

The Church That Did It Right • Acts 11:14-20; 13:1-3

When people from Wooddale Church move away from the Twin Cities they sometimes ask me to suggest a church in Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, New York or wherever they are moving. On occasion I can be helpful. But most of the time I don't have a recommendation because I'm at Wooddale Church on weekends and I haven't experienced too many other congregations. So instead of suggesting a specific church, I tell them the kind of church they should seek.

Among other things, it should be a church like the church of Antioch described in Acts 11 and 13. It is a marvelous example of a church that really did things right. It was an especially interesting church because the people of the church were the first ones in history to be called "Christians".

Antioch was a Roman city 15 miles up the Orontes River from the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. The city had a reputation for giving nicknames to people. For example, when the Emperor Julian came to the city of Antioch wearing a beard, they nicknamed him "The Goat". He probably didn't appreciate the name, but it stuck.

The people of Antioch became increasingly aware of the followers of Jesus Christ and started calling them "Christians". The "-ian" ending literally means "belonging to the party of". They called followers of Caesar "Caesarians". (Interestingly, this is the same word used for the surgical birth of a child because that's the way Julius Caesar was supposed to have been born. The procedure became known as a "Caesarean section"—in other words, a procedure belonging to Caesar.) Likewise, they nicknamed followers of Christ "Christians". At first it was a derogatory nickname. But it stuck. In fact, the followers of Jesus liked it. They started calling each other "Christians". They wanted to be known as belonging to Christ. But it was not so much the name of the people as the behavior of the people that distinguished them. So let's take a look at their practices.

Jesus had predicted that his followers would spread his message around the world, but they were

slow to get started. Then persecution began and that spread them out to other places besides Jerusalem. It all started when one of the leaders of the Jerusalem Church named Stephen preached a sermon tracing the history of Israel and culminating in the story of Jesus. The people became angry and picked up rocks and stoned him to death. That initial persecution began to grow and to spread, so we're told in Acts 11:19-21:

Now 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. Some 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. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

It was actually a simple process. They were Christians. They traveled. As they met people they talked about how they had been transformed by the person and the power of Jesus Christ. At first they just told this to Jews. But they were bubbly about it, and they eventually started telling everybody. And God blessed them. One by one Jews and Greeks started converting to Jesus. As they converted they formed a new church in the town of Antioch.

The church of Antioch did what all churches are supposed to do. They evangelized. Churches

were never intended to be fortresses. They were never intended to be like closed mutual funds—only for the benefit of those that are already inside. They were never intended to retain the Christian message for themselves alone. Christianity,

at its very core, is an evangelistic religion. We spread the good news of Jesus Christ convinced that people are better off if they hear and believe. As Christians we are convinced that the eternal destiny of every person depends on faith in Jesus Christ.

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Wooddale Church always seeks to be an evangelistic church. We constantly talk about Jesus. We provide every possible opportunity for people to hear about Jesus Christ and believe in him. We encourage Christians to seek daily opportunities to tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ. In our services we have FaithStories which are spiritual autobiographies in which people from the Wooddale church family tell about how they came to faith in Jesus Christ or how they have shared their faith in Jesus Christ with other people. We're not perfect. We're not as good at evangelism as we want to be. We probably don't measure up to the Antioch standard, but we really want to be a church that does it right and that begins with evangelism.

Evangelism sometimes upsets people. There are those who worry that something might go wrong or that bringing in outsiders will cause compromise. So, when the church at Jerusalem heard about all this evangelism at Antioch they decided to send out an investigator to see what was happening in Antioch. And they chose Barnabas.

Barnabas was a very good choice. He was a positive and godly man. He was sensitive to what God was doing. He saw the church at Antioch with Jews and non-Jews all together worshipping Jesus Christ. Their lives had been transformed, and he was ecstatic. He thought it was absolutely wonderful. It was true that the church at Antioch was unconventional. It was attracting a different class of people and was trying lots of new things, and he was convinced that God was making it happen.

But Barnabas realized that evangelism is never enough. These new Christians needed to learn and to grow. They had never read the Bible. They didn't know how to pray. They were ignorant of how to live a godly life. They needed solid models and effective teachers. But they couldn't be discipled by just anybody. If they were taught by a traditional Jew their Greek language and culture would be ignored and unappreciated. If they were taught by a Greek instructor there might not be an adequate understanding of the Old Testament and the rich history of the Bible.

Barnabas knew just the right man. His name was Saul. His story had appeared earlier in the book of Acts, but he had disappeared off the history pages for nine years. He had probably been living in his home town of Tarsus. He was a man with two names. By the Jews he was called Saul; by the non-

Jews he was called Paul. He was bilingual; he was bicultural. He grew up Jewish but was educated as a Greek-speaking Roman. He understood both traditions and cultures. He was the perfect pastor for this fast growing new church.

There's a valuable lesson here about right fit. Paul was perfect for Antioch, but he might not have fit so well in Jerusalem. Peter was great in Jerusalem and Rome, but he probably was not the right apostle for Antioch. God gifts us differently and delights to put us where our gifts are best suited to do what needs to be done.

Acts 11:25 and 26 says, "Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people."

It takes time to make a disciple. Disciples are learners. Disciples are people who take next steps in Christian life and maturity. They go to classes. They study the Bible. They learn how to evangelize, how to give, how to pray, how to suffer and how to do everything that a Christian does.

