

THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH

Introduction

1. Lakeview Church has been in Zion for 52 years. The city has dramatically changed and so have our church and the other churches in our community. The changes will continue and we will feel the pressure of those changes in our local churches. The question remains how do we adapt to the changes and remain unchanging in our commitment to God and His Word?
2. Part of the reason for looking at the Church as it is revealed to us through the pages of the NT is to note how they remained steadfast to God's revelation but how they moved ahead and adjusted as they encountered the various challenges before them. Perhaps by examining what they did we can gain some insight and wisdom in terms of how we are to respond to the challenges before us.
3. Last week we saw how the church was born. It was birthed in Jerusalem, in the heart of Judaism. Jews were brought face to face with the Gospel. As God regenerated the hearts of many of those Jews, they encountered challenges from those who saw Jesus not as the answer, but as an intrusion into Judaism, a harmful departure from the Law of Moses, a theologically corrupt sect that needed to be destroyed. But the Gospel kept growing. More and more Jews, in and around Jerusalem, were trusting in Jesus.
4. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they received power from the coming Holy Spirit. And when that happened they were to be witnesses of His Gospel there, but also in Judea and Samaria and even to the end of the earth! It happened. The Spirit came. They received power. But they didn't wander very far from Jerusalem and Judea. So God moved them out. And today we will see where He moved them and what they learned and what they did. Our main focus today will be the church at Antioch.
5. Kids, here is your assignment. What is the name of the church that sent Paul and Barnabas out as missionaries to tell people about Jesus (**Antioch**)? What name did the people in that city call those who were believing in Jesus (**Christians**)? The

church believed they needed to go and tell of Jesus. One way to do this is to send others. If we send others how might we support them? We might give them money so they can live, but we also need to do what for them (**pray**)? It's sometimes hard to know what God wants us to do. Mostly we need to ask Him for what so we will know what to do (**wisdom**)?

I. PLANTED ON THE EDGE OF PAGANISM (Acts 11:19-21 – ¹⁹ 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. 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. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord). So what was happening?

A. God's mandate and methodology ("Go"... and when they did they were met with persecution, and that had an impact... they "were scattered")

1. God had instructed the eleven to, ***"Go and make disciples of all nations..."***

Those were the marching orders. They had begun the assignment, but had stopped far short of the goal. Granted, not a great deal of time had passed, but they were concentrating their efforts in Judea, and especially in Jerusalem.

2. There had been various outbreaks of persecution resulting in some outward movement. Now, some 25 years later, due in large part to the murder of Stephen, the Gospel moved north and west of Palestine. The Gospel was spreading, but the target audience remained the Jews (v. 19 - ***speaking the word to no one except Jews***). So, they are going but the target needed to be adjusted, but that wasn't happening.

B. God's interruption and redirection - ***"To no one except Jews, but..."*** (The conjunction, "but" is a great Biblical word!)

1. Apparently the Gospel had reached the Island of Cyprus and had even traveled all the way to Cyrene, which was on the northern coast of Africa. However, it was still an outreach to the Jews. But some of these Jewish converts, who were apparently not as "Jewish" as those coming from Judea, when they arrived at the city of Antioch in Syria, they started witnessing to the Gentiles there. And those Gentiles started trusting Christ!

2. So, away from Jerusalem “the nations” were beginning to trust Jesus – just like Jesus had said! This was on the edge of paganism. The OT Scriptures were not known. A commitment to a monotheistic God was not there. The habits of synagogue worship were unheard of. This was a new challenge and God was at work! So here they are...

II. POSITIONED AS A PROMINENT PROCLAIMER OF THE GOSPEL (Acts 11:22-26 – ²²The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians). Let's start with...

A. Curiosity and providence (**the report** and **they sent Barnabas**)

1. When things start happening, people hear about it. And when it's different, when it is something new, the news carries quickly. They understood the concept of people believing in Jesus, but not Gentile people!
2. The Church of Jerusalem was the place where it all began and to a certain extent Jerusalem was the guardian of the truth of the Church. Not knowing exactly what was going on, they picked a good man, a tested man, a spiritual man, to go and see what was happening in Antioch.
3. What he saw there blew him away. He saw the grace of God at work. He saw many coming to Christ. He was glad! He didn't immediately go back to Jerusalem. Instead, he traveled west to the city of Tarsus looking for Saul – or as we know him, Paul. This was the...

B. Right team at the right time (Saul...)

1. The Gospel is the work of God but He uses people to accomplish His work. Why did Barnabas look for Paul, and how did he know that Paul was the right guy? Barnabas is described as a man who was full of, that is, controlled by, the Holy Spirit. But I think there is more to it.

