

September 5, 2021 by Steve Brandon



Antioch: A Great Church

Acts 11:19-26

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From time to time as I speak with people outside of our church, I am often asked the same question, "How are things at church?" Depending upon the season, I say something like, "It's going really well. Our people are united. We have had some new people come. We are growing in our love for God." Or, I may say something like this: "It has been pretty difficult recently. We have had some conflict in the church. Some people have left. We are just plugging away, trusting the Lord."

Well, this morning, as we look at our text in the book of Acts, we are going to be looking at a church this morning, where things were going really well in the church. In fact, I would say that things were going great. Had a leader in the church been asked, "How are things at church?" He would have said something like this: "Things are booming now! People of all sorts are telling others about Jesus. Many people are coming to faith. Our church is growing. Jews are coming to faith. Gentiles are coming to faith. People of differing backgrounds and customs are coming together in unity. The people are remaining steadfast and faithful. We have some of the most gifted leaders and teachers at the church. We are all learning so much about the Messiah. God's grace is clearly evident among us. People are giving of their finances to those in need! The church is hoping to be a pioneer of missions, to send out their best around the world! Church is going great!"

My message this morning is entitled, "Antioch: A Great Church." It comes from Acts 11:19-26. If you haven't yet turned there in your Bible, now would be a great time to do so. As I will read from the passage about this great church in Antioch.

Up to this point in the book of Acts, we haven't heard anything yet about Antioch, much less the church in Antioch. Because, we hear of its formation here in chapter 11. as people scatter from Jerusalem to Antioch, and bring the gospel with them. and people believe the good news about Jesus Christ, that he died on the cross for our sins. and that forgiveness of sins comes through faith in his name.

And this church in Antioch will become the central hub of activity for the next few chapters of Acts. not because a focus for the next few chapters of Acts. not because everything happens in Antioch, but because the church in Antioch becomes the place from which everything goes out.

In chapter 13, we will find the first Christian missionaries sent out from this church (Acts 13:1-3). In chapter 14, we find the missionaries returning to the church in Antioch to report on their activities (Acts 13:26-28). In chapter 15, we find representatives from the church in Antioch going to Jerusalem to challenge the false doctrine that is coming out of that city. At the end of chapter 15, we find more missionaries going out from the church. In chapter 18, we read of missionaries returning to the church in Antioch again!

So Antioch becomes the central hub of Christian missionary activity in the book of Acts. In some regards, it makes sense, as Antioch was one of the three largest cities in the Ancient World. In fact, it was the third largest city during these days, behind Rome and Alexandria. And being such a metropolis, they would have many resources and many people. The church was able to corral their resources and direct them toward missionary endeavors.

So, let's read about the church, particularly how it began. As I read, listen for the characteristics of the church that make is great.

Acts 11:19-26

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. 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. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When 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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and 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 look at what made this church so great. First of all, in the church, we see ...

1. Many Witnesses (verses 19-20)

These “many” are identified in verse 19 as “those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen.”

This takes us back to Acts, chapter 7. I trust that you remember the story. Stephen was accused of speaking against the temple and against the law. The temple, his accusers said, is the place that God works his will. The law, his accusers said, is the way to be right with God. Stephen stood his ground before the hostile crowd, and showed from the Old Testament how God’s work has never been about a particular place, God called Abraham from Mesopotamia. God preserved Joseph in Egypt. God called Moses from Midian. God preserved the Israelites in the Wilderness. God’s working wasn’t just in the temple. Then he confronted his accusers with these words:

Acts 7:51-53

“You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

At this point, Stephen’s hearers turned on him. They rushed together at him (Acts 7:57). They cast him out of the city (Acts 7:58). They stoned him to death (Acts 7:58). “There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1).

Now, it’s super-important that you understand what was taking place here. The church scattered. The apostles remained in Jerusalem. That is, The congregation was scattered. But the leaders remained in Jerusalem. This means that the church spread and grew, not with official leaders, or “trained theologians,” or “pastors,” but with “ordinary people,” in the congregation.

And so, when we read in verse 19 that “Those who were scattered ... [were] speaking the word to no one except Jews,” The ones who were speaking were not the apostles, or leaders of the church. Rather, it was those who had come to faith in Jerusalem. The butchers and the bakers. The carpenters and the cleaners. The dentists and doctors. The farmers and fishermen. The tent makers and teachers.

