

# ***“Antioch: A Model Church”***

**Acts 11:19-30**

Baxter T. Exum (#1018)  
Four Lakes Church of Christ  
Madison, Wisconsin  
May 31, 2009



## **Introduction:**

This morning I would like for us to consider a congregation of the Lord's people in the New Testament book of **Acts—Acts 11**—a congregation that in many ways very quickly surpassed the church in Jerusalem in terms of size and accomplishments. We know that the Lord's church was established in the city of Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost in 30 AD. We also know that the church in Jerusalem was persecuted almost from the very beginning. Peter and John are placed in prison—they are threatened, they are arrested, and within just a few years, we find that one of the deacons of the church in Jerusalem, a man by the name of Stephen, is hauled in to appear before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and as he is making his defense—as he is preaching the gospel—the leading Jews interrupt his speech, they cover their ears as they scream, they rush Stephen out of town, and Stephen is stoned to death right there on the outskirts of Jerusalem. The Bible tells us that those who threw the stones actually laid their coats at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul. This Saul, later known to us as Paul, then began to ravage the church, going from house to house and dragging out those who belonged to the Way—he would take them and he would throw them in prison. At this point, the Bible tells us that God's people then scattered in all directions—they ran away, and as they ran away they preached the good news as they were going. And so instead of stamping out the early church (as was the original intent), we find that Saul's persecution was a little bit like taking a campfire and throwing the burning embers in all directions, because we find that the church in Jerusalem might have been fewer in number, but those glowing embers were tossed out in all directions and began to spread.

Some of those embers landed in the city of Antioch. There are actually two Antiochs mentioned in the Bible, but the Antioch we are considering this morning, was known as Antioch of Syria, **»PPT»** located about 300 miles straight north of the city of Jerusalem. **Acts 11** (on **page 1722** in the pew Bibles). Many people do not realize that Antioch of Syria was actually the third largest city in the Roman Empire at that time (Rome was first, and the second was Alexandria, Egypt). The population estimates vary, but the population of Antioch of Syria was somewhere between 500-800,000 people. It was a huge city and was perhaps roughly the same size of Milwaukee—and would have been a huge city in the ancient world. Historians and archaeologists tell us that the population of Antioch was varied and diverse (to say the least). Residents ranged from retired Roman army officers, to merchants, to sailors (the city is located in the far northeast corner of the Mediterranean—along a major trade route between Rome and Greece and Asia and India). In addition to many sailors and travelers, we also know that there were many Jews. In fact, the

Jewish population was so strong and prominent that Antioch was one of very few cities in the ancient world that had a Greek-speaking synagogue.

Archaeologists tell us that the architecture in Antioch was amazing. It is in Antioch where the Greek and Roman civilizations had merged. The main street was at least four miles long and was paved with marble. Not only that, but the street was lighted at night; again, something that was almost unheard of in the ancient world. There was a covered sidewalk on the main street. Excavations have been done and have found that the sidewalk was five miles long, so people could go shopping downtown without getting out in the weather. If we could imagine a marble sidewalk, lit up at night, and covered—starting right here and going all the way to the capitol building here in Madison, we would have some idea of how advanced Antioch really was. I mean, we do not even have covered sidewalks here in Madison! And then on top of this, we are told that the city also had running water, thanks to a Roman aqueduct bringing water in from the mountains.

We also know that the city was surrounded by a huge wall. »PPT» We are looking right now at a statue of Tyche (or Fortune), the patron goddess of Antioch. The statue is now on display at the Vatican Museum in Rome. You might notice that she is standing on a guy representing the main river that runs through Antioch, and (I don't know if you can see this), but if you look at her head, »PPT» you will see that she is wearing a replica of the city wall! The wall was up to 60 feet high in some places, and it was wide enough so that two chariots could pass each other side by side when riding on top of the wall. And so you can see that Antioch of Syria was a major city in the ancient world.

