

THE REVIVAL AT ANTIOCH
Great Revivals
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We're looking at Great Revivals of the New Testament. We're selecting three. Last week we looked at the great revival of Jerusalem. Next week the revival at Ephesus. Today in Acts 11, the Revival at Antioch.

Acts 11:19-20 "Those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia [modern day Lebanon] Cyprus, and Antioch speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene [north Africa] who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also preaching the Lord Jesus."

As we look at the experience of the church at Antioch today I'd like to look with you at the city itself and the founding of the church and some characteristics of this church.

Antioch. If I had a favorite church of the New Testament, I guess I would select Antioch as my favorite. We don't know as much about it as some of the others but yet there are some exciting features to that church which I think if part of any church will make it spiritually alive and tuned up to do the Lord's work.

Antioch itself was a town located about 300 miles to the north of Jerusalem. It was in Syria – still is in Syria. It was a major city in the ancient world. In fact, Antioch was the third largest city in the ancient world – Rome being the largest city and Alexandria of Egypt being the second largest. Then came Antioch. A large city by ancient world's standard but not so huge by our standards. Some five hundred thousand people living in this town located in a beautiful river valley some fifteen miles from the Mediterranean Sea line. A beautiful, gorgeous town. Five hundred thousand may not seem like a lot of people but when you consider the fact that they did not have the kind of electrical or plumbing or other kinds of facility that we have in our culture it gives you an appreciation of how five hundred thousand people could live together without modern sanitation, garbage trucks, paved roads and the like.

It boasted the longest main street in the world. Some 4½ miles in length. Covered colonnade on each side of the street. That's 4½ miles in length. It was a cosmopolitan town. A town in which there were Jews and Gentiles, barbarians and Greeks. The town in which it was said that the western civilization met and rubbed shoulders with Assyrian desert. It was a crossroads kind of a town. Crossroads in commerce, crossroads in culture.

It was a town that was also a multi religious type of town. The Romans tolerated a good measure of religious freedom as long as it didn't interfere with Roman governing purposes. Outside the city of Antioch were located ancient groves, temples. Immorality was there centered in the groves.

Antioch although being in a beautiful river valley and having a beautiful town, beautiful setting was known as one of the most immoral cities of the ancient world. Rome's morals as bad as they were had been corrupted by Antioch's morals which were worse.

In this very beautiful town there were people who lived very unbeautiful lives which is kind of a characteristic of human life isn't it? And a characteristic as well of major urban areas. It is in

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this city that the gospel is going to come with great power. But there was going to be a real difference in this city than the existence of the church in the city of Jerusalem. In this city, unlike Jerusalem, the Judaic faith was certainly not in the majority. Jews were a distinct minority. Here in Antioch Jesus was never physically present. In Jerusalem he was. There was a faith to build on in Jerusalem because Jesus had ministered in the town. But in Antioch he had never been. In Jerusalem there were the apostles but in the first coming of the presence of the Christian community to Antioch there were no apostles. In fact, in Antioch there would be kind of a watershed test of Christianity. That is could Christianity be planted successfully in a non-Jewish culture as it was in the Jewish culture. It was successful in Jerusalem but after all, Jesus was Jewish. Jerusalem was Jewish. Because of the fulfillment of the law and the prophets could the gospel stand the test of translating into what we might call a pagan or Greek culture.

You know there's always a certain amount of risk that is involved in transplanting plants. A plant can die in transplant. We look at the church in its transplanting from Jerusalem to Antioch and we ask, Can the gospel make it? That's a city with a teeming population, a different language to cope with, different culture to cope with, an entire different religious perspective to cope with from the citizenry. Can the gospel make it in such a place? And if the gospel can make it in such a place, then it can make it anywhere.

We are still living off the fruit of the successful test of the transplanting of the gospel from the Jerusalem culture to the Antioch gospel. Because it proved that the gospel could come without Jesus physically being present or the apostles being physically present. In fact even at Antioch there is no record of signs and wonders being performed in association with the planting of the church, although at Jerusalem they were bountiful. It may be that they were performed and Luke simply doesn't note it. But there is that element of the planting of the Antioch church.

