

A modern-day church of Antioch

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The Jews of Jesus' day traced their lineage all the way back to Abraham. They were the chosen people of God. Even though they were under the rule of the Romans, they awaited the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. They awaited a Messiah who would come to be their Deliverer, and who would sit on the throne of the King of David, forever.

In Jesus of Nazareth, God kept His promise, sending His Son to be the Savior of the world. While most Jews did not recognize Jesus as the Christ, some did. But these Jewish believers still were stuck in their past ways of thinking. Many of the Jews believed Jesus was the Promised Jewish Messiah, but they did not yet see that Jesus had come to save men and women from every nation. Because of this the Jewish believers kept Jesus to themselves.

In [Matthew 28:18-20](#) we find some of Jesus' last words:

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’”

The earliest followers of Christ were told to make disciples of all nations. The book of Acts shows us that they were making disciples in Jerusalem, but somehow the *“of all nations”* part of Jesus' command was not being fulfilled.

In [Acts 1:8](#) we see another similar instruction from Jesus: ***“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*** Once again the instructions are clear but seem to be neglected by those earliest of believers.

In response God orchestrated several events to usher the Jewish believers out of this closed mindset and to grant them a vision for the world. As Paul writes in [Philippians 2:13](#), ***“For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”*** So God took it into His own hands to guide and shape the early church to be a force for world-wide missions.

The first event happened right after Stephen’s being stoned to death in Acts 7. [Acts 8:1,4-8](#) recount the event in these words:

“¹There arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.”

“⁴Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word.⁵ Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.⁶ And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did.⁷ For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed, or lame were healed.⁸ So there was much joy in that city.”

Through persecution God had now sent the Gospel to the Samaritans, those half-Jews who had intermarried with pagan nations centuries before. The Samaritans were reviled by the Jews, and yet had heard the gospel and had responded with much joy. In a marvelous and surprising fashion the Gospel had proven itself competent to save even Samaritans.

Later in [Acts 8](#) God sends this same Philip to a desert place between Jerusalem and Gaza. There in this desolate location Philip sees a chariot carrying ***“an Ethiopian Eunuch, a court official of Candace, a queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was now returning.”*** The eunuch was reading the book of Isaiah, but did not understand what he was reading. Philip engaged the eunuch in a conversation and was invited aboard the chariot to explain about these prophecies of Jesus. After a while they saw some water. The eunuch believed in Jesus and asked to be baptized. From what we can see, it appears that the Ethiopian had been a Gentile but had converted to Judaism, so was viewed no longer as a Gentile, but now as a full Jew.

So now we have Samaritans, those half-Jews, saved by the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have seen a former Ethiopian Gentile who was now a Jew, saved by Jesus Christ. God’s next step was to answer the prayers of a Roman centurion ([Acts 10](#)). His name was Cornelius. He prayed to God and often helped the poor, but as of yet did not know salvation through Jesus Christ. Through a vision God instructed Cornelius where to find the apostle Peter. Through a vision God instructed Peter, a Jew, to go with the men of Cornelius to Cornelius’ home to share the gospel with Cornelius, his friends and his family. Peter, a Jew, would now break all Jewish norms of his day and enter the home of Cornelius, a Gentile. In the words of Peter in [Acts 10:28](#), ***“You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.”*** [Acts 10:34](#) continues the story, ***“So Peter opened his mouth and said: ‘Truly I understand that God shows no partiality,³⁵ but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.’”*** Peter then preached the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ. ⁴⁴***While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.⁴⁵ And the believers from***

among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.”

In the beginning of [Acts 11](#) Peter defended his interaction with Cornelius the centurion to the church leaders in Jerusalem. He tells how the Spirit came with power and how the Gentiles were saved. Some, still clinging to their ideas of Christ only coming for the Jews, doubted, but after Peter finished explaining what God had done, ***“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.’”***

This was a remarkable event because no one had ever seen salvation given to the Gentiles. Was salvation through Jesus Christ really open to all? Gentiles had received salvation, but one must note that the Gentiles had sought the Jewish believers out. The Jewish church still had not caught a glimpse of the full plan of God. The Jewish believers still had not taken the initiative to reach out to the Gentiles with the good news of Christ.

This is the point of the story in Acts 11 that the city of Antioch comes into view. Now Antioch was a great city. It was a free city in the Roman Empire. It was the capital of the province of Syria. It was the third largest city in the known world, only behind Rome and Alexandria. It was located near the mouth of the Orontes River, only 24 kilometers from the Mediterranean Sea. The international trade routes passed through Antioch in such a way that it had become famous for both business and culture. It was truly a cosmopolitan city, but it had a dark side as well. Besides the chariot racing and its constant pursuit of pleasure, Antioch was famous for the worship of Daphne. The priestesses of the Temple of Daphne were really sacred prostitutes who every evening added to the luxurious immorality of the city. Antioch was steeped in materialism, sexuality and its pursuit of pleasure, and was known for its decadence.

