

The Antioch Example

Acts 11:19-30

Introduction

I invite you to travel with me to the golden city of the Roman empire. Antioch was called the queen city of the east. Its main street was more than four miles long and was paved entirely with marble. It was also lined on both sides by marble columns. It was the only city in the ancient world that had its streets lit at night.

The Roman author Cicero described Antioch as a place of scholarly citizens and classical studies.

In addition, Antioch rivaled Corinth in its sinfulness. Chariot racing, gambling, and the pursuit of physical pleasure was the action in this city. In fact, even its chief religion at the temple of Daphne, was nothing more than immorality and prostitution.

Antioch was “sin city”. Any vice, any god, any pleasure was within walking distance. The streets of Antioch were never quiet; this city never slept. If there was a city in the Roman empire that you would never imagine to be the place for an evangelistic crusade, it was Antioch. If there was ever a city that would ignore the gospel, it was this first century sin city.

Yet, in the next few verses in our study through the book of Acts, we discover an incredible example. We discover, in fact, an example of Christianity; an example of God’s grace; an example of godly living in the midst of ungodly temptation. Believe it or not, we discover an example of a New Testament church.

The Church in Antioch . . . Created!

Let us pick our story up with Acts, chapter 11, verse 19.

So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.

This may sound strange unless you remember the transitional nature of the book of Acts. These believers had left Jerusalem at a time when the gospel was being delivered to the Jew first. They had no idea that Peter had recently introduced the gospel to a Gentile named Cornelius. They were simply following a pattern of evangelism that had already been expanded – they just did not know it yet! Continue to verse 20.

But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Now, in our passage today, there are five phrases that jump off the page. I would like to work our way through this passage and simply highlight key phrases or statements that could stand alone for deep discussion and application.

Key phrase: “. . . [They] began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”

We just read the first key phrase. Go back to verse 20b.

. . . men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

These two towns of Cyprus and Cyrene were simple, blue collar towns that were built around copper mines. Evidently, some of the Jewish men were burdened for the cosmopolitan harvest field of Antioch.

However, I must tell you, this ministry was unconventional. Copper miners had never been through rabbinical school. They did not know they were supposed to go to Jerusalem and get permission first. They were so excited with what Jesus Christ had done in their lives that they assumed the big city needed to hear the message! Gentiles even! They just arrived in sin city one day and began preaching the Lord Jesus.

The grammar of these miners was probably poor and their hands were callused. Without market research and demographics, purpose statements and administrative techniques, these men were simply on fire.

Their ministry was unconventional, but let me add, the results were undeniable. Look at verse 21.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.

We do not know all the details, but Antioch would never be the same. The temple of Daphne had a dramatic drop in business; the chariot races and gambling tables noticed a drop in profits; the streets seemed a little quieter than usual. Why? Because the city was being swept up in this evangelistic crusade!

The Church in Antioch . . . Deepened!

Now notice verse 22 of Acts, chapter 11.

The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

Ah! Jerusalem has heard the report. They say, “We’re not too sure about this group of preachers. What are they called? ‘Copper Miners for Christ’? Barnabas, go check it out.”

Now, we have studied this man Barnabas before. His nickname was “Encourager”. If you look further at verse 24a, Luke provides another biographical sketch for his readers,

for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. . . .

Three characteristics marked Barnabas in the mind of Luke: his character, his commitment, and his courage.

If you were a member of the Jerusalem church, and the leaders needed to send someone with discernment and faith; someone dominated by the Holy Spirit, may I ask you a question? Could they send you?

Could you discern whether or not the revival in Antioch was the genuine item? They could have said, “Barnabas, we don’t have a set of guidelines to give you. We have no church growth materials for you to compare Antioch to. Just go in faith and with sensitive ears to the Holy Spirit.”

Ask yourself, “Could the church have chosen me?”

So, Barnabas finally arrives at Antioch. Look at verse 23.

Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

Key phrase: “. . . [Barnabas] witnessed the grace of God . . .”

Verse 23 gives us the next key phrase, Barnabas “saw” the grace of God. What does the grace of God look like?! We talk about living under grace; experiencing the grace of God; being saved by grace, and we sing *Amazing Grace*. But what does grace look like that Barnabas could see it?

