesus.

[6 : 39] They carry the message about Jesus wherever they go, like bees carrying pollen. And hey, presto, by God's grace, through the work of his Holy Spirit, spiritual pollination happens everywhere they go.

The gospel is going long. That's what Luke's telling us. The gospel is going long. And the gospel is going deep. Because in Antioch, look at what happened at verse 21.

The Lord's hand was at work. These are the descriptions of a historian who wants people down the line to know the details. So he's taking his time to tell us this.

The Lord's hand was at work. And great numbers turned to the Lord. And Luke tells us that again at verse 24. To bookend that wee bit.

A great number of people were brought to the Lord. So Luke wants us to know that what happened in Antioch was no drop in the ocean. What happened in Antioch was an unmissable act of God.

[7 : 40] Great number of people become Christians. And reports of this filter back from Antioch, filter back all the way down to Jerusalem. And verse 22, what they do is they send Barnabas from Jerusalem to go back to Antioch, almost as their ambassador, to go to Antioch and to see if what is happening is the real deal.

And what happens is that Barnabas confirms what the people in Antioch are saying about the disciples, that yes, they are many Jesuses. Look at verse 23.

When he sees his disciples going for it, what is he? He's glad. Right? I take it that's always one of the marks of the Holy Spirit in our lives, when we see what God is doing somewhere else, and it makes us glad.

It's not all about here, is it? Makes us glad when we see what God is doing elsewhere. These guys are Christians, says Barnabas. They've got it.

It's real. God is at work. Last week we thought about the first Gentile Christian. Do you remember his name was Cornelius? If you want to listen back, you can on the website. If not, just read it in your own time. Cornelius, the first Gentile Christian.

[8 : 53] Now do you see what's going on? We've got the first Gentile church. The gospel's growing. It's going long. It's going deep. And here are the four reasons the people in Antioch called these people Christians.

And as we look at these, remember the question we're asking ourselves. Would our community call us Christians? So here is number one. What do they see about these guys?

They see, first of all, that these people are worshipping somebody else. What did Barnabas see? Verse 23. He saw what the grace of God had done.

Now just take in that phrase. It's not about these people that they've turned over a new leaf. They've decided to be better. Decided to have a crack at this Christianity thing.

No, no, no, no. This is about God giving them new hearts as he, and like only he can do, as he breathes in life to spiritual dead bodies.

[9 : 54] He takes souls and he transfers them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. And that means that if you are a Christian, that is what's going on in your life.

It doesn't matter if you've had an amazing testimony. It doesn't matter if you've been brought up as a Christian, all of you. What is going on is a miracle that God has taken you from darkness and transferred you to light through the work of his son on the cross.

It's what he's done. It's what's going on here in Antioch. The grace of God is at work, which is tremendously freeing because that means you and I did not get into God's good books because of our works.

It means that we've been saved purely by his grace and his compassion and his love because he is that kind of God. What's going on in Antioch?

There's new creations everywhere. You can imagine, right? Cosmopolitan city that prizes material prosperity and beauty, thinks nothing of cutting someone down with a bit of wit.

[10 : 58] And you're living in a place all under the banner of Caesar is Lord. That's really who's worshipped here. Yes, we can do stuff under his, but that's the banner we're operating under.

You can imagine if you're somebody who says, actually, no, there was a man who came back from the dead and he's Lord of all. And he controls my tongue, my thoughts and my wallet.

You can imagine that that is your confession in a place like Antioch. You're going to stand out like a mile, stand out a mile like a sore thumb. I loved it.

It was down, um, uh, Wee Cafe in Birdie House with Grace yesterday. Just opened it. It's a kind of 20 schemes thing where they're trying to get people back into work.

They've opened this cafe in this community. And I loved it just on the door. Nailing their colours to the mass in the community, what they're all about. Jesus, I'm the bread of life.

