

ACTS
The Making of a Biblical Local Church
Acts 11:19-30

Do you realize that you, as a member or regular attender at Grace Church, are part of a local church which is in the process of reformation along New Testament lines? You are part of a local church which is making history and which is open to change and is changing to conform to a biblical concept of a local church. Sometimes people will say to me, "Is Grace Church really trying to be biblical?" These same people often point out that Grace Church meets in a building and there were no buildings in New Testament times to house local churches. Or they point to the wearing of choir robes and say, "What biblical precedent is there for robes?" They may also ask if Sunday school or church programs are really biblical. My answer is that the Bible says nothing about church buildings, choir robes, Sunday schools, church programs and a hundred other things we do today in all local churches. Therefore, we cannot prove these things biblically, either right or wrong, so whether we have these things is a matter of opinion and preference.

However, there are some basic commands and principles in the Bible about a local church which are essential if there is to be a local church. There must be a body of believers sharing the common life of Christ who are under the authority of elders. There must be qualified teachers of the Word who are teaching the Christians and training them to do the work of the ministry. There must be a participation in the Lord's Table and a faithful exercising of church discipline to have a biblical local church.

In Acts 11:19-30, we have a record of the forming and functioning of the local church at Antioch. This was the first real church made up of both Jews and Gentiles, and it became the central, mother church for the preaching of the gospel to the Gentile world. From this point on in the book of Acts, Antioch begins to take a place of predominance and the local church in Jerusalem begins to lessen in prominence and authority. The church at Antioch represents primitive, pristine, basic Christianity, and it is a type of local church after which every local body of Christians in the twentieth century should strive to pattern itself. Remember, however, because of two thousand years of history we are in a different time, culturally and technologically, making it impossible to set up a local church in the twentieth century exactly like a church in the first century. However, there are basic principles about a local church which never change and a church in reformation should strive to meet these New Testament qualifications.

FORMATION OF A LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:19, 20)

"So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone." -- Dr. Luke briefly goes back over about ten years of church history to explain how the gospel originally was preached to Gentiles in Antioch. Right after the martyrdom of Stephen which is recorded in Acts 7, a persecution broke out in Jerusalem and many Christians fled the city and moved to various cities in the Roman Empire such as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. These persecuted Christians were converted Jews, and while they had a passion to share Christ, their cultural hangups with Gentiles made it almost impossible to preach to anyone except Jews. However, as they went on their way, they spoke the word to whatever Jews they could. The word "speaking" represents a simple, common, natural speech such as is used in everyday conversation. This does not represent preaching from behind a pulpit or lectern but gossiping the gospel in the street language of the people. The pulpit of these anonymous Christian saints was the market place, back yards, and porches, as they shared the simple gospel in simple terms so the average man could understand. Apparently, there was a large Jewish population in Antioch and some of these folks were converted to Christ.

"But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus." -- There were some Greek speaking converted Jews from the island of Cyprus

and Cyrene in North Africa, who also came to Antioch. In time, they began to preach to the Greeks (Gentiles) as well as the Jews. Apparently, these folks shared the gospel in a speaking way as well as proclaimed it in a preaching way as heralds of the truth.

They came to Antioch. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire exceeded only by Rome and Alexandria. It was noted as a famous sports city and was especially famous for its chariot races. It was a city of magnificent culture and riches. It was a pleasure city and they worshiped the god of sex. About five miles outside the city was the temple of Daphne, where sex was enthroned and worshiped through priestesses who were really religious prostitutes. It has often been referred to as the "heathen metropolis of the East." Antioch, therefore, was mighty in influence and magnificence, fabulous in wealth, strategic in position, cosmopolitan in atmosphere, corrupt in morals, idolatrous in practice and predominantly Greek in population. Yet, out of this corruption sprang a new church. The Living Christ made His impact upon a hedonistic city.

Who were these witnessing Christians? We are not told, but we can be fairly sure they were laymen and not officials of the church. They were common laymen who had a fire burning within their souls to tell others about Jesus Christ. They did not preach social reform or church membership, but they proclaimed Jesus as Lord and told of the free and gracious salvation He offers to all men. Before any local church can be formed, there must be a faithful preaching of the gospel.

There has been much study done recently on church growth at the Fuller Theological Seminary School of Missions. While there are many secondary reasons why a local church may grow, such as a T.V. ministry, expository preaching, bus ministry, home Bible classes and so forth, the one common denominator is that all these churches have an active lay ministry who are faithfully witnessing for Christ. In these churches, laymen are being mobilized and trained. It has also been pointed out that about ten percent of any congregation has been given the spiritual gift of evangelism. While it is the responsibility of all Christians to witness verbally for Christ, about ten percent will show definite skill and ability in evangelism. It is the task of the ten percent to help train the ninety percent. It has also been shown that the most effective time for effective witnessing for the average Christian is the first three years after his conversion to Christ. Why? Because it is during these years that the new Christian has many unsaved family, friends and acquaintances, and this sphere of people will be witnessed to by most people within a three year period. As a Christian grows deeper in Christ, he develops mainly Christian friends and finds himself mainly doing Christian ministries. In any local church, the greatest potential for evangelistic effectiveness comes from a combination of the ten percent of the mature Christians who have the gift of evangelism coupled with the recent converts of less than three years. It becomes obvious that new converts to Christ are essential for a normal, healthy development of a local church.