But as amazing and advanced as Antioch might have been, »PPT» our concern here this morning is the church. It was to this huge, diverse, advanced, and fortified city that faithful Godly Christians took the gospel as they were running away from the persecution that had been coordinated by the young man named Saul. When the embers were thrown, they landed in Antioch. As Christians ran for their lives, as they traveled 300 miles straight north, this is where we pick up in **Acts 11:19-30**. In our pew Bibles, the Scripture is found on **page 1722. Acts 11:19-30..**

***<sup>19</sup> So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch. <sup>23</sup> Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. <sup>25</sup> And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; <sup>26</sup> and when he had found him,***

*he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch. <sup>27</sup> Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> 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. <sup>30</sup> And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.*

As we look back over these verses, **»PPT»** and as we think about the future of the Four Lakes congregation right here in Madison, I would like for us to consider several very practical lessons that we can learn from the church in Antioch. What did they do right, and what did they do that we can do?

**I. One of the first things we notice is that THE ENTIRE CONGREGATION WAS OPEN AND OUTGOING WITH THEIR CHRISTIAN FAITH. **»PPT»****

Back up in verse 19, we have a reference to *“those who were scattered.”* That reference goes back to Acts 8. If you flip back to Acts 8, we read that on the day that Stephen was murdered, *“...a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”* Please notice who was scattered, *“...they were all scattered, except the apostles.”* So, the leaders of the church stayed behind, and the rest were scattered. And then we find in Acts 8:4, *“Therefore, those who had been scattered went about preaching the word.”* So, we are talking here about regular, average, everyday Christians—not the apostles, everybody BUT the apostles. These regular people, as they ran away from Saul, preached the good news as they were scattered.

We now fast-forward to Acts 9:19, and we find that some of these people, *“...made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.”* By the way, the word *“speaking”* here does not necessarily refer to getting up behind a podium in front of thousands of people, but the word refers to normal, everyday conversation. These people, as they fled to the city of Antioch, were speaking the word of God to the people they met in their regular, everyday lives.

Can we imagine what those conversations would have been like? These people were chased out of Jerusalem, they were running for their lives, they had left their homes and their families behind, they were fleeing from Saul simply because they were followers of Jesus, and what did they do? They spoke about Jesus! Jesus had been such an influence on their lives they could not stop talking about Him! Everything focused on Jesus! But the plot thickens. Not only did they speak the word of God to their fellow Jews, but we find in verse 20 that, *“...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.**" Again, no one famous here—we are not even given any names, only where they were from. These men came to Antioch and preached not only to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. They did not limit their discussions to people who were already religious, but they reached out to the pagan Gentile world. They spoke about Jesus at work, and in the streets, and in the marketplaces. Again, no podiums, no church buildings, but they were speaking to Jews and Gentiles about the Lord Jesus Christ.

How is this for a little twist: Couldn't we say that the apostle Paul was a great missionary even before he was a Christian? In fact, as the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul (in a twisted, round-about way) was actually responsible for the spread of the gospel to the gentiles in Antioch! It was Saul's persecution that nudged the first Christians to leave Jerusalem with the Great Commission. It was Saul's persecution that motivated the early Christians to, **"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"** (**Mark 16:15**). Jews were no longer talking only to Jews, but they were now talking to total strangers—they had moved on to the Gentiles. The good news was not just good news for the Jews, it was not just a Jewish Savior dying for the Jews, but it is the story of Jesus being the Savior of the whole world. These people no longer looked at Gentiles as being unclean dogs, but they started seeing Gentiles as lost people needing a Savior. For the first time in history, the church was now actively looking for pagan people, and the massive outreach starts right here in Antioch.