[11 : 57] There it is. Bang. This is who we are. Loved it. These people are worshipping someone else. There's something else that makes them tick. There's someone else who they're all about. I guess the question I was asking myself this week is, Do people in my life know what I'm all about?

Do they know that I worship somebody else? Think about it. In your workplace, in your school, in your university, do people know? Your family friends, do they know?

That these people are worshipping somebody else. That's what they're saying in Antioch. Secondly, these people, they think they're heading somewhere else. And here's your boy Barnabas.

Right? You might remember Luke introduced us to him at the end of chapter 4. His name's not Barnabas. That's the interesting thing about Barnabas. His name's not Barnabas. His name is Joseph.

Barnabas, if you remember, is his nickname. It means son of encouragement. So the believers see this guy doing his thing, and they say the defining feature of your life is that you're an encourager.

[12 : 59] Love that. You've had a hard day. Barnabas is the guy you want to call. Your life's rocking all over the place. You don't know if you're going to make it tomorrow.

He's the guy that you want to turn up at the door. Barnabas is an encourager. And I think that's why they send him to this church in Antioch. Tough place to be a Christian. Who are we going to send? We're going to send the encourager.

Luke gives us a wee description of him again at verse 24. He's a good man. He's full of the Holy Spirit and faith. And boy, is he using those gifts in Antioch.

And we're not just told about him. We're told what he's saying. What he's saying, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.

That's what he's saying. That's his message to the disciples. You want to boil it down? It just means keep on going. Remain true to the Lord. Keep on persevering.

[14 : 00] Right? I was thinking about it this week. This is like Dory from Finding Nemo. Do you remember her phrase? What's her phrase? Keep on swimming. Just keep on swimming.

Just keep on swimming. So she says, just keep on swimming. Keep on going. And that's Barnabas. She says, just keep on going. Just keep on going.

I know it's tough. Just keep on going. Life following Jesus is tough. Finding life exhausting as a parent, wondering if you can keep on going. The ups and downs of your health making you anxious about the future.

The death of a loved one left a huge hole in your heart. The uncertainty about what tomorrow looks like, let alone plans coming together for next year. Is it crippling you?

All meaning that you might be here physically today, but spiritually inside you are struggling.

Barnabas is the kind of person who draws alongside and he brings people back.

[15:01] And I take it this morning. I think all of us need that. To draw alongside and to say, I know life's tough.

But let's keep on going. Let's keep on going. Where does Barnabas bring them back to? He brings them back to the Lord. Love this guy.

Can you imagine him doing this thing in the church? I'm all ears. I love you. Tell me what's going on in your life. I want to listen. And that sounds brutal.

Oh, isn't life just so complicated and hard sometimes? But here's what you and I need. Just look at Jesus. Would you look at him?

Would you remember who he is? Remember what he's done? Would you remember what he's doing? The right hand of God. He's praying for us. Do you remember what he said was going to happen?

[15:56] Do you remember how he said he wouldn't leave us as orphans? He would come back? Do you remember how he said that? Do you remember how the Bible is the story of the God who is faithful to keeping his promises? Not one of God's good plans will ever fail.

Do you remember that? Do you remember how Jesus said that heaven's ahead of us? Do you remember how he said in the words of the old hymn he will hold us fast. He will hold us fast. Where I fear my faithful fail he will hold us fast. Barnabas draws alongside and he just says let's just keep on going. Let's just keep on going.

You know about the Sally Lloyd-Jones thoughts to make your heart sing. We do it with the kids sometimes. She's got a wonderful way of just phrasing it at the end. There's three travellers just going on and one at the front says to the guys at the back listen, talking of Jesus he's already gone ahead of us into the new day.

He knows the way. He knows what will happen. He is all we need. Let's keep on walking. It's another Christian life sometimes. Day after day after day just plodding sloggling it out in the paths of faithfulness.

[17:05] Living by faith not in today but living by faith in what God has said is true about the future and the heavenly city which is ahead of us. Do we need, some of us need some of that today.