2. This was not the first encounter Barnabas had with Paul. Soon after Paul's conversion, Paul made an effort to join the disciples in Jerusalem. But they would have nothing of it. They really thought he was a plant, a spy, who had infiltrated the believers and was working an undercover operation. Frankly. As the 9:26 says, ***“they were all afraid of him.”*** And here is that conjunction again - ***27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles and declared to them how on the road he had seen the Lord, who spoke to him, and how at Damascus he had preached boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 And he spoke and disputed against the Hellenists. But they were seeking to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned this, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.*** Barnabas believed that Paul was the real deal. And he was convinced, “This is the guy we need.” And he found him and he brought him back to Antioch and they worked together for a whole year. Just a note about the label they received in Antioch – “Christians.” Prior to this those who believed in Jesus were considered a sect of Judaism. With the preaching of Paul and Barnabas, a distinction grew. Belief in Christ began to develop an identity of its own. Probably it was a term of derision, given by those in Antioch, but it became a badge of honor for those who believed in Jesus! Let's speed ahead to chapters 13,14 and 15. Antioch was...

III. PREPARED AS A BASE OF OPERATIONS (for the expanding church) (ACTS 13:1-3; 14:24-28; 15:30-35) By this time Antioch has attracted and developed several solid leaders. Note what happened next.

- A. Solid leaders are subject to God's direction - ***Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.***

1. The Bible is not clear how these leaders heard from the Spirit. It simply does not specifically say. But that was their understanding. And notice when this happened. It was while they were worshiping. It was also while they were

fasting. Now, with this new direction, they continued their fast and they prayed, and then they laid their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off to proclaim the Gospel to the far corners of the known world – a world that had never heard of Jesus.

2. Antioch became the sending church, the church that would be the gateway to the western world reaching to Greece and Rome. Generally speaking, the church was never designed to sit still. It was designed to be dynamic, moving ahead, reaching beyond its borders to accomplish the goal of making Christ known! So they set out on their mission. They traveled far west to the province of Galatia, to another town called Antioch (of Pisidia) and God did a great work there. Then it was off to Iconium and Lystra (that's where Paul was stoned and left for dead). But that didn't slow them down. They revisited these cities, including Lystra, ²² **strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.** ²³ **And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.** And then it was time to go back to Antioch and report what God was doing!

- B. Accountable servants testify of God's work. ²⁴ **Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia.** ²⁵ **And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia,** ²⁶ **and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.** ²⁷ **And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.** ²⁸ **And they remained no little time with the disciples.**

1. Notice – **"They sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled."** God had sent them and they had done His work and now they were ready to praise Him for what He had done through them!
2. Notice that they gathered the church together and then they declared all that God had done! This was no brief update. They spent a long time with these

disciples at Antioch declaring how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles!

C. Humble teachers make plain God's Word - ³⁰ ***So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch, and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words. ³³ And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brothers to those who had sent them. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.***

1. Last week we talked briefly about the Council in Jerusalem. Some decisions were made that would affect the ministry of Paul and Barnabas to the Antioch Church and to the mission on which they had been sent. The letter referred to in the text came from the council.
2. Good decisions are usually met with rejoicing. But they also open the door for further instruction and growth. And that's what happened here. Paul and Barnabas and others seized the opportunity and remained, helping the saints understand the Word. Challenges are growth opportunities for all of us. That was true for the church in Antioch and that can be true for us.
3. It is time to get rather pointed.

CONCLUSION

1. We are a church in decline. Some of that is due to the changes in our community. Some is due to the changes in our world. We must remain faithful to God and His Word, but at the same time we must also remember that our responsibility is to glorify the Lord – to make Him known.
2. We have been placed in this situation by the providence of God. This can be a very exciting place to be. This is not the time to withdraw or to pull back or to retreat somewhere else. This is a time to watch God do great things! But God also expects us to look to Him, to receive strength and wisdom from Him, to be willing to pay a price to make Him known.
3. I'm asking us to do two things between now and April 27th. That's the Wednesday evening when as many as are able will meet together to discuss where we are and

where and how we need to proceed. The first thing I am asking us to do is that we would all pray that God will grant us wisdom as He our decisions. The second thing is that we might consider a personal day of prayer and fasting, one day between now and April 27, taking the time we would normally be eating, to read His Word and talk to Him – not trying to discern anything other than focusing our attention on Him. (Here is a quick note on fasting if it is an unfamiliar concept: God created both bread and hunger. He did not need to create man with needs of hunger and thirst but He did so to call attention to Himself. Everything exists to call attention to God and to bring admiration to Him (Romans 11:36 and Colossians 1:16). Bread was created for the glory of Christ. Hunger and thirst were created for the glory of Christ. Bread can glorify God in two ways. It can be eaten with gratitude for His goodness, and it can be forfeited out of hunger for God Himself. When we eat we taste the emblem of our heavenly food – the Bread of Life. When we fast we say, “I love the Reality above the emblem.” Both eating and fasting are worship. Both fulfill the call to do all to the glory of God. Each has a hidden danger. The danger of eating is that we will fall in love with the gift. The danger in fasting is that we will belittle the gift and glory in our willpower.

4. God is glorified when we find our delight in Him. And when we find our delight in Him, we will honor Him with our choices.