

Barnabas

The Making of a Missionary Church

Antioch of Syria was a cosmopolitan city, closer in character to a modern metropolis than any other city in the Roman world. Antioch is crucial for a biblical perception of urban mission, because patterns were established at Antioch that set the course of mission history and changed the religious map of the world. At Antioch, the gospel first began to be preached to people who had no previous connection with the Jewish faith and community. The church at Antioch, by commissioning and sending out the first missionaries to the unevangelized world, became the mother of all the Gentile churches. Furthermore, in the life and ministry of the Antiochan church, a man who was destined to become the great urban apostle of the first century learned firsthand what a Gentile church could be, and this lesson made an indelible stamp on his career.

Beauty, Idolatry, and Sin

As cities go, Antioch had everything to offer. Under Roman rule, it was the third city of the Empire, the capital of the province of Syria, and was governed by a proconsul in charge of two legions of soldiers. Known as "Antioch the Beautiful," the city undertook a tremendous building program, which was financed jointly by Augustus and Herod. Its athletic stadiums drew thousands to see the annual games. Antioch was the center for diplomatic relations with Rome's vassal states in the East, and was a meeting point for many nationalities and cultures. It was a place

where East and West met each other, a truly cosmopolitan center.

Every religious movement in the ancient world was represented in Antioch. There were the cults of Zeus and Apollo and the rest of the Greek pantheon. There were also the Syrian worship of Baal and the Mother Goddess and the mystery religions with their teachings on death and resurrection, initiation, and salvation. Occultism was common along with magic, witchcraft, and astrology. Archeological excavations in and around the city indicate that every religion of ancient times had followers in Antioch.

Antioch was also known for its immorality. The lurid dancing girls of Antioch were the talk of the Mediterranean world. As a large, rich, commercial center, Antioch embodied the voluptuousness and corruption of a pagan society untouched by Christian influence. The city rivaled Corinth as a center for vice, and the Roman poet Juvenal, writing near the end of the first century A.D., charged that the wickedness of Antioch was one of the sources of Rome's corruption.

Despite these negative features, Antioch became the main gateway of the gospel to the Gentile world. It is interesting to note that the New Testament never talks about Antioch's wickedness and idolatry, its culture and beauty, or its importance as one of the great commercial centers of antiquity. In describing Antioch, Luke refers only to the great spiritual events that took place in the city. Events in Antioch affected the course of the gospel, threw open the Empire to evangelization, and molded the character of the missionary enterprise. As for impact upon the world, Antioch soon came to supersede Jerusalem and developed into the missionary headquarters of the first century.

A Church of Unknown Origins

Just when and how the gospel first arrived in Antioch, no one knows. The Book of Acts tells us that when the disciples of Jesus were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen's martyrdom, some of them came to Antioch. It is possible that there was already a believing community in Antioch before Stephen died. This church, which did so much to change the religious map of the Roman Empire, was founded by some unknown missionary, probably a layman who, without publicity or recognition, was faithful to the Lord. Maybe it was

Nicolaus, one of the first deacons at Jerusalem, who came from Antioch and may have decided earlier to return home and spread the Good News among his fellow proselytes (Acts 6:5). In any case, we are not told who it was that first preached the gospel in Antioch, or under what conditions he labored.

Most of the churches of the first century, and all succeeding centuries, were founded by Christians whose names were never recorded in history books. They received no acclaim, on earth at least, for their labors and sacrifices. Some giants of faith and missionary endeavor stand out against the horizons of history, and we all know their names: William Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone. Their very names call to mind the opening of great areas of the world to the gospel. We thank God for such people, for they were faithful servants and God used them mightily. But at the same time we must remember that the vast majority of converts, and most Christian churches, were the fruits of an anonymous multitude who never made the history books but who served God faithfully without earthly acclaim. It was that way at Antioch. We do not know who began the church, but Christians for centuries have benefited from what he or she did.

Racial and Ethnic Barriers Overcome

Luke records that when persecution broke out in Jerusalem, the disciples of Jesus were scattered as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. As they fled, they spoke of their faith to none except Jews (Acts 11:19). We can understand the racial and ethnic narrowness of their evangelism when we remember how reluctant most people are today to bridge the gaps between different communities and to witness cross-culturally, even after nineteen centuries of Christian growth and instruction.

"But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20). That was the breakthrough! The earlier preaching of Philip to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian proselyte, and Peter's encounter with Cornelius the centurion, remarkable events as they were in themselves, still had to do with people who belonged to the circle of Jewish faith and piety. But at Antioch pagans heard the gospel from Christian lips, and the universality of the gospel era began to take shape.