Do we need to draw alongside one another and do what Barnabas M. Seuer is doing in Antioch. Life's tough. I get it. I know. Oh, it's hard but Jesus aren't just Barnabas the kind of guy who would make a really good friend.

Imagine that in Antioch you're just people looking at you. Life is incredibly tough for them but somehow they're just keeping on going with Jesus. It's people they think they're heading somewhere else.

Number three, these people they're devoted to learning something else. See Barnabas verse 25 and again I love this in the text he goes to Tarsus. See, remember our map it was just around the corner he goes to Tarsus because he knows that that's where Paul is.

Now Paul's there because the disciples had smuggled him out of Jerusalem and sent him to Tarsus on a boat when the Jews made an attempt of his life that's back in chapter 9 and Barnabas gets there and thinks no, no I'm not the guy for this job I need Paul and I love the humility that Barnabas shows here because this is a chance for Barnabas to put his name on the map.

[18:30] Right, who wouldn't want to be part of the first Gentile church to be the guy that God used to go and say hey, I played a part in this, right, established Barnabas International Ministries you know, could get all this kind of stuff out but Barnabas knows the guy who Jesus said was going to be the minister of his to the Gentiles was Paul and Barnabas says, you know what, no, Jesus said it was him and he goes to get him and he brings him back and the two of them do it together and the two of them get involved in the lives of the people in Antioch get involved in what's going on and they teach so what they do is the word in the text that Luke tells us they teach they teach these young believers they get them in their Bibles to see who Jesus is come and see come and learn what he's done why it matters what it is to be a child of God what it means to live the Christian life

what happens after death the whole shebang what Paul would call later the whole council of God and you see how they do it not just for a one-off course they do it verse 26 for a whole year just nurturing these young believers in the ways of the Christian faith it's why in our meetings that the Bible is central it's why we do Bible studies during the week in our small groups it's why we do one-to-ones reading the Bible together because this is what we need the gospel to quote Tim Keller it's not the ABC of the Christian life it's the A to Z of the Christian life we never graduate from this these guys have a heart for nurturing the young believers and the fundamentals of the faith you know my dad sent me a picture on family whatsapp group sure you've got them he did it

I think it was November I get so confused about what storm was what he just sent me a picture and I'm pretty sure it was storm Arwen is that the one storm Arwen he sends me a picture of a huge tree in the garden that's come down and what's happened it's come down but all you see is just roots in the picture just roots these roots that have just been nourishing this tree for years and years and years these roots there seems to be hundreds of them these roots there's not just tons of them there's metres and metres of these roots and what's happened is he's been brave he's gone online he's bought a chainsaw to try and free the tree and he's cut a few things off to loosen it and all of a sudden bam the tree's gone back the roots have brought it back and he flings the chainsaw and he jumps out over the other side the roots were so down in it it's true isn't it what we want for our lives the roots of our lives to be deep in the word to be deep in the word and is it not true that storms reveal in our lives storms reveal where our roots really are alright

I remember one of the first hospital visits ever did in this church was to go and see a lady called Ruby Ruby was she was dying of cancer down at the western some of you will know her remember her some of you won't but just what a wonderful godly lady remember going to see her she's sitting there she is a shadow of her former self as she just said I'm scared and I loved her honesty she said I'm scared I'm scared refreshing about how she was feeling but she said something else she just said but I know Christ has me and that's roots they taught them for a year these guys they're learning something else it comes out in the storms of their life people in Antioch looking and saying they're learning something else something else is making them tick roots down in the words and fourthly these people they're up for helping someone else and I love this verse 27 this man this prophet called Agabus and remember

