

## **THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE CHURCH**

**Acts 11:19–30**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Just twelve verses. We're in the third major section of Acts. The first section, the first five chapters, was on the Birth of the Church. The focus was Jerusalem. Acts 6:1 through Acts 9:31, "Persecution Leads to Expansion," the growth of the church in Samaria. Acts 9:32 through Acts 12 is the third major section: the acts of Peter, and the beginnings of Gentile Christianity. Those are nice formal titles to get a hold of the content. Tonight's message I've called "The Changing Shape of the Church." We know that, in our lifetime, the church has gone through tremendous change because the culture is changing tremendously.

I recall what a struggle this was for me a few years ago. Around the late seventies, I had been pastor of this church for five or six years and I was right on the verge of resigning. I was so frustrated. Although the church was growing, we were seeing such a rapid turnover in people that scarcely would I get to know someone, and it seemed like they left. I remember one summer in the church we had what I call the "Oregon Trail." It seemed like that summer everyone in the leadership had been called of God to move to Oregon or whatever. I said, "I cannot take this much change." My idea of a church is somewhat Midwestern. It's the archetypical, white steeple, Baptist church on Main Street or Cherry Street in Maintown, USA, where you've got the family pew and the four-generation family and stability and order and structure and red pews and carpet and white interior and everything is nice and it's been there and it gives you a feeling of solidity and permanence. Here I was pastoring a church that we knew, by statistical studies, was losing 30 percent of its people every year, just by normal attrition, which meant that every single year we had to take in 30 percent more people just to stay even with the amount of people we had in

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the church twelve months earlier, and that amount of change began to be very frustrating to me. My idea of a church was sort of like the Midwestern church with the great oak trees in the front yard casting their leafy shade on the body that gathered in. Tranquil, permanent roots and, in the midst of almost leaving this church because of its high rate of mobility (by the way, studies on the city of Costa Mesa show that the vacancy rate of houses and apartments in the city of Costa Mesa runs 30 percent a year. Almost one out of every three apartments and homes will go through a change in residence this year in the city of Costa Mesa. The church is part of that change), the Lord one day spoke to my heart and said, “In California it’s impossible to have a church that’s beside the road, white-framed and with oak trees. It’s not going to happen. This soil doesn’t grow oak trees. It grows palm trees. Those roots don’t go very deep. The tree grows high, but the roots don’t go deep. So you have a choice.” The choice was not between being an oak tree kind of church. But it was a choice between whether we were going to be tumbleweed church or a vine church. That was, by the way, before they founded the Vineyard Fellowship churches. That shows how old I am. I said, “In the body of Christ we can be a vineyard.” There are people just blowing around from place to place, personality to personality; basically dead, collecting against fences. This church can be a vineyard, and people come and they’re potted for a while and they’ll grow. And hopefully, in a year or two or twenty years—for some of you, it’s been that long and longer—we want you to be in a flowerpot that you can transfer when it comes time for you to move and you’re more flourishing than when you came.

We had a church that was changing its shape. We also had to learn that there was a lot of flexibility and diversity that the church had to address, living in the contemporary culture. We found out that everybody earned a living and made their house payments. In Orange County, almost everyone works, every member of a family—husbands and wives and/or single parents

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and the like. We began to realize that there was less volunteer time available for the church. The Midwestern church had historically more volunteer time available. We have had to have an effective church ministry without that kind of time.

We also had to recognize that, as a church, we do not have the advantage of extended family relationships. The church must work all harder to be a family to one another. We began to realize, also, that there was a change that was happening in even the texture of our services. In the churches I grew up in, Sunday nights were the great evangelistic services where people came to the Lord. We have found that, by and large, Sunday mornings and Sunday evenings are not our primary time when people are making first-time decisions for Jesus Christ. I don't know if many of you are aware of it, but its Tuesday nights. We have as many young people from junior high through senior high here on this campus on Tuesday night in our services as we have in our sanctuary tonight. That's where, every week, we are seeing a lot of teenage decisions for Christ. We're seeing a lot of children decisions. We're not seeing as many adult decisions for Christ as I would like, but probably on a par with other church fellowships, we're somewhere within range. There has been a tremendous change within the nature of the church itself. For example, thirty years ago, the word "divorce" was hardly even mentioned in church. If you attended a church and you were divorced, it was almost like you had leprosy. We've seen a whole switch in our culture. In fact, now, because we have a need to do it and do it nonjudgmentally, we're doing divorce recovery workshops. We realize that 40 percent of our culture is being impacted. We realize that we're ministering in areas of stress that we never had before. Therefore, churches like ours have counseling ministries. Before, that really wasn't perceived as a need. And some still think it's not a need, but I kind of think it is. We need to have the availability of people in

