

8. Healthy Churches Continue to Serve Christians Who Move

In Acts 8:4, we read, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” One of those who left Jerusalem, during this persecution, was Philip. He went to the city of Samaria. Acts 8:5 says, “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.” Many people in that city responded to the preaching concerning the kingdom of God and turned to Christ. Then, all of the men and women who believed were baptized.

What we want to focus on, here, is what happened when the church in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Samaria. Acts 8:14 says, “Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.” Here, we see that the leaders in the church at Jerusalem had a concern to help those Christians who were scattered to other places. They knew that Philip had become part of the leadership team in Jerusalem. They heard that he had led many people to Christ in Samaria. They immediately sent Peter and John to help him help those new believers in their spiritual growth.

Peter and John helped Philip teach these new believers. They even showed him how to deal with one who tried to buy the gift of giving the Holy Spirit to others. The result of this continued ministry was an encouragement to Philip and was used by the Lord to strengthen the believers in Samaria. After teaching, and preaching, in Samaria for a period of time, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem. However, they also used the opportunity to reach out to the surrounding area. Acts 8:25 says, “So when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans.” Peter and John helped the new Christians in the city of Samaria, but they also used the opportunity to reach out to the surrounding villages.

Acts 9:32-35 also tells us that Peter went to the towns of Lydda, Sharon, and Joppa to help the disciples who had gone to those towns. In fact, Peter was in the town of Joppa when the Lord showed him, by a vision, that he was to take the Gospel to Cornelius, and the other Gentiles who were gathered in his house, in the city of Caesarea. In addition to helping the new Christians grow, Peter also preached the Gospel wherever he went. Acts 9:34-35 says, “And Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus the Christ heals you. Arise and make your bed.’ Then he arose immediately. So all who dwelt at Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” These accounts show us that the church at Jerusalem took the responsibility to help Christians both in the area of Samaria as well as along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

However, Acts 11 gives us the most complete example of the church in Jerusalem taking responsibility to help Christians who had moved to other areas. Acts 11:19-21 says, “Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” Antioch was more than two hundred miles from the city of Jerusalem.

In spite of the distance, notice how the church in Jerusalem responded when they heard what was happening with the believers that had fled to Antioch because of the persecution. Antioch was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. It was more than ten times the size of Jerusalem. Acts 11:22 says, “Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch.” The church at Jerusalem realized that those newer believers would need help in their own spiritual growth, in order to help the new believers in Antioch. As a result, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to help them. Barnabas added Saul to the team.

Acts 11:23-26 tells us what Barnabas and Saul did, both to serve the believers that had fled from Jerusalem as well as to help the new believers in their spiritual growth. Acts 11:23-26 says, “When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.” Here, we see some of the reasons why healthy churches continue to serve Christians who move.

First, the church at Jerusalem realized that Antioch was a different kind of city than Jerusalem. Nearly all of the people who were in Jerusalem were Jews and spoke the same language. That was not true in Antioch. Many of the new believers in Antioch were Hellenists. (Acts 11:20) They spoke the Greek language and were familiar with the Greek culture. As a result, that was probably why they sent Barnabas and he, later, added Saul to the team. Barnabas had grown up on the island of Cyprus, (Acts 4:36) so he would have been very familiar with the Greek culture and language. Paul grew up in Tarsus, so the same would be true in his life. All Christians need to learn how to apply the Word of God in their own language and culture.

Second, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem to Antioch needed further encouragement and teaching to help them grow in their own spiritual lives, so they could help those who were just becoming believers. We see that Barnabas immediately began to share with all of the believers, both those who had fled from Jerusalem as well as the new believers. The last part of verse 23 says that Barnabas, “Encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.” Here, we see that Barnabas encouraged these believers to determine, in their hearts, that they were going to follow the Lord, regardless of how much persecution they might face. All Christians who are learning to lead others need continued encouragement.

Third, the believers in Antioch needed a mature believer who could provide an example, by his life, that others could follow. People learn to follow the Lord by following the Lord’s people. 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7 says, “And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe.” Barnabas provided that kind of example for the believers in Antioch. Three characteristics of the life of Barnabas are given to show us that his life was an example that others could follow. He was a good or righteous man. He was full of the Holy Spirit. He was full of faith. New Christians become what we are, whether that is good or bad.

Fourth, the new believers in Antioch needed to be shown how to reach out to their relatives, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and other acquaintances. Barnabas was an ideal example to show the new believers how to reach out to others. Acts 9:26-27 tells how Barnabas had earlier reached out to Saul. Those verses say, “And when Saul had come to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. And he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” Barnabas could show the believers how to reach out to others, because that was a part of his life.

Fifth, the new believers in Antioch needed to be shown that believers are most effective as they work together as teams. Barnabas modeled this by going to Tarsus, getting Saul, and adding him to the team that was teaching the believers in Antioch. No Christian has all of the spiritual gifts. As a result, we all need team members who are more effective at certain ministries than we are because of the fact that God has equipped them with different *spiritual gifts, hearts or passions, abilities, personalities and experiences in life* (given them a different SHAPE).

Sixth, the believers who had fled from Jerusalem, and the people who had become new believers in Antioch, also needed systematic teaching of the things Christ had taught His followers while He was here on earth. Acts 2:42 says about the church at Jerusalem, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Every new believer needs to be taught the teachings of Christ. Once they have gained that knowledge, then they need understanding. Luke 24:45 says, “And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.” Once Christians have knowledge and understanding of the teachings of Christ, then, they need to be shown, by example, how to apply those teachings in their daily lives. Paul said, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” We need to show new believers, by our example, how to imitate Christ.

We see the impact that these six things had on all of the believers in Antioch. It was in this city that believers were first called Christians. It was also from this city that the Gospel spread to the rest of the Gentile world. However, this all happened because the church at Jerusalem continued to serve the Christians who had been forced to flee from Jerusalem by sending someone from the church in Jerusalem to help them grow and mature in their spiritual lives. That is why this is a characteristic of a healthy reproducing church. May the Lord richly bless you as you develop reproducing Christians, and then, work with them to develop reproducing churches.