

Antioch's Contribution to Christianity

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Foreword

I appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the fiftieth anniversary issue of *Faith and Mission*. Over the years Southeastern Seminary has had a close relationship with Southern Seminary, where I teach. Southeastern's first president and a number of its early faculty came from Southern. A healthy exchange of both faculty and students has continued between the two schools over the years. It seems to me that the relationship is similar to that between the churches at Jerusalem and Antioch in the earliest days of Christianity. In origin Antioch was in many ways a "sister" church of the Jerusalem church, but it quickly developed in its own unique direction and became one of early Christianity's greatest centers. With this somewhat remote analogy in mind, I offer this essay on the contribution of the church at Antioch.

Establishing the Church at Antioch

Many would agree with Bruce Metzger's assessment of the church at Antioch: "With the exception of Jerusalem, Antioch in Syria played a larger part in the life and fortunes of the early church than any other single city of the Graeco-Roman Empire."¹ Metzger might have understated Antioch's significance. In a real sense, the church as we know it today might no longer exist were it not for the vision of the Antiochene Christians. It was at Antioch that Christianity first broke out of its Jewish matrix and embraced the wider world. It was largely a story that involved the Hellenists, the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians of Jerusalem.

The Coming of Christianity to Antioch

The story of Antiochene Christianity begins with the selection of the seven in Acts 6:1–6. Luke calls them "Hellenists," which surely refers to Greek being their native language and possibly also to their sharing aspects of Greek culture.

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In all likelihood they were Jews who had come to Jerusalem from the Jewish Diaspora, from places such as Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia, places represented in the Greek-speaking Jewish synagogues of Jerusalem (Acts 6:9).

The story of the needy Greek-speaking widows and the selection of the seven to serve them need not be elaborated here. For our purposes, the significant observation is that already in early Jerusalem Christianity two groups existed, groups with major linguisti...

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