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the body of Christ who have been trained, spiritually and professionally, to help us work through these knots in human relationships.

There are just all kinds of changes that are occurring and will continue to occur in the body of Jesus Christ as we go. One of the things we have to do as a church is continue to flex and learn what the things which are permanent, that do not change, are and then the things which are cultural in nature and need to be contextualized or changed as time goes along.

That's the issue before us in the Scripture tonight. There are two churches that are front and center in the Book of Acts—the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch. Like churches in contemporary society, no two churches are alike. Those two churches were not alike. There were vast differences. They had the same doctrine, but there were vast differences between the churches.

I want to take a moment to talk about the Jerusalem church and what it stood for and why God raised up the Antioch church, and what that means for us as a church which is changing shape in today's culture and society.

If I were to characterize the Jerusalem church, if you want an easy alliterative outline, I would identify it by the three E's. It was an "expanding church." It was an "experiential church." And it was an "experimental church."

#### **I. Expanding church.**

It began with a hundred and twenty people and, in one day, it added three thousand. A few days later, it added five thousand more. Then it grows, day by day. Then we read that it multiplies. So here is a church that, within a compass of a few years, is a mighty force within a limited geographical area. A dynamically growing church. All of us want to be a part of something that's going and moving. One can't fault that church, unless you look at the size of the world the Lord

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had called them to reach. There were two hundred and fifty million people in the Mediterranean world then. There were four million Jews out of the two hundred and fifty million people. There were maybe a hundred thousand people in Jerusalem. So the church, by the time we get to the end of Acts 5 and beginning of Acts 6, had probably grown to maybe 15 percent of the Jerusalem population. It was a vast and large church. Yet, if it looked around, it could not only see that there were two hundred and fifty million people to reach, there were a lot of Jews yet to reach. So the church must learn the lesson from Jerusalem, that it must never gauge its success by the people it has on the inside. It's always still the work to be done. But it was an expanding church.

### **II. Another thing about this Jerusalem church was that it was an experiential church.**

Here was a church that was not gathered around somebody's ideas. Here was a church which had members who had seen, talked to, eaten with and fellowshiped with the risen Lord. And those who had not done this had dove into the experience of a vital conversion experience with Jesus Christ, had had their lives radically altered, their sins forgiven, and had come into an experience with the Holy Spirit. They had seen God work in their midst with signs and wonders. How many here have ever eye-witnessed or known someone personally for whom an answer to a prayer to Jesus, a miracle occurred, that you can't explain in human terms? How many of you know of something like that that's happened, firsthand? That's what the Jerusalem church was—an experiential church. In my own life, I've seen God do things in healings that could never be explained by human agency. It's wonderful to be a part of a church like that. One doesn't want to fault a church that has that kind of experience.

### **III. Then it was also experimental.**

The church ought to be at work, trying new things. Some things we're going to try are going to flop. Generally, we don't advertise our failures. The Early Church in Jerusalem tried some

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experimental things. They have this deal of communism; they shared all things and had them in common. No other church in the Mediterranean world in the first century ever tried that. Few churches try that today. But that church tried it. It worked for a while. Later on in Acts, we'll look at some of the reasons why the Lord let them use that. It was a dynamic church you would have wanted to be a part of...I would have wanted to be a part of it.

But it lacked one key thing. To make it a church that would make it a model for getting the gospel to the two hundred and forty-six million people in the world that were not Jewish. It didn't lack in doctrine. It didn't lack in experience. It didn't lack in dynamic ministers. It didn't lack in apostles. It didn't lack in leadership. It didn't lack in all those areas. But it lacked the ability to culturally shift gears and reach non-Jewish people, to reach the Gentiles.

