

Sunday January 19th, 2025

Acts 11:19-30

Series: “Lessons from the Early Church”

Sermon: “Visit to Antioch of Syria”

Westminster Chapel in London was pastored for many years by Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones. Dr. Lloyd-Jones was a Welsh preacher whose career was punctuated by his zealous attacks on liberalization of the church, and the Christian message. Although having died several years ago, you can still hear him preach on YouTube. Dr. Lloyd-Jones was also known for being the preacher who always wore a suit. In his biography, there is even a picture of him on the beach with his little daughter, wearing a suit as he sits in the sand.

Many people used to joke that he was probably born in a suit. Years ago, when many evangelical churches began experimenting with gimmicks and entertainment to increase their attendance, some Westminster folks began pressing Dr. Lloyd-Jones to adopt some of the new trends. Dr. Lloyd-Jones told his people that he knew a sure-fire way to fill every seat in the Westminster chapel. The church replied, “Tell us, tell us, And Let’s do it!”

Dr. Lloyd-Jones said, “It’s very simple. Put a notice in the Saturday edition of The London Times that I shall appear in the pulpit the next day wearing a bathing suit!” After a few minutes of silence and reveling in the shocked faces of his congregation, Dr. Lloyd-Jones went on to teach about the biblical basis for proper worship, as opposed to the approach of using entertainment to entice people to attend church. (Martyn Lloyd-Jones [Banner of Truth], 2:112)

Once or twice a month or more, I receive in the church mail, or by email, invitations to attend well-crafted and heavily marketed seminars, or events, that promise to show participants how to more effectively market their church. Especially how to make it user-friendly to newcomers or “seekers”; which is the current buzz word. At these seminars there are usually pastors brought in from mega churches from across North America, who pastor churches numbering in the hundreds, if not thousands.

Some of the topics covered might include how to make your sermon shorter and less threatening to the unchurched; how to use drama and multimedia to get the message across. I have read about seminars that promise to help us make our sanctuaries more inviting with the addition of padded pews, improved lighting, and high-fidelity surround sound. And guess what? These methods do work. They do tend to bring people in and bring them back for more.

Some of the largest evangelical churches in North America use these methods and teach them to hundreds of pastors with dramatic results. So, it is easy to see why churches and pastors are drawn to such strategies. Who doesn’t want to see the church they attend, or pastor, grow dramatically? Go to any event where pastors are present, and one of the first questions you get asked is how big is your church? So admittedly there is a bit of ego attached to this quest for fuller pews.

In our stop today at Antioch of Syria, we encounter an example of some very impressive church growth. Like Damascus, which we visited last week, Antioch became a place where persecuted Christians fled.

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From a small number of believers, the church at Antioch grew tremendously and large numbers of people came to faith. Three times, Luke underscores the large numbers of converts.

So, it begs the question; what was behind this numerical growth? I know this will shock you, but the church in Antioch did not employ the latest church growth techniques. They did not study the demographics of the city, read books like the *Purpose Driven Church* or attend a Willow Creek Event. Rather the reason the church was growing so quickly is stated in verse 21. “The hand of the Lord was with them.”

This was a church that God was blessing. Now, I need to be clear right off the top, that God’s desire for every one of his church communities, is that he wishes to bless us. But being blessed by God does not necessarily mean we will see huge numerical growth. And we must tread carefully in ever thinking that just because a church is big, or growing rapidly, or using the strategies I mentioned earlier, that the church is being blessed by God.

It must also be stated that we can, however, hinder God’s blessing of his church if we ignore or violate the principles that were demonstrated in Antioch. The church of Antioch marks a major development in the church, and in western civilization. Antioch was different than Jerusalem and Damascus, because the church was more and more distinguishing itself from the Jewish synagogue.

As Gentiles came to faith in staggering numbers, the Jewish elements of the faith were being altered and even abandoned. It was here in Antioch that we were called Christians for the first time, and it was from Antioch that the first missionaries went to Europe. If it wasn’t for this little church, it is quite conceivable that you I would not be Christians today. One shudders to think how things would be without God’s blessing on the believers at Antioch.