In other words, the normal people of society. Not those trained in theology, not professional ministers, not the paid evangelists or invited speakers, but everybody. This is a great illustration of the main point of the theme of the book of Acts: “Be My Witnesses.” This is applicable to all of us. It’s not, “Steve, Be My Witnesses.” It’s not, “Elders, Be My Witnesses.” Rather, it’s “Everybody, Be My Witnesses.”

That’s what we see at the church in Antioch. We see, “Many Witnesses.” We see this in verse 20 also. “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.” Again, these aren’t your paid professionals. These are your average people of the church.

I remember years ago, a man coming to our church, was proud about the deal that he made with his former pastor in the Suburbs. He said, “Steve, my pastor and I had a deal. I brought people to church. He preached the gospel to them.” But that’s not what we see here in the book of Acts. We see the scattered people, not the apostles “speaking the word” (verse 19). We see the believers, not the elders, “preaching the Lord Jesus.”

And so, church family, I encourage you all to be bold in your witness for Jesus. Be praying for opportunities for the gospel.

As a pastor, my contacts with unbelievers is minimal. I have to work hard to create opportunities to mix naturally with unbelievers. So, one of my outlets is pool. That’s one of the reasons why I play pool on Monday nights. It’s my way to pray for opportunities for the gospel. On the way to play, I’m always praying for the Lord to give me opportunities to share the gospel. Watching to see what opportunities the Lord give. Opportunities aren’t always so big, but I rejoice in anything.

In the tournament on Monday, I played against a guy in the first round. It was close match, tied until the final game. And then, I lost. Afterwards, I had a conversation with the guy who beat me. We began to talk about what each of us did for a living. When he found out that I’m a pastor of a church, the first thing he said to me was this: “Pray for me.” I promised him that I would. As conversation continued I had some opportunities to bring up the church. He didn’t seem too interested. But I have prayed for him every day this week. I’ll be praying for an opportunity to speak further with him on Monday, about Jesus and the forgiveness of sins.

This is the sort of thing that all of us can be doing to make Rock Valley Bible Church great, not just me. but all of us praying for opportunities to speak about spiritual things with people. And some of us, may even be like those in verse 20. In verse 20 we see some ...

2. Daring Witnesses (verse 20)

This is my second point: “Daring Witnesses.” I get this point, not because it’s mentioned in the text, but because of what F. F. Bruce said in his commentary. He called these men in verse 20, “Daring spirits.” because they brought the gospel to the Gentiles. something that took a bit of boldness to press beyond the status quo.

In verse 19, we read that those who came to Antioch were “speaking the word to no one except Jews.” But in verse 20, we read something different. We read of others who came to Antioch who “spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.”

Now, there is some difficulty exactly identifying who these “Hellenists” are. But, most likely, they are the simple contrast with verse 19. Verse 19 speaks of the Jews. Verse 20, then speaks of the Gentiles, the Hellenists.

And this was a daring thing to do. Listen to how F. F. Bruce describes it,

The disciples who had fled from the persecution in Jerusalem had confined their evangelizing activity to the Jewish communities of the various places to which they came. The idea that the gospel could have any relevance for non-Jews

was not one that would naturally occur to them. But in Antioch some daring spirits among them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, took a momentous step forward. If the gospel was so good for Jews, might it not be good for Gentiles also? So they began to make known to the Greek population of Antioch the claims of Jesus as Lord and Savior. This enterprise met with instant success."¹¹

Now, it was not obvious that those who would preach to the Gentiles this would be "met with success." In fact, it was very counter cultural.

Remember, we looked at this last week? When Peter crossed over the line from the Jews to the Gentiles. It took an act of God for him to do so. It took a vision, which Peter resisted and resisted and resisted. Until, finally some men came and told him of another vision that a Gentile in Caesarea had, in which he was to send for a man named Peter, living at the home of Simon, a tanner by the sea. And even then, it took the Spirit telling Peter to go with these men and "make no distinction" between Jew and Gentile (Acts 11:12). Peter had to be a "daring spirit" to be so bold as to enter the house of a Gentile to bring the gospel to them.

