



Digging

Deeper

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The Church at Antioch

By Ligonier.org

Right after Peter's encounter with Cornelius, Luke tells us about the Jewish and Gentile believers in Antioch. Acts 11:19 says that when the disciples were scattered after the death of Stephen, some went to Antioch but told the Good News only to the Jews. The next verse tells us that later on some of them began to speak to the Greeks as well, "telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

When Alexander the Great died, his empire was divided. The Ptolemies took Egypt and made Alexandria their capital, while the Seleucids took the area around Syria and made Antioch one of their central cities. The Romans conquered all this, but Antioch continued to be the capital of the province of Syria. Thus, it was important for the church to establish a stronghold in Antioch. Later on Antioch became one of the great theological centers of the early church.

When news of the Antiochene revival reached Jerusalem, the disciples sent Barnabas to Antioch to help. Barnabas recalled that God had set aside Saul of Tarsus to be an evangelist to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Now that Peter had officially opened the door to the Gentiles, and now that Gentile mission had begun in earnest, it was time to enlist Saul; so Barnabas went to Tarsus for him (Acts 11:22-26).

We read in Acts 11:26 that Saul and Barnabas taught in Antioch for a year. The New Testament distinguishes between preaching and teaching. Preaching is heralding the Gospel. The outline of New Testament preaching (in Greek, kerygma) is seen in the sermons in Acts: Jesus came into the world in fulfillment of the Scriptures, died on the cross for the sins of the world, has ascended to be Lord, and calls all men to repent and enter the kingdom.



Antioch

By the Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary

ANTIOCH (PLACE) [Gk Antiocheia (Ἀντιοχεια)]. A number of cities built by various Seleucid kings bore the name "Antioch." The two that had the most important impact on the peoples of the Bible were the Antioch in Pisidia (south central Turkey) and the Antioch on the Orontes River in Turkey near the modern border with Syria.

ANTIOCH OF PISIDIA

Pisidian Antioch was a city in south central Turkey founded in the 3d century B.C. by one of the Seleucid kings, probably Antiochus I or Antiochus II, and initially occupied by settlers from Magnesia on the Maeander in Ionia. The city has been identified with ruins just east of the modern town of Yalvaç (38°17'N; 31°11'E). Around the middle of the 2d century B.C. a fine Ionic temple was built at the extramural sanctuary of Mên Askaênos, an Anatolian deity and the most important god of the city (Mitchell and Waelkens *fc.*, chaps. 2–3). Little else is known of Antioch's history in the Hellenistic period, but it became prominent in 25 B.C. when the Roman emperor Augustus annexed the central Anatolian province of Galatia, to which it belonged, and refounded the city as a Roman colony populated by veterans from the Roman legions V and VII (Levick 1967: 29–41). It swiftly became an important and successful community. Between 15 B.C. and A.D. 35 three members of the imperial household—Drusus, brother of the future emperor Tiberius; C. Domitius Ahenobarbus, the father of the emperor Nero; and L. Cornelius Sulla Felix, son-in-law of Germanicus—as well as two Augustan generals, P. Sulpicius Quirinius and M. Servilius, held honorary magistracies in the colony. At the same time the city center was adorned with a magnificent series of buildings connected with the imperial cult: a Roman-style podium temple set in front of a semicircular portico at the head of a large colonnaded square, a colonnaded street named after the emperor Tiberius, a triple arched gateway, which was completed in A.D. 50, and a staircase linking the street with the imperial sanctuary (Robinson 1926; Mitchell and Waelkens *fc.*, chap. 4). Also during this period members of Antioch's leading families began to hold important positions in the Roman military and administrative hierarchy, and the elite of the colony were among the first easterners to enter the Senate at Rome (Levick 1967: 103–20; Halfmann 1979). The colony continued to prosper through the 2d and 3d centuries and under Diocletian became the metropolis of the newly constituted province of Pisidia. An early 4th-century governor, Valerius Diogenes, was responsible for an important building program and was also active in the persecution of Christians (MAMA 1 no. 170; Calder 1920), but by the end of the century Antioch had an orthodox bishop in correspondence with St. Basil, and had witnessed the construction of several major churches (Mitchell and Waelkens *fc.*, chap. 2 and appendix 1; Kitzinger 1974).

