

July 7, 2013

“The Church at Antioch” or

The Model of a Transformative Church in a Lost and Hurting World

Acts 11:19-30

The title of today’s message is, “The Church at Antioch” or “The Model of a Transformative Church in a Lost and Hurting World.”

A few weeks ago we talked about the model of the church in Jerusalem, a model showing us we need to be devoted to:

Being filled with the Holy Spirit

God’s Word

Fellowship

Ministry to those in need

Prayer

Worship

Taking the Good News of Jesus Christ to Everyone

We have in the church at Antioch another model of a church that was being used by God to transform the world. But the church at Antioch initiated a successful Christian mission to the pagan Greco-Roman world. This church was **resilient, creative, effective, and compassionate**, and therefore serves as a model of the Church as God’s agent of redemption and transformation in a lost and hurting world.

God used the church at Antioch in the face of persecution to bring about redemptive change in the lives of people throughout a pagan society. Its leaders acted with revolutionary passion (we just celebrated our Independence on the 4th of July and we remember the revolutionary passion of our founding fathers in the face of danger if what they were doing was discovered). The leaders of the church in Antioch also had revolutionary passion in the face of the danger of persecution. And this passion was energized and authenticated by God’s power and grace. Their personal lives demonstrated good character. Therefore, the local church that they established was sensitive to contemporary human need and responded to it in a way that reflected God’s compassionate heart in a hurting world.

1. A Church with a Revolutionary Stance (v19)

Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews.

Antioch was 300 miles north of Jerusalem in Syria. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire. There was a large Jewish population there. When persecution broke out against the believers in Jerusalem, after Stephen’s death many of the believers traveled there. They did not hide out there to save themselves from the persecution, because when they got there they preached the message of Christ to the Jews who were there.

They were motivated to turn adversity—harsh persecution—to advantage; an opportunity for spreading God's Word.

When persecution came they could have went into hiding. They could have just found a place where they could keep to themselves and worship Jesus privately. But, you see, here's the thing, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and when people are filled with the Holy Spirit they are concerned for souls. Remember Jesus said that in Acts 1:8 "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere."

The way to know that people have the Holy Spirit is that they are witness of Jesus. If you want to know if a people have the power of the Holy Spirit, if you want to judge any move of the Holy Spirit to discern if it is of God or of man, then use this criteria: The Spirit's work is always focused on the harvest of souls! - telling people about Jesus.

If we don't go into the community spreading God's Word, if we just want to meet here privately, perhaps doing some good service in the community, but not concerned about the salvation of a hurting world then we need to change our designation from church to club. Clubs have their private meetings, plan good things to do in the community. But that is not enough for the church. The church receives power when the Holy Spirit comes upon it, power for telling people everywhere about Jesus.

When the believers went to Antioch they first went only to the synagogues and preached to the Jews. But fortunately some of the believers from Cyprus and Cyrene had the courage to spread the message of Jesus outside of Judaism and the gentiles began to believe in Jesus for salvation too.

(v20) However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus.

Up to this point going to the Gentiles was unheard of. Fortunately these believers from Cyprus and Cyrene were motivated to abandon the tradition of preaching only to Jews and to risk unprecedented innovation in the service of the Lord by preaching to the non Jews.

Antioch was also a corrupt city, an immoral city, and a city of many pagan religions. Yet, the believers saw this as an opportunity. It didn't stop them from sharing the message of Christ, it gave them more passion for sharing their message.

If we are going to be church with a revolutionary stance we have to be just as innovative. The message of the Gospel does not and must not change, but the method

can change. We need be innovative, revolutionary in our methods of reaching others for Christ. Alpha is one innovative way we have used, and many have come to Christ through this method. Another thing I like about Alpha is that it is open to anyone, because the message of Christ is for every individual.

Last week we looked at Ananias who questioned God when asked to minister to Saul. Saul had been persecuting believers, arresting, even consenting to their death. Many of us have probably reacted like Ananias when God prompted us to minister to someone who we considered to have a bad reputation, or someone whose life seemed hopeless, or undeserving of God's grace.

2. A Church with Real Spirituality

Evidenced by the "Lord's power" ensuring their effectiveness (v21)

The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

When the Holy Spirit motivates to turn adversity to advantage; adversity to an opportunity for spreading God's Word and we obey; When the Holy Spirit motivates to abandon tradition and risk unprecedented innovation in the service of the Lord and we obey we will see the Lord's power in our effectiveness. We will see the evidence of God's undeserved grace authenticating everything we do (v22-23)

When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing (NIV- "evidence of the grace of God"), he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord.

We want to be a church that is seeing the evidence of the Lord's power, blessing, and grace. A church with real spirituality.

3. A Church with a Resourceful Staff

Distinguished by exemplary Christian character – "good," "filled with the Holy Spirit," and "strong faith" (v24)

Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

These are the kind of leaders they chose. The church in Jerusalem had the same requirements. Acts 6:3

And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom.

Antioch was a model of a resourceful staff not just demonstrated by their Christian character, but also demonstrated by their commitment and competence in teaching (v25-26)

Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

Barnabas and Saul were committed to Antioch, staying a full year with them. What were they committed to? To teaching the people. They had to be able to teach about Jesus and His Word.

What were the most important requirements in choosing their leaders? It was much different than the world's requirements for leaders. To serve in the church they had to be well respected (good reports heard about them and their integrity); they had to be filled with the Holy Spirit; and they had to demonstrate the ability to appropriately apply God's truth to life's situations and be able to disciples others by teaching them to do the same.

4. A Church with a Responsive Spirit

Receptive to genuine ministry that is inspired by the Spirit (v27- 28)

During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.)

Prophets had special gifts in ministering God's messages to His people. At times, they would foretell the future (as Agabus did here), but the gift of prophecy was also the gift of exhorting, encouraging, and strengthening God's people. God spoke through prophets, inspiring them with specific messages for particular times and places. There are also false prophets and this is way we need to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

But what I want you to see here is that when there was genuine ministry inspired by the Spirit the church was receptive.

There is another characteristic of a church with a responsive spirit that we also see in the church at Antioch, they were Ready to act compassionately as followers of Christ, both individually and collectively, in order to alleviate human need (v29- 30)

So the believers in Antioch decided to send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

The model the church of Antioch shows us is a church that reflects the compassion of God to human need in practical ways.

So here is the model we should look at and follow and we can start by asking some important questions:

What are some of the adversities that challenge us deeply that God may, however, want to turn into advantages for the spread of the gospel?

What are some unexamined traditional habits or cultural taboos that may be preventing our church from reaching people who desperately need to hear and receive the gospel?

Pray that there will be clear evidence of God's power and grace energizing and authenticating every activity in our church so it will be a source of encouragement in the pursuit of its mission.

Pray also that not just us, but the Christian Church in America will consistently reflect the compassionate heart of God in responding in a practical way to human need, in the name of Christ.