If I were starting a church at Antioch I would certainly not do it as described for us in the book of Acts. I think I have a much better plan. I'd say 300 miles to the north is the third greatest city in the world. The Lord has said for us to go to all the world in His Great Commission. He told us to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost part of the world. Antioch is the first stage of the uttermost part of the world. The great town is waiting for the gospel. So here's what I purpose we do. I purpose we send out 70 persons (Jesus sent out 70). We select 70 persons who have been healed recently or had some incredible things done in their life and they can communicate that as well as something about the word. We send them as kind of an advance team to Antioch. We section the city off into 35 different segments and put two in each section. They go to whatever house is receptive or whatever marketplace is receptive and share their testimony, they preach the word. They kind of saturate the city. We want to create an advance sort of climate. Following that witness of the 70 what we'll do is send 6 of the apostles. Not just one but we'll take half of the contingency we have and put them in the town and they're going to preach every week. Peter will be among them. At first he won't because we're going to save him for the great open-air meeting we're going to have. We're going to rent the largest coliseum in Antioch. Antioch did have a coliseum. They had the chariot races in Antioch which were the equivalent in ancient culture I think of our pro football game. Peter had proven success; he would give the sermon, the altar call. We'd take the fruit of that meeting and we'd have church at Antioch. That's the way I would have done it. While this was going on the Jerusalem church would have been fasting and praying for the success of the endeavor at Antioch.

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That may have been the way the Lord wanted them to do it. But it was not the way that it was done. There's very intriguing reason why that was not done. That leads us to understand how the church at Antioch was founded.

If the Jerusalem church had really understood the Lord's order about go in to all the world and go to the uttermost part of the world they would have moved out on their own to begin evangelizing. The fact is they didn't. They had the orders to go. They had the leaders to go with the orders. They had apostles and prophets. They had in their own experience a successful model of what it is like to have growing church, externally and internally. Some churches grow externally and people aren't growing internally. Some may grow internally and don't grow externally. But Jerusalem had it all together – a successful model of what a church should be. They could simply go to Antioch and say here's what worked for us and here's what will work for you. They certainly had spiritual as well as financial strength. They had it within their grasp to do it. But for some reason they didn't. Acts gives us why the Jerusalem church didn't move out. Then by the way of contrast how the Antioch church really got started.

The reason why the Jerusalem didn't actually move out with a missionary party to start a church in the city of Antioch was they had what we would call hang-ups. Cultural hang-ups. Peter gives us kind of an inclination of this when the Lord is giving him the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven with all manner of clean and unclean animals. In Acts 10 he says when the Lord tells him to rise and eat he says, "Lord, all my life I've never eaten anything that was unclean." When he comes to the Gentile Cornelius' home in Caesaria which is some 60 miles to the north of Jerusalem Peter introduces himself by saying, You know how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate or visit any one of another nation. That's why evangelism from the Jerusalem church in Antioch wouldn't have worked. It was unlawful. It was against church tradition. In order to effectively witness to people one must establish a personal relationship with them. The Jerusalem church didn't have blimps to drop gospel tracks on notch. The most effective transmitting of the gospel is face to face, one to one, person to person. If it was unlawful for a Jew to eat with a Gentile or visit in the house of a Gentile then right from the word go the Great Commission couldn't be obeyed because the Jerusalem church couldn't figure out how they could get around their rules, in order to obey the Great Commission. Churches still have problems like this. Bu that was the problem with the Jerusalem church.

Not to take anything away from the Jerusalem church. Within that culture they were a dynamo. Here was a church that within a matter of months grew from 120 people to well in excess of ten to fifteen thousand people. Hats off to any church that can do that. And do it without people getting lost in the crowd.