"And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord." -- Because the resurrected Christ was placing His sovereign hand on these faithful witnesses and also on what they preached, large numbers of Jews and Gentiles were trusting Christ as personal Lord and Savior. When men trust Christ, it is always because the hand of the Lord is at work.

As these laymen shared Christ, many were turning to Christ for salvation. These new Christians began to share the common life of Christ. They began to study about Christ together, pray together, love one another, sit at the Lord's Table together, share Christ to the world together. They had spiritual life without any real outward organization. They had the nucleus for a local church because the life of Christ was there, but apparently they were not yet an official local church. They shared a common life and the gifts of the Spirit were working, but there was no official organization. The seeds of a local church were in this new group of Christians at Antioch.

Before a local church can ever be formed, there must be a group of born again believers gathered together sharing the common life of Jesus Christ and exercising their spiritual gifts. It is not people gathering together on Sunday to hear a message which makes a church, but the gathering of believers together to share the very life of Jesus Christ together.

ORGANIZATION OF A LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:22)

“And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, . . .” -- Great numbers of Gentiles were turning to the Lord and this news somewhat disturbed the Christian headquarters in Jerusalem. They were suspect of this movement of the Holy Spirit. When they consented to the legitimacy of the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family, these Christian Jews had no idea that the gospel would be so acceptable to Gentiles immediately and they would be flooding into the church in mass. This was almost too much change too quickly for the conservative believers in Jerusalem.

“ . . . and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.” -- The Apostles at the Christian headquarters sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate the situation and to minister to these new Christians. This was a wise choice, because Barnabas was a Greek speaking Jew from Cyprus, so he could identify readily with those from Cyprus and Cyrene who were doing the preaching.

I, personally, believe that the Apostles dispatched Barnabas to Antioch to be the chief teaching-elder or to be the pastor-teacher to this group of new converts, and this was the beginning of official organization for a local church. The seed was already there because they were sharing a common life, but there was a need now to organize with a teaching-elder. The foundation had been laid, but now there was a need to incorporate these new converts into an organized body to get them growing.

DEDICATION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:23, 24)

“Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God . . .” -- When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he saw the results of the sovereign grace of God. He saw Jews and Gentiles, converted by the grace of God, worshipping Jesus Christ together. It is impossible to see the grace of God, but we can see the results of God's grace as we observe people who have experienced the miracle of the new birth and demonstrate the fact by having changed lives.

“ . . . he rejoiced. . . ” -- Barnabas rejoiced at what he saw and heard in Antioch. His Jewish background was against Gentiles coming into the church on an equal basis with Jews, but he rejoiced when he saw God mightily at work in Antioch. He realized that the grace of God often flows in channels he did not completely understand.

Barnabas was happy when he saw God blessing the Christians in Antioch even if he did not understand or agree emotionally with everything happening there. Many Christians are not happy when they see God blessing Christian groups which do not act and think just like they do. Beloved, we should be happy about all the work of God wherever it is taking place. Now this does not mean that we should give one hundred percent approval of everything that is going on in these groups just because there is some outward success. The right approach is to make sure we are following the Scriptures the best we can, but we should always be ready to rejoice when people are being converted to Christ. Let us never become so separatistic that we cannot rejoice with those who are being blessed by God outside our little group or so narrow that we think Christ can only work through our church. We must learn to hold our biblical convictions in love and to rejoice with the whole body of Christ.

“ . . . and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; . . . ” -- Barnabas was called the “son of exhortation” and when he got together with the new church in Antioch, he exhorted or encouraged them. As new believers, they needed encouragement and love, not a brow beating from the teaching elder. Barnabas encouraged these new converts to determine from the heart to be true to the Lord. The word “resolute” means to have a set plan. Their Christianity was not just to be a gathering of Christians where there was to be singing, praising and rejoicing which brings warm feelings. This sort of emotional Christianity soon fades. No, they were to have a set plan and a determination of heart to remain true to the Lord. They were to read and study about Christ from the Old Testament and obey the commands of Christ as given by the Apostles which is now recorded for us in the New Testament.