So by the time we hit Acts 11:19, almost fifteen years have gone by in the Christian church and there has yet been no significant thrust of the later part of Acts 1:8. Witnesses, not only to Jerusalem and Judea but to the uttermost part of the world, by and large the church is not doing that. But we have seen that the Holy Spirit is getting the church, beginning to get the church, ready. So as we read verse 19, we say, "Those who had been scattered by the persecution" (NIV). If we want to look for an anchor point for 11:19, we would have to go back to 8:1: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered" NIV). So 11:19 hooks back to 8:1. Here are two things that happened. On the one hand, Philip went to Samaria and ultimately Samaritans were saved and ultimately Peter went to Cornelius. That was one thing that happened as a result of believers being scattered. But another thing that was happening was that some went to Phoenicia, which is modern day Lebanon, Cyprus, which is the largest island in the eastern Mediterranean and Antioch, which was 300 miles north of Jerusalem, modern day Syria, the third largest city in the ancient world,

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the city of five hundred thousand people, with a main street 4.5 miles long, 32 feet wide, that colonnaded the whole way.

The events of Acts 8–10 are essential if there is to be a Gentile church, because the Lord was leading the church by degrees, bringing first the Ethiopian eunuch, then the Samaritans, then a full-scale Gentile and a Roman centurion into the church and helping the church understand Acts 11:18, “God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto God.” Why didn’t the church know that God was interested in saving Gentiles? Because they were culturally blind. They were looking for Gentiles—in order for a Gentile to become a Christian they were saying he must become Judaized first, he must keep kosher, he must fulfill the law, the customs. Only when he becomes fully Jewish, only then can he become a believer. It was going to be the church at Antioch that would shatter this cultural mode, and we’re going to see how they do it and how the Lord is at work, changing the shape of His church today as a result of the pattern at Antioch. These people that were scattered were telling the message only to Jews, which is natural. You witness to people just like you. You’re more comfortable with people that speak your language, think your thoughts, and belong to your political party. What Republican witnesses to leftist Democrats? And what leftist Democrat witnesses to right-wing Republicans? They’re almost mutually exclusive terms, even in the Body. In the body of Christ, we find political orientations. There are churches you can go to in LA County that are all Democrat, and they can’t conceive how anybody can be a Republican and be a Christian. And there are churches in Orange County that are all Republican, and they can’t conceive how anybody can be a Democrat and still be a Christian. So we feel comfortable with people who think a lot like us; and what often happens in the church is that we link all of our culture and our political beliefs as having the weight of our theological or doctrinal beliefs, so that it all becomes part of the same package. If you don’t line

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up with me on all the issues of life, including biblical issues and non-essential issues, then somehow you're outside the fold.

That's what was happening here. They witnessed only to Jews. But there were some of these people, "men from Cyprus and Cyrene [Libya, North Africa], [who] went to Antioch," and here we begin to see how the church changes, and uses new methods. They do something profoundly different. A new method, they spoke "to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20, NIV).

What's the significance of that statement? They spoke to the Greeks. It means they spoke Greek. If you're going to reach Greeks, you can't speak Hebrew, you can't speak Aramaic. You've got to learn the language, and you've got to speak it to them. Up to that point in the church, all the preaching was in Hebrew or Aramaic. Now, suddenly, you have people coming along saying, "It doesn't matter that you're not a Jew, that you're not Hebrew, we'll speak Greek to you." That created an uproar.

Let me illustrate culturally how that works today. Sometimes we think the gospel can only be communicated one way, and that's the way we're most comfortable with. I remember when the Jesus Movement began. God was using Calvary Chapel in the late sixties. There were people coming in that had a different style of music, a different style of hair and a different style of clothing. There were churches that really got upset with that approach and put signs on the door, "No bare feet allowed here." "No persons with sideburns below their ears may enter." "No person with hair below their collar line may enter." Why? Because Christian men don't look like that, right? What was happening in the Jesus Movement in those early years? What had suddenly begun to occur was that someone was speaking in the language that the people that were in that part of the culture could understand. They didn't understand, "O God, our help in ages past, our



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help for years to come”, but they understood the “love song.” God began to reach that segment of the culture through a different “language.” This time, not a foreign language, but music.

