

Men of Cyprus and Cyrene

Luke tells the story twice, and the second time he tells it differently.

The first time, it is a disaster. Stephen is stoned, and “there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). That is the last we hear of them for three chapters. Luke goes off after Philip, and Saul, and Peter.

He had opened the book with the instruction. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth (1:8) – the last thing Jesus said before the cloud took him. Matthew has it as all the nations. There was never any doubt about the brief.

Then Luke comes back to the scattered. “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews” (11:19).

Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch. They had reached the end of the earth, or near enough, and they were still only talking to their own. Driven four hundred miles from home, with the instruction ten years old by then, and nothing had changed except their address.

Then verse 20.

“But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”

They were in a Greek city, so they spoke to Greeks.

The blank

We know where they came from and we do not know who they were.

Cyprus and Cyrene. An island off the Syrian coast and a city in North Africa, both with old Jewish communities, both a long way from Jerusalem. That is the whole description. Luke gives them a region and no names.

It is not that he was short of ink. Acts is full of minor figures who are named anyway. Ananias, who was sent down the street to a blind man in Damascus. Agabus, who came down from Jerusalem and tied his own hands with Paul's belt. Rhoda, the servant girl who heard Peter at the gate and was so pleased that she left him standing in the street. Luke keeps her name. He keeps the name of Simon the tanner, whose only contribution was a house by the sea.

He did not keep these.

Whether he knew them and left them out, or whether by the time he asked there was nobody left who could say, he does not tell us. Either way the record is blank at the place where the gospel crossed over.

The inspection

“And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord” (11:21).

The report reached Jerusalem, and Jerusalem sent Barnabas.

That is an inspection. Something had happened at a distance that the mother church had not sanctioned and could not see, and they sent a man to look at it. The same instinct had shown up a chapter earlier, when Peter went to Cornelius and came back to find the circumcision party waiting for him – “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” – and he had to set the whole thing out for them in order, point by point, before they were satisfied (11:2–4).

Peter was a named apostle and was called to account. The men at Antioch were never asked. Nobody wrote to them. The examination went to the work, not to the workers, and by the time Barnabas arrived there was a church to look at.

He looked at it and was glad. Luke’s word is that he “saw the grace of God” – he saw it, in a room full of Greeks, and did not require an explanation for how it got there. Then he went to Tarsus to find Saul, and the two of them taught there for a year.

Barnabas is the one who gets the credit in most retellings, and he earned it. But he arrived afterwards. The decision had been made already, in a city a long way from anyone who could have stopped it.

What came of it

Antioch is where the word Christian was first used (11:26). Luke mentions it in passing and does not say who used it; it has the sound of a name given from outside, by people who needed a word for a group that was neither Jewish nor Greek.

It is also where the sending began. The five prophets and teachers at Antioch – a Cypriot Levite, a Jew called Niger, a man from Cyrene, a man raised in Herod's household, and Saul of Tarsus – were worshipping and fasting when the Spirit said to set two of them apart (13:1–3). Paul's first journey leaves from there. So does the second. So does the third, and he comes back and reports to that church between them.

And it is where the argument finally had to be had. Men came down from Judea saying that unless the Gentile believers were circumcised they could not be saved. The church at Antioch said no, and the dispute went up to Jerusalem (15:1–2). The council met because Antioch would not back down.

Every Gentile church after that runs back through those three things, and all three run back through verse 20.

Afterwards

The church at Antioch lasted.

Within seventy years it had a bishop, Ignatius, who was taken to Rome to die and wrote seven letters on the road, arguing hard for the authority of

a single bishop in each city. Within three hundred it was one of the great sees, named alongside Rome and Alexandria. It gave its name to a school of reading – the Antiochene, plain and historical, against the allegory of Alexandria – and it is where Chrysostom preached before they took him to Constantinople.

Then the ground moved. Earthquakes, repeatedly, and catastrophically in 526. A Persian sack in 540. The Arab conquest in 637. A Crusader principality, and then the Mamluks in 1268. The great city became a town, and the town is there still.

None of that was visible from verse 20, and none of it is the point. The men who started it did not know they were starting anything. They had been run out of their homes, they travelled the length of the coast, and in a Greek city they spoke to Greeks. What came of it outlasted them by two thousand years and never carried their names.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During its development, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words here emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.