

THE AMAZING POTENTIAL OF ONE SURRENDERED CHURCH

18 Biblical Discussions for Church Leaders

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Introduction

WHAT CAN ONE CHURCH DO?

In many parts of the world there are so many churches that it would be easy to think that many of them, especially the average ones, are not that important—that we could lose a few hundred of them and not feel the difference.

The importance of one solitary church is often lost because its effects in the surrounding community, or around the world, are not investigated and recorded. We forget what God has done in the past, and don't yet know what present efforts will produce in the future. And of course we give little thought to the intangible, immeasurable effects which a church can bring in the heavenly places. We wrongly think that all our victories are visible, earthly.

As church leaders, we find our energies demanded by daily operations of church life, making it difficult to see the larger impact of our small endeavors. Consequently our prayers and planning do not reflect the glory of what God is doing through us. We fail to see and celebrate the future potential of today's obedience.

The solutions we often seek are new methodologies that have worked in another place and promise to work for us. But these may bring answers to questions we are not asking, solutions to problems we have not encountered.

All of these considerations point us back to simpler times when there were not so many voices giving us their advice, times which remind us that the unchanging Holy Spirit will still activate and use churches of all sorts, in varieties of ways.

Most churches need to be inspired by God's view of their existence and their efforts. They long to be reminded that the Church is itself a miracle, and that it is wondrous because God designed it and inhabits it.

ANTIOCH

Because of attention given to rapidly growing churches today, declining or maintaining churches can easily feel inferior. Due to the emphasis on numerical growth, the small or medium-sized church can too easily think of itself as failing.

Then along comes a story of a church that presents a model that is different than those which many esteem today. We don't have any attendance figures for this church. Their budget is a non-issue. As for their facility, they likely didn't have one. But we can't ignore this church because, despite its unimpressiveness by many of today's standards, it proved to be one of the single most significant churches ever. Plus it's in the Bible!

From the church at Antioch, we receive hope that any and every church has a chance at greatness beyond its own resources. By finding its role and playing it the way Antioch did, a church today can accomplish more in God's harvest field than it ever dreamed possible. Here is why. Greatness

for your church has little to do with buildings, budgets and attendance and more to do with responding obediently to each step God asks you to take. It is about playing the specific role God wants you to play in your community, one that is unique to you, different even from the church down the street. It is about knowing why your church is there in that particular place, at this specific time, and stepping out in faith in response to the opportunity you have and the guidance God gives to you.

Antioch sat in the shadow of Jerusalem, the mega-church with its thousands of attenders and famous leaders. It sprouted as a fragile upstart amidst the towering weeds of Antioch's Roman paganism, not enjoying the religious climate of Jerusalem with its Temple and worship lifestyle. When it began, Antioch's only claim to fame was the trouble it might cause. (No one had ever birthed a church among Gentiles. Was this even supposed to happen?)

It soon became evident that Antioch was definitely supposed to happen and, more than that, God was very much in favor of this small, upstart church.

Antioch shows that God is eager to use the offbeat church that may have a dubious beginning or a less-than-stellar history. In fact, the assembly at Antioch shows us how one church, led into a higher level of surrender, can attain a quiet greatness and expanding impact.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In this study, we want to go back and sit with the Antioch believers in hopes of seeing our town the way they saw theirs. We want to enter their church life, to experience their teaching times. Perhaps most of all, we want to join them in the season of special opportunity when, in faith, they did not shy away from making their greatest sacrifice. We want to see why their progression of surrender allowed them to become a church far greater than their size or resources.

From this visit to Antioch, we'll not only receive hope, but a challenge to emulate them in our churches today. The opportunities for a church to take a strategic step of obedience are as great today as any time in history. The ever-changing context, the population explosion, and the proliferation of un-Christian ideas calls for hundreds and thousands of churches—large and small, traditional and innovative—to begin a fresh process of hearing and obeying God.

We will not focus on techniques, for those do not explain what happened at Antioch or what needs to happen with us. Our interest will be on the principles and dynamics that have not changed, and do not fail in any culture. They are tested, timeless and transferable.