It is quite interesting that God would choose this godless type of city to begin His world-wide missions effort. As we read the book of Acts, we see how God orchestrated events in such a way that His will and desires for the spread of the Gospel were carried out. [Acts 11:19-21](#) describes the next event in this way:

“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.”

It is in these verses that we see the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham all the way back in [Genesis 12](#), ***“And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*** The gospel started with the Jews, but God’s ultimate plan was to be a blessing to the nations. We now see that some of the Jewish believers were beginning to understand this true heart of God.

Because of the persecution that had begun after Stephen’s death, the followers of Christ fled in different directions, but as they went they continued to tell the good news of Jesus Christ to Jews that they met

along the way. But there were a few men from Cyprus and Cyrene who even began to preach the Lord Jesus to Gentiles in Antioch.

This was a giant step in the spread of the gospel. Jews were purposefully taking the good news to the Gentiles. Finally, the mystery of the gospel and redemption of people from every nation, tongue and tribe would now be fulfilled.

They preached the Lord Jesus. They did not preach religion. They did not preach rules. They did not preach some social agenda or some politically correct message of self-improvement. They did not preach “your best life now” or how to use religion to help you get what you want. They preached the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them. We can find this phrase, “*Hand of the Lord*”, throughout scripture. In [Joshua 4](#) God dried up the Jordan River so that the children of Israel could enter the Promised Land. God then commanded them to build an altar of stones so that ***“All the people of the earth might know THE HAND OF THE LORD, that it is MIGHTY: that ye might fear the Lord your God forever.”*** We see the Hand of the Lord on Elijah as he outruns king Ahab’s chariot and horses for almost 30 kilometers ([1 Kings 18:44-46](#)). We see the Hand of the Lord taken from King Saul once he decided to walk in disobedience. We see the hand of the Lord throughout scripture as He disciplines, protects, strengthens, convicts, grants faith and accomplishes God’s purposes in supernatural ways.

As these men from Cyprus and Cyrene preached the Lord Jesus, the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. Salvation is not something that one can just figure out as if it were a mathematical equation or can just be won over to as in some sort of academic debate. God drew the people to Himself ([John 6:44](#)). The Holy Spirit convicted the non-believers of sin ([John 16:8](#)). Faith unto salvation was granted ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). The hand of the Lord was upon them and it was clear that God had brought a great work of salvation as the doors of redemption were opened to the Gentiles on a grand scale.

A great number believed and turned to the Lord. No one will ever know the names of these men from Cyprus and Cyrene who first understood the heart of God, but they were used by God to change the face of eternity.

[Acts 11:22-26](#) continues with these words:

“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.”

At this point the church leaders in Jerusalem had already heard from Peter about the Spirit's moving amongst the Gentiles at Cornelius' house, but could it be true that Jews and Gentiles could worship together and be in the same spiritual family? Was it okay for the Jewish believers to intentionally share their faith with non-Jews? They had many questions so they sent out Barnabas, one of their most trustworthy sons, to investigate the rumors from Antioch.

Barnabas was a well-to-do Levite from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean that was part of a main trade route. It was a multi-cultural center that would have exposed Barnabas to many cultures and peoples. He was Jewish, but very likely was a man of grace to all whom he encountered. Barnabas had shown such a supportive and generous spirit that the apostles had changed his name from Joseph to Barnabas, which meant son of encouragement ([Acts 4:36-37](#)). He had sold land and given the proceeds to the poor. Barnabas had shown his courage and graciousness when he supported and sponsored Paul, when all others were leery of Paul's conversion ([Acts 9:27](#)). Barnabas was also from the same place as those who were preaching in Antioch. For these reasons it was a wise choice to send Barnabas to discern the nature of these claims of salvation for the Gentiles in Antioch.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch and saw the grace of God he encouraged those in the church of Antioch. But how did Barnabas "see" the grace of God? He saw Jews who had stepped beyond religious taboos and shared the love of Jesus Christ with Gentiles. He saw pagan Gentiles who had now become followers of Jesus Christ. He saw those who had been dead in their sin now alive in Jesus Christ. He saw Jews and Gentiles worshipping Jesus Christ side-by-side, as spiritual brothers and sisters. He saw Jews and Gentiles forgetting their differences and united by their new-found identity in Christ, their same heavenly Father, and their same citizenship in heaven. Humanly it was impossible, but through Christ it was happening.

Once Barnabas saw all of these new Gentile believers in Antioch, he knew that they would have to be taught the ways of Christ by someone who was willing and able to minister to Gentiles while weathering attacks from both Jews and Gentiles. So Barnabas went to Tarsus and found Saul. He brought him to Antioch, and together they taught a great many people for a year. Saul had been trained by the best of the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem. At the same time, he was a Roman citizen and had a call and a passion for the salvation and spiritual development of the Gentiles.