One of the most interesting things about Antioch was that it was not founded by an apostle, or trained pastor, or missionaries. Rather it came about because some unnamed people who fled from people like Saul who wished to harm them. This little band of believers began to tell others about Jesus, not just Jews, but Gentiles as well. The Greek word for “speak” used here is the same word used for conversation.

The implication here is that these believers did not stand in the marketplace and preach, but instead simply talked to their neighbours and friends about Jesus. It was their everyday contacts that God blessed. It is believed that Luke, who wrote Acts, was from Antioch, and that someone who knew him, shared the story of Jesus and he came to faith. It is also interesting that Luke, who is recording these events, could have told us these early pioneers’ names but he didn’t.

Perhaps they remained unnamed for a reason. If they were named, they would have been held up as some sort of missionary hero, and be viewed as a notch about everyone else, or that we might be led to think that what they did, we could never do. But their remaining unnamed, tells us they were just ordinary common folk who met Jesus, and wanted others to meet him too.

Later, Barnabus and Paul rose to leadership in Antioch through their teaching ministry, but this church still didn’t depend on them in order to function and grow.

They could send Paul and Barnabus off to Jerusalem on a relief mission in which they would be gone for a couple of months and still flourish. Later, when Paul and Barnabus set off on their first missionary journey, it was Antioch that commissioned them, and sent them, but still Antioch as a church kept rolling along.

Antioch knew, and lived the principle, that the church is a body of believers. They believed that each member was gifted by God, and each one was expected to use their gift in ministry. If the spreading of the gospel, or the functioning of the church, depends on the labours of full-time missionaries and pastors, ministry will remain limited. If all of us who have accepted Jesus as our Savior, and feels the obligation of serving him, and telling others about him; the gospel will spread, and the church will be built up.

If we wish to understand the scripture passage before us today, we do need to know something about Antioch. Antioch was located 300 miles north of Jerusalem and was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. At the time of the events recorded in Acts 11, the city held about 500,000 residents. Antioch was a center of trade and travel, because it sat on a crossroads between Europe and Asia.

The city was therefore a melting pot of different races, including Romans, Syrians, Jews and others. The city was also known for its depravity. Five miles outside of the city was a place called The Grove of Daphne, where worshippers of Artemis and Apollo pursued their religion of pleasure with temple prostitutes. The Roman satirist Juvenal criticized Antioch as the sewage of Orontes, which is the river running through Antioch that flowed to the Tiber, the river of Rome. Juvenal was saying that Antioch was so bad, it was polluting Rome 1,300 miles away.

God often picked cosmopolitan areas for his missionary endeavors. Who more than the people of Antioch needed the message that Christ came to save sinners. Acts tells us that many Gentiles “turned to the Lord”. This means they gave up their pagan ways; forgoing their idols, their sexual immortality, their corrupt business practices; all their sinful ways to trust Jesus.

When Barnabus comes to check out what is happening in Antioch, the bible says he witnessed the grace of God. What is meant by this is that we can’t see the actual grace of God, but we can sure see its effect on the people it touches. Barnabus could see clearly that God had transformed these folks. The church of Antioch was blessed, because the Good News of Jesus was never separated from the fact that we all must repent of our sin and turn from our evil ways.

One remarkable proof that God is blessing his church is that lives are being transformed. The message of grace and salvation never changes regardless of where it is shared. No matter our race, creed or educational background we all need to be reconciled to God.

Now there is an elephant in the room in this passage, and I wonder if you caught sight of it. Barnabus’ appearance at Antioch indicates that word had got back to Jerusalem about the enormous church growth going on, and the mother church in Jerusalem was alarmed. You can imagine the conversations. “Have you heard about Antioch? A bunch of laymen are sharing Christ with pagans, and they are meeting together, Jews and Gentiles in one church!”

Alarms went off among the brethren in Jerusalem. It was one thing for Cornelius, a Roman Gentile to come to faith through Peter's preaching, but pagans coming to faith by the witnessing of untrained laymen. Well, we better check this out. And so Barnabus was sent to "get things under control." Note what happened when Barnabus meets with the Antioch church.

