

The Antioch Model

Acts 11:27-30; 12:25-13:3

In his book, *Dropping Your Guard*, Chuck Swindoll tells a story of an Atlanta man who was flipping through the *Yellow Pages* and noticed an ad for a place called “Church of God Grill.” Curious, he dialed the number. A man answered, “Hello! Church of God Grill!” He asked about the unusual name. The man answered, “We had a little mission down here, and we started selling chicken dinners after church on Sunday to help pay the bills. People loved the chicken, and we did such a good business, we found ourselves needing to shorten up our church services in order to get enough dinners ready on time. After a while we closed down the church altogether and just served chicken dinners. We kept the name we started with, and that’s Church of God Grill.”

Sometimes, a mission statement isn’t a bad thing. Obviously, when the chicken business eclipses the ministry business, a church has lost its way. But a church can lose its way due to far more subtle distractions. Usually, such distractions pertain to self; the desire to protect the *status quo*, or the desire have our own needs, wants or place to be more vital than simply doing the work of the Kingdom.

To measure church health, leaders turn to what are dubbed “models” - mega-churches that produce *How We Done It!* books. There’s good information to be found in such books provided that we are willing to probe deeply enough for enduring principles and not just for methods that may be outdated tomorrow. You have heard the terms; the Willow Creek model, the Southeast model, the Saddleback model. One church model has remained useful for almost 2000 years. It’s not rich on methods, but the principles are real pearls. How does our church’s health measure up to the Antioch model?

Jesus told His disciples: “... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The church was born in Jerusalem and most of the story of the church thus far in the book of Acts has unfolded there. In our text, the drama shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch of Syria, one of the most important cities of the ancient world and the home of over one-half-million people. Due to the persecution spearheaded by Saul of Tarsus before he became a believer, the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered. These exiled believers preached Christ wherever they went.

¹⁹Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. ²⁰Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. – Acts 11:19-21

When the Apostles in Jerusalem heard about this large group of new believers in Antioch, they sent Barnabas there to help establish them as a community of faith. Barnabas had befriended the newly converted Saul, who had ventured back to his hometown of Tarsus. Barnabas went to Tarsus to find Saul and brought him to Antioch to help with the work there. Followers of Jesus Christ were first called “Christians” in Antioch. It may not have been intended as a compliment, but it stuck.

We are all beneficiaries of a courageous mission that was launched in Antioch, for the first step in vaulting the Gospel toward our end of the earth was taken by that ancient fellowship. We owe that church an historical debt, but there were also characteristics of that church that are worthy of imitation by any church that desires to be a church that effectively bears witness to Christ in the world.

I. Antioch Esteemed the Universal Membership of the Church (11:27-30)

²⁷During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

A. Famine Was Victimizing the Christians in Jerusalem

Prophets were a recognized office in the early church. They do not appear to have been permanently attached to any one fellowship, but moved about with messages for the churches. Along with "apostles", eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus, the prophets provided the foundational truth upon which the early church stood. The prophetic office was subject to abuse. An extra-biblical document entitled *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* warned against any prophet who "in a vision asks for money or a meal." The old "God told me to tell you to give to me" school of prophecy developed fairly early. But the earliest churches welcomed prophets as needed spokesmen for God, so when Agabus predicted a famine, the question was not "Is he for real?" but "What can we do to help?"

Most biblical prophecy spoke to current conditions or of near-future events. Secular historians confirm Luke's accuracy as a historian as well as Agabus' credibility as a prophet. Severe famine did occur in many places during the reign of the emperor Claudius. Josephus, the Jewish historian tells us that Judea was hit the hardest around A.D. 44-48 and that help came to Jerusalem from Jews in Syria.

B. The Response of the Christians in Antioch Was without Hesitation

Centuries before Christians learned to think in terms of denominational affiliation or local church membership, all they had were brothers and sisters in Christ that just lived in other places. "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea." Means differed, but the term "each" leads me to conclude that a deep concern for the believers in Jerusalem was distributed throughout this fellowship. Compassion was not simply the responsibility of a benevolence committee, the quilting circle or the pastor. Each believer was moved to a response. That's the mark of a healthy church. Leadership may know more than others about a particular need, but they must work to capture the hearts of the fellowship, because everyone shares the responsibility.