The job of the Antioch church, then, is the same as the job for Wooddale Church and other churches today, and that is to make disciples. The mission statement of Wooddale Church is as follows: "The purpose of Wooddale Church is to honor God by making more disciples for Jesus Christ." As a church we can never be satisfied with non-growing Christians. We must always keep pushing people to become more like Jesus Christ. We must offer teaching, classes, challenges, ministry opportunities and whatever else is needed in order to turn unbelievers into Christians and Christians into fully committed disciples of Jesus. Do we have high expectations? Of course we have high expectations. To be a Christian is to be like Jesus. We can never let up on discipling. It's the right thing to do.

The third thing the Antioch church did right was giving. In this they were quite amazing. When a famine spread across the Roman Empire they became concerned about the people living hundreds of miles away in Judea. We read in Acts 11:29-30, "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul." In a sense, this proved that they were Christians and demonstrated their discipleship. As Christians they cared about the needs of others and

generously gave their money to help others far away. Frankly, to be a Christian is to be a giver. It is almost unimaginable that someone could claim to be a Christian and be primarily a taker and a keeper. Christians give. That's just what Christians do.

It's very interesting to note how the Christians in Antioch gave because they set a Biblical pattern for how all Christians and all churches are to give. First, they decided in advance. Second, they set the number according to their ability. Third, they did it; they gave. And fourth, they pooled all of their gifts together.

Let's read it again: "The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul". So apparently each of these Christians (and they were fairly new Christians in the church in Antioch) set an amount that they could contribute based upon their ability—more for those with more money and less for those with less money. Then they followed through with their decision, pooled it all together and they turned it over to Barnabas and Saul who then carried this gift (notice: "gift", singular!) to the people who were needy.

At Wooddale Church we want to follow this biblical pattern as closely as possible. That's why we have what we call "faith promises". We ask each Christian to decide how much they are able to give to help those who are away from Wooddale Church. Those who have more should decide to give more; those who have less should decide to give less.

Decide and write it on a card. Then, give what you decided. We pool it all together and use the money to feed the hungry, help the poor, communicate the gospel and please Jesus Christ. It's the way they did it in Antioch. It's the pattern of the Bible. It's the way of the church that wants to do it right.

Let me just add a side story about proportionate giving. I have a friend in Denver who is struggling with serious health problems and certainly isn't rich. He studied what the Bible says about money and even wrote about his findings. He made a personal decision that he would give proportionately. That is, the more money he received, the more he would give; the less money he received, the less he would give.

I don't know his percentages, but let's say it's 5%. So he decides that this year he will give away 5% of what he has. If next year he has less, his commitment is to not only give less but give proportionately less, so that would be like 4%. On the other hand, his commitment is that if he gets more he will give proportionately more—so that may be like 7% or 12%. Last August I heard him talking about this, and he said that since he's been doing this he has been surprised, in fact amazed, at the continual growth both of his income and of his giving. He is doing exactly what they did in Antioch—"the disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea."

Try it. If you have a little bit of money, give a little bit, maybe just \$1 or \$2, according to your ability. If you have a lot of money, stretch and decide to give hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars. Try it for a year and see what happens. You may be surprised as well as delighted!

The Antioch church did it right: evangelizing, discipling, giving and sending. One of the normal results of doing things right is sending out a church's own people as missionaries. Here's what happened in Antioch as reported in Acts 13:1-3:

In the church of 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. 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." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

There was amazing diversity in this highly effective church. Look at the list. Barnabas was a Jew from Jerusalem. Simeon, called Niger, apparently was a black man because Niger means "black". Lucius of Cyrene was from North Africa. Manaen was an aristocrat who had been raised with Herod the tetrarch who was a king. And Saul, who is also called Paul (the man after whom our capital city in Minnesota has been named!) was a Jew by birth, he received a Greek education and he was a Roman citizen. So there was great diversity.

But together this church was tuned in to the Holy Spirit. They listened and obeyed what God

***To be a Christian is to
be like Jesus.***

wanted them to do. And God wanted them to send away two of their very best to become missionaries to other people and other places. So Paul and Barnabas left for a three year missions trip that established new churches and won converts across the Roman province of Asia and eventually in to Europe. The truly effective church gives not only its money but its people to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Likewise, Wooddale Church wants to be a sending church. Many of our very best leaders and teachers have become missionaries. We have sent out dozens of Wooddale families as missionaries around the globe. There are grandparents at Wooddale Church who see their grandchildren every few years because they are in Africa, Europe or Asia. There are hundreds of Wooddalers who have left to begin other churches in Minnesota and hundreds more who will go with more new churches. There are men and women in the Wooddale family praying and preparing to go. There are parents who have prayed and offered their children for distant missionary service. It's a very good thing. It is biblical. It is right. We give our best for Jesus Christ and his kingdom. We support them financially. We pray for them daily. We love them and write to them and visit them and do whatever we can to make them more effective.

The Antioch Church did it right. It's no wonder their story is written into the Bible. But what is a church? It's not a building—the church in Antioch probably didn't own a building. It's not a denomination—they didn't have denominations back then. It's not an organization. It's people. Churches are people. And churches are effective or ineffective, significant or insignificant, godly or ungodly—all because of the people.

The Antioch Church was long ago and far away. Today we are the church. It is up to each one of us, and all of us together, to be and to do what God wants us to be and to do for Jesus Christ. May we do it right—evangelizing, discipling, giving and sending—all for Jesus Christ!

And so, our Lord, it is for Jesus' sake that we want to do it right, that we want to be and do all that you call us to be and to do. There isn't one of us who can pull this off. But together, controlled by your Holy Spirit, we can be to our generation what the Antioch church was to its generation. And may we do it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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