

Becoming an Antioch Church

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Introduction

In one sense we could say that the church in Antioch was the first church that Paul started. Even though the church actually began prior to Paul's coming to assist Barnabas, it was Paul's persecution of the Church that caused the scattering of the believers from Jerusalem to the city of Antioch (Acts 8:1).

Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

As these believers were scattered, they went everywhere preaching the Word and sharing their faith (Acts 8:4). They primarily preached to other Jews (Acts 11:19) but some of these believers whose original roots were in Cyprus and Cyrene openly to preached the Gospel to a more diverse crowd (Acts 11:20). As they preached many people turned to the Lord (Acts 11:21).

Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but the Jews only. 20 But some of them were men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who, when they had come to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

Soon the news of this revival reached the church at Jerusalem and the leaders of the Jerusalem church decided to send leadership to Antioch to formulate this loose-knit group of converts into a local church (Acts 11:22).

But whom should they send? Who would be a likely candidate to bring order and some structure to this move of the Spirit that was taking place among the Hellenists in Antioch?

The Jerusalem leaders selected Barnabas, a good man who was full of the Holy Spirit and faith who had been a faithful man in the local church for many years (Acts 11:24 with Acts 4:36-37). Not only was Barnabas a good choice based on his faithfulness and character, but he was also a good choice as a man of Cyprus who would be familiar with the culture of those in that region (Acts 11:20 with Acts 4:36).

When Barnabas arrived, the first thing that he noticed was that he had his work cut out for him. He experienced a great wave of evangelism as he preached the Word. He realized that he was going to need some help establishing and grounding these converts in the faith and shaping them into a pattern church.

Where would he go to find such help? As he prayed about it, he remembered a man that he had befriended a long time ago by the name of Saul (See Acts 9:27). He was a man who was thoroughly schooled in the Scripture and would be able to teach the Word of God to these converts. Barnabas went looking for this man, Saul (Acts 11:23, 25-26).

23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.... 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Barnabas and Saul became a team and for the next few years they intensely taught the people. Not only would they work as a team in this church plant, they would become the first missionaries to be sent out from this church as Saul and Barnabas went on to fulfill their apostolic call (Acts 13:1-3).

History and Background of the Antioch Church

This is how the church at Antioch got started. This church was destined to become a very influential church for well over 500 years. Some of the giants among the early church fathers pastored this great church, including Ignatius of Antioch who was most likely the third lead pastor of this church.

Prior to, but especially after, the destruction of Jerusalem, the Antioch church became a real hub of Christianity and a true pattern church for the world especially in its missionary spirit and doctrinal purity. It became the launching pad for Christianity to be spread among the Gentile peoples of the world.

This church began like all churches. It started out as a small church with little or no influence in its city. However, because the foundation of this church was strong and the nature of the lifestyle of the people that made up this church was truly Christian, the church grew strong and became quite influential. In fact, this church at its height grew to a place of over 100,000 in membership with over 3000 people on paid staff (McClintock & Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, Vol. 1, pg. 268).

Because of the Jewish nature of the Jerusalem Church, and because of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., it is fair to say that the church at Antioch became the first church to really model true New Testament Christianity and it became the **PATTERN CHURCH** for the world. It still serves us today as a pattern for an apostolic church.

The church of Antioch had been birthed out of an apostolic ministry and it went on to fulfill an apostolic call as a congregation. The key elements in the foundation of this church, as it is described in the Book of Acts, serve as a model for apostolic churches in the world today.

What were these key elements that established the Antioch Church as an apostolic church? What are the characteristics of an “Antioch Church”?

Twelve Characteristics of an Antioch Church

The Antioch Church was:

1. AN EVANGELISTIC CHURCH (Acts 11:19-20)

The Antioch Church was started by believers who were fleeing for their lives, but who could not cease to share the Good News wherever they went. These were people who had been

delivered from the Kingdom of Darkness and they were ready to risk their lives to bring others into that same experience of freedom. The Antioch Church was birthed in a spirit of evangelism.

This spirit of evangelism continued under the ministry of Barnabas and Saul. So often churches that begin evangelistic lose the evangelistic edge as they get to a certain size. Much of the church growth in the North American today simply consists of believers moving from one church to another.

Fortunately, there were no other churches in Antioch when Barnabas came to that city. If the church was to grow, it was going to have to grow through evangelism. An apostolic church is a church that is able to keep the fires of evangelism alive, even though the church may be many years old. Reaching our own “Jerusalem” is still the first commission to the church (Acts 1:8).

2. A TEACHING CHURCH (Acts 11:26; 13:1)

The Antioch Church was a church committed to the intense training and discipleship of its membership. Paul and Barnabas taught intensely. They believed in and practiced the commission that Jesus had given in Matthew’s account (Matthew 28:18-20). When new converts came into the church there was a discipleship track for them to run on.

