

## Antioch

*What do we know of the origin and character of Christianity at Antioch? What did the Church at Antioch contribute to the Pauline mission? Does Antioch develop a distinctive form of Christianity, as distinctive theology? What writings are attributed to Antioch in the first century?*

In the first century Antioch was the third most important city in the Roman Empire and it was the location for the second Christian church to be planted. Due to the Christian Jews fleeing persecution in Jerusalem and converting Gentiles in Antioch the church had to deal with how the Jewish law applied to Gentile converts. Paul used Antioch as a base before he set out on three mission trips because of its strategic geographic location. Antioch is also significant as it may have been the location for where the Gospel of Matthew and Galatians were written.

After the stoning of Stephen many Christians fled Jerusalem and travelled to many different cities including Antioch (Acts 11:19). Some of these Jewish Christians who had arrived in Antioch spoke to the Greek population and many of them were converted (Acts 11:20-21). The first Gentile converts to Christianity were probably Gentiles who had some loose connection with the Jewish synagogue in Antioch, but were not circumcised. These Gentiles were sometimes called “God-fearers”. To these Gentiles, Christianity may have seemed appealing (Bruce, 1980, p. 251).

This increase of Gentile believers caused the church in Jerusalem to send Barnabas to investigate what was happening (Acts 11:22). After Barnabas encouraged those in the Antioch church, he sought out Saul and brought him back to Antioch where they stayed for a year, teaching the church. It was here that this new movement was first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). This new name, meaning servants of Christ (Bruce, 1980, p. 252), might have been needed to shape their new identity separating them from the Jews in the same city. It is possible that the title “Christians” came later in the first century, when Luke wrote Acts

(Georgi, 1995, p. 39) and not when Paul and Barnabas were teaching the church. This theory arises because Paul never uses the term “Christian” in his letters, possibly indicating that he did not know the term (Georgi, 1995, p. 40). This might mean that the Jews and Christians were initially more intertwined in Antioch during the 30s and 40s (Georgi, 1995, p. 40).

However, in the New Testament the word “Christian” is only mentioned in Acts 11:26, 26:28 and in 1 Peter 4:16 and is used directly or by implication by non-Christians (Bruce, 1980, p. 253). It was only in the second century that Christians used the title themselves (Bruce, 1980, p. 253). It is possible that in Antioch the people in the church were called “Christians” from the beginning, but it was only later that the Christians themselves appropriated the title.

With the increase of Gentiles being accepted into Christianity in Antioch an issue arose in relation to what extent converts were to participate with the Jewish laws and customs, including circumcision. This led to a council in Jerusalem where the church leaders discussed whether uncircumcised Gentiles were still saved (Acts 15:1-6). The decision from the council was that believers are saved by grace alone and not by being circumcised (Acts 15:11). In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul recounts how after this decision was made<sup>1</sup>, when Peter came to Antioch he opposed Peter for separating himself from the Gentiles during meals. Jewish food purity laws were not a topic of discussion in the Jerusalem council (Painter, 1997, p. 53). However, by extension of its decree, Paul saw Peter's actions as going against the gospel of justification of faith alone, as it implied that Christians had to live like a Jew in order to be saved (Gal 2:15-16). This relaxed theology of Jewish laws and customs meant an increase in Gentile converts and eventually led to Christianity having more of a Gentile culture than a Jewish one (Betz, 1979, p. 83).

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<sup>1</sup> Painter (1997, p. 67) comments that some scholars think the incident in Gal 2:11-14 could have happened before the Jerusalem council, even though Paul writes about it directly after his account of the council. Turner (2011, p. 9) sees Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10 as parallel accounts. A natural reading of the text suggests Peter came to Antioch after the council, which explains the severity of Paul's confrontation to Peter.

Paul was quite fond of Antioch. Paul's mission trips originated from Antioch and both his first and second journeys ended back in Antioch. It was the first city that Barnabas had brought him to and they both stayed a year teaching the church there (Acts 11:26). After both Paul's first and second missionary trips, Acts notes that he stayed some time there (Acts 14:28, 18:23). Before Paul's second missionary trip, after the Jerusalem council, Paul and Barnabas again remained in Antioch to teach (Acts 15:25). It seems that Antioch was "the main centre of missionary activity around the Gentiles in Syria and Asia Minor" (Betz, 1979, p. 104).

Depending on how one dates Galatians, it is possible that it was written in Antioch between Paul's first and second mission trip, even before the council in Jerusalem in Acts 15. If this is the case then Galatians is Paul's earliest letter. This view is unlikely as Galatians 2:1-10 seems to be Paul's account of Acts 15, even though there are some differences. It is more likely that Paul wrote Galatians later, just before Romans, around AD 57 (Turner, 2011, p. 8), or before 2 Corinthians as Galatia is not mentioned as part of the collection project in 2 Corinthians 8-9 (Jervis, 1999, p. 39). If this is the case, the location for the writing of Galatians could be Ephesus, Macedonia or Corinth (Jervis, 1999, p. 40).

The Gospel of Matthew is considered to have been written in Antioch, even though Painter (1997, p. 88) suggests that there is "little concrete evidence to support this view". It is likely that when the Jerusalem Christians fled persecution, they brought to Antioch the sayings of Jesus that could be attributed to the hypothetical M (Painter, 1997, p. 87). The hypothetical Q is also considered to have originated in Antioch (Painter, 1997, p. 86). This could support the argument that Matthew was written in Antioch. It is evident that Matthew was used widely in Antioch, but not its composition (Painter, 1997, p. 89). Despite this evidence "modern

scholarship favours some place in Syria, probably Antioch” (Mounce, 1985, p. 23) for the location of the Gospel of Matthew being writings.

Antioch is a significant city for early Christianity. It was the first Church planted outside of Jerusalem and included a lot of Gentile converts. This caused the church to consider how much Jesus had accomplished for both Jews and Gentiles and how inclusive they were to be in regards to enforcing Jewish customs and laws. This set a trajectory for Christianity after the first generation to primarily have a Gentile, and not a Jewish culture.

## Works Cited

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