Music is a language all in itself, and not every one of us speaks the same language musically.

It’s always been interesting in this church, because we try to fulfill a broad spectrum of musical tastes and we don’t get out on the extremes of music. But even at that, all of us have differing perspectives of what good music is. “Good,” meaning, “what blesses me.” For some of you, it’s Bach, and for some of you, it’s Chet Atkins language. Not that he blesses you spiritually, I understand.

I’ve seen churches in an academic community that got nowhere ministering in that community because they never spoke the language of the university. The pastor would get up every Sunday and would wail away at anybody that was educated. Well, how are you going to reach educated people if every Sunday you’re attacking those evolutionary nuts in the biology department?

You’re not going to do it that way. Granted, if you’re in a university community, you can attack evolution, but you have to do it in a more sophisticated sense. You just can’t get up and wail away at it and use derogatory stories.

Have any of you tried to minister to a hundred and sixty junior high kids at one time? You’ve got to learn to speak their language. If you don’t, you’re in trouble. I don’t even try it. I’m not that crazy. I know what age I am and what communication skills I have. I don’t even try that stuff. What I’m simply saying is, as a body of Jesus Christ, we must learn that flexibility is often a watchword. Not that we ever compromise doctrine. There’s no difference doctrinally in terms of the belief in the Resurrection, the infallibility of Scripture and all that kind of thing. No difference at all between Antioch and Jerusalem. But a world of difference just in that phrase,

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“They spoke Greek.” Language was different. Culturally, they were approaching things differently.

“The Lord’s hand was with them. [That’s the real key.] And a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21, NIV). When the charismatic renewal arose, I noticed that the people that were leading the charismatic renewal were not people who had been leaders in mainstream Pentecostal historic churches. Why? Because the mainstreamers were like me. They had all these theological problems. If you’re going to lead people into a new experience with the Holy Spirit, you can’t always be concerned with “some things are not being done quite right here.” So God raised up a whole new generation of leadership. I’m excited about what the Lord’s going to do in the next generation of Christians, because you can be sure again, when He’s doing profound things, to reach culture. He can’t just dip in to the people who are currently in a place of responsibility. He’s going to always be thrusting forth new people who are fine-tuned to what the Spirit will want to accomplish in that particular time period.

So, sure enough, you’ve not only got a new method of doing something—speaking Greek—but you get new leaders at Antioch. The leaders are Barnabas and Paul. They’re not leaders at Jerusalem at all. They never were leaders. Barnabas maybe was in the second or third tier of leadership, but Paul really never had an easy time in Jerusalem, whether he was against the church or a member of the church. People had problems with Paul because of his mission to the Gentiles. Here we find Barnabas being asked by the church at Jerusalem to go up and check out the church at Antioch. So when he arrived, he saw the evidence of the grace of God. Who you put on a committee is so important. Who you ask to do something will often determine whether that gets done or not. If you put a negative person on a job, it’s going to wind up with them saying, “It can’t be done.” They’re going to see all the problems. The church had the good sense

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to pick a man whose very name meant “son of encouragement.” The body of Christ is always going to need people like that, people who don’t look at all the problems. What did Barnabas do when he got to Antioch? He saw the grace of God, and was glad. There are a lot of things he could have seen. If he had been a Judaizer or a legalist, he could have seen the bologna sandwiches that were on the tables. He could have seen the lack of kosher diet. He could have seen the phylacteries that needed to be worn on the person’s head and on the arm when they prayed. They weren’t there. He could have seen all that and said, “Things aren’t right here. And besides, they’re baptizing men who haven’t been circumcised and can’t be. That place is a theological zoo out there in Antioch. We’ve got to get it straightened out.”