But in the Mediterranean world of about 250 million people there were only about six million Jews. The Jerusalem church would be successful in reaching a narrow slice of the pie but in order for the 244 million people to be reached a whole new style had to emerge. You say, I thought every new church was the same, was perfect. Wrong on both counts. Each church in the New Testament like each church today, like each individual today has its uniqueness. And each church like each person has some of its drawbacks and weaknesses. I dare you to find a perfect church. The Lord wanted to reach the 244 million in addition to the 6 million. This tells us something very important from the Lord's perspective about the growth of his church. The church has a tendency to say, "Look how we've grown!" forgetting that the Lord is concerned with humanity as a whole. That it is not simply what has been done. It is what is yet to be done.

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The Antioch church is therefore brought into being. It's not brought into being by Jerusalem saints. They have cultural hang-ups. How does the gospel then come to Antioch?

A persecution arose because of Stephen's preaching and Saul's persecuting activities. It's striking that if a church does not move out to obey what the Lord has told it to do that he finds another way of getting them to move out. It's better to move out when he speaks the first time rather than hit us over the head with a bat.

Sure enough persecution arose. Persecution accomplished what obedience to the great commission or disobedience had not accomplished. As long as things were ok the church stayed in Jerusalem. But once persecution started they had to scatter. Some scattered to Antioch. Those that scattered to Antioch in the first wave from Jerusalem went to the Jews only. They were continuing the Jerusalem model of the church. They were not yet ready to visit with the Gentiles or have relationships with them.

Then finally some persons came who had a less tightly binding tradition background. They came from North Africa, Cyrene and Cyprus. They came to Antioch and they spoke also to the Greeks. To reach the Greeks you've got to speak their language. To reach people you must know where they're at. A really important lesson for individual witness and for the church that the Jerusalem church knew theology, it knew the scripture, it knew Jesus, it had apostles, it had signs and wonders but in Antioch it wasn't going anywhere because it didn't understand and couldn't relate to the people that were there. Often that is why a church or an individual may not be able to meet the needs of a community. It may simply be speaking its own language and church jargon and doing its own thing off in isolation and not really tying in to where the needs of the world is and where there can be a bridge built to establish a link between human needs and the answer which the gospel brings.

There are really several progressions of the founding of the church. First the Jews come. I don't want to take away from their role in the church. In fact, wherever you find in the book of Acts, Paul going on a missionary journey, you'll find that he went to the synagogue first it tells in his writings in Romans. He goes to the Jew first and then to the Greek. Why does Paul do this? He does it because it's a very important strategy in the founding of a church or a building of a base on which to reach a community. Of all people the Jewish people from centuries had been prepared by God through the scriptures, through the law and the prophets, through their relationship with one another so that when a Jewish person was completed – that is to say he believed in Jesus as the Messiah – he was already to be a teacher. Somebody that was coming in from a pagan background didn't know beans. Didn't know Genesis from Hosea. Or sanctification from redemption. But the Jewish audience would have an understanding of this. God was preparing them for a key role of responsibility. So if Jewish persons could first be brought to faith in Christ in a particular town then they served as kind of teaching, spiritual supportive base for the many people coming in that had had no previous contact with God.

If we do nothing with all that we receive the lifelong work that the Lord has been attempting to do in our life. We're simply sitting on what we have rather than using it.

There's a place for the Jews in the church, the people who have followed God literally all their life.

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Then comes the next stage – speaking to the Greeks. It is an Antioch that the believers will become known by a new name. This is because the church style is different. The Greeks are involved. An Antioch they would have terms that would apply to various factions. They had the diminutive term “ian” attached to the name. Like the party that belonged to Caesar was the Caesarian party. The party belonging to Christ became identified as the Christian party. A whole new identity emerged as the Greeks were brought into the church.

This church therefore became much different in membership and constitution from the Jerusalem church. It had a mixed group from the beginning. Then word gets back, 300 miles south to the Jerusalem church saying, Do you hear what’s happening in Antioch? There are persons coming to faith in Jesus the Messiah. The Jerusalem church said we must do something about that. We must establish some kind of a link.

So Acts 11:22 says “News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem and they sent...” They sent. Who would the Jerusalem church send for this mission? If you want to kill a project then select the wrong person. The one good way to sabotage a committee is to give a committee a job to do and then pick a person to be on the committee that’s opposed to the job and you’ll sink it every time.