I think we're to understand that these are unique things that happened in this time God tells them about a severe famine that's going to hit the Roman world and historians back up the authenticity of this and the response of the believers is they hear they see what it is right we hear of a recession we hear of financial troubles that might be coming what's our first thought as a culture it's make sure that we've got enough make sure that you have enough in the pension pot make sure that you have enough in your savings account make sure that you've got the toilet roll when it's about to go make sure you've got the milk before everyone else buys it that's not these guys first reaction it's not to look after number one they think of their poorer brothers and sisters who are back in Jerusalem for whom this is going to hit them really really hard that's their first thought we see on a personal level we can work that out is there someone in our church family here who's going through a hard time maybe financially maybe we've got a duty to help it's a church family we want to be the kind of church family who's looking out for one another and wider as well

I've been added to a whatsapp group that's been set up by a ton of churches down south and up here as well just thinking about how we can support our brothers and sisters in Ukraine prayer updates coming in different pictures being sent how can we support our brothers and sisters over there not just in Ukraine but the surrounding countries as well who are taking refugees and I take it that should be our heart to want to help our brothers and sisters we'll think about ways potentially that we could do that I'm sure but there's something bigger going on I think we need to see here and this is this is where we need to see this is more than just an office whip round for a good cause this is Gentiles wanting to care for their Jewish brothers and sisters because their common faith in Jesus has connected them and they've decided to do this notice that word in the text that it's not just something they feel obliged to do they want to do this it's a choice it's a gut conviction because they realise that they have got a Christ shaped duty to look after their fellow brothers and sisters and again do you see how the gospel

[25 : 11] Luke is showing us is smashing down worldly barriers you guys are just little Jesuses you're little Jesuses and so here's the question then would our community call us Christians by that definition let me flip it around are we giving our community and you can broaden that out our

neighbours our work colleagues whatever it is you want are we giving our community cause to call us Christians and here's where I'm reminded just as we close of my friend Thomas right Thomas was one of my best friends growing up and we were kind of students at roughly the same time I was up in Aberdeen he was down in Edinburgh and what we used to do like most students do is during the summer in particular get work so I used to work at banks Thomas used to work at bars one of the bars he used to work at in the summer was Edinburgh University TV at bar that's where he used to work and he used to work there during

August during the Edinburgh festival now that is a tough environment to be a Christian in with every angle you look at that from long hours that kind of work temptation everywhere but the people in his team watched Thomas and they watched what he didn't do how he didn't join in going big on the booze he didn't join in the crude chat and they watched what he did do how he spoke about Jesus he was just a good guy to work with and the end of the whole summer of working together his non-Christian supervisor who I found out this week from him was called Lucy posted a picture on Facebook and I spent hours trying to find it this week and I couldn't picture on Facebook best Christian I've ever met now that's a Google review worth having isn't it what I loved about the story I texted Thomas this week said do you remember that photo he said I remember that photo it was back in 2009 and he said I remember it because Lucy she lives in a totally different part of the world now she's doing something completely different but every now and then I hear from her life's going really hard

Thomas would you pray for me I just need someone to chat to Thomas if you get 10 minutes to speak on the phone would you like to FaceTime or Zoom Christian let's just never underestimate the power of just a simple witness to the grace of Jesus and let that encourage you this morning if you're in a place and you're just finding it hard to witness for him to just keep on going never underestimate what God can do through the simple witness of a Christian would the people in our community call us Christians because the disciples were first called Christians here at Antioch let's pray shall we and so heavenly father we just thank you for this morning and thank you for the challenge that this has brought us the challenge to be witnesses for you in our community father thank you for the comfort that these verses have brought today that if our faith is in you if we believe in the Lord

Jesus that is not because we've decided to make a decision that is because first and foremost you are a God who is gracious and good and the grace of God has been at work in our lives and we thank you for the new life that is found in Jesus and so father I pray for us today particularly as we come now to remember your son Jesus and what he's done for us on the cross as we take the bread and the wine together father would you be moving in our midst bringing that sense of knowledge of who he is and so father I pray that you would just be with us as we do that now in Jesus precious name amen