But he saw what God had done in changing peoples’ lives. He went to the deeper issues. Is there a fundamental life change? Not an external change. Not just wearing different clothing, but looking for a heart change. Once you were liars, but now you’re honest. Once you were depraved, but now delivered. Once you were possessed, but now you are healed. All these kinds of things, Barnabas saw in the church at Antioch and was glad.

He encouraged the church greatly. He himself was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, He brought a great number of people to the Lord. New leadership—Barnabas never had that kind of leadership in Jerusalem. But Barnabas does a very wise thing. To me, Barnabas is one of the great unsung heroes of the New Testament. Really, without Barnabas, we wouldn’t have Saul. What does Barnabas do? He realizes that his ministry has its limits. I want to submit to you that any person in a place of responsibility has a terrible time learning that, because we all like to think we can do everything equally well. That’s not the case.

Barnabas realizes the church is growing but it needs a kind of ministry that’s beyond what he’s able to give it. So he traipses 125 miles north to the university town of Tarsus, where there is, at

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the university town, a scholar of scholars who is the brightest of the Hebrew world, who studied under Gamaliel, and who is fluent in the literature and the language of the Gentile world. This genius Christian was named Saul, and had been so dramatically converted on the road to Tarsus; after leaving Jerusalem, because he caused too much trouble, he had buried himself in Tarsus for about ten years as a non-entity. We don't even know what in the world he was doing at Tarsus. But Barnabas remembers the incredible melding of the Hebrew world and the Greek world that was in this one person's life. He said, "This church needs more than an exhorter." Barnabas was an encourager, an exhorter. Barnabas said, "This church needs an apologist. This church needs a teacher, someone who can deeply ground all these new converts in their faith." So he goes and says to Saul (Paul), "You've got to come with me." So he brings him down.

Notice how Luke so suddenly notes the difference between pre-Paul and post-Paul at Antioch. Pre-Paul is a time when Barnabas is encouraging the church. In verse 23, "He was glad and encouraged them." But look what happens when Saul gets there, in verse 26, "They taught great numbers of people." A world of difference between being encouraged and being taught.

Encouraging ministries are ones that tell us motivational stories. They get us heart-warmed. The wonderful kind of motivational ministry that Robert Schuller has, for example, puts wings on weary hearts. It's encouraging for many people to hear stories that touch the heart.

Then there's the apologist side of the ministry of Walter Martin, who puts a floor underneath your feet and teaches—doesn't just tell inspiring stories, but teaches. Because the church has to be grounded by something deeper than motivational stories. There's doctrine to be learned. And there are roots to be put down.

This new leadership arises at Antioch. The disciples there, for the first time, are called "Christians." Look at the names of churches today as compared to churches a generation ago.

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When I came to this church, our name was “Glad Tidings Assembly of God.” That name served this church well in the forties and fifties and early sixties. But we began to realize, in the early seventies, that “Glad Tidings” was a word that people didn’t use too much in the vernacular anymore. “Tidings” is a word that’s kind of gone out. So we said, “Let’s call it something different.” We said, “The church buildings are a center, and we want to be Christian, and we are located in Newport, so why not ‘Newport Christian Center’?” When we came to Costa Mesa, then, “Newport Mesa Christian Center.” That was before there were hardly any “Christian Centers.” Now, there are so many “Christian Centers,” it’s almost a denomination without being a denomination. I’m not sure that I buy into everything every Christian Center is doing. So we may change our name again down the road. As a church, we have got to hang loose and stay flexible. And realize that names and buildings and locations aren’t really what the church is about. The church is about a ministry that is not bound by a name or by personality or by a building or a particular format. The Lord of the church is free to do whatsoever He will in the church. Buildings, while useful, do not define the church. The Lord is constantly at work, enlarging His church and changing His church and making it more effective. New leadership is needed.

We’ve taken some giant steps ahead in the last few years in reaching out in ministry. Forty percent of the adults in Orange County are single adults and we have been praying for a number of years, “Lord, help us to more effectively reach single adults.” We’re doing that better than we’ve ever done it. We want to do that increasingly well. There are so many people with problems; the pastoral staff doesn’t have the skill, the time or the ability to counsel the people that need to be counseled. “Send us persons who are godly and trained and can do this.” We took a giant step a year ago and got a junior high pastor. Some people say, “Why couldn’t we have

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gotten a volunteer to do it?” Volunteers only have so much time. Kids today by the age of twelve are making lifetime decisions: Are they going to use drugs? Have sex? Or whatever. Are they going to make Christ their Lord? When I was eighteen, people were making those decisions, and now it’s at age twelve. Ten years from now, it will probably be at age eight. We had to say, what are we doing to reach these unchurched kids who are in a critical moment in their life?

