



Being an Antioch Church (Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-2)

It was my full intention to start this week on my new series on the Seven Churches of Asia this week with an introduction on Revelation 1. The general idea was to explore seven churches who were in trouble for one reason or another to see, to put it crudely, if we could pick up any tips as we go through the process of reflection and renewal in our own church.

But the Lord has other ideas. What I did know was that we are not called to be like any of those seven churches and that I was reminded of a call I made two and a half years in an evening service to be like another particular church. God has already spoken to us over the course of my ministry of the kind of church we should be. It's just that the elapse of time, the fact it was preached to the faithful remnant in the evening service and many of you not even being in the fellowship at that time means that that most of you will be hearing about this for the first time.

There's a lesson here: if God teaches you something, remember it and treasure it in your heart. We have been asking the Lord what sort of church we should be like. The answer has been with us for some time.

So what sort of church should we be like: an Antioch church. What's an Antioch church? It's one that has the values of one of the most innovative and productive churches in the New Testament. Because of what God did at Antioch, the church changed from an obscure Jewish sect into a world beating phenomenon. The message of Antioch is that God wants all His churches to be Antiochs, not obscure people doing obscure things.

In its early days, the church at Jerusalem and in Judea struggled with the whole notion that the Holy Spirit was being poured out on the Gentiles. They found it difficult to cope with the idea that people other than Jews could know Christ. But they first had to face up to the fact that Samaritans accepted Christ and then started to come to terms with Romans like Cornelius becoming a Christian. The apostles may have walked for three and half years with Jesus, moved in the power of the Spirit; yet were out of their depth when it came to the conversion of gentiles. But God had other plans! And those plans were worked through, not by the apostles but a group of un-named disciples from places that maybe you hardly know anything about!

19 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. 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.

Most Jewish believers fleeing persecution, shared the gospel at Jews, not Gentiles. But there were some from Cyprus and Cyrene who went to a Gentile city - Antioch which was in Syria. Why from Cyprus and Cyrene? Remember, these people were still Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene. First of all, there were large Jewish groups in both Cyprus and Cyrene - remember that Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry His cross? Simon wasn't a Gentile. He was a Jew in Jerusalem for the Passover.

Secondly, the Jews of Cyprus and Cyrene sat far more comfortably with Gentiles than those in Judea and Galilee. Jews of the Diaspora did because they had to so they didn't have to be convinced in the same way that Peter had to that Gentiles could be saved. The wording of Acts 11:19 tend to suggest that the

people in Antioch were seeing conversion of Gentiles about the same time as Philip was seeing conversion of the Samaritans. They were ahead of the game in Antioch. Whilst Peter was wrestling with the notion of Cornelius being saved, the believers from Cyprus and Cyrene were establishing a local church in Antioch.

And who were being saved? This time it wasn't God-fearing Gentiles like Cornelius, but Gentiles - Greek speakers from a pluralistic society who did not start from a God-fearing position but were complete pagans before they trusted Christ.

The apostles sent someone trusted to check out that these believers were genuine. It's interesting that they didn't choose one of the Twelve, but instead sent one of the Deacons - Barnabas. Why Barnabas? That isn't difficult to figure out. Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew (or more precisely a Levite Acts 4:36 *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas, which means Son of Encouragement, 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet*) and it was Cypriot evangelists active in Antioch. He was the logical choice to work out what was going on.

Like we saw before, Barnabas was convinced by what he saw. Barnabas had no problem in affirming that a work of God was going on and he was used in the salvation of people too.

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.

And what does Barnabas do when he sees all this? He realises they need to be taught. Does he send to Jerusalem for an apostle or two? No. He goes all the way to Tarsus to see Saul. Why Saul? We could say - it was a work of the Spirit. Well, it was.

I'd like to suggest to you that the Jerusalem apostles weren't equipped to deal with the church at Antioch. In fact if you look at Galatians 2: 8 (*For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles*) you'll see with the wisdom of hindsight that this was not Peter's call and by implication the others in Jerusalem Paul mentions in that chapter.

The Gentiles of Antioch knew nothing about the things of God, and no-one had ever taught Gentile people from scratch before. They had no experience of the culture of the people in Antioch. They knew Greek but they couldn't move in their circles. We saw how last time Peter agonised over Cornelius. By the time we get to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 many still agonising about it. Here were Gentile converts and God was raising up someone who had the right background and gifts to minister to them. Barnabas as one from a Cypriot society knew this only too well.

Unlike the Jerusalem apostles, Saul was well placed to teach Gentile Christians. He was from Tarsus. He moved in Gentile society, he was a Roman citizen, he spoke Greek fluently, probably as his first language. He understood them and their culture. But he was also a Pharisee of the Pharisees. He knew the scriptures and could teach. But most of all Saul was called. Look at Gal 2:8. His call was to the Gentiles and he knew it and Barnabas recognised that in giving Saul leadership in Antioch.

We need to see in this an important principle. God raises people for ministry in the church. It's an important principle we should observe as we move forward with the Lord as a church. When we are a small church it is easy to become frustrated that we cannot do this ministry or that ministry and we struggle with it. Unfortunately it often ends up that tasks are done by a small number of overworked people. And worse, they are doing so many things that they are in danger of doing few of them well.

When we want to expand our ministries, we look to the "usual suspects" to do something about it. Many churches struggle with ministries run by people unsuitable and not gifted or called for the task.

But I believe as God takes us forward, he will raise up the Saul of Tarsus needed for the ministry of the church. We are at that point and we need to pray as a church that God will raise up those people and open a way that His purposes will be served here in Swaffham. Perhaps we need to "go to Tarsus" and find one.