As you can imagine, this massive new outreach brought with it a few problems. One problem was that the followers of the Lord could no longer be looked at as being a sect of the Jews. And because of this, the Bible says in **Acts 9:26** that, **"...the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."** This is the first time the word **"Christian"** is used in the Bible. Seven-hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied that God's people would be called by a new name. As was read in our Scripture reading this morning, a door to the future was cracked open just a little bit, and Isaiah said, **"For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not keep quiet, until her righteousness goes forth like brightness, and her salvation like a torch that is burning. The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; and you will be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will designate"** (**Isaiah 62:1-2**). The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch—their righteousness truly went forth like brightness and their salvation like a torch that was burning! Those who were scattered were scattered like hot embers from a fire—preaching the gospel as they were scattered.

It is so interesting how we can get so excited about a new restaurant, or a good movie, or sports, or the weather. We can tell our friends and neighbors to go eat at some new place or to go see some new movie, but it is so hard for some people to talk about the Lord. How often do we talk about the Bible? How often do we speak about the Lord? You know, even the best restaurant in Madison will only satisfy us for maybe 3-4 hours, but heaven will last for eternity. We need to remember what Jesus said in **Mark 8:38**, **"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him**

*when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.*” And yet we learn this morning that we can all do what they did! The disciples in Antioch were open and outgoing with their faith, and their enthusiasm ushered in the new name that had been prophesied by Isaiah.

**II. There is a second lesson we can learn from the church in Antioch. Not only were they very outgoing, but we also learn that THE CHURCH ITSELF WAS COMPLETELY COMMITTED TO THE WORD OF GOD. »PPT»**

When the church in Jerusalem hears about the conversion of the Gentiles, they send Barnabas to go check it out. Barnabas encouraged the new congregation to stay strong, he must have seen a need for teaching, and so in **verse 25** Barnabas went to go find Saul. Please remember that Saul was the reason why the Jewish Christians had left Jerusalem in the first place! In **verse 26**, Barnabas brings Saul to the church in Antioch, and for a year, Saul helped in the teaching of the new Gentile converts. **Verse 26** tells us that they taught *“considerable numbers”* during that year. The Christians in Antioch were committed to the word of God—they were committed to learning, and they were committed to teaching. Even though these people were already Christians, Paul and Barnabas spent a year teaching the word of the Lord to those who were already a part of God’s kingdom. As Paul would go on to write later in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, *“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”* Our mission, then, is to expose ourselves to as much of God’s word as possible—on a daily basis, year after year, Sunday morning, Wednesday evening, every day—even for those of us who may think we already know it. They were committed to the word of God. And once again, they were simply following the Great Commission. As Jesus said in **Matthew 28:19-20**, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you....”* They taught people, those people were baptized, and then they kept on teaching, and they were teaching not some kind of man-made doctrine, but they were teaching the word of God. They were committed to God’s message.

Even several chapters later, in **Acts 15**, we find that the church in Antioch faces a challenge. Some Jewish men from outside the congregation had come in and were trying to force circumcision on the new Gentile Christians. They were creating a disturbance. They basically wanted the Gentiles to become Jews before becoming Christians. The church in Antioch could have said, **“Well, for the sake of unity, let’s just ignore this problem. Let’s just agree to disagree. Let’s just let this one slide.”** They did not do that, but they sent a message to the apostles in Jerusalem—asking for God’s will on the matter. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem answered their request with a message from God, and as that letter was read publicly, we are told that the church in Antioch **“rejoiced in the message.”** They were committed to learning and following the word of God. They learned the word, they taught the word, and in a time of conflict they went to the word of God for a solution. They were completely committed to the word of God.



**III. There is a third lesson we can learn from the church in Antioch, because as we look back over the last few verses of Acts 11, we find that THEY WERE AN ACTIVE CONGREGATION—SPECIFICALLY, THEY WERE ACTIVE THROUGH THEIR ACTS OF BENEVOLENCE. ▶PPT▶**