We have, in Orange County, some areas we haven’t reached. We have a tremendously vast number of university students from foreign countries. The greatest mission field is at our doorstep. I pray that the Lord will help us find someone to lend a hand in a thrust in that area.

We desperately need to do a better job helping marriages and families. We need to pray and think about how to better strengthen family life and married life within the body of Christ in this community.

We need, as a church, to think better about what our obligation is to one another, within the context of smaller groups, where we have the liberty to share our faith and share our needs and, in a non-threatening Christ-centered atmosphere, grow by mutual encouragement and study. We really must address that as the years come and go.

There are areas of specialized evangelism, crisis evangelism, evangelism and ministry to handicapped people, which we really haven’t gotten into; and ministry to various segments within the community. The church, if it’s going to be a vital church, must always be out on the cutting-edge. What ground is the Holy Spirit wanting us to break into next? So there will be new leaders that will rise up to do that. Just as we have to get new methods, we have to get new leaders.

Verse 27 indicates, however, that with whatever new thing God is doing, it’s not out there in the left field. It’s always linked to the community He’s already gathered.

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So there is a prophet from Jerusalem who comes, by the name of Agabus. He stands up and, through the Spirit, predicts severe famine that spread over the entire Roman world, and we know that this actually happened in the reign of the emperor Claudius. “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” (Acts 11:29–30, NIV).

That’s a remarkable series of verses there. Think about it. That church is a Gentile church. It had not been started by the Jerusalem church. There was no overt decision on the part of the Jerusalem church saying, “Let’s go up to Antioch and begin the first Gentile church.” The Jerusalem church never had a missions convention. It never took faith promises to send missionaries up to Antioch: “We are going to make an overt decision to evangelize the Gentiles.” The Jerusalem church had never done that. They had been dragged, practically kicking and screaming, into ministry to the Gentiles and, only reluctantly, seemingly concluded that also to the Gentiles, repentance and eternal life has been given. The Jerusalem church, in their culture, was one of the most nonmissionary churches probably that there was in the Early Church. Because it was encapsulated within its culture. It did not look beyond its cultural walls. So the Antioch church could have had a chip on its shoulder. They could have said, “Here we sat, fifteen years after the Resurrection, and no one had come to us from Jerusalem. Here they’ve got all the miracles, they’ve got all the teaching, and they’ve got all the experience. We were unreached. It took some non-entities, people from Cyprus and Cyrene, to come and share the good news with us. Not even apostles. They didn’t even send anybody high-ranking to begin with. Now they’re going to have trouble. Why should we help them? And besides, we’ve already formed a different denomination up here. We don’t want to be linked with those people.”

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As you know, I hate the term “independent church.” I believe the term “independent church” is as much of a non-truth as the words “independent Christian.” There are no independent Christians. You have to be interdependent if you’re going to be a Christian. There are no independent churches. If you’re going to get the work of the Lord done worldwide, you’ve got to cooperate with other church bodies. Because no single church can float the kind of missionary program or educational enterprise or literature enterprise that needs to be floated if the whole body is to be ministered to, so churches have to work together. They can’t call themselves independent, really. They may try to, but it’s not true. They can’t be independent and be effective in the body of Christ.

The church at Antioch does a marvelous thing. It probably has absolutely no real good reason to do something nice for the Jerusalem church. And after all, the Jerusalem church has the gray heads and the more spiritual, mature people. These are all new Christians up at Antioch. They take an offering for the Jerusalem church. The Jerusalem church, more spiritually mature, had never taken an offering for them. They take an offering for the Jerusalem church. They say they’re going to be suffering. How can they be suffering? Didn’t earlier they sell everything and have it all in common a few years? Where did all the money go? They spent it. They spent it all, and besides, they had been persecuted and probably a lot of their properties were confiscated. That’s why the Lord let them sell it anyway. They might as well enjoy it as their enemies. Now this young church helps.