The cosmopolitan climate of the city was conducive to this kind of breakthrough. Antioch was at one and the same time a Hellenistic city, a Roman city, and a Jewish city. It was the meeting place of Oriental and Greek civilizations. It had a large Jewish population, but religiously many of the Jews were lax, and social barriers between Jews and Gentiles were relatively small. Some of the Jews themselves were engaged in proselyting efforts, and converts to Judaism were numerous. If the gap between the Jewish and Gentile worlds was to be bridged anywhere, it could be expected to happen in this cosmopolitan center.

In his book *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green reminds us that it was not the official policy of the Jerusalem church to evangelize Antioch. On the contrary, it was a spontaneous movement arising from Christian people who could not keep quiet about Jesus their Lord.¹ Green points out that Antioch of Syria was almost a microcosm of Roman antiquity in the first century, a city which encompassed most of the advantages, the problems, and the human interests with which the new faith would have to grapple as it moved across the world. The racial and ethnic issues were certainly two of the most fundamental, and in this area the Holy Spirit led the church of Antioch in a direction of highest importance for the spread of the gospel.

Evangelistic Revival and Careful Follow-Up

Two unnamed Christians, foreigners to the great city, began preaching "Jesus is Lord" with tremendous results. There were many "gods" and many "lords" in the Gentile world, but for these followers of Jesus there was only one God, the Maker of heaven and earth; and only one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made and who himself had come into the world to reconcile sinners to God. The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:21). All the important things that the Antiochan church did later must be seen against the background of the evangelistic fire that broke loose in the city when the gospel of Jesus Christ was first preached to the Gentiles. Before Antioch reached out in mercy to the needy, or commissioned some of

their own leaders to carry the gospel to faraway places, the church learned to evangelize powerfully and fruitfully in its own city streets.

News of these occurrences reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem and the church sent a one-man commission, in the person of Barnabas, to find out what was happening. At this early stage in the church's history, Jerusalem still had great influence, and we can imagine how the disciples in Antioch felt when they heard that Jerusalem was sending someone to investigate their movement. They probably thought: "Here comes trouble!" Jerusalem was the mother church, the citadel of Jewish conservatism. Things did not go the same way in Antioch as they did in Jerusalem, and the new Gentile converts brought to the church faces and practices which Jerusalem could hardly imagine. What would Barnabas be like? Would he take back to Jerusalem a negative report? Would he condemn this exciting new breakthrough of the gospel into the Gentile world and oppose its spreading any further?

"When he [Barnabas] arrived," says Luke, "and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (Acts 11:23-24a, NIV). What a relief it must have been to the Antiochan church that Barnabas was the kind of man that he was. One of the hardest things to understand in religious work is the attitude of some of God's children who, when they see something beautiful happening, oppose it, criticize it, and refuse to have anything to do with it. But Barnabas was not such a person. When he saw the evidence of God's grace at work transforming people's lives, he rejoiced, recognized its potential, and threw his energies into the follow-up program. Barnabas realized that the devil would soon begin to discourage the new converts and lead them back into sin and idolatry. The fruits of the Antiochan revival needed to be consolidated immediately or much would be lost. Barnabas apparently did not even take time to go back to Jerusalem with his report. Maybe he sent the elders a letter, but the Bible does not say. All we know is that he set to work at once and "a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24, NIV).

¹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 114.

ment of the church through internal growth—children born into Christian homes and brought up in the covenant community to acknowledge God in their whole walk of life. Church growth of this kind is important and it represents God's age-old way of dealing with believing parents and their children from one generation to another. The second kind of church growth is what we call *transfer* growth. It takes place when church members move from one location to another and in the new location either join an established church or begin a new one. As far as any numerical addition to the church of Jesus Christ is concerned, nothing has happened. There is no net increase. Christians have simply transferred their membership from one community of believers to another.

The third kind of church growth is the kind that took place at Antioch. We call it *conversion* growth. Granted, in the beginning there was some transfer growth at Antioch as refugees arrived from Jerusalem, but the really important factor in Antioch was the number of pagans who were converted to Christian convictions and church membership. That is the kind of growth we must look for in evangelism. When, due to uncertainty or frustration, people engaged in mission work begin to minimize the importance of winning converts from unbelief to saving faith in Christ, something has seriously gone wrong. The pattern established at Antioch was followed consistently by Paul and the rest of the apostles. They verbally proclaimed the Good News of the Lord Jesus for the purpose of persuading men and women to believe the message and be converted to the Lord. Anything less than this is a serious departure from the New Testament pattern of evangelism.