If a congregation of people is ever going to get to the place where they are touching the world, they are going to have to be composed of people who have become “disciplined ones.”

Disciplined ones are believers who have done more than prayed a simple prayer at their conversion. Disciplined ones are ones who have sold out to the lordship of Jesus Christ and who have made a radical change in how they live. Disciplined ones are those who have put the purposes of God ahead of their own purposes, who have left houses and lands for the sake of the Gospel.

Members of an Antioch Church must be true disciples who have come to the cross, repented of their sins, accepted the life of faith, been baptized in water and the Holy Spirit and who have distinguished themselves from the sinful generation in which they live (Acts 2:37-40). The members of an Antioch Church will be expected to make personal sacrifices to see the harvest become a reality.

Paul and Barnabas focused on teaching as they laid the foundation of this great church. They taught for change and they witnessed a change in the lives of the people. The character of Jesus was produced in these people who were called “Christians” because their life reflected the character and nature of Christ, not because they merely attended church services on Sunday (Acts 11:26).

As Barnabas and Paul were faithful to teach, other teachers were raised up. In fact, by the time Barnabas and Paul were ready to be sent out as the first missionaries of this church, they had replaced themselves. Acts 13:1-2 tells us that there were certain “prophets and teachers in Antioch.” Where did these leaders come from? They came out of the teaching ministry of Paul and the prophetic ministry of Barnabas.

History records that leaders from the Antioch Church were used to help maintain doctrinal purity in the emerging church and that it established a theological seminary for the training of church leaders for many years to come. (McClintock & Strong, Vol. 1, pg. 269)

3. A MULTIRACIAL CHURCH (Acts 11:20; 13:1)

As you look at the complexion of the leadership team at the Antioch church it is immediately apparent that this church was a blending of races and cultures, much more than Jerusalem could ever have been. Those who founded this church had a very inclusive vision and extended the Gospel beyond the Jewish community including men of Cyprus and Cyrene (Northern Africa). Their leadership included Lucius of Cyrene.

This kind of diversity does not usually just happen in church planting. Too many church planters and church builders limit the scope of their vision feeling that they must have a narrow target (usually people with money). Actually, the more diverse the church is the more powerful and influential it will become. We want the church to be just as diverse as the throngs gathered before the throne of God in the Book of Revelation.

The various races and ethnic backgrounds represent our “Samaria” that needs to be a focal point of ministry and outreach. God’s heart is for all peoples of all nations and He does not want our heart to be any smaller (Deut. 10:17-19).

An Antioch church begins by reaching out to the nations in its own backyard. So many communities today have large ethnic populations. Many of these are immigrants to this country and are strangers and foreigners in our midst. God is clear in His admonitions that we are not to forget the stranger and the foreigners among us, but we are to open our hearts wide to them.

Building a church with wide ethnic diversity actually paves the way for touching the nations of the world. How can we expect to love the peoples of the world that we have not seen when we find it so difficult to love those same people that we see every day in our own communities?

4. A TEAM MINISTRY CHURCH (Acts 13:1)

Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

The Antioch Church believed in the five-fold ministry and practiced team ministry. The leadership of the church was a broad-based leadership team where all of the leadership gifts were present. The evangelistic gift, the prophetic gift, the teaching gift, the pastoral gift and the apostolic gift were all evidenced and in operation.

As a result, all of the ministries of the Body of Christ had a point of identification and the various gifts among them could be adequately equipped and released. Team ministry makes it possible for the leadership to reproduce after its own kind. Churches that do not have a healthy pipeline of up-and-coming ministries will have a difficult time sending ministries forth. It was because Paul replaced himself and Barnabas replaced himself that they could

themselves be sent out by the Antioch Church without fear that the mother church would be in peril.

5. A SPIRIT ANOINTED CHURCH (Acts 13:2)

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

The Antioch Church believed in and practiced the gifts of the Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit enumerated in I Corinthians 12 are definite supernatural gifts given by the Holy Spirit to assist the Church in accomplishing their mission. They flow along with the power promised in conjunction with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

If Jesus is truly going to be the head of the Church, there must be a way for Him to communicate to His people. One of the ways that the Spirit speaks in the church is through the prophetic word. The prophetic word came to the church at Antioch, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

This was not just a word for Barnabas and Saul; it was a word for the Church as well. The church was going to have to pay the ultimate price to be an apostolic church. They were going to have to be willing to send out apostolic ministry to function in their call. They were going to have to be able to send out the “cream of the crop.”