Notice that Barnabas did not tell these new Christians in the early stages of organization to form committees, plan a budget, hire a staff, program a social life in the church or bring in special speakers. No, he encouraged them to remain true to Jesus Christ in holiness and doctrine. It is not wrong to have committees, or a budget, or a staff, but we must always put our emphasis upon remaining true to Christ. If we cleave to Christ, individually and as a

church, we shall grow in power and fruitfulness. Furthermore, all church organization, budget planning and hiring of staff should have as the final Goal activities that will aid Christians to remain true to the Lord. It is possible for lives to become barren and dry in the midst of activity if there is not real heart devotion to Christ.

Notice, also, that Barnabas did not tell these new Christians to seek a second blessing or search for the experience of tongues, or tarry for a second work of grace. No, he told them to be true to the Lord. When they were saved, they received all they were ever going to get from the Lord. Salvation had been given to them and there was nothing more they were going to receive after salvation. However, they were to develop what they had by faith which was a progressive experience as one remained true to the Lord. Therefore, we can conclude that Christians do not need anything new. Christians are to remain faithful to what they have and not to go after something else. No Christian will ever be able to use up what resources he already has. His resources will never run dry. What is the key? The key is to remain true to the Lord.

There can never be a solid local church unless the members are dedicated and remain true to Christ.

“. . . for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith.” -- Barnabas was also a dedicated pastor or teaching elder. Barnabas was “a good man” in that he was a kind, benevolent, cheerful, open-hearted and gracious individual who had a father image. Barnabas, you remember, sold a tract of land and gave it to the Christian cause in Jerusalem. It was Barnabas who defended Paul when the Apostles and the Church of Jerusalem were afraid of Him. Barnabas was also a man “filled with the Spirit.” Consequently, he had a bold witness for Christ and out of his life came the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Apparently, Barnabas was easy to get along with since he was void of inflexibility or a harsh spirit. Barnabas was also a man of “faith” in that he had an unwavering confidence in God to release His power in any situation. He merely acted upon what God said. He did not wait for feelings, but he believed God's Word and promises. This attitude, of course, was catching, and Barnabas had a real impact upon everyone with whom he came into contact.

One of the main reasons this local church at Antioch prospered was that its leadership was dedicated to Christ.

“And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.” -- With the coming of Barnabas and the organizing of this local church, many more people in Antioch became Christians. Good organization and administration aided, not hindered, this local church. The words “brought to the Lord” can be translated “added to the Lord.” People were being added to Christ and not just added to a church roll. The way to build a local church is to lead men to Christ and the local church roll will take care of itself.

EXPANSION OF THE PASTORS MINISTERING TO THE LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:25, 26)

“And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.” -- There was such tremendous numerical blessing in the Church of Antioch that Barnabas knew he could not carry out the pastoral duties alone. He, needing an assistant or associate pastor, left for Tarsus to find Saul (Paul) and to bring him back to minister at Antioch. We do not know why Barnabas chose Paul. Perhaps the Apostles in Jerusalem suggested this move when they assigned Barnabas to Antioch. Perhaps Barnabas had some direct revelation from God to choose Paul. However, it seems more logical to assume that Barnabas chose Paul because of his personal relationship with him. He knew Paul was called to minister to Gentiles and Antioch was going to become the hub of Gentile evangelization. Furthermore, Barnabas liked Paul and had high respect for his teaching ability and evangelistic heart. It seems reasonable to assume that Barnabas realized that he did not have the spiritual gift of teaching that was needed for this new church in Antioch. Barnabas could evangelize and exhort, but the saints needed instruction in God's Word, so he went to find Paul and bring him back to the church in Antioch.

Barnabas must have considered the risk in bringing Paul to Antioch. Paul was brilliant, highly educated and trained, zealous for Christ and a strong leader, but Barnabas refused to let this be a threat to him, for he recognized the principle of gifted ministry and felt that both he and Paul could minister together in Antioch.

Notice carefully that Barnabas did not leave the choice of bringing an assistant to Antioch to a pulpit committee.

Barnabas chose a man whom he could trust, whom he respected and with whom he could work, and he went after the man himself. Barnabas knew that the wrong man in this position could split the church, but the right man would bring great blessing to the church in Antioch.

Barnabas was not a preacher who wanted to be a one man show. In fact, he probably saw the great danger of this, for often a flock tends to follow one man more than they follow Christ. Barnabas believed in a multiplicity of pastors ministering to one flock and this brought tremendous blessing.

Notice also that Barnabas wanted the best possible man to be his assistant and he went outside the local church at Antioch to find this man. Probably there was not enough trained leadership yet in Antioch for anyone to become Barnabas's associate.

The basic temptation of a preacher is to build a work around himself so as to attract men to himself and gain disciples for himself. This is always the danger of a one man ministry.