Barnabas was a teacher and organizer. He recognized what the Antiochan church needed most at that time: encouragement, instruction, and counseling in the direction they ought to go. Barnabas realized too that the increasing number of converts meant that he could not handle the follow-up alone, so he went to look for Saul, the gifted young convert from Pharisaism whom he had introduced to the apostles at Jerusalem (Acts 9:27). This decision on the part of Barnabas to look for Saul of Tarsus and bring him to Antioch to help in the teaching ministry was crucial both for Antioch and for the spread of the faith throughout the Empire. Barnabas probably did not realize that he was recruiting

for active ministry a man whose preaching, writing, and personal influence in the providence of God would change the course of history.²

Paul's experience at Antioch provided him with a model of what the church should be. It was a model which later he set out to duplicate, not rigidly or without allowance for differences required by local customs and circumstances, but still with its basic contours visibly intact.

For Paul, Antioch remained the place where he had seen what the Gentile church could be. It was there that he learned what it meant to bring Gentiles to a saving faith in Jesus Christ and instruct, guide, and work with them until a strong, functioning church had been established. Antioch did more to mold Paul than most people realize. A great deal of what we have come to recognize as the Pauline strategy of church planting, (and the theology which accompanies it), can be traced to his early experiences with the vibrant young church at Antioch.

Critics Called Them Christians

In the ancient world, slaves were called by their master's name, and that probably explains how the followers of the Lord first came to be called *cristiano* ("Christians"). Slaves really had no will of their own; they could only obey orders. Their names were derived from the persons who owned them, and they could not hold property or leave an inheritance. They were their own masters in nothing, but in everything they submitted to a higher authority, that of their master and lord.

The Bible does not record the name of the observant critic who first gave disciples the nickname, "Christians." But the name stuck because it fit. Disciples of Jesus regarded him as their Master and themselves as his slaves. "We are not our own," they said, "for we have been bought with a price." Body and soul, in life and in death, they belonged to their divine Master, Jesus

² The question may be asked whether Barnabas had learned of the prophecy made at the time of Paul's conversion concerning his future ministry (cf. Acts 9:15; 22:21; 26:18). If Barnabas was already aware of God's intention with Paul, then he may have recognized in Antioch the very situation that would launch Paul on the Gentile mission to which God had appointed him.

Christ. Doing God's will was their chief concern. The sovereignty of God was more than a slogan or a doctrine. It had a decisive influence on their way of life, and the enemies of the gospel took note and called them "Christians."

The apostle Paul learned much about the character and purpose of the Christian life by observing and working with the young church at Antioch. He took up the derogatory title given to followers of Jesus and made it his badge of honor. He introduced himself to the Romans as "Paul, a bondservant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1). The "bondservant" status of Christ's followers echoes throughout all of Paul's writings. Christians have no abiding citizenship or inheritance on earth. Their home is in heaven. The purpose of life is service to God, and whether they live or die, they belong to him. The mark of the Antiochan believers became the definition of discipleship for all times.

Today there is a growing awareness that the major reason for the church's powerlessness in the secular city is the lack of true discipleship on the part of most church members. Few merit the name "Christian, bondslave of Jesus Christ." Materialism has made church members virtually indistinguishable from the rest of mankind. The world's way of thinking and doing has by and large taken over, and consequently the church has little to say, with credibility at least, to the secular city. This is a generalization—thank God, there are exceptions. But no honest and informed observer can deny that the supreme need of the church is a radical rediscovery of what it means to be Christian.

Is it not principally in the teaching ministry that we have failed in evangelism? Significantly, the phrase, "and in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians," follows immediately after the statement: "For a whole year they [Barnabas and Saul] met with the church, and taught a large company of people" (Acts 11:26). Without a thorough teaching ministry, the Antiochan believers would not have matured into the kind of people their critics dubbed "Christians." And no urban strategy today can be expected to produce great fruits unless it includes in-depth instruction in the Scriptures, Christian life, and discipleship.

Compassion Toward Needy Saints

While visiting a small chapel in Brazil I observed the clothing which some of the children wore. It was the winter season and fairly cold. Toes stuck through the tips of some of the children's shoes, and a few barefoot ones kept their feet curled beneath them, partly perhaps because of the cold and partly out of embarrassment because they had no shoes. These children came from Christian homes; homes where the fathers worked ten to twelve hours a day, six days a week, to earn a living for their families; homes where mothers did everything possible to feed their children and clothe them adequately against the cold. When I looked at the coats worn by the two girls sitting next to me I realized that my Black Labrador at home in Michigan had better things to sleep on than these little girls could wear to church.

What would the Antiochan Christians do if they were informed of Christians suffering in a faraway place? Well, what *did* they do? Luke tells us that when they learned that a great famine would sweep over the world and their brethren were already suffering in Judea, they "determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea" (Acts 11:29, RSV). While not denying that Christians have obligations to help needy people indiscriminately, the believers at Antioch sensed that their first duty was toward needy saints. The Old Testament teaching that among God's people there should be mutual sharing and relief of poverty had been made clear to them by their teachers (Deut. 15). As a result, the believers did not have to be scolded or pled with. Once the needs of the Judean believers were presented, they responded generously.