If we looked throughout the book of Acts and beyond at every reference to the church in Antioch, we would find that Barnabas saw:

- people coming to faith in Jesus Christ (chapter 11);
- sacrificial and spontaneous giving (chapter 11);
- praying and fasting (chapter 13);
- a vision for the world – Antioch will commission the first missionaries (chapter 13);
- people accepting one another in the body of believers – there was neither Jew nor Gentile

(Paul will make reference, in the book of Galatians, chapter 2, that in Antioch, Jews and Gentiles ate together – which was probably a reference to the Lord’s supper).

Barnabas saw that! That is what grace looked like.

Barnabas is in the middle of it all, preaching and encouraging faithfulness. He soon realizes that he cannot do this alone. In fact, God’s word is now exploding among the Gentile people. Who could help him? Verse 25 reveals the answer and the next key phrase.

Key phrase: “. . . he left for Tarsus to look for Saul”

And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;

Now remember, nearly eight years have elapsed since Saul and Barnabas last met. You may remember our previous study of chapter 9 of Acts, when Barnabas risked his reputation by introducing Saul to the apostles and defending this former “hatchet man” of the Sanhedrin.

It was not long after that introduction that Saul was sent packing back home to Tarsus. The apostles had no use for him. There seemed to be no future for him in the church. It was, “Hello Saul . . . Goodbye Saul.”

However, that was not Barnabas’ reaction to Saul. Barnabas never completely forgot him. And now, who better to serve with him than a Jew who was cultured in Greek and was also a Roman citizen? Saul was perfect for the job – if only Barnabas could find him!

The word translated “look” in verse 25, is a very intense word.

Ladies, when you go to the mall and look for a new outfit, you kind of browse – you have got it down to a science. My wife and I can walk into a ladies section and in five minutes, she will say, “I don’t see anything here for me.”

I love to hear those words, but I think, “We didn’t look at everything.”

That is one kind of looking – a casual browsing.

On the other hand, if you have ever lost your child in a store, you know the kind of looking that you start doing. You are looking with intensity. You look down every corridor and up every aisle; you are

listening for their voice; you allow nothing to distract your attention – not even a ninety percent off rack. You are fervently looking.

That is the kind of looking that is described in verse 25 – fervent looking. In fact, this compound word literally means, “to look up and down”. It was used only one other time by Luke, and that was in the narrative when Mary and Joseph are on their way back from Jerusalem and suddenly ask, “Where’s Jesus? I thought he was with you! Well, I thought he was in the wagon with you!” Luke, chapter 2, tells us that they returned to Jerusalem and looked for their missing boy.

Why was Barnabas so intent on finding Saul? Why would he risk displeasing the apostles? Notice that Barnabas did not ask them. Why risk handing over this incredible ministry to an unknown man; an obscure character who was unproven and overlooked by the church leadership?

It was more than intuition; it was more than the fact that Barnabas and Saul had hit it off eight years earlier, it was the will of God.

How do I know that this was the will of God? Because in chapter 9, verse 15 of Acts, the word of the Lord had come to Ananias. It was a word that he, without a doubt, shared with the other apostles. It was a word from the Lord that Ananias shared with Saul, saying,

. . . “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles . . .”

Barnabas, sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and obedient to the word of God, realized that Saul’s time had come. Look at verse 26a of Acts, chapter 11.

and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. . . .

The Church in Antioch . . . Accused!

Continue in verse 26. This includes the next key phrase.

And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Key phrase: “. . . the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.”

There have been a lot of names in the New Testament for believers. These include:

- disciple
- brother/sister
- witness
- saint
- child of God
- steward
- elect
- pilgrim
- priest
- beloved

Yet, from history, we discover that the name “Christian” was a name the pagans came up with, not the Christians. In fact, the name is only used two other times in the New Testament.

It seems to have been a derogatory name meaning, “little Christs,” or “imitators of Christ”. That name was enough to sentence a person to death.

However, in Peter’s epistle, the Holy Spirit uses the word in a positive sense. Look at I Peter, chapter 4, verse 16.

but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.

What does it mean to be called a Christian? Is it:

- a nametag you put on for Sundays?
- an adjective for a good person; that is, “That man is a good Christian man”?
- synonymous with being an American citizen; in other words, “Of course I’m a Christian, I was born in America”?
- a name for people who have never committed a felony; that is, “I’m a Christian because I’ve never killed anyone”?

No. The name Christian means, “Little Christ”; that is, “one who imitates or adheres to Christ”.

Eleven years ago, my family and I moved from Texas to North Carolina. We became North Carolinians. How? By simply residing in the state of North Carolina.