And for a church to be great, we need some "daring spirits" to go and preach the gospel to those who are outside of our regular circles. For me, I find that in the pool hall, trying to be light in a dark place. Perhaps some of you will rise up to be daring in your witnessing opportunities as well. Crossing cultural norms. Going where it's dark. Who knows, perhaps the Lord will open to you a measure of success as he did with those in Antioch, when these daring witnesses were willing to cross cultural lines to bring the gospel to the Gentiles.

But if ever it's going to happen, it will happen under the sovereign hand of God. And that's exactly what we see in verse 21. We see God's hand at work.

Acts 11:21

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

This is my third point. The church in Antioch was great because of ...

3. God's Hand (verse 21)

It was "the hand of the Lord" who was with those witnesses. Truth be told, this is really the secret sauce behind every great church. It is "the hand of the Lord." He only is the one who blesses the work.

In a church, you can have extremely dedicated people. You can have immensely righteous people. You can have incredibly smart people. You can have exceedingly gifted people. But apart from the Lord, such people gathered will not make a great church without the hand of the Lord.

"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Psalm 127:1). You can equally say, "Unless the Lord builds a local church, they labor in vain who build it."

I love what Paul said when talking about the church in Corinth. (I'm looking forward to talking about this church when we get to Acts 18, where the church began.) This church was boasting in its great leaders. (And they had great leaders, like Paul, the zealous theologian, like Apollos, the mighty preacher.) But when Paul described the church in Corinth, he said this,

1 Corinthians 3:4-7

For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.

When describing those who are instrumental in seeing a church grow and flourish, he calls them "servants through whom you believe." But God is the one who assigns the fruit (verse 5). Paul says that he started the church, yes. He says that Apollos taught the church, yes. but like any farmer knows, it wasn't Paul or Apollos that were responsible for the church to grow as it did. It was "God [who] gave the growth" (verse 6).

Listen again to 1 Corinthians 3:7: "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Only God is anything when it come to the growth of a church.

And this is what we see in the church in Antioch. "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."

Now, why do you think that they had so many "turn" to the Lord? Because God was the one at work, granting repentance. "Turning" to the Lord is a practical synonym for "repentance." Do you remember how our text ended last week? "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). God grants repentance. And what happened at the home of Cornelius in Caesarea, also took place in Antioch, with many turning to the Lord.

For us at Rock Valley Bible Church, it's the same. We need the Lord to grant repentance to the unbelievers in our lives. So we pray and plead for the Lord to grant repentance to the unbelievers in our lives.

Let's move on. The church in Antioch was great because they had ...

4. Outside Support (verse 22)

Acts 11:22

The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.

Here, we see the church in Jerusalem, hearing what's going on in Antioch, sending one of their best to help the church in Antioch.

In some measure, as the church developed historically, this was an opportunity, for the mother of all churches in Jerusalem, to give it's sanction and approval upon the church. We saw this in Acts 8, when the church initially scattered to Samaria. When the apostles in Jerusalem heard all that was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to check it out. They sent them to observe what was going on. Also, they sent them to seek the blessing of the Lord upon the work.

That's what we see here with Barnabas. He was sent by the church in Jerusalem. to see what was going on in Antioch. to seek to the blessing of the Lord upon the work. And this outside support is what helped to make the church in Antioch great. Because, as we shall see in a bit, Barnabas was a huge blessing to the church. Not only did Barnabas encourage them and exhort them, but he also brought Paul to them, who could really help them grow in the Lord.

This outside support is extremely helpful, especially when you are starting a church. I'm thankful to God for the support that we received from Kishwaukee Bible Church in DeKalb, who supported our efforts in the early years of our church. They supported us with oversight and direction. They supported us with time. They supported us with people. They supported us with money. Apart from the support of Kishwaukee Bible Church in DeKalb, we would never exist as a church.

Planting churches is hard. We need to do all we can to help and support those planting churches.

This is what we see in the church in Antioch. They had support of the church in Jerusalem, particularly, they had the support of Barnabas. His role in the church is described in verses 23 and 24,

Acts 11:23-24

When 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, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

I'm calling Barnabas a "humble builder." It's another thing that makes a church great:

5. Humble Builders (verses 23-24)

Barnabas is no stranger to us to us who have been working our way through the book of Acts. He first comes on the scene in chapter 4. His real name was "Joseph," but he apostles dubbed him "Barnabas," which means "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36). He got the name because he was an encourager. He was a man who looked upon the good things and affirmed them, rather than being a man who sees the bad things and criticizes.

