

Gamma

Acts 11-13

Study 11 The church in missions

Q1 . Look at Acts 11:19-30. Look at the whole history of the young church in Antioch. Mark the number of stages in its development and name each one.

First, there was the cross-cultural and courageous preaching of the gospel by the Cypriot and Cyrene missionaries (v.20). They sowed the “good news”.

Second, God responded and his hand (power) caused many to believe: *“the Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number... believed and turned”* (v.21).

Third, the new converts are quickly examined and encouraged/confirmed by Barnabus. They get lots of affirmation. (v.22-24).

Fourth, the encouraged converts leads to a greater dynamic of evangelism, and lots more people come to faith (v.24).

Fifth, a team ministry of in depth training and discipleship and leadership development is begun by Barnabus and Saul. (For Saul, this is his own advanced training.) This lasts one year (v.25-26).

Finally, the young church begins to help its mother church and begins to serve and minister in deed (v.27-30) and eventually in word (by sending out Saul and Barnabus to plant new churches (13:1ff.) Notice that one of the first signs of vitality is, again, financial generosity! (cf. Acts 4:31-37).

Q2 . Looking at this number of stages in its development and comparing it to our church in FBC do you see any developmental stage that is missing or lacking and how we can improve on it? Can each of you share how you too can participate in this?

Q 3 . Why do you think that Christians weren't called "Christians" until Antioch (v.26)? Why do you think the Antioch church was so successful in showing the power of the gospel?

The Antioch church was the first place that the gospel had created a truly new humanity out of many different nationalities. Before, when the outside world saw a group of Christians meeting together, they only saw Jews, and they figured that this was just some variety of Judaism. It is also true that, if the outside world had only seen Greeks together or Romans worshipping together, then it would have figured that it was just some variety of Greek religion or Roman religion. The world believes that religion is just a function of your culture, family, or class. But when they saw something absolutely new — people coming to faith across cultural and racial and class boundaries — then they realized that this was something unique and different. The multi-cultural shape of the Antioch church seriously undermined the popular skepticism that believed all religion to be just a part of one's culture. (e.g. "I'm Catholic because I'm Italian, I'm Presbyterian because I'm Scottish, I'm Muslim because I'm Bosnian")

There was no more powerful witness to the unique power of Christianity than its "inclusiveness". A historian explains why this made Christianity stand out from all other religions of the time:

"A fourth reason for Christianity's success is to be found in its inclusiveness. More than any of its competitors it attracted all races and classes... Judaism never quite escaped from its racial bonds... Christianity however gloried in its appeal to Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian. The philosophies never really won the allegiance of the masses... they appealed primarily to the educated... Christianity, however... drew the lowly and unlettered... yet also developed a philosophy which commanded the respect of many of the learned... Christianity, too, was for both sexes, whereas two of its main rivals were primarily for men. The Church welcomed both rich and poor. In contrast with it, the mystery cults were usually for people of means: initiation into them was expensive... No other [religion] took in so many groups and strata of society... The query must be raised of why this comprehensiveness came to be. It was not in Judaism. Why did it appear in Christianity?"

– K.S.Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* vol.1 (Harper and Row, 1937).

This may be a reason why the Antioch church and the multi-cultural congregations of the Graeco-Roman cities grew even more rapidly than the Jewish churches. Barriers that separated people (normally) did not just come down as a result of the gospel preaching, but the broken barriers were actually a major part of the gospel communication. They shocked onlookers — no other religion had produced it. How could this religion, then, be seen as simply the power-grab move of a particular culture or strata of society? It could not. That is why only in Antioch were believers called “Christians” and only there did the world realized something remarkable had been unleashed in the empire.

Q4. How does your own church in FBC or elsewhere fare in terms of this multiculturalism. How you gone out of your way to fellowship with people who are not of your culture and ethnic group in church? Are there practical ways of improving on this which you might bring to the leadership. What concrete steps can you take to do this in your own life?

Q 5. Look at Acts 12:1-24. What does the incident about Peter teach us about prayer?

v.5 tells us about prayer’s character — it must be *earnest* and corporate. The word for “earnestly” can be translated “agonized”. It is the strongest word possible — it means intensity of feeling, of thinking, and of will.

v.6-11 tells us about prayer’s power over obstacles — Peter was a) chained, b) between two soldiers, c) then guarded by two sets of sentries, d) finally locked in behind an iron gate. Prayer cut through them all.

v.12-17 tells us about how little we believe in the power of prayer. Even the people whose prayers were strong enough for God to work did not have enough faith to believe they were answered. Do we believe that intercessory prayer has this kind of power? Cf.II Cor.1:8-11; Eph.3:20,21).

Q6. Look at Acts 13:1-3. This body became the first missionary-sending body in history. What led them to this? Notice the role of a) their leadership make-up, b) their routines, c) the Holy Spirit.