That says to us, by the way, that an effective church is one that cares about the body of Christ elsewhere. We, as a church family, for example, express our concern for missions and the establishment of the churches in the various parts of the world in which we have missionaries serving; we’re doing an Antiochian kind of thing. We absolutely have not been benefited at all



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by those churches out there. But we're saying, "We have an obligation, because of the gospel, to help."

There is a famine. Not necessarily a famine of literal lack of food, but a famine of God's Word, and of the healing, saving power of Jesus Christ, and we want to do something about that, so we're involved.

It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians. Fifteen years after Jesus had risen from the dead, finally a tag is put on these people, and it's natural that it happened at Antioch, because Antioch was one of the great centers of the chariot races. It had a pro-chariot franchise, much like American pro-football franchises. There were four franchises in Antioch: the blues, the reds, and two other colors. They were aligned with various parties. One of them, for example, with Caesar, the chariot franchise of Caesar was called the "Caesareans." How natural that in a pro-sports city like Antioch, the partisans would attach an athletic name to the new community in its midst, "These are not Cesareans, these are 'Christians,' 'the partisans of Christ,' 'the little Christs'." Here they came into being. And it would be this church in Antioch that not only had the new methods and the new leaders, but the new purpose—because Antioch, not Jerusalem, would become the missionary center for the growth of the church in Acts 13–28. It was always to Antioch that Paul, the missionary, would return, because that was the church that most had a heart for reaching the world.

I'm pro-Jerusalem and pro-Antioch. I want to be careful that I don't—in talking about the shape of the changing church—be down on the Jerusalem church. I'm not. I grew up in a very structured kind of sense, and my Jerusalem church is the Assemblies of God per se. I love all the traditions and things we have done in the Assemblies of God. Yet I realize, if I look at our average Assembly of God churches, if we're going to reach the community we live in, we're

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going to have to do some things differently than maybe we did it in Cotter, Arkansas, where my father pastored, or in California. Therefore, the church needs its rootage in tradition, if you come with tradition within any church body. We make an effort to say in this church that we're trying to see God do something new, and it doesn't matter where you came from, but where you are going—that counts. You can see, on the one hand, God working in the ways in which we are accustomed to seeing him move. But on the other hand, we have to stay flexible and open enough to realize that God, in every generation, is going to want to break through in areas we haven't seen, with ministries we haven't imagined.

That's why I don't get as upset as some people do on the subject of music. I realize there are some people who get all bent out of shape on what the size of the beat is before you become carnal. It just seems to me that music is like a language: you figure out what speaks to a particular generation and you glorify Christ in it and you use it. There is some music out there in the gospel world today that doesn't do a single thing for me. It doesn't edify me at all if it's not my style. If my kind of music were the only kind of music ever played, there would be a very narrow span in the body of Christ. So the Lord uses art forms, educational attainments at various levels, all kinds of people, so that by all means, we might win some. That's where the bottom line is.

Are we true to Christ in our basic doctrines? Are we true in our heart? Then, can we be flexible on everything else so that we can see Christ plant His flag of ownership in every life, whether the person is like us or different from us, whether they're the same color or not, whether they're the same age or not? We want that to be the case. The church will take the shape that the Holy Spirit has for the hour in which it lives.

### **Closing Prayer**

## **THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE CHURCH**

### **Acts 11:19–30**

Our Lord, we thank You this evening for Your Word. We pray that we may be alert and attuned, as people who live at the close of the twentieth century, to be astute and read the signs of the times and be faithful to You. To have an old-fashioned gospel, while at the same time saying, “Lord, help us to learn the methods that work in our generation,” and You will certainly raise up new generations to do Your will and Your work. You’re not limited to man, and You’re not limited to any method. We just open ourselves in this church body to say, “Lord, have Your will and work in every arena of our church life, that we may see as wide and as flexible and as penetrating a ministry in this community as possibly can be done.” We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.