This book is intended to serve as a tool which can be used to prompt your church in how to realize your amazing potential. The way in which you choose to use it will depend on your context. The elements provided are:

- **READING** The chapters emphasize the aspects of Antioch church life that are relevant today. They are short enough to be read together by a group, if desired. Some chapters uncover spiritual realities that stand behind churches in any age.
- **DISCUSSION** The material should be discussed, especially by church leaders, but may be useful for any group that cares about the church.
- **QUESTIONS** The intent of the questions which accompany each chapter are (a) to delve deeper into the Antioch story, and (b) to apply the principles to your own church situation. You are encouraged to come up with your own questions also.
- **PRAYER** Nothing will prove more significant than praying through the implications of this study. It is recommended that extended times of prayer accompany each study. Some suggestions are given.
- **PROJECTS** Simple projects are recommended at the back of the book as possible ways of making these principles more applicable to your church. You will also think of other projects you can undertake.
- **RETREAT** A personal or group retreat could concentrate on the material studied. There are many ways this book could be used as a retreat guide. Some suggestions are found in the supplemental pages in the back.

A word for clarification: In this study we use the word “Church” (with upper case “C”) to refer to the entire Body of Christ, sometimes called the universal church, made up of all who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. We use the word “church” (lower case “c”) to refer to a specific local church.

BIRTH AND GROWTH OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH

Acts 11

19. 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.

20. 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.

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

22. And the news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

23. Then when he had come and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord;

24. for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord.

25. And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul;

26. and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And it came about that for an entire year they met with the church, and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

27. Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch.

28. 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.

29. 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.

30. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Acts 12

25. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Acts 13

1. 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.

2. And while they were ministering to 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. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

(New American Standard Bible)

TAKING OFF BLINDFOLDS

The next church that needs to be planted and the next ministry that needs to be started are often hidden by the blindfolds of past precedent. Because we are accustomed to ministering to a certain kind of people using methods familiar to us, we don't easily see the potential church among a different kind of people in the next place in which God wants to shed His light. We figure our current ministries are up and running and that anyone who is really interested in finding God's love will hopefully search for us. Not only that, the church we have now needs all our attention and can always use more people, so why divide our energies by starting something new and different?

This is the soil out of which innovation must sprout. Leading up to Antioch, ministry followed familiar precedent. The believers were moving out in all directions from Jerusalem due to the persecution there. They had shared with the Jews along the Phoenician coast, with its main cities of Tyre and Sidon. Some had bought tickets to sail to the island of Cyprus to share the Gospel with the Jews there. Some had by now gotten as far north as Antioch in Syria where, according to the church strategy of the day, they were "speaking the word to no one except Jews alone" (Acts 11:19). The assumption was that the next membership classes would consist of Jews.

A church today might be surprised if they spent a day discussing, “Who are the people we usually speak to?” Every church has its habits, including certain conversations it has and certain ones it does not. It would help to then ask, “Who are the people we *don’t* usually speak to?” with the follow-up, “Why don’t we?” Precedent blindfolds us.

Our churches are in towns or cities in which diverse kinds of people intermingle with each other but don’t really see each other because they move around in different layers of interaction. For example, I (a Caucasian living in North America) can walk by a nearby school and pass a man from India who wears a turban, but I don’t think of befriending him or even greeting him because he lives in a different layer than I do. I figure he wants to be left alone. He and his family speak, eat, and worship near me, maybe even next door, but they are hidden by my precedent of getting to know people who are similar to me.

I could say the same thing about the man on the street corner who stands and hopes that I’ll stop my car and give him some money. Or, being a middle-aged man, I could even say that a teen-aged person is in a different cultural layer than I am.

But the Antioch story would not have been told if everyone stuck with precedent, if all had continued doing ministry the familiar way, speaking only to people similar to themselves. There would only have been a Jewish congregation or two, rather than the Gentile church that had such amazing impact. What were needed were a few ground-breaking innovators who

envisioned a church where everyone else saw people-we-don't-often-talk-to. These few men decided to map out new territory and sketch a place for a new congregation consisting of different folks. These new people were close in proximity but far away ethnically, socially and religiously. They operated in a different layer of town. So the innovators had to jump into a new strata, which they did, “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” (Acts 11:20).

Their own background of ethnic diversity may have helped them see the ethnic layers in Antioch that weren't hearing the Gospel. But still, they were people of courage who broke with custom and saw a possibility where others didn't. May God give us such men and women today.

REFLECTING GOD'S HEART

The Antioch phenomenon—particularly the proclaiming of the Gospel to the Gentiles there—did not happen as an isolated incident. It was a natural outgrowth of the believers' growing understanding of God.