Antioch first missionary sending church in Christian history. The evangelistic efforts in Samaria and Antioch were not strategically planned by the Jerusalem church. In both cases, Christians fleeing persecution simply shared their faith through friendship with the people around them in their new cities (see 8:1-4 and 11:19-20). How did the church in Antioch receive the insight to begin the worldwide missionary project?

a) Their leadership make-up. The church at Antioch had a council of leaders (evidently functioning something like a board of elders) who were “*prophets and teachers*”. (Luke does not tell us if all were prophet/teachers or if some were one and some the other. Nor does he define either here! Pity.) What is remarkable is the diverse range of human stations from which these men are drawn. Barnabus was a Cypriot Jew (4:36). Simeon was called “*Niger*” which means “the black”, almost certainly indicating that he was black African. Lucian was from “*Cyrene*” which was in North Africa. He may have been black, but most of the people of North Africa at that time were not. He was probably one of the original Cyrenian evangelists who came to Antioch in the first place (11:20). Manaen was either a foster-brother or relative of Herod Antipas, and thus was of royal, upper class status. And then there was Saul, who was a Jew and, essentially, an “academic” — a professor. The leadership of the church reflected the multi-class and -cultural membership of the church.

Experience tells us that such a group would not have always seen eye-to-eye! (Consider how Peter — a Jew with little sophistication, and Paul — a Jew with great education and sophistication — had conflicts due to differences in background.) Yet the leaders in such a diverse body would have continually cross-pollinated each other’s consciousness, so that they would have all been far more aware of the needs and opportunities of the whole Mediterranean world than any homogeneous leadership team. In general, a group of very different people who can agree on common goals is a far more creative body than one made of similar people. The concept of strategic missions was born in such a group. It figures.

b) Their routines. Luke indicates that the Antioch church did not come to the concept of strategic missions as a result of their seeking it directly. v.2 says, “*while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting*”. The most natural reading of these words is that they were not in a special season of prayer, nor were they specifically and deliberately planning for missions. Rather they were going about their routine work of worship and seeking God’s presence. (Who was praying? v.1 refers to the whole church along with the leaders, so it is probable that this prayer time was not just for the 5 prophet/teachers. Though we cannot be completely sure.)

What do we learn from this? Surely, we cannot infer from this that special seasons of prayer or deliberate planning is wrong! Rather, what we learn is that what would seem like “special” prayer for us was clearly “routine” for the Antiochan church! Periods of intense worship, fasting, and seeking God’s presence were just normal for them. And it shows us that this is the kind of church that God reveals himself to.

c) The Holy Spirit. Luke leaves us in the dark as to exactly how the Holy Spirit showed the church that he wanted Paul and Barnabus to become missionaries. This is very frustrating, of course! Did God send a prophecy through a member of the church (cf.11:28)? Was it an idea that came to some of them while they prayed and after deliberation decided the Holy Spirit was leading them to do this as a body (cf.15:28 with 15:1-22)? The Holy Spirit spoke to the church in both ways. The fact that Luke leaves us in the dark means that it is not necessary for us to know the method. In fact, by omitting the specific, he may be better teaching us that God will lead his church if we are seeking him in that way.

It is also important to notice that the Holy Spirit does not give many details!

“Set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

(v.2) The message does not indicate exactly what countries to go to nor what methods to use. This means that it was only shown to the church to send the two missionaries out, but not to tell them exactly what to do. It takes a sense of adventure to follow the Holy Spirit’s

calling. He does not show you the whole map, but takes you one step at a time.

Finally, notice that prayer was not only the cause of the word from the Lord, but it was the result. Possibly, during the meeting one or more people received the insight that Saul and Barnabus should be sent to plant new churches in other countries. In response to this insight, we see in v.3 we see that they again fasted and prayed some more. Why? They did so until they “*placed their hands on them*”. The laying on of hands is always a way of identifying with someone, saying “we are with you, part of you, agreeing with you.” What this meant was that the whole church was confirming and agreeing that the Holy Spirit had truly called them. So, in response to the Spirit’s leading some members, the whole group prayed and confirmed it.

Q7 Acts 13:1-3. What can we learn from this incident for our own churches today?

John Stott has great way of summarizing what happened here. *“In our anxiety to do justice to the Holy Spirit’s initiative, we should not depict the church’s role as having been entirely passive... This balance will be a healthy corrective to opposite extremes. The first is the tendency to individualism, by which a Christian claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without reference to the church. The second is the tendency to institutionalism, by which all decision-making is done by the church without reference to the Spirit... Personal choice... is safe and healthy only in relation to the Spirit and the church”*.

Thus we learn that, on the one hand, we are not to be self-accredited, saying, “God told me this” before we get confirmation from other Christians. On the other hand, we are not to turn our church into a bureaucracy, where decisions are made through mechanical processes only. We must seek to hear the Holy Spirit in the community, together. Then we must seek confirmation of what we have heard in the community, together. This is the way we balance and avoid individualism and institutionalism.

In v.2 we see that the leaders (and probably the people) prayed and sought God intensely, and were open to God’s leading at such times. The leaders did not simply hold meetings together; they worshipped together. That guards against institutionalism. In v.3 we see the leaders (and probably the people) prayed some more in response to God’s leading and finally reached consensus that this strategy was the right thing to do. That guards against individualism.