The time of Antioch's greatest prosperity came during the 1st century after its refoundation by Augustus, and it is against this background that the most famous episode in its Christian history, St. Paul's mission, should be viewed. Paul visited Antioch three times (Acts 13:13–52; 16:1–6; 18:23—on the last two occasions Antioch is not named but a visit may be presumed). On his first missionary journey Antioch was his first stopping point in Asia Minor, and the first place where he proselytized among both gentiles and Jews (Acts 13:42–49). This visit, perhaps in A.D. 47, occurred precisely as the great building program for the city center was nearing completion. The choice of Antioch reveals much about the character and strategy of Paul's mission. He had come from Perga in Pamphylia, on Turkey's south coast, where he had not stopped to preach, and before that from Paphos on Cyprus, where he had won over, at least temporarily, his most distinguished convert, the governor Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:5–12).

We now know that Sergius Paullus (as his name should be written) himself came from Pisidian Antioch: members of his family received honors there and intermarried with another prominent local family, the Caristanii. They also acquired large estates in central Anatolia (Halfmann 1979; Mitchell, ANRW 2/72: 1073–4; Mitchell 1981). It is overwhelmingly likely that Paul, who had almost certainly adopted the Latin name in place of the Hebrew Saul in recognition of the meeting with Sergius Paullus (Dessau 1910), was directed to Antioch by his recent convert. There were other reasons why Antioch should have been an attractive destination. The clear purpose of Paul's journeys was to visit major cities in the eastern parts of the Roman Empire: colonies such as Alexandria Troas, Philippi, and Corinth; or leading provincial cities like Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, and Ephesus. The ultimate goal, demonstrated not only by events but by the early Epistle to the Romans, was Rome itself. Although in the event most of Paul's known converts came from lower-class backgrounds (Meeks 1982), he clearly had ambitions to win over the leaders of society in the cities. Pisidian Antioch was a natural target for his activities. It not only contained a large population of Roman citizens, but was even divided, following Roman practice, into wards (*vici*) which were named after prominent landmarks or institutions of the city of Rome itself (Levick 1967: 76–78). The splendid buildings associated with the imperial cult were on a scale that could hardly be paralleled in the Greek part of the empire and emphatically underlined these associations. Antioch would have appeared to Paul as a model of the capital itself.

Paul's first addresses in Antioch and nearby Iconium were in the synagogues, which may have had their origins in the Hellenistic period when the Seleucid Antiochus III is known to have settled Babylonian Jews in Phrygia (Josephus *Ant* 12 § 147). He reminded them of the tradition to which they belonged and identified Jesus as the savior descended from David whose coming had been prophesied to the Jews. The address contains one of Paul's most explicit descriptions of the crucifixion and resurrection as proof of the fulfillment of those prophecies. According to Acts, the mission attracted so much attention that on the Sabbath following the first address almost the whole city, Jew and gentile alike, turned out to hear Paul, causing the leaders of the Jewish community to turn against him. They looked for support from leading persons in the city and from highborn women who were "god-fearers" (*sebomenai*). This expression distinguishes the group from the *Ioudaioi*, Jews in the full sense, and it is illuminated by other passages in Acts which separate Jewish sympathizers from Jews, and by inscriptions from Asia Minor which make clear that these divisions were characteristic of most of the communities of the Diaspora (Millar and Vermes 1986: 150–77). Since the leading women of Antioch were certainly members of the Roman colonial families settled by Augustus, it is clear that, as in contemporary Rome, Judaism was winning converts among the aristocracy of the period.

Some twenty years after Paul's visit to Antioch, the Phrygian city of Acmonia, which also had a prominent Roman community, had a synagogue built with funds provided by a highborn woman of Galatian descent, Iulia Severa. She had close associations with the locally established Roman family of the Turronii, one of whom was the leading member of the synagogue, another a high priest of the Roman imperial cult (MAMA 6 nos. 264–65). This cultural milieu is strikingly similar to that implied by the account in Acts of Paul's experience in Antioch.

In the longer term the mission failed. Apart from the information that can be extracted from the apocryphal 2d-century Acts of Paul and Thecla, relating the martyrdom of one of Paul's notable converts, there is virtually no trace of Christianity in Pisidian Antioch before the peace of the Church in the 4th century A.D.