This kind of voluntary sharing between believers had taken place in Jerusalem from the very beginning. In Acts 2:44-47 (NIV), the life of the early Christians is described as follows:

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-35 gives a similar picture of early church life. What is described here was not an early form of communism of the kind propagated by Karl Marx and his followers. Nowhere does the Bible teach that it is wrong to own property, or that the Christian community should take over its members' private possessions and own them collectively. On the contrary, early Christians were free to use their possessions as their consciences directed them. If they felt led to sell their land so that the money obtained might assist the poor, such sales were acceptable. Sales of this kind would not have been condoned if private ownership of land and other such possessions were wrong in principle. What we see in the New Testament are not prohibitions against private ownership of land and property, but the voluntary sale of excess possessions on the part of wealthier Christians to meet the material needs of their poorer brethren.

The apostle Paul saw what the Antiochan churches did, and his own hands helped convey their gift to Jerusalem, where it was administered under the supervision of the elders of the church. Later, when Paul was on his missionary journeys, he taught by his preaching and writing that the support of the saints was a primary Christian responsibility. II Corinthians 8 deals with the "gracious work" (vv. 7, 19) of Christian charity toward needy brethren. In Paul's theology and mission strategy, word and deed ministries were not separated, nor administered separately by different agencies. They were integrated both in the church and in the apostolic mission.

The Strength of a Balanced Church

There was a balance in the ministry of the Antiochan church. Luke wrote that in the church at Antioch there were "prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1). In this situation, prophets most likely were those who spoke God's truth to the unsaved, to inquirers, and to those who were coming to Christ from Jewish or pagan backgrounds. Teachers were those who deepened the faith of the new believers through instruction and helped the young believers mature in their understanding of the Scriptures and the practice of the Christian life. Merrill C. Tenney says of the church at Antioch that it was the home of both great Christian preaching and the headquarters of evangelistic missions. From

this center of both teaching and proclamation, the missionary fire spread across the Empire.³

This balance between evangelistic proclamation and patient, thorough instruction was vital to the health and growth of the church. We see throughout the New Testament that evangelism and teaching were not separated in the apostolic mission. Paul's teaching ministry is referred to repeatedly (Acts 11:26, 15:35, 18:11; 20:20; 28:31), and the apostle called himself a teacher (I Tim. 2:7; II Tim. 1:11). The epistles were part of Paul's teaching ministry, and it was characteristic of the apostolic ministry that evangelism and nurture were maintained in lively balance.

There was also balance in the spiritual life of the church. Worship, fasting, and prayer were earmarks of the community that God chose to use mightily for the spread of the gospel. Great missionary movements can always be traced to people on their knees, and there has never been a church that accomplished significant things for God that was not strong internally and spiritually.

The clearest evidence of Antioch's strength was its readiness to be a sending church, the first missionary-sending church of the New Testament era. From Jerusalem witnesses were forcibly "scattered abroad" (Acts 11:19), but from Antioch apostles were set apart, commissioned, and sent forth to the work (Acts 13:2). Such sending was, and still is, the sign of a vibrant and obedient church.

In Acts, the church is the object of missions, the agent of missions, and the source of mission personnel. The immediate goal of the apostles was to plant churches wherever they went. No evangelistic effort was regarded as successful unless a community of disciples, a church, was established. At the same time, the church itself was God's special agency of evangelism in every city and region, and from the church missionary personnel were called. The apostles' whole strategy was built around this concept of the missionary nature and responsibility of the church.

The apostles whom the Antiochan church commissioned never forgot the special relationship they had to this congregation. When their first missionary journey was completed they came

³ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961), p. 253.

back to Antioch where, Luke affectionately records, "they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled" (Acts 14:26, RSV). When the missionaries arrived, "they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (Acts 14:27, RSV). Luke says that they stayed "no little time" with the believers in Antioch, and the "home service" ministry of the apostles must have been a great blessing to the church. It is still true that when a church adds an international dimension to its ministry by sending and supporting overseas workers, the spiritual growth, joy, and vitality of the church's own life are greatly enriched.

Antioch left an indelible mark on first-century Christianity. It was there that Barnabas and Paul gained experience in urban ministry. The city of Antioch was a microcosm of everything the two apostles later confronted on their missionary journeys. The church that was founded in Antioch was a model that served them well as they traveled from city to city, preaching the gospel and establishing believers in the faith.

The experience in cross-cultural evangelism, the multi-racial face of the Antiochan church, the concern of believers for suffering brethren in other places, and above all their single-minded devotion to Christ and his service, demonstrated what God's grace could do in a highly urban and pagan environment. To the leaders of such a church the Spirit spoke, commanding them to set apart two of their own number to perform a special work for God in distant places. Through this gateway the gospel went forth to other cities, where the struggles and victories of Antioch were repeated over and over again.