Luke tells the story in such a way as to make it very clear that Antioch happened because God revealed to His Jewish Church that they were now to remove cultural impediments to the Gentiles coming to Christ. It happened through the deeply impacting incident between the Gentile soldier named Cornelius and Peter, the recognized leader of the Jerusalem church. Cornelius was seeking after God, and received instruction from the Lord to

send for Peter. Peter was on a housetop, praying, when he received a vision from God which broke with theological precedent: animals formerly considered unclean could now be eaten.

Cornelius' messengers arrived and, because of the vision, Peter did not refuse to visit the Gentile at home. When Peter heard his host's story of seeking after God and appearance by an angel, the apostle recognized what God was revealing—all Gentiles now have equal access to the Gospel, no longer as proselytes to Judaism, but as Gentiles believers in their own right. "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter took a lot of criticism for fellowshiping with an uncircumcised Gentile, but when he explained to the Jerusalem leaders all that had happened, they concluded, "Well, then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). With the very next verse, Luke begins the little story of a new kind of church in Antioch, a tale of common believers who courageously and innovatively entered into a different layer of society and proclaimed Christ.

Any church that hopes to share in the Antioch experience must discover the "Gentiles also" heart of God. The freedom to preach to Gentiles was brand new at Antioch. It is not new to us, but it must be fresh within us if we hope to break with custom and reach new kinds of people or new parts of our region. A church today that is not continually reminding itself of God's love

for all people severely limits its scope of ministry. But the congregation that looks out on its community through God's eyes will see untold potential in sharing Christ's love with peoples who were formerly hidden from view.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are the ethnic and social "layers" in your town or region, and what kind of people are in them?
2. What layer(s) currently feel comfortable in your church?
3. To what degree do you have conversations with those who are different than yourselves?
4. What barriers prevent you from initiating relationships with different kinds of people?
5. Is this subject of blindfolds something you need to pray about at length? If so, what issues do you need to bring before God?

BACKED BY CHRIST'S AUTHORITY

The only reason any church has the right to exist, much less advance, is that it's Founder and Head has authority over the whole world. That statement will earn a scoff from cynics, but it accurately reflects Jesus' own statements. Only His authority gives a church the proper perspective on why and how it should operate.

Jesus commanded us, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The "therefore" thrusts us back to the basis for such an outrageous command. The reason we have the right and responsibility to make disciples for Jesus in every nation without exception is because Jesus has been given authority in every nation without exception: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18).

Since the Father has granted the Son such global authority (and commensurate responsibility), the Son in turn has inducted believers, the Church, to discharge His plan and to do so in His delegated authority.

The Church needs to understand the nature of Jesus' authority lest it attempt to accomplish feats which its Head is not concerned with. Is His mandate to Christianize all civil governments, to obliterate all competing religions, to protect the environment?

What, then, is the nature of the authority on which the Church is to carry out its disciple-making assignment? Again, Jesus' own words are most

helpful. In His High Priestly prayer, Jesus acknowledged, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Thy Son, that the Son may glorify Thee, even as Thou gavest Him authority over all mankind, that to all whom Thou hast given Him, He may give eternal life” (John 17:2-3).

Such a statement reminds us that Jesus of Nazareth had to be either a delusional egotist or precisely who He claimed to be, the Son of God. The authority He had received charged Him with the task of saving eternally all those whom the Father would give to Him. And He elsewhere promised that He would not lose anyone whom the Father had given Him to save (John 6:37-40).

The human perspective on Jesus’ authority is that “everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life” (John 6:40). The authority is so complete that no contradictory belief, no competing power, no family pressure or threat of harm can break the salvation Christ provides, for no other authority—not even Satan’s—is greater than God’s (John 10:28-29).

What does this say to the Church today? The orders under which we serve are given us by our Head who has every right to give them and the authority to back them up. The focus and concern of His authority is to give eternal life to everyone given to Him by the Father. There is no place on earth or heaven where Christ has not been granted this authority, which means there is no culture or religion—not Islam or Buddhism, not Hinduism or atheism, not agnosticism or materialistic humanism—that has greater authority on earth. Behind the curtain, there is no place or force in the

heavenly sphere—no principality or power, no demonic host nor Satan himself—that can forbid the Son of God from dispatching His saving plan. On that authority, the Church should expect to find faith as it proclaims the Gospel. We should go with the expectation that there are some whom the Father has given to the Son for salvation.

