

ANTIOCH: CROSSROADS OF FAITH

In the first century, cities such as Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus held faith-filled communities bound together in one rapidly growing Church. Unknown to them, they were only the first steps on the road which would take Christianity around the world. Antioch was a vital crossroad in the journey. Directions chosen there have guided the spread of faith down to our day.

Its location destined Antioch to be a mixture of diverse cultures. Caravans from Asia Minor, Persia, India, and even China traveled through this natural meeting place for East and West. Merchandise from afar was sent to large warehouses before being transferred to barges and hauled down the Orontes River to waiting ships.

Great powers struggled to control the city because of its strategic location and, more importantly, because of its growing wealth and influence. The Greeks hellenized Antioch, marking it with their culture and philosophy. Inevitably, as Rome extended its borders, the city became a Roman stronghold. Even before Rome made it the capital of its Syrian province in 64 AD., Antioch was a favorite haunt of Roman soldiers. Roman culture added to the city's luxury with a forum, an amphitheater, a Roman bath, a hippodrome, a theater, and an aqueduct carrying water to fountains, public buildings, and villas in the city. Wealthy and dazzling to behold, Antioch deserved its title, "Golden."

From a religious standpoint, the city reflected its cosmopolitan character. The Greeks worshipped the gods of Olympus. Roman soldiers in the area remained loyal to Mithras, god of the Persians. Alongside their pagan neighbors, a large Greek-speaking Jewish colony prayed to the God of Abraham. Primarily traders, they kept their Jewish faith in synagogues near the foot of Mount Silpius. This southern section of the city was also where the Jewish community lived.

ANTIOCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Peter was the first apostle to reach Antioch. In a cave on the slopes overlooking the Jewish colony he preached in what tradition calls Christianity's oldest church, the Grotto of Saint Peter. Near here the famous Chalice of Antioch, originally thought to be the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper, was discovered in 1910. Later

studies date it between the third and sixth centuries. Still, the intricacy of the design housing the chalice suggests how the faith of the Christian community grabbed hold among artisans such as this skillful silversmith.

Jewish and Greek converts to Antioch's Christian community looked to the Mother Church in Jerusalem. Church leaders such as Barnabas followed Peter to strengthen the unity of their faith. As Saint Luke, a city native, recorded, "*Antioch was the first place in which the disciples were called Christians*" (Acts 11:26). By the time Saint Paul, born in Tarsus only a day's ride away, visited Antioch, the Christian community was flourishing.

With their different religious backgrounds, Antioch's Christians debated difficult questions about observance of Jewish law. They sent Barnabas and Paul to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for help. The Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15:1-35) decided to free the gentile converts of any restrictions imposed by Jewish law. Now the Christians were an entity in themselves, with no ties to the Jewish community. In effect, the Council opened the way to a Church universal in character.

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch with a letter confirming the decision of the Council. During his two years there, Paul's initial fervor and zeal for the spread of the Church became a consuming fire. Antioch would be the Church which sponsored his apostolic mission to the gentiles.

In the year 57, Paul's third missionary journey was never completed. Christians in Antioch waited for him, only to hear that he had been arrested and taken to Rome to be martyred. There too Peter ended his journeys with a martyr's death.

Antioch had its own martyrs as the emperors of Rome attempted to stamp out the new religion. At the end of the first century, refusal of Christians to worship pagan gods incensed Emperor Trajan. Ignatius, third bishop of Antioch, was arrested and taken to Rome to be devoured in the arena. En route, the chainbound Ignatius wrote to the faithful scattered from the Near East to Rome.

The keynote of all his letters was unity in belief among all Christians. His letter to the congregation in Smyrna contains the first reference in Christian literature to the term "Catholic Church." Ignatius constantly

insisted on unity with the bishop by faith in and obedience to his authority. He also upheld the Virgin birth and called the Eucharist "the flesh of Christ" and the "medicine of immortality." Issues he raised would be argued for centuries by theologians in Antioch and those who followed, leading to the discord he warned against.

ANTIOCH IN THE CHRISTIAN EMPIRE

Antioch remained the most prominent city in the Middle East throughout the Roman era. In 297 AD the Emperor Diocletian made it the capitol of Anatolia ("the East"), a civil diocese stretching from Cyprus to Mesopotamia. With Jerusalem destroyed in 70 A.D., Antioch became the hub of Christian influence in the East as well. The Ecumenical Council of Nicea I (325) placed the city as third in rank of the apostolic sees. Later its archbishop would be accorded the title patriarch.

Vigorous theological debate made Antioch an intellectual hothouse. The "school of Antioch" played a significant role in theological thinking which enriched but challenged the young Church's development. Although other writers and synods preceded him, Lucian of Antioch is credited with founding this school of thought around 270, when his teachings gave a clear direction to the school's characteristic exegesis and Christology. Against the allegorical approach favored by Alexandrians such as Origen, the Antioch school offered a more literal interpretation of Scripture.