6. A PROPHETIC CHURCH (Acts 11:27-30; 13:2)

The Antioch Church made a strong place for prophecy in the church. Jesus was the head of this church and His voice through prophecy was important in guiding and directing the mission of the church. As a result, it became a place where prophets were raised up and a place where the prophets’ ministry was respected.

When Agabus visited this people, he had liberty to share his prophetic gift. As he shared even a prediction about a famine, which was to come some years later, there was an immediate responsiveness to the word. The church sent relief to Jerusalem for a famine that would not actually happen for five to seven year (Acts 11:27-30).

And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

The members of the Antioch had what is sometimes referred to as 20-20 prophetic vision based on II Chronicles 20:20.

“Believe in the Lord your God, and you shall be established; believe His prophets, and you will prosper.” II Chronicles 20:20b

What a credit it is to Paul and Barnabas in their discipleship of this group of believers. They respected the word of the Lord and were willing to do whatever the Lord asked of them no matter how costly. That is the spirit of an Antioch Church—instant obedience.

7. A GENEROUS CHURCH (Acts 11:30; 13:3)

The Antioch Church was a giving church. They had truly entered into the scripture, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). An apostolic church must have a generous spirit. Missionary work, planting churches, reaching out in evangelism and providing training programs for future leaders all cost a lot of money.

It is so much easier to just sit, relax and be a nice little community church that “hangs on” until Jesus comes. But if a church is going to be a city influencing church, a nation influencing church and a world influencing church, it will have to be a church filled with people who love the people of the world more than they do their own money, their own comfort and their own pleasure.

An Antioch Church is a church with a high level of commitment among its membership. It is a church where people are willing to expend their time, talent and resources. It is a place where they are willing to give their best away.

In my own experience over the years, I have been part of a leadership team that believed in and practiced church planting. During this process I have lost many of my very closest friends to the field as they followed the call of God on their lives. It was a painful and yet glorious experience. At least now I can go almost anywhere in the world and get free lodging.

There is a cost to being an apostolic church. The cost includes the sacrifice of time, talent and finances. It includes saying goodbye to friends and family who join with others in team outreaches. It includes being willing to let go of pastors and church leaders that we have grown to love and appreciate. It even means seeing your senior pastor move out of his or her position and become more apostolic in nature. It means being willing to share your leadership with the world.

8. A WORSHIPPING CHURCH (Acts 13:2)

As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

The Antioch Church was a church that understood their function as priests unto God. They knew how to “minister unto the Lord.” The ministry unto the Lord in this passage undoubtedly refers to an atmosphere of worship. As priests unto God one of our primary functions is ministering to the Lord. We minister to the Lord through our sacrifices of praise and worship.

New Testament priests who understand their God-ordained function to position themselves in worship are also the kind of people who can be led and directed by the Holy Spirit. Our posture of worship places us in a position to hear the voice of the Lord more clearly.

If Jesus is going to be the builder of the Church, the people of the church must be in a place of humility before the Lord so that they can receive His instruction. Our posture of worship is a continual reminder that Jesus is the Lord of the Church.

9. A PRAYING CHURCH

*As they ministered to the Lord **and fasted**, the Holy Spirit said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, having **fasted and prayed**, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. Acts 13:2-3*

The Antioch Church made it a priority to set aside seasons of prayer and fasting to hear the voice of the Lord to the church. Prayer is the pipeline of the Spirit and was a major key to the success of the Church in the Book of Acts. A praying church is a powerful church.

An apostolic church must be composed of people who know how to touch God in their personal life, who know how to get the mind of the Spirit in seasons of prayer and who are seasoned enough to know what is God and what is not.

An apostolic church also fosters a corporate prayer life among its members. This would include regular prayer among the elders and leaders of the church, corporate prayer times in the regular life and activity of the church and special seasons of prayer, fasting and waiting on God.

It is in these seasons of prayer and fasting that God often speaks to the church as a whole and gives the church His agenda.

10. AN EQUIPPING CHURCH

The Antioch Church believed that the primary function of leaders was the raising up, equipping and releasing of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). They believed that every member had a function and were committed to seeing every believer reach their destiny.

Leaders of apostolic churches cannot be jealous leaders who suppress other would-be leaders in the church. They need to have confidence in their own calling in God and be willing to acknowledge the gifts and ministries in others. They will find joy in seeing others reach ministry goals and destiny.

The Antioch Church believed in the laying on of hands for commissioning. They also believed in prophetic gatherings for the confirmation of calling.

11. A WORLD CHURCH

I am sure that the Antioch Church had a vision for their city, but they also had a vision for the world. Antioch became the center for world missions and church planting teams. The Book of Acts only gives us the record of one of these teams, but we know that there were other teams doing the same thing. Paul and Barnabas began as the first team. Later they split up and there were two teams, Paul and Silas and Barnabas and John Mark (Acts 15:39-40).