In the same way, you are a Christian because you reside in the body of Christ.

However, the question remains, “How are you living up to your name?”

If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

In Costa Rica, the traditional Spanish bullfight has undergone some specific changes that distinguish it from what a tourist would see in Spain. The Costa Ricans no longer allow the toreador to kill the bull after the classic fight. As a result, the great bullfighters do not stop in Costa Rica and no native fighters are really being developed. Therefore, the Costa Ricans have altered their fight to allow anyone who is older than eighteen and sober to fight the bull. Many times the fight begins with as many as one hundred and fifty young men standing proudly in the ring, waiting for the bull to break wildly through the entrance gate. When the bull does enter, immediately one hundred and forty of the “bullfighters” scramble wildly over the sides of the ring. From the beginning mob of so-called toreadors, only ten or less are really ready to challenge the bull. All one hundred and fifty want the name of “bullfighter,” but only a few are willing to live up to it.

More than likely, every one hearing this wants the name “Christian”. The question is, “How many of us are willing to live up to the name of Christian?”

The Church in Antioch . . . Involved!

Now look at verses 27 and 28 of Acts, chapter 11.

Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.

Ephesians, chapter 2, informs us that apostles and prophets were part of building the foundation of the New Testament church. They both eventually moved off the scene. Any home builder knows that you do not keep laying the foundation. They are eventually replaced with pastors and teachers who built the superstructure of the church upon that miraculous foundation.

The gift of prophecy could still exist today, not in the sense of foretelling the word, but in the sense of forth telling the word, or declaring the word of God that has already been revealed. One of these prophets makes a prediction that a famine is coming that will impact their area. History records that there were actually three of them.

The Jerusalem church had already been decimated by persecution and thousands of believers had fled. The church in Jerusalem needed help.

Key phrase: “. . . each of them determined to send a contribution . . .”

Now notice another key phrase in verse 29.

And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.

Continue to verse 30.

And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

There was no percentage dictated to these Christians; there was no command given to them. It was simply the response of caring hearts.

And, do not miss the irony in this. Who is helping who? The Gentiles are helping the Jews. Antioch, the movement that the apostles were not too sure about, is now helping the apostles. And, guess who is carrying the money. A man they had dismissed eight years earlier as somewhat unimportant to the cause; that is, Saul himself.

Application – From Antioch to America!

Did you know that verses 29 and 30 are the very first reference to a church taking up a missionary collection? And it is, to this day, one of the signs of a healthy church; that is, when people in one church can give money away to people in another church or ministry.

Phillips Brooks, a famous pastor from a century ago, was once asked what he would do to revive a dead church. He immediately responded, “I would ask them to take up a missionary offering.”

One of the most sensitive nerves in the human body is the nerve that activates the muscles that move the arm from the side to the back pocket.

Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.”

These Antioch believers gave!

If we want to be like the church in Antioch

If we want to be like the church in Antioch, there are a couple of things we need to do.

We have to act worthy of our new identification

1. First, we have to act worthy of our new identification; our new name!

Before the world, Paul, in his epistles, exhorted the believers to walk worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before other believers, the believers in Antioch could have ignored the Jerusalem church. They could have said, “Hey, you didn’t care enough about us to send an apostle here – you sent a layman, Barnabas. Besides, we know how you feel about Gentiles. So you’re having trouble making ends meet? Well, get another job!”

However, they imitated Christ. They were like Christ in their actions and attitudes toward those who were in need.

We have to be alert to new opportunities

2. Secondly, if we want to be like the church in Antioch, we have to be alert to new opportunities.

It is the church in Antioch that:

- will become the center of evangelism;
- will send out the first missionaries;
- will support the apostle Paul; in fact, after his missionary trips, he will return to report, not to the church in Jerusalem, but to the church in Antioch.

These copper miners planted a church that bristled with anticipation. What new opportunities are there for our church? One opportunity is to plant daughter churches in our own county and to continue to plant, reproduce, resource, and encourage many churches worldwide. When the time comes for me to hang up my sermon notes, I want our church to be able to look over our shoulder and see, not just beautiful buildings and thousands of people worshiping, but to see that we have been like the church in Antioch; that we had a part in reaching the world.

Let us walk worthy of our name – we are Christians! Let us be alert to new opportunities for ministry – ministry that ultimately glorifies our God and Savior Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/15/1997 by Stephen Davey.

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