Antioch teaches us that we are our brothers' keepers in a sense much broader than just pertaining to those with whom we share a building. Obviously, we have to be responsible stewards of the Lord's resources. We live in a day when we must demand accountability from any church, organization or individual that solicits our assistance. Still, eyes that see our Christian duty as extending beyond our own doors are essential. We have brothers and sisters around the world. A healthy church does not see the Body of Christ or the Church for which Jesus died simply in terms of four walls.

II. Antioch Evidenced the Inward Miracle of the Church (12:25-13:1)

²⁵When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

¹In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

A. An Interesting Demographic Mix Developed in Antioch

Saul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem with the benevolent gifts of the Antioch Christians. In chapter 12 of *Acts*, Luke's story-telling shifts back to Jerusalem as the author records the martyrdom of James, the brother of John, and the miraculous release of Peter from prison. But, in the final verse of chapter 12, Luke returns to Saul and Barnabas, who themselves are returning to Antioch.

The most prominent characters in the church of Antioch, the prophets and the teachers, are named. The Greek grammar suggests that the first three men; Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius were prophets while Manaen and Saul were teachers. We have already addressed the prophetic office. Teachers would develop Christian doctrine out of Old Testament revelation. Why these five men are named is not clear. As far as the movement of the book of *Acts* is concerned, only Saul and Barnabas will be mentioned again. Still, a number of interesting observation can be drawn from this simple list of names.

Order was significant in the ancient listings of names. Barnabas, formerly Joseph of Cyprus, had been given his new name by the Apostles. Barnabas means "Son of Encouragement". He first appears as a generous benefactor of the poor. Later, he championed the newly converted Saul when the Christians in Jerusalem were struggling to trust their former persecutor. The man with the big, loving heart is listed first, because he is likely the dominant character in the church at Antioch, having been the man commissioned by the Apostles in Jerusalem to go to Antioch in the first place (11:22).

"Simeon called Niger" is next. "Niger" is a Roman name meaning "black." He was probably a black man. Some legends identify him with Simon of Cyrene, a city in northern Africa. Simon of Cyrene was the man compelled by the Romans to carry the cross of Jesus to Golgotha. Whether this was the same Simon or not, "Lucius" is clearly identified with "Cyrene". We already know that Antioch had bridged the division between the Jewish and Gentile worlds. Might it have also bridged racial divides?

Next, is Manaen. This man was "brought up with Herod the tetrarch". The word literally means that Manaen was "nourished with" Herod. Often, the children of royalty were nursed by a young mother from among the household servants. This may have been the case, or, Luke may only have meant that the two boys were raised in the same household, like a foster brother. In any event, Manaen was a child of privilege, raised with Herod, the same king who had ordered James' execution and who had similar plans, no doubt, for Peter had that Apostle not been miraculously rescued by God.

Saul is listed last. He may have been the youngest of the group. He was identified as a young man when he first appeared in Scripture at the stoning of Stephen, and only a few years have passed since. Saul may have been listed as he is to juxtapose him with Manaen. As a former Pharisee, Saul was a purist in regard to his Judaism, religiously and politically. The Herodian line was only half-Jewish. They were also in political bed with Rome. Pharisees hated Rome, and they weren't crazy about the Herods. It would take some doing for two guys like Manaen and Saul to get used to one another.

B. Antioch Was a Church that Built Bridges

Antioch was a healthy church because the tensions that ordinarily divide people were melted away under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Bridge-building unity is one the most conspicuous evidences of Jesus in any church. I have never been terribly in awe of churches, even monstrously large churches, that target this or that demographic, because I believe that the real miracle of the Holy Spirit occurs when Christ unites groups of people that otherwise cannot seem to get along. What is more, I believe that this kind of deliberate bridge-building is essential if a church is to be the beacon of light that Jesus desires her to be. It happened in Antioch, and ancient prejudices were no milder than our modern ones.

Well-intentioned people today talk about unity and bridge-building, but they will never build anything that can last. Unity is not in us, and it won't happen according to the puny and naïve ideals of political correctness, multiculturalism or tolerance. It will only happen when Christian people tire of their big and empty words, and go to work building real bridges out of the flawless steel of reverence for Jesus Christ. He must be Lord in every area of life. He must even be Lord of how you look at other people.