The Antioch evangelists found that Jesus' authority had preceded them, yielding a crop of souls. We must expect to discover the same.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How should the nature of Jesus' authority to save provide focus and confidence in the outreach of your church?
2. To what degree do your believers gather strength from the truth of Jesus' authority to save and keep all whom the Father gives Him?
3. How do you reconcile the authority claims of Jesus with the cries for tolerance and relativity from many cultures today?
4. A season of prayer could focus on asking Christ's authority to save to become known in specific families, neighborhoods, ethnic groups, etc. which surround your church.

GOD'S FAVOR

The Antioch experience was unprecedented, but we should not conclude that it cannot be repeated in many aspects. God doesn't desire another church to precisely copy Antioch, for every church has its unique setting and opportunities, but He intends to manifest in churches today many of the same qualities and results.

Consider the response which the Lord brought to the culture-crossing evangelism at Antioch, "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). After Barnabas came and encouraged the first harvest of souls, the growth continued, "And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord" (Acts 11:24).

Numerical growth was already the pattern in Acts. The embryonic church in Jerusalem had begun with around 120 people praying together and waiting for the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15; 2:1). After Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, there was phenomenal response of about 3,000 new believers (Acts 2:41)! In the following weeks, more believers were continually added (Acts 5:14).

It shouldn't surprise us that God delights in numerical church growth. After all, if we are to make disciples of all nations, some hefty numbers will have to be tallied.

How large was the congregation at Antioch? We are never told, except that they were "considerable" and "large" (Acts 11:21, 24). But what is

considered large? The church likely met in various homes. We could speculate that each of the five leaders at Antioch (mentioned in Acts 13:1) hosted a meeting in his home. Or the church may have rented a hall. We might project that the church was a couple hundred people, even up to a thousand or more. It is significant, and helpful, that we don't know specifically how many people attended, so that our emphasis can be placed on other things besides the numbers.

In fact, we should focus less on numerical growth and more on having the hand of the Lord with us. If we have His benevolent hand, we will see the numerical increase He desires. And numerical increase without His blessing—which seems quite possible—is merely a shadow of a church, lacking the substance of God's favor.

This should lead us to learn from Antioch what it means to have the Lord's hand with us.

The hand of the Lord, in and of itself, is not a desirable thing. We sometimes see God's hand *against* the nation Israel (Ezek. 3:14) and *against* false prophets (Ezek. 13:9). Even in Paul's upcoming ministry, the Lord's hand of judgment (through blindness) will be *upon* Elymas the Magician (Acts 13:11). So, we only want the hand of the Lord if it is *with* us.

What does that look like? The hand of the Lord is with a church as He chooses it and uses it as His instrument. This is the sense in which the phrase is used of John the Baptist's ministry (Luke 1:66). The hand of the Lord is with a church when God is making Himself known to them in a real

way; this is Ezekiel's sense of it in Ezekiel 3:22 and 8:1. And here in Antioch, the Lord's hand is evident, not only in the numerical growth, but in the entire story of the church—both the outward results and the inner conditions. That's why we must read between the lines to discover the spiritual environment that God granted them.

In our churches today, we are very keen to have numerical growth. But we might be closer to the target if we ask God to reveal any ways we are preventing His hand from being with us.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Looking deeper at the Antioch story, what activities and outward results characterize God's favorable hand?
2. Looking below the surface of Antioch, what internal conditions in their church life indicate His hand of favor?
3. What obstacles could cause God's hand to be "against" a church instead of "with" it?
4. A lengthy session could be given to praying and discussing how this applies to your church, both historically and at present. To what degree do you feel the hand of the Lord is, or is not, with your church?

ANTIOCH, THE CITY

- Capitol of the Roman province of Syria. It was called “Queen of the East,” the third most important city after Rome and Alexandria, Egypt (by 165 A.D.).
- Located on Orontes River, in Syria, 300 miles north of Jerusalem.
- Inhabited by Syrians, Greeks, Jews, Romans. Over 200,000 people in Paul’s time.
- Commercially aggressive, licentious, and cosmopolitan. Architectural splendor, with temples, palaces, theaters, aqueducts, some marble roads.
- Nearby suburb (Daphne) was known for sensuality and low morals
- Antioch is now a small town in southern Turkey called Antakia (or Antakya). Little remains of the ancient city.
- Several 4th century church sites have been discovered. Many churches met in caves to avoid persecution.