Can you imagine if they were to pick one of what’s called the Judaizers from the Jerusalem church? One of the people who were causing trouble and saying, You must keep all Jewish customs and laws or you are not a Christian. Can you imagine if they had picked one of them to go to Antioch? They’d inspected the church and what would they have seen? Not the grace of God, like Barnabus saw. He would have seen people eating hot dogs and bacon. He would have gone back to Jerusalem and said, “They can’t be Christians there because they’re eating hot dogs and bacon.”

But the Jerusalem church had the good sense to send a person who was large hearted – Barnabus. In the first time we find him in scripture was he’s selling things to give to people in need. The next time we find him is when he’s taking this person, Saul, who now confesses that he’s come to believe in Jesus. He’s taking Saul when no one else will have anything to do with him. Barnabus goes and gets him and introduces him to the apostles at Jerusalem and says, He really is a true believer. He’s the kind of person who believes and is generous. They send him and when he comes to Antioch he sees the grace of God. There’s a lot of other things he could have probably seen and pointed out as weaknesses or immaturity in the new believers. But he saw the grace of God and he was glad. He exhorted the believer.

Barnabus as an exhorter to me suggests that he was sort of an inspirational speaker. Under his leadership at Antioch the church continued to grow. Then Barnabus did an incredible thing. He recognized that the church as it continued to grow that it needed in leadership someone who had greater talents than himself. That to me is one of the most credible talents of Barnabus, incredible qualities of anybody in all the scripture. He said the job is bigger than my ability. Therefore rather than try to frustrate this church by managing it or being in it with my ability, I’ll go get somebody else. He refused to live by what is called now the Peter principle of getting promoted to the level of your incompetence. Barnabus knew what his level was. He honestly recognized his limitations, traveled another 300 miles to the city of Tarsus where he found the rabbi Saul. And Saul came back.

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If the Lord ever uniquely prepared a person for Antioch it was this man. Trained as a rabbi, spoke fluent Greek, had been brought up in a Greek town, the great university town of Tarsus one of the greatest university cities in the ancient world, and Roman citizen to boot.

When we talk about redemption, we see it in Paul's life. Redemption suggests to us that the things that we have done even before we are a Christian are usable in our new life in Jesus Christ. Paul may have many a day scratched his head and wondered why he was memorizing all the rabbis. That was part of the training of the period. If you were in training to be a rabbi, intensive memorization, intensive work with both the scriptures and the commentaries on the scriptures. He might well have wondered some day after he had studied for 14 hours what am I doing? Here is the person who can undergird that developing church at Antioch with solid food from the scripture and from the living word Jesus.

He may have wondered why it was he was brought up in a university town. But when you hear him on Mars hill or Lystra where he speaks to Greeks, communicate as he must have done at Antioch you understand that he wasn't learning the pagan poets in vain. He could turn around and use it in his Christian life.

That Roman citizenship, the Lord redeemed. I want to say to you: Whatever is in your past, the Lord can take and somehow use now in your life in Christ for his own glory and for your good.

Saul comes. When Saul comes to Antioch Luke in writing the history tells us this, "Barnabus went to Tarsus to look for Saul. When he had found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a large company of people. I don't want to do an overplay here but it is significant to me that the first time the word "peace" is used in reference to the church at Antioch is when Paul got there. Before then the ministry had been exhortation. If I could characterize Barnabus' ministry he was an inspirational speaker who could encourage you with stories, with motivations, things that would make you want to get out and slay the world. Don't ever forget that that is a crucial ministry the Lord has. The Lord in the ministry wants Barnabus's but he also wants Saul's. Systematic trained teaching which occurs through Paul's ministry provides a foundational base for this church to continue its expansion and growth.

This church then becomes rooted in the written word and in the living word, Jesus Christ. What are some characteristics or distinguishing qualities of this church which has come into a being? A successful transplant. Let's look at them quickly.