We were never called to mutual tolerance, which is nothing more than a glorified biting of the lip. We were called to unity, which is the natural condition of those who agree on the Lordship of Christ. If it cannot happen within the walls of a local church fellowship, it cannot happen anywhere else in the world. A healthy church exalts Jesus Christ to be Lord over everything - even Lord of the differences.

III. Antioch Embraced the Outward Mission of the Church (13:2, 3)

... ²While 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." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

A. Barnabas and Saul Are Sent Into the Gentile World

Barnabas was the central figure in the ministry at Antioch. He was older, and perhaps, larger and more imposing in stature. After all, in Lystra, he would be mistaken for Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. The Roman name, Paul, means "runt" or "dwarfish." Because Paul was the chief speaker, those same citizens of Lystra would confuse him with Apollos, the messenger of the gods (Acts 14:12).

When the pair left Antioch, Barnabas was the lead character in the team of "Barnabas and Saul" (verse 2), but a transition soon took place when Saul stepped forward to rebuke and blind a blasphemous sorcerer named Elymas (Acts 13:4-12). When the pair moved into the land of the Gentiles, Luke began to designate Saul by his Roman name, Paul, and he began to list him first: "From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia ..." (Acts 13:13). Paul became the central figure of this missionary endeavor, and of those he shared with a second partner named Silas. The rest is history.

B. Barnabas and Saul Were the Missionaries, but Antioch's Role Was Crucial

They "fasted and prayed". No great endeavor for God is undertaken on mere human whim. Somehow, according to verse 2, the Holy Spirit had issued the command. A vision for the world was planted in the leadership of the church, but even with the confidence that this was what they were supposed to do, they continued to bask their actions in prayer and fasting. We are not very accustomed to the concept of fasting, and there is often a tendency to sensationalize that which we do not understand. The Old Testament Jews did that and they were regularly rebuked by the prophets for fasting without the appropriate spirit. A fast is a time of denying oneself of any number of things for the purpose of more clearly discovering God, whether in a time of mourning or in a time of seeking His guidance.

They "placed their hands on them." Three purposes for the laying on of hands are presented in the New Testament. One was to heal. One was to impart an Apostolic gift. The most common was to ordain. This external service would have had a profound impact on the whole fellowship in Antioch for it powerfully communicated the sobriety of the divine mission, but also that they all had a part in it.

They "sent them off." Implied in this phrase are all the necessary strategy meetings, logistic preparations and financial considerations required to advance the gospel into the world. The mission of the church in the world to reach the lost is very much a marriage between our best human efforts to the leading and empowering of the Holy Spirit. We get into trouble when we overlook either of these essential dynamics. Sometimes, we trust our plans as though we think they are all that matter in advancing the Gospel. More often, we settle into a cozy mode of believing that saving the world is a quiet work of God that goes on with or without us. The missionaries, after all, are the experts. It is through the church that the dreams of would-be missionaries are confirmed to be the leading of the Holy Spirit. It is through the church that support and prayer and authority are provided for the servant.

A healthy church is a mission-minded church, but I refuse to define that mission in terms of "local versus foreign", budget percentages, or the number of missionaries that are supported. A mission-minded church recognizes, throughout her fellowship, the mandate of God to reach a lost world and she takes personal responsibility for the task. A healthy church sees clearly that the reason she exists is the very same reason Jesus came - to reveal God's salvation to man by way of the cross.

But I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all men to myself. - John 12:32

Paul had no different agenda when he encountered Gentiles:

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. - 1 Corinthians 2:1, 2

The church is a body, a living organism. When she is healthy, it is her nature to grow. Men tend to transform this organism into an institution. Growth becomes the burden of preeminent men instead of the very nature of the organism. Methodologies become more of a factor than the character of the Master. Manmade leadership structures displace divinely mandated servanthood. Men manage, maneuver, adjust, program and repair. In the midst of it all, it is so easy to forget "Why?" and even easier to forget "Who?" But, when the Master is preeminent in the life of His church, the resulting light cannot help but to shine before men, and Christ draws people to Himself through His church.

© 2004 by R. Karl Crouch, 2183 Veumont Drive, Lancaster, PA 17601