

The church at Antioch

The forces of righteousness have always been more powerful than the forces of Satan. A case in point is the beginning of the church in Antioch of Syria. Antioch was one of the great capitals of the Roman Empire. Syrians, Greeks, Jews, and Romans constituted major elements of its population. Antioch was at one time the third-largest city in the Roman Empire, after Alexandria in Egypt, and Rome itself. There were other cities by the same name, so this Antioch was known as Antioch on the Orontes (i.e. the Orontes River, along which it was located), or Antioch of Syria (or Syrian Antioch).

Although it was a great city, it was a corrupt city into which the Christian community was introduced. Researcher Phillip Schaff wrote, "*Fashion was the only law, pleasure the only pursuit, and the splendor of dress and furniture was the only distinction of the citizens of Antioch. The arts of luxury were honored, the serious and manly virtues were the subject of ridicule, and the contempt for female modesty and reverent age announced the universal corruption of the capital of the east.*" We could easily be describing one of our modern cities of this day.

How did the church begin and how did it fare in such surroundings? A brief commentary can be found in Acts 11. Those who were scattered as a result of the Jerusalem persecution traveled as far as Antioch, (Acts 11:20) *And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. (21) And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.* The church in Antioch grew to a great membership in a relatively short period of time. After the persecution in Jerusalem the church in Antioch became the true center of Christianity.

EXPLANATION OF GROWTH

Antioch was important in the early spread of Christianity. The term "Christian" originated there. It was also a safe haven for believers who fled from Jerusalem after the persecution that broke out after the stoning of Stephen - considered to be the first Christian martyr. But how do we explain the phenomenal success of the gospel in Antioch over that of other cities? There are three great characteristics which the church in Antioch possessed that explain this growth.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, it was a teaching church. These brethren realized full well that the religion of our Lord is a taught religion. The following language is used in Acts 11 to describe the teaching program of our brethren in Antioch; "*speaking the word . . . preaching the Lord Jesus . . . exhorted them all ... taught much people,*" (Acts 11:19, 20, 23, 26). These brethren believed in the power of the word of the Lord! Apparently, they were particularly adept at seeing the opportunity that presented itself and capitalizing on it. It mattered not whether it was on the street corner, by the river side, in a synagogue, or in a private home, they were continually proclaiming the word of the Lord. How we need to emulate their example today! It is not enough to preach the gospel to an audience that's normally 90% Christian and lean back with a sigh of contentment and say we have preached the gospel. The picture I get of the church in Antioch was far different in their evangelistic approach.

The airwave and printed page are effective ways of getting the gospel out to people, but none are as effective as that personal contact/evangelism. Personal evangelism programs have been demonstrated as one of the most effective means of reaching the lost, yet less than 10% of our congregations have aggressive efforts in this area. Correspondence courses and special Bible classes have proven valuable, but all too often we simply do not exert the necessary effort. On an

average, we are converting less than 5% of our membership each year, and many of these are our young people." This was not the case with the church in Antioch. The teaching program of the church in Antioch is an indictment against our generation. The church that has an aggressive teaching program is a church that grows.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, the church in Antioch was a *benevolent church*. They recognized a responsibility to "*send relief*," (Acts 11:29) *Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea*: They did this apparently without any special call from the brethren in Judea. The need existed and they met it. There was no quibbling as to the method. This was a congregation of God's people who cared. In this simple act is revealed another principle of success in His Kingdom. Our Father has a way of blessing those who minister unto the needy.

It's easy to criticize churches for their lavish cathedrals with the hungry and naked lying at their door, but if we are not careful, we do the same thing on a somewhat smaller scale in our own communities. Tragically, many are not even aware that such conditions exist. They "*pass by on the other side*," (Luke 10:31). Somehow, we never find our way into the back alleys and the depressed areas of our communities. Here are souls that desperately need salvation. The words of John the Baptist, should still ring in our ears, "*He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath food, let him do likewise*," (Luke 3:11). These words are as applicable in the 21st century as they were in the 1st. It's been said "*The heart that is warm with the grace of God is generous to every human need.*" And that's right

The church in Antioch was not a wealthy church. They were also threatened by the famine in Jerusalem, but this did not stop them from sending relief. The essence of Christianity is giving. These brethren gave because they found joy in so doing. They had learned the meaning of that great principle of our Lord, "*It is more blessed to give than receive*," (Acts 20:35).

IN THE THIRD PLACE, the church in Antioch was a great church because **it was missionary in spirit and in practice**. (Act 13:2) *As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. (3) And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.*

Its geographical position served as a focal point for expansion. They did not wait: until the entire city of Antioch was evangelized before sending men out to other areas. We do not read of the church in Jerusalem launching a great program of foreign evangelism instead, the Antioch church began the first program of foreign evangelism. It is readily apparent that they stood behind Paul and Barnabas financially and spiritually. What high spiritual moments those have been when they were fasting and praying and laying their hands on these who were entrusted with the gospel for a lost world, (Acts 13:3). Surely this made the parting of these two missionaries much easier.

These two men could have found many excuses for not going, but they were not offered. When the way became difficult, they could have turned back, but they did not. We watch the bleeding body of Paul stoned and left for dead outside the gates of Lystra as it slowly comes to life again. He revives not to give up the effort, but to go on to the next city. We talk of these men and this church because we must look at them in relation to the current needs of the world to the gospel of Christ.

Which man, which congregation can claim exemption from the command to go? The missionary movement which began in Antioch and Jerusalem swept over the world. It was their

purpose for existence. It must be ours today! Paul summed it up - "*to live is Christ,*" (*Philippians 1:2*).

And yet, far too few churches have any real mission program. Budget after budget reveals that many churches spending far more for physical facilities than they do for preaching the gospel. This is not to say that we don't need new buildings, but let us not forget their purpose!

It's been said that, "*Missions inevitably flourish in the evangelistic and liberal church. They are three links in a chain. Whenever you find the first two, you inevitably find the third.*" Liberal is not referring to liberal in doctrine, but liberal in your outreach to people. But when you remove one of the two elements, the chain is broken and your effectiveness is lost. We are living in crisis times, so let us share with the church in Antioch the impelling urgency of the command to go.

The Antioch church in the first century was indeed a model church. It was zealous, evangelistic, liberal, benevolent, and mission minded. This kind of a church makes a real impact upon the community in which it exists. It's my hope that we here at Blodgett be like this good church was in the first century. **(Acts 11:21) And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.** What about you?

Invitation