

Healthy discipleship cultivates an outward vision

Acts 11:19-30, 13:1-3

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This descriptive story of the church at Antioch can help us learn three important lessons about discipleship:

1. They were global disciples in the making. (Acts 11:19- 26)
2. Their discipleship cultivated generosity. (Acts 11:27-30)
3. Their obedience to the Holy Spirit's instruction resulted in sending out members for the missionary task. (Acts 13:1-3)

What do you think of when you hear the word "Christian"? The word "Christian" is a term we often take for granted, but what can we learn from its origins?

Luke records in Acts 11 that the gospel was proclaimed to the Gentiles, and specifically the formation of the Gentile church in the city of Antioch in Syria. When many people came to Christ in Antioch, the locals coined a new name for these followers. It was in Antioch where the disciples were first called "Christians". The people of Antioch noticed this movement and sought to find a new term to identify them.

The city of Antioch was situated on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and about 20 miles inland at the edge of a couple of mountain ranges. At this time it was the third largest city in the world behind Rome and Alexandria. It was a cultural melting pot of people who were Greek, Jewish, Roman, Arab and Persian.

I want us to look at the beginnings of the church at Antioch and learn how discipleship played an important role for the church. Healthy discipleship positions the church to give to others and to send out their own to the nations for the sake of the gospel.

As the Great Commission was given by Christ we see in the book of Acts the gospel going from its beginnings to the ends of the earth:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

In Acts 8 the Gospel goes to Samaria. It was a result of the believers being scattered, **but** the gospel spread. The gospel was being planted. In this case it was Samaria:

“⁴ Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word. ⁵ Philip went down to the city¹ of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ.”

But in Acts 11 it goes even further. The church started in Antioch:

“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.” (Acts 11:19-21)

In Antioch they started preaching the gospel to the Hellenists –non Jewish, Greek people.

1. The Church at Antioch were Global Disciples in the making (Acts 11:22-26).

I would love to interview Paul and Barnabas and hear exactly what they had in mind as they taught and disciplined the church during that year.

The disciples of this church were first called Christians, which means “little Christs”. Ironically the church leaders and teachers intuitively taught them to become “little Christs”:

- To live as Jesus lived. To love as Jesus loved. To give themselves away.
- To have love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.
- They were taught to love their neighbor.
- They were taught to be salt and light.
- They were full of the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, God incarnate in the world.
- We who become like Him live our lives in the same way.
- We make disciples.

This was normative for the early church as we can see in Acts 2:42-47. **The early church was devoted to:**

- The Apostles’ Teaching.
- The Fellowship.
- The Breaking of Bread.
- The Prayers.

I believe it was out of their discipleship that the church of Antioch instinctively knew what to do as the next two actions take place.

When the prophets came into town in verse 27 of Acts 11 and told of a great famine that was coming, the church knew what to do.

2. Their discipleship cultivated generosity. They were a Church that gave of their material resources (Acts 11:27-30).

This young church had a generous heart. They were taught to give themselves away. When they heard of a famine which would greatly affect their brothers in Christ, they knew they needed to do something about it. Theologian Ajith Fernando, in his commentary on the book of Acts, writes that as this young church (Antioch) gave a gift to the “mother” church in Jerusalem, it shows how the missionary spirit had caught on so soon in a church that would become the mother church of Gentile missions. What a great role reversal. The mother church in Jerusalem sends the gospel, and the daughter church in Antioch sends money to the Mother church. It also shows the solidarity between the two churches.

Giving our resources is one way a church can demonstrate its commitment to our Lord. Think about our church Immanuel for a moment. Several times this fall a need has been identified and members and attendees have given generously.

3. Their obedience to the Holy Spirit’s instruction resulted in sending out members for the missionary task (Acts 13:1-3).

Acts 13 was a natural part of who they were as a church:

- They were gathered together, which they did regularly.
- They were praying, which they did always.
- They were fasting.
- They were worshipping.
- They were in close communion with the Spirit, and the Spirit spoke.
- They sent out their own members to the mission field.

While the church at Antioch acts as the sending agent / agency, it is the Holy Spirit who sets apart, calls, commissions and empowers the two missionaries.¹

Conclusion

I think personally that the Great Commission was woven into the fabric of their being. It was not merely a program, an event, or an emphasis. It was who they were as the church of Antioch.

What does that mean for us here today?

¹ Eckhard J. Schnabel - *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament - Acts*, p. 555.

“²¹ Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”²² And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:21)

As we pray, as we worship, as we study God’s word, as we give, as we serve others and our community, God is shaping us for work beyond our walls.

As you received the gospel, as you have been discipled, you will be able to carry it wherever God calls you in your life.

If you indeed see yourself having a “sent identity”, your address does not really matter.

You are **SENT**.