One tremendous quality is what I would simply describe as warmth toward new persons. Or the inclusion of new believers. You must remember that the church of Antioch grew rapidly. It does not happen in social situations or with people who are unfriendly to one another or lacking in love toward one another or inhospitable to strangers. That kind of growth can only occur when we reach out to establish vital spiritual ties and friendship ties with other persons. Establish that kind of linkage, which is crucial to the church. That happened at Antioch. New people found it easy to be included and be a part of the church.

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Another tremendous thing at Antioch, a tremendous Christian quality, is what I would describe is love of learning. They listened to Paul teach for a whole year. I believe the church continued to build upon that teaching foundation.

What's so significant about that? We must remember the educational context of first century people. A good many of them would be illiterate, never had the opportunity to learn how to read. They wouldn't be able to come to an assembly such as this with note pad and pencil in hand. Christianity in its coming came largely because most of the population was this way, to illiterate persons. Persons who hadn't had the advantage of much formal learning so to speak. But the striking thing is the gospel when it comes never talks down to people's ability and says, Because you've never had a chance, you'll never have a change. Because you're stupid you might as well remain stupid. You don't have the capacity to learn anyway. No approach like this in Christianity to these people at Antioch. But rather a recognition that because of creation God put within us an ability to mentally respond to our creator and our redeemer. That involved the possibility for growth intellectually and spiritually. The church at Antioch, many of the people would not have in any way had the kind of educational background you have.

Another thing about this church I think is a special sensitivity to the Spirit of God. 11:27 "In those days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them stood up and foretold a famine that would come over the whole world." Notice the response of the Antioch church. Not idle curiosity. But a real sensitivity to what word had been spoken.

I would submit that this church was spiritually mature enough to separate false word from true word. Probably this was a church that was able to distinguish between the word of the Lord and the word of man so that when Agabus spoke he spoke truly as the prophet of God and the church had the sensitivity to accept it.

That sensitivity of the spirit led to another great quality that was generosity. Agabus said there was a famine coming over the world. They looked around to see who they could help. Agabus didn't suggest Jerusalem. He simply gave the prophecy and the Antioch church on its own drew the deduction. They said there's Jerusalem saints that are poorer than we, a lower income than we do. Even though they did send the gospel to us by missionary endeavor and maybe they were a little bit prejudice at the start, what's that matter now. We're in Christ. We're one in Christ. Forget the past.

Too many churches are thwarted. Too much Christian growth is shattered because we remember how somebody treated us. Some have said, I will never again do anything in a church because I was once the victim of some unfortunate circumstance.

If the Antioch church had had that attitude the Jerusalem saints would have died and that church could have said, It serves them right! But none of this kind of thing. There is an overwhelming generosity that arises. They sent an offering to help them out in a time of famine.

A depth of leadership in this church. They find it easy to send Barnabus and Saul off to Jerusalem to give the aid. They could get along without them while they took the famine relief down to Jerusalem. Acts 13:1-2 the five key leaders of the church at Antioch are meeting together, fasting and worshipping the Lord and praying and the Lord says, set apart for me Barnabus and Saul for the work I have called them. In one blow the Holy Spirit is going to rip

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out the two top leaders of the Antioch church – the teacher and the exhorter – and they're going somewhere else. What's the church going to do without its two top persons? It's going to keep right on going. The church was not wedded to a personality that stood behind the pulpit preaching or teaching. It was wedded to the Lord Jesus Christ with a purpose for that community and to one another. The church survived the loss of its two key leaders. So Paul never did come back to pastor the church at Antioch although he visited a couple times later. A depth of leadership in this church.

The way the Antioch church participated in the starting of other new churches was interesting. They didn't send one of their young men. They kind of did things in reverse in the first century. Maybe that's why they got so much done. They took the cream of their leadership and the Antioch church could keep right on going.