While Alexandrians emphasized Christ's divinity, Antiocheans also debated the nature of His humanity. Diodore of Tarsus pursued their dualistic Christology and stimulated his influential disciples, including John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Another student of Lucian, Arius of Alexandria, argued a Trinitarian heresy, Arianism, that only the Father was fully God.

Disputes on the relation of Christ's humanity to His divinity led to a fracturing of the Christian community. In 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius, whose followers would be driven out of the Empire and find a home in the Assyrian Church. In 451 the Council of Chalcedon condemned Monophysitism, further splintering the Church. Those Antiochians who rejected Chalcedon evolved into the Syrian Orthodox Church, while the chiefly Greek-speaking Antiochians who accepted this Council became known as Melkites.

Two centuries later the Syriac speaking monks of St. Maron's monastery would form their own jurisdiction, the Maronite patriarchate. The tangle of distinctions has endured. Today the patriarchal heritage of Antioch is claimed by Catholic Maronites, Syrian Orthodox, and Syrian Catholics, as well as by two Greek-Byzantine patriarchs, the Orthodox and the Catholic Melkite.

The Church of Antioch was also a center for ascetic, liturgical and missionary activity throughout this period. Monasticism flourished in the Syrian desert and the mountains of Cilicia and the Lebanon. Antiochian missionary activity was responsible for establishing the catholicates of Georgia and Persia. To this day the Christians of the Malabar coast (South West India) refer to their communities as "Syrian Churches". The liturgical tradition of Antioch – associated with such names as John Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Romanos the Melodist – would be brought to Constantinople and provide the dominant influence on the entire Byzantine way of worship.

THE DECLINE OF ANTIOCH

During the next 500 years Antioch slowly slipped from its place of prominence. The Churches' Christological disputes had divided the community along its two major ethnic lines, Greek and Syrian. The Greek Church of Antioch increasingly looked to Constantinople for support and direction. As a result the Greek patriarchate of Antioch tended to become increasingly dependent on the Church of Constantinople.

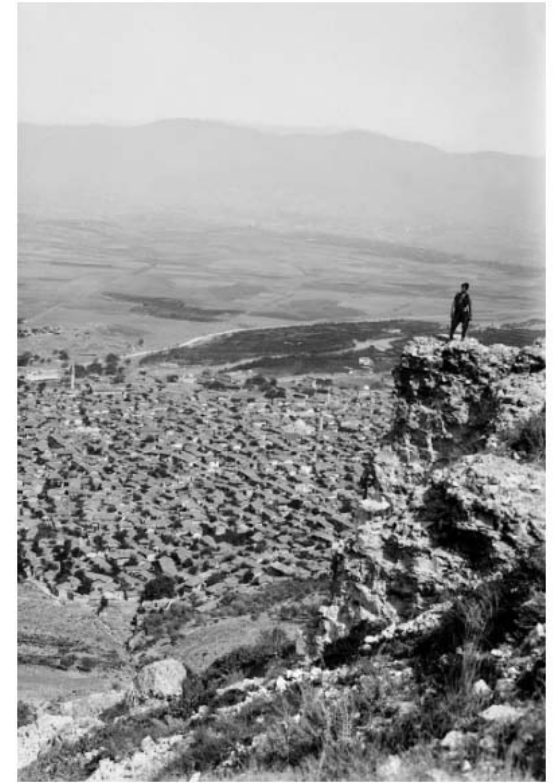
The city had experienced a devastating fire and earthquakes in the fifth century, but it was violent conquest by the Muslim Arabs in the seventh century heralded its decline as a center of any importance. The next six hundred years were regularly punctuated by conquests and reconquests by Byzantines (989) Seldjuk Turks (1071), Crusaders (1098), and Baibars (1268).

The most devastating of these invasions for the Greek Church of Antioch was that of the Crusades. When the Crusaders were in power they sought to impose a Latin patriarch and bishops on the Church. As a result the Greek hierarchs spent most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries wandering, from Cilicia and Constantinople to Asia Minor) as their see experienced wave after wave of conflict and pillage. Finally in 1366 the Greek Patriarch moved his see to Damascus, retain-

ing only the title of Antioch as a souvenir of its ancient prominence.

Today what was once the glory of the young Church is modern Antakya in southern Turkey. It was cut off from the rest of Syria after World War I as a part of the great migration of peoples orchestrated by the western powers. Modern apartments dot the hillside where spacious villas once stood. But the legacy of Antioch cannot be defined by ruined walls. Like the mustard tree, its deep roots and far-reaching branches belong to one Church wherever it has spread. Its heirs are those Christians who, century after century, continued to live out the truth contained in that tiny mustard seed planted there by Christ's apostles.

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