Nothing hurts a church more than chronic complainers, who see the bad, and point out the bad, and talk about the bad, yet are unwilling to lift a finger to help improve matters. I have encountered my fair share of such people in my time of pastoring.

But this was not Barnabas. No. He was a committed follower of Jesus. Who worked hard to build the church. When he stepped on the scene in Acts 4, we find out that he "sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet" (Acts 4:37). He saw the need, that there were hurting people, who were in need of financial help. And so, he sold his property to help those in need.

Likewise here in Antioch, he gave of himself to these people. He didn't come with criticism, pointing out all of the things that needed to change. No. He came with joy.

Acts 11:23

When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad,

The grace of God was evident in the church in Antioch. And this thrilled the heart of Barnabas! And he did what he could to encourage the people:

Acts 11:23

He exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose,

In other words, "what you are doing, keep doing!" Barnabas didn't come in with his agenda, telling those in Antioch where they got it wrong, or where they needed to change things. or how they needed to do things better. He simply encouraged them to "remain faithful." "Press on!" "Keep going!" "You can do it."

In some ways, he was like the cheerleader. This word translated, "exhorted" in verse 23 could also be translated, "encouraged." Consistent with his name, "Son of Encouragement," verse 23 can be read, "he [encouraged] them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purposes."

The character of Barnabas is described in verse 24.

Acts 11:24

for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

This is what makes a good builder of churches, those who are good, honest men, who walk in integrity. those who are Spirit filled, walking in

love, joy, peace, and patience. those who are full of faith, believing that the Lord is near to all who call upon him. Barnabas had all of these qualities.

Well, I identified Barnabas as a “humble builder.” This comes out with clarity in my next point.

Great churches have ...

6. Gifted Teachers (verses 25-26)

Acts 11:25-26

So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and 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.

After being in Antioch for a some time, Barnabas recognized a need. He recognized a need for a good teacher. So, he sought out Saul (who is also called Paul).

We were introduced to Saul in Acts, chapter 9. If you remember, he was a zealous Pharisee, on the way to Damascus to persecute Christians by going door to door in search of them, so that he could bind them and bring them back to Jerusalem, where they could be tried as heretics for following Jesus. But, along the road, Jesus appeared to him, saying, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Jesus struck him blind and sent him to Damascus, where he spent several days in prayer. God wonderfully changed him. The church’s greatest enemy became the church’s greatest leader.

Now, if you remember, when Paul was in Damascus, he began preaching Jesus, “proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:22). That he is the one to deliver us from our sins. That we need to place our hope in him! Yet, the believers in Damascus were fearful of associating with him, because they knew him to be a persecutor of the church. And when Paul returned to Jerusalem, the believers in Jerusalem were fearful of him as well, because “they did not believe that he was a disciple” of Jesus (Acts 9:26).

But it was Barnabas who believed in Paul. Barnabas is the one who came to the apostles and stood up for Paul, Barnabas told the apostles all that happened on the road, and how Paul preached in the synagogues in Damascus, and how Paul is to be trusted.

This shows the humility of Barnabas. He saw how well things were going in Antioch. He certainly was equipped. He could have serve the role of being a lead teacher of the church. But he knew that there was somebody better. Saul of Tarsus. And so, he went off to search him out. He went to his hometown to find him and then bring him to Antioch.

This was a huge act of humility. Few pastors would ever do this, to pass up an opportunity to be a main teacher at a growing, thriving church, in favor of someone else.

I know of a situation of a pastor who simply will not give up his pastoral role. I consider him a very godly man. But he's clinging to his pastoral role. He had an assistant pastor for over a decade, who was young and energetic and gifted. He led the worship and the youth group at the church. He even pursued his Ph. D. to further qualify himself. Though they talked about a transition for a number of years, when it came down to it, the pastor, as he aged, refused to transition to his younger protege. So, the younger man left the church two or three years ago to pursue other ministry opportunities.