Peter and the others did get to move around the Roman world eventually but their learning curve was slower than Paul's and besides as we have seen Peter and co had a ministry to Jews - at least at the start. They had to adapt and change. There's a lesson here too. When we have been used to doing church one way for so long, it's difficult to take on new ideas and ways of doing things. But let's not inhibit the gospel by deprecating those that move more easily with them.

One of my first tasks at Woodberry Down was to establish a regular youth service. I was a dinosaur at that time and it was suggested that I visit a young Pentecostal Pastor called Sean O'Boyle who ran a church called Powerhouse in Wood Green. Yes, I thought it sounded like an electrical store too. Because it wasn't called the something church, you might guess that they did things differently. Sean used to be a club DJ and his ministry was to reach twentysomethings. Going to Powerhouse on a Sunday was an experience. Their whole service was based around breakfast so we sat around (or stood around) tables to worship and had our breakfast when the speaker was sharing the Word. The music was all based on modern dance music.

You might be horrified by the whole thing and say how awful! But men and women who had never been near a church in their lives; who were into drugs and in broken relationships or dysfunctional families were getting to hear the gospel in language and music that they understand. Reaching twentysomethings was an area in which Woodberry Down failed to reach people, yet they were packed into Powerhouse. Woodberry had to catch up - and I still don't think they really have.

The challenge for us as a church is that the people we need to reach in Swaffham are culturally different to us. We need to pray that God will raise up the Sauls and Barnabases to reach them and that he will give us the grace to support them. The apostles at Jerusalem may have had problems grappling with the idea of reaching the Gentiles initially, but they encouraged those like Barnabas and Saul who were doing it successfully.

Antioch in Syria was a watershed for the Church. From this point on we see the rapid transition of the Christian faith from being a Jewish group into being distinctive and consisting mostly of Gentiles - the majority of people in the world. Antioch set standards for others to follow. Let's have a look at them because I believe that God wants the church of the 21st century to be an Antioch church because it was Antioch that made the difference and from where the gospel found new vigour.

- Antioch was a cutting edge church

The distinctive name of Christian came from the church at Antioch. The most enduring name for a follower of Jesus Christ found expression in Antioch. In their two years of ministry at Antioch, Paul and Barnabas established something that was not Jewish, it was new and vibrant and different and the hand of God was clearly in it all. We can see from Paul's writings that even though he had a burden for his countrymen (look at Romans 9-11 for example), much of his analysis appealed to the Greek mind and logic. We'll see later that he had an excellent grasp of Greek literature and philosophy and unashamedly used it for the sake of the Gospel.

It was new ground, leading edge stuff. It was church, but not the same as what had gone before.

I believe God is doing a new thing in Norfolk and it's not going to be the same as what has gone before. It may not even be the same as what other people are doing. If change and growth is of God, it will be distinctive and different because that's what Antioch was about.

At the EBA Assembly Paul Hills encouraged us to "Do Different". We need to do different because what we've done in the past doesn't work. That isn't a criticism that is just aimed at traditional ways. Many of the new ways of doing things can be equally as sterile if the church is not done in the will of God.

I believe that as a Church, we are being called to do something that has not happened for a long time in Swaffham. We are all being taken in a direction we have not gone before - to reach out and embrace the 97.5% of people in Swaffham who never darken our doorstep. To communicate with them. To bring them Jesus.

- Antioch was a caring church

Antioch also set standards in other ways. It didn't think itself divided from the Jerusalem church because it had different leaders, that it was cutting edge and was made up of Gentiles and looked on by suspicion by many Jewish believers outside Antioch. They cared for the church at Jerusalem as brothers. They didn't do their own thing and think suspiciously of Jerusalem and its Jewish Christians. That's another way we need to do different - to recognise that we don't do our own thing. Insularity and suspicion between churches - even of the same denomination or of an evangelical persuasion - are rife in Norfolk. Saul and Barnabas made sure that wasn't the case in Antioch by caring for them

27 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.

If we are to be an Antioch church then we need to be a church that is happy to embrace other believers even if they aren't Baptists, and to recognise and help other parts of God's kingdom here in Norfolk - and to allow them to help us.

- Antioch was a missionary church

13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

Where Antioch truly made the difference was in sending Saul and Barnabas out in mission. This was the world changing aspect of Antioch. Until this time we learnt that the church spread much by persecution. They were often pushed. It's true that we hear of individuals like Peter and Philip answering a call to go. But at Antioch the church was listening and set apart Saul and Barnabas. But it didn't stop at that - they continued to fast and pray for them once that commission was known. This takes me straight on to the fourth characteristic of an Antioch church.

- Antioch was a praying church

In retrospect, maybe I should have put this one first as the other things seem to have come out of it. Antioch was a church open to the voice of God. Listen again to these two incidents:

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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.

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." 3 Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent [them] away.

Antioch was a church that listened to the voice of God. They listened to prophetic word. They spent time in prayer and fasting - waiting on God. In the situation in chapter 13, they continued to pray after they received the word. They tested it before God and when they found it was true, they went with it. How much do we as a church listen for the voice of God? This could be another sermon in itself

Is our desire as a church to be one that grows? Then we need to be an Antioch church, one that is prepared to listen to the voice of God and then do it, never mind how cutting edge it might be. Their act of obedience led to a revolution in mission and the gospel spread rapidly in the Eastern Mediterranean as Paul and Barnabas went forth.

What about us. Are we going to be an Antioch church? Or are we going to be something else? A Corinth, stricken by strife? Or worse a Loadicea? That's the challenge. I believe we have been called to be an Antioch church. Let's commit ourselves to it.

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