Paul has not been mentioned in the book of Acts since Acts 9. It has been about ten years since we have heard of Saul of Tarsus or Paul the Apostle. Ten years ago he went to Jerusalem as a new Christian, caused too much trouble, and was sent off to Tarsus by the Apostles for further seasoning and training. Paul probably came to Tarsus defeated, disillusioned and discouraged. Why? Because he had not learned to trust the living Christ for success in the ministry. As a new Christian, Paul was trusting his ancestry, his education, his brilliance, his orthodoxy and his zeal, but he failed. He still had to learn that success in the ministry does not depend on any human credentials or activity but upon total trust in the Living Christ. For ten years, he was ministering in around Tarsus and was learning the vital lesson to relax in Christ and to let Him do the work of the ministry through him as an instrument.

Paul did not come to Antioch as the main leader. He came as Barnabas's assistant. In Acts 11:30 the reference is to "Barnabas and Saul," not Saul and Barnabas. However, after Acts 13, we see Barnabas taking a second place to Paul for the references are to "Paul and Barnabas." Even the great Apostle Paul needed training under an older, wiser pastor and Barnabas was the perfect man for the job.

"And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; . . ." -- Both Barnabas and Paul taught the Church at Antioch for one year, so that the preaching and teaching was not carried on by one man but by two gifted men. Teaching by a gifted ministry is the New Testament practice.

While they team taught every saint in the local church at Antioch for one year, one of the main thrusts of their ministry was to recognize the Christ appointed leadership in the Church at Antioch and train them. When Barnabas and Paul left for the first missionary journey in Acts 13, there were three other leaders (probably elders) in the local church in Antioch. "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul (Acts 13:1).

Notice, also, that the local church at Antioch did not fold up when their two teaching elders (Barnabas and Paul) left for a few weeks to take a love offering to the needy saints in Jerusalem. These two men apparently had been very successful in the training of good leadership in the local church.

". . . and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch." -- Good teaching, good training and good exhortation from Barnabas and Paul produced a strong local church with Christians who were living dedicated and committed lives for Jesus Christ. This caused the unsaved world to call them "Christians," which means "partisans of Christ," or "those who belong to Christ's party," or "Christ's men." Up until this time followers of Christ were called Nazarenes, Galileans, disciples (adherents of a teacher), saints (separated ones), brethren (sharers of common life), and believers (those who have trusted their souls to Christ). The name "Christian" has stuck throughout the centuries. We are Christians, or Christ people, who belong to Christ and who follow Christ.

DEMONSTRATION OF LOVE BY THE LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:27-29)

“Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius.” -- Some visiting prophets from Jerusalem came to the church at Antioch and one of them, Agabus, predicted that a great famine would come over the then known Roman world and the area of Palestine would be particularly hard hit. This famine has been recorded in secular history and it occurred under the reign of Claudius in A.D. 44 and 45.

These verses show us that at the Church at Antioch other men other than the teaching elders were able to address the local church. There was freedom for various gifted men to minister to the body.

“And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.” -- As soon as the Christians in Antioch heard from the Spirit through the prophet that there was going to be a fierce famine in Palestine, they began to prepare for it. They made extra money any way they could and gave it for the needy in Jerusalem. They loved the brethren in Jerusalem and they demonstrated their love by giving a contribution to help them through tough times. “But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him” (I John 3:17)? What happened in Antioch is a beautiful picture of real concern for the whole body of Christ by one local church. There was a fraternal spirit, a bond of love, that held these early Christians together.

As the church at Antioch developed a strong home church, they could then begin to do more for other Christians who had needs.

ADMINISTRATION OF FINANCES WITHIN THE LOCAL CHURCH (Acts 11:30)

“And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.” -- This is the first mention of the office of elder in the New Testament, but the elders, both teaching and ruling, became the leaders in the local churches when the Apostolic office passed off the scene of history. Notice carefully that Barnabas and Paul took the love offering from the Antiochian Christians to the elders. It was not taken to the deacons or to a finance committee. This indicates that elders are the overseers of all finances in a local church. The elders received the money and distributed it as the people had need.

It is also wonderful to note that Paul, who persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem as an unsaved man, now is chosen to bring the relief to the same church. Oh, how beautiful is the grace of God!

CONCLUSION

Are you a Christian? Are you a Christ person? Are you one of Christ's men? What is a Christian? A Christian is a person who has trusted in Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior and who has a firsthand relationship with Jesus Christ. A Christian is one who has received the Holy Spirit, has been placed into spiritual union with Christ and shares the common life of Christ. A Christian is also one who belongs to Christ and follows Christ.

Are you a Christian? You can be by saying, “Thank you, Jesus, for dying for my sins. Please come into my life and take charge as my Lord. I'm turning from my sin and changing my attitude about Christ. Right now, I receive you into my life.” If you do this in all sincerity, you will become a Christian, or a Christ person.