Recently, there was gathering of this church. The former assistant showed up. Sadly, the older pastor is now suffering from dementia to such an extent that he couldn't remember the name of his former assistant. He believes that he should preach until he cannot do so any more. So, he isn't transitioning his pastoral role.

But this wasn't Barnabas. He was a humble builder, who recruited a gifted teacher. He was willing to find the better man for the job. My hope for Rock Valley Bible Church is that I will be like Barnabas when the time comes, willing to step aside for a man better equipped to lead the church in the future.

Now, the last we heard of Paul was in Acts 9. His story is resuming here in Acts 11. We will see his story blossom in Acts 13 and following. In fact, from chapter 13 on, the book of Acts will follow Paul and his missionary journeys. and his planting and strengthening of churches. and his arrest in the temple in Jerusalem and his years of imprisonment in Caesarea and his travels to Rome to stand trial. And Paul was a gifted teacher. He wrote much of the New Testament.

Now, according to verse 26, Paul spent a whole year in Antioch, and “taught a great many people.” The question might easily come, “What did he teach them?” We can make a good guess by what he wrote to those in Corinth. He wrote to them, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). That is, the central focus of all his teaching was about Jesus Christ and what he accomplished upon the cross. Everything that he taught in Corinth all stemmed back to the sacrifice of Jesus.

Later in 1 Corinthians, he speaks of the priority of this message:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

That is, the death of Jesus was “for our sins” was Paul's first and top priority! This is what Paul taught. This is the gospel. The life of Jesus, and how we can experience forgiveness of sins in his name. What Paul taught in Corinth is an indicator of what he would have taught in Antioch.

He would have taught them what it meant to be a disciple of Christ. what it meant to be a “Christian.” This word comes up in verse 26.

Acts 11:26

And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

A "Christian" would be a "Christ-ian." That is, a follower of Christ. If you read through the book of Acts, you find that followers of Christ are most often described as "disciples." When Paul was first saved and came to Jerusalem, "he attempted to join the disciples. And they were all afraid of him, for they did not believe that he was a disciple" (Acts 9:26). This word, "disciple" is used vastly more than this term, "Christian." It is used even more than "believer." A "disciple" is a "learner" or "follower" of Jesus. That's what it means to believe. It means that you are a faithful follower of Jesus.

Sadly, today there are those who say, "You simply need to believe in Jesus to be saved. You don't need to be a disciple. That's for higher committed Christians." But when you read the book of Acts, you see that a disciple is the common term to describe one who believes.

Here in verse 26, we read that they "were ... called Christians." Notice that "were" is an indication of a passive voice. That is, the disciples didn't call themselves "Christians." Rather, they were called "Christians" by outsiders. And this was probably not such a good name, actually. It was sort of a despised term. If they were in our culture today and had a football team that used this as a mascot, they may protest at the use of the term, because it was used in Bible times more as a derogatory name.

This term is only used three times in the New Testament. The first comes here in our text. Another is found in 1 Peter, when Peter says, "Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name" (1 Peter 4:16). The sense is that an outsider is bringing some hardships upon people because they were "Christ-ian." They were following Christ and this was not a good thing. The only other occurrence of this word comes in Acts 26:28, when king Agrippa is exasperated at Paul's evangelistic attempts. Agrippa said to Paul, "In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?" (Acts 26:28). Agrippa can't believe that Paul was calling him to become one of those despised people.

Now, we don't read anything in the New Testament that tells us that the term is a bad term or that the early followers of Christ rejected the term. But it wasn't such a wonderful term that they took it upon themselves. "Disciple" was the term that they preferred to us. Yet, others called them "Christians." The term has stuck. It is used all over the world today and is a fine term.

Here's yet another reason why the church in Antioch was great. Outsiders called them "Christ-followers." Could that be said of you? When they see you and the way that you act, they are compelled to describe you as one following the Christ. Perhaps a current way to say this is the term, "Jesus Freaks." The church in Antioch was great because they were called, ...

7. Jesus Freaks (verse 26b)

By in large, this is a derogatory term used to describe those who are fanatic about their religion. Yet, it's a term that few followers of Christ would reject. Is that true of you? When people look at you, would they call you a "Jesus Freak"?

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 5, 2021 by Steve Brandon.

For more information see www.rockvalleybiblechurch.org.

[1] F. F. Bruce, Acts Commentary, p. 225.