In [verse 26](#) we read how it was *"In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."* Whether it was meant as a derogatory term or just a designation of a new group that followed a man known as *Cristus*, the fact was that something about their lives associated them with Jesus Christ. We also see this truth at work in [Acts 4:13](#), when Peter and John stood before the rulers, elders, scribes and Annas the high priest in Jerusalem. [Acts 4:13](#) says this, *"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."*

He or she is a ready tool in the hand of God when it can be recognized that a person belongs to Christ. These early believers, though small in number and limited in resources, would eventually spread Christianity throughout the entire Roman Empire. The same principle is true today. One way that the

world will be drawn to the heavenly Father is as they watch the lives of His children. Bearing God's image to a watching world demands that we become like Christ (Phil. 2:5, Acts 1:8, Acts 11:26, Matt. 5:14-16). When Christians live Christ-like lives, people will see what God is like through us and be drawn to Him (Matthew 5:16). Like those in Antioch, we must preach the Lord Jesus. We desperately need the Hand of God upon us and the grace of God evident amongst us. As we supernaturally live like Jesus, people will be provoked to question and be brought to Jesus.

The church in Antioch began and continued through the cross-cultural witness of their people. Jews and Gentiles worshipped together. Its unity in the midst of diversity stood in stark contrast to the society and even to the churches of their day.

The Apostle Paul touches on this in Ephesians: ***“While we were dead in our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ.”*** Whether Jew or Gentile, our earthly identities have been set aside. We are now alive in Christ and bound together as children of God and citizens of heaven. The dividing wall of hostility has been torn down. This unity is so remarkable that Paul even called it a mystery. In Ephesians 3:6 he writes, ***“This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members together of one body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”*** God did this, ***“So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.”***

God has now brought together Jews and Gentiles. God has now extended the offer of salvation to all people of all nations, and brought them together under one Lord and Savior. This is the church, and through this unified church the manifold wisdom of God is made known to the rulers and authorities in the spiritual realms.

When the world and even the spiritual realms see the diversity of peoples brought together by the unity of Christ, God is glorified. This is the beauty of the church, and more specifically, our church.

We have the opportunity to be a modern-day “church of Antioch”. In our church God has seen fit to bring together such a diverse people and then unify them in Christ. If we will embrace God’s unifying power in our midst and love one another to the fullest degree, God will be glorified, we will be made holy and others will be drawn to salvation.

In John 13:34 Jesus says, ***“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”***

Love will make the difference. But be warned, it will be messy. It will hurt at times. It’s not easy to love people who are different than you, but that’s the whole point. This love is different in kind from how the world loves. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, ***“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get?”***

If we live as spiritual hermits and seek a private, alone, Christian life, we will not be made holy and the full glory of God will not be put on display. If we choose only to relate with people who look like us,

think like us and easily relate with us, then we will be comfortable, but once again we will not be made holy to the full extent, and God will not receive the full amount of glory. When we choose to live in a costly relationship with those who are greatly different than us, then God will be greatly glorified, because this love will only be able to be explained by the grace of God and the Spirit of Christ that binds diverse peoples together.

It is fine to have close friends who are a lot like you, but as a modern-day church of Antioch we have to also be intentional about building relationships with other believers who are greatly different than us. In these relationships we will be challenged, sharpened, sanctified, and the gospel will be grown in our lives in the process.

Evaluate your relationships periodically. Are you taking the initiative to build relationships with others? Are you getting involved in a language group, a zone ministry, a Bible study group or a ministry team? Ask God for guidance as you intentionally seek out meaningful relationships within the church.

As we continue to read in the book of Acts, we find more about the church in Antioch. In [Acts 13:1-3](#) it says,

“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.”

It is from the church in Antioch that Barnabas and Paul were sent out to plant churches. In the midst of prayer and fasting, those in the church of Antioch heard God instruct them to send out Barnabas and Paul. Eventually this would multiply as more church planters were trained by Paul to the point that [Acts 19:9-10](#) tells us,

“Paul took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. ¹⁰ This continued for two years so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”

What a remarkable testimony of the work of God, that started with the initial Jews who shared the gospel with the Gentiles in Antioch and continued with them sending out Barnabas and Paul.

Discussion questions

1. What in this sermon most interested you or caught your attention?
2. Jesus had told His apostles and other believers to go and make disciples of all nations, but yet they seemed only to be focusing on Jewish converts. Why might this have been?

3. What do you think are some of the commands in the Bible that Christians often choose to ignore? Why do you think they do that?
4. In this sermon we see how God orchestrated events to usher the early church to the perspective that God wanted them to have. Can you think of any times in your life that God used events or people to move you from where you were to where He wanted you to be?
5. To share our faith there must be a time eventually when we “preach the Lord Jesus”. How do you feel about that? What might a person do to strengthen this part of sharing their faith?
6. In Antioch the unity amongst Jews and Gentiles was a sign that the grace of God was with them. In a multi-cultural church like ours, how might we express our love for one another as we seek to live out our unity in Christ?
7. What in this sermon do you think God wants you to remember?
8. What do you think God wants you to do about it?
9. How can we pray for you?