Apostolic churches use Acts 1:8 as their pilot verse. They have a vision for Jerusalem or their city. They have a vision for Judea or their region. They have a vision for Samaria,

which includes ethnic grouping in their sphere of influence. But they also have a vision for the world. They believe in world missionary activity that takes the Gospel to the “uttermost parts of the earth.”

12. A RESPECTED CHURCH

The Antioch Church became respected as a model for New Testament Christianity. It became a pattern for other churches to follow. It became a place where church disputes were settled. Several church councils were held in Antioch and it was considered one of the top five churches in the world for many centuries to follow.

What a tremendous Church! How does a church get to this place of prominence and influence? How does a church become an apostolic church?

The Foundation of the Antioch Church

A tremendous church must be built on a good foundation! The foundation of the Antioch church must be in place if any church is going to pattern themselves after this early church.

The foundation of the Antioch church involved **five things** to which I have already alluded. All five of these have to do with **the quality of Christianity** that was experienced by the believers who formed the membership of this great church. **The greatness of a church is not measured by the quality of its leaders, but by the quality of the average member who belongs to the church.**

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.

22 Then news of these things came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. 23 When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord. 24 For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. 25 Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. 26 And when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with the church and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

1. A turning to the Lord (Acts 11:20-21)

When converts were added to the Lord in the Antioch Church there was a true turning. There was a turning away from sin and a turning unto the Lord. The Bible refers to this process as repentance. Repentance involves a 180 degree turn. You can't turn to the Lord unless you turn from something else. New Testament Christianity involves a turning from darkness to light! A turning from serving self to serving the living God!

Turning to the Lord also involves coming into right relationship with Jesus Christ as the Lord of our lives. The believers at Antioch turned to the Lord. When we accept His lordship, we acknowledge that He is the Lord of the universe and He is over all. People loved the blessings and miracles of Jesus, but when it came to the matter of Lordship, they cried, “We will not have this man reign over us!”

2. A cleaving with purpose of heart to the Lord (Acts 11:23)

The type of believers that formed the foundation of the Antioch Church did not have a shallow commitment to the Church and the work of the local church. They were people who faced squarely the obstacle of the cross and came to a complete surrender to Christ.

Other translations of Barnabas' admonition to these believers include:

"To make up their minds to be faithful to the Master." –TCNT

"To remain with fixed resolve, faithful to the Lord." –Wey

"To be resolute and steadfast in their devotion to the Lord." –Gdspd

"He made clear to them the need of keeping near the Lord with all the strength of their hearts." –Bas

Barnabas was asking for a determination based on vision. Their faith wasn't just another thing that they were involved with; it was the center of their life. The word "cleave" means "to glue to; to attach oneself closely to". In Greek it is descriptive of the relationship between husband and wife. God is looking for a covenant relationship among His people!

3. A willingness to be taught (Acts 11:26)

The believers at Antioch had a hunger for the Word. To satisfy this hunger it meant going to meetings—gathering themselves together. They were training together and searching the Scriptures daily. Christ and the Church were their whole life.

I fully understand the concept of balance, but we may be so balanced that we will never move. In today's context, is the church imposing itself to expect more than one gathering a week? The people in the Antioch church viewed themselves as *DISCIPLES* or pupils and learners. This implies humility on their part and a hunger and a recognition that they needed what the Word of God provided.

4. A responsiveness to the Lord (Acts 11:27-29)

It is beautiful the way these Christians at Antioch responded to the word of the Lord (Hearers and Doers). The prophet prophesies a famine that is several years off and they determine to send relief. They don't even wait for the famine to come. I am sure the people of Jerusalem were amazed to get an offering for a famine that they had not as yet experienced.

This was the heart of the Antioch Church. They had a simple obedience to the voice of the Lord. There is no question that God would be able to lead them into many exploits. Too many of us resist the will of God and find it hard to respond to His leading. A church is no stronger than the people who make it up. Are we responsive and obedient? Can the Lord easily lead us?

5. A genuine Christianity (Acts 11:26)

It is important to note that the believers in Antioch were ***CALLED CHRISTIANS!*** They didn't call themselves Christians. No buttons, badges or bumper stickers gave signal to their faith. They were called "Christians" because the life that these people lived reminded observers of a person about whom they had some knowledge. These believers reminded people of "Christ."

A Christian is a follower of Christ. God is looking for people of faith who are willing to walk where Jesus walked in all and every aspect of life. The members of the Antioch Church were good Christians first and an apostolic church second.

The Need Today

Every community has the need for an Antioch Church. God wants many churches to accept the call and the unique challenge to be an Antioch for their region. God wants us all to lift our vision higher and see the world the way He does. He wants us to renew our passion for the commission.