He rejoiced. I am so glad it was Barnabus who was sent. I shudder to think what would have happened if one of the legalistic members of the circumcision party had gone. Barnabus however, was a man who lived by grace, and so he saw the grace of God at work and rejoiced. There were surely imperfections in these new believers, I mean who among us is perfect. The church was made up of a very diverse group, with lots of baggage.

But instead of focusing on the imperfections, Barnabus saw the grace of God saving people. Instead of dispensing a bunch of Jewish rules on them, Barnabus worked to encourage them to remain true to God. So, we need to ask ourselves; what do we see when we view a new convert? Let me describe one to you. He is about 20 years old, and he comes to church wearing a baseball cap which he wears backwards.

The rest of his attire consists of ripped and faded jeans, and a T-shirt with some form of marketing on it. He has a tattoo and an earring. But here he is in church, praising God at the top of his lungs. Singing about God's salvation. What do you see when you look at a person like this? Do you think that a true Christian would not look like this, or do you rejoice that a young man has found Christ? We are called to treat others with the same grace that God treated us.

Barnabus demonstrated something else in this passage. Grace motivated him to help these new believers remain true to God. Barnabus knew, as does every pastor, that it is one thing for a person to make a profession of faith, but it's another thing to persevere and grow in holiness when temptation and trials hit, as they surely will. Barnabus, whose name means, "Son of Encouragement", began to teach and encourage these new believers.

I am sure Barnabus would have told them the stories of Jesus that he had heard from the apostles. He would have shared the Old Testament. He would have prayed with them, taught them the Lord's supper, and generally gave them as many tools as he could to help them to be steadfast in their faith. In a word, he disciplined them. Later, Paul, a wealth of Scriptural knowledge, comes and deepens their growth even further.

Barnabus is also described as a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and faith. He was a man of integrity; in that he practiced what he preached. Barnabus was a good man because the Holy Spirit was active in him. Barnabus desired to see the church grow, not for his own glory, but for the glory of God. He could also discern things very well, because at one point he realizes that the needs of the Antioch church outstripped his skills, and so he travels to Tarsus to get Paul.

Barnabus had no problem taking a back seat to Paul, because the purposes of God far outweighed his ego. Leaders must be people of integrity, and the church needs to pray for their leaders to remain steadfast in a world where temptations abound. Temptations of the flesh, but also temptations of inflated ego and self-importance. Next, we must also today ponder the importance of our name.

Sunday January 19th, 2025

I mentioned earlier that it was in Antioch that believers were first called Christians. It was a name given to them by non-believing towns people. It was probably a name meant to dismiss them as irrelevant. Picture if you will one of them preaching and someone asks, “Who is this guy? To which someone replies, “Oh, he just one of Christ’s men, or Christians.”

Christians therefore became identified as people who followed the teachings of the apostles who had followed Christ. In Antioch the believers were called Christians because they adhered to the teaching of Paul and Barnabus. All this teaching of faith had the effect of changing people, so they were now identifiable by the lives they led. Our faith should change us and should make us easily recognizable as followers of Jesus.

In Antioch, we also read that God blesses his church when people respond to opportunities to share and bless others. There was a great famine in Jerusalem, and so the church in Antioch dispatched Barnabus and Paul to take relief to the stricken believers in Jerusalem. God blesses us when we quietly, spontaneously and joyfully give to meet the needs presented to us. The Antioch church could have said, “Well, we have enough problems here to look after, let Jerusalem take care of itself.” But they didn’t. They responded with great generosity.

Antioch is a great example for us. A church founded by simple believers who loved God and desired to serve him. They operated by God’s grace and not by legalism. Their leaders set a good example and taught from God’s word. They were generous and trusted God to meet their needs. And the hand of the Lord was upon them and large numbers came to faith in Antioch because of them.

Wouldn’t it be great if First Baptist Church was like that? Well, that’s the point; it can be if we just follow the example of Antioch.