A church cannot afford to be attached to any one personality. I find no church in the New Testament which was simply a pastor led church. Most all the churches had a multiplicity of leadership. There was a depth of leadership. If persons become a part of the church simply and fore the sole reason that there's a particular person pastoring it, that is the worst way in the world to build a church. The reason is we are as people a part of the vision of our purpose in the community and love for one another. The great thing about the church of Jesus Christ is it can keep on going when its leaders go through transition. To me this is a fundamental principle of the scripture. I see this as a need within our own church to more and more develop a depth of leadership within the church.

A characteristic of this church is what I call a missionary involvement. When Barnabus and Saul go off on their missionary journey, twice they return to the church at Antioch. And the church had a chance to rejoice in what God had done. At the end of the first missionary journey in Acts 14:27 and 28 Luke records, When Paul and Barnabus arrived back at Antioch they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to Gentiles. The Antioch church was the first church to officially send missionaries out. And when the missionaries came back they gave a report to the church and the church was fascinated to hear what God had done. That would suggest to us by the way that when the church of Jesus Christ thinks more than simply its own self when it thinks about others and about the Lord's compassion and the Lord's heart for the world and it does something about it, things will always happen. When Paul and Barnabus return to Antioch after the first journey and after the second journey no longer could it simply be said that the church was at Antioch. But the church was literally over almost all the Mediterranean civilization of the first century world.

Something happened when that church acted in faith and love and prayer and became involved with the cause of Christ in the world. Selfish people are never beautiful people. A selfish person can only think about himself. There are more exciting things than that. Same thing about churches. Churches that are selfish inevitably become turned in on themselves and fail to see the purposes of God and therefore fail to grow and develop into beautiful and vibrant plants in the Lord's vineyard.

One closing scripture. Acts 4:12. Some years before the founding of the Antioch church. Peter is appearing before the Sanhedrin for the very first time. He is under interrogation for the healing of a man who had been lame from birth. He stands up and prophetically preaches to the Sanhedrin about the fact that God has raised Jesus from the dead. He closes his message verse

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12, with this awesome statement: “There is salvation in no one else for there is no other name under heaven given among men where by men must be saved.”

I'd like you to see for moment that Peter had the theology before he had the methodology. He knew in his heart if Jesus is risen from the dead then there can be no other way in which persons could be saved. But just like you and I have gone through this I knew something to be true but I went on and on for a long time and did nothing about it at all. Peter knew it was true. There was no other name. But what was he doing? Careless about Antioch. He could care less about taking the gospel to the Gentiles which was part of the Great Commission. He simply kept staying in Jerusalem where it was comfortable, all the time quoting his Bible verses. There is no other name. He knew it to be true but he did not act upon it. Until such a time as the Holy Spirit through the intervening of circumstances forces action upon that which had been stated.

From that I personally learn and I think we as a church learn, that it's possible on the one hand to have a profession of faith. But on the other hand separate from that a performance of faith. Through the founding of the church at Antioch we begin to see a living performance of the church's living profession. In 4:12 it made the profession in Antioch and beyond to tell us of the thing actually being done.

Lord, bring my performance together with my profession so I may do and be all that You want me to do and be.

Our heavenly Father as we look back into history we give you thanks for this church at Antioch. This band of disciples that banded together from different economic, racial, religious backgrounds and found their unity in you. We praise you for the history of that period. We thank you now for the realization of your presence within our midst and that indeed some of the patterns we see at Antioch or even Jerusalem, are the kinds of things we see you doing in our midst. Help us Lord, perceive the difference between the seedtime and the harvest time. First the blade and then the ear. Then the full corn. The times when we look at your work and we're looking for full corn. Instead you're pointing us to the developmental stages of what you're doing. We are cautious and careful not to judge because we know that you are the Lord of the harvest and in your good time you will bring forth that vine which you have planted to its full length and purpose. You've planted your vine. We are your branch in this fellowship and this community. We ask that You would do all in our midst that would cause us to be the people that you would have us to be and that we would be responsive enough to you to bring our performance together with a statement of faith. So that in all things we might give glory to you and manifest to the world that by our love we show you forth as Lord and Savior. Grant us that newness, that springtime, that joy and effervescence which so mark the development of this Antioch church being lost in joy and love to you and to one another. We ask these things in your name. Amen.