A man by the name of Agabus gets up and prophesies that there would be a famine. From secular history, we know that there were several years of bad harvests between the years of 45 and 48 AD. The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that many families in Judea suffered during this time and that many people died for lack of money to buy food. And yet instead of rationalizing, instead of reasoning that they needed their own funds back home in Antioch to take care of themselves, the Christians took up a collection and sent the funds to Jerusalem where the famine was much worse. They took up a special collection (just as we have done several times here at this congregation—for Hurricane Katrina and Tsunami relief). In verse 29, the Bible says that, ***“...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. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.”*** We notice here that they were not coerced into giving, but ***“...each of them determined to send a contribution.”*** No one was commanded to give a certain percentage, this was not a tax, but it was a private and personal decision for each person. It was ***“in the proportion that any of the disciples had means.”*** That tells us that some gave more than others. Those who were able gave more, and those who were not as able gave less. The purpose of the contribution was ***“for the relief of the brethren living in Judea.”*** We are certainly reminded of 1 John 3:17-18, ***“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”***

We also notice here that our first responsibility in a time of need is to help our fellow Christians. They sent a contribution, ***“...for the relief of the brethren.”*** This is exactly what Paul would go on to say in Galatians 6:10, ***“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.”*** We also find in this passage that they pooled their resources and sent the contribution to the elders of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent the contribution with Barnabas and Saul (two well-known and trusted brothers). Again, they were responsible with the contribution. Like we do here at Four Lakes, we never have only one person count the contribution, but there are always two men who do that together. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:20-21, they were, ***“...taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men.”***

Can you imagine what it must have been like for the Jewish Christians to receive such a generous gift and to know that it came from a primarily Gentile congregation? For years, for centuries, the Jews had looked down on the Gentiles, and now the Gentiles were sending financial support to the Jews to help out in a time of famine. How touching that must have been! But the point for us this morning is that the church in

Antioch was an active and generous congregation—just as we should also be here in Madison.

By the way, it was the church in Antioch that went on to send out the very first missionaries. Starting in **Acts 13**, they send out and support the apostle Paul on the first of his missionary journeys, and they will go on to send Paul out again. They were the sponsoring congregation on all three of Paul's journeys. God can do wonderful and amazing things through an active, outgoing, and Bible-based congregation.

### **Conclusion:**

As we close this morning, I want to just touch on a phrase we skipped over back in **verse 21**. In **verse 21**, the Bible says that, ***"...the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord."*** God saw what was going on in Antioch, many people were being saved, ***"And the hand of the Lord was with them."*** The same hand that created the Universe and brought order out of chaos. The same hand that gave strength to the weak, health to the sick, and life to the dead. The hand of the Lord was with them, and the congregation grew number as well as in strength. From secular history, we are told that by the time of the Nicean Council in 325 AD, there were more than 200,000 Christians in the city of Antioch—nearly a quarter of the population of the entire city—nearly the population of the entire city of Madison today. The hand of the Lord was with them...

- They were open and outgoing with their Christian faith.
- They were completely committed to the word of God.
- They were an active and generous congregation.

These three things are things that we can do today. God can still use a church like the church in Antioch. We can do these things this week right here in Madison. As has been announced for several months now, this coming Saturday is the main day for our annual Vacation Bible School. Last week, several members got together and made some invitations. It looks like we have about enough for every single person here this morning to take one of these home. I would encourage every person here this morning to take one of these and either today or tomorrow give it or mail it to a friend. Don't just stick it in your Bible and leave it there. Don't find it there months from now. This is not a bookmark! Some of you know that my best friend in college was brought to the Lord in high school out in California because his dad's coworker invited him to a Vacation Bible School. He came, he obeyed the gospel, and now he is a gospel preacher. So VBS means a lot to me personally, and it means a lot to the Lord.

After lunch today, we are also all invited to come back here to the building to take a few invitations door-to-door. I don't plan on spending more than about an hour, but we have about 200 invitations for the homes within a block or two of this building. If you have seen the news, then you know that there was a horrible accident within about a mile of this building. At least one teenager is dead. There are children in

this neighborhood who need to hear about God sooner rather than later. This is yet another way that we can follow the example of the church in Antioch of Syria. Let us pray that the hand of the Lord will always be with us as a congregation.

If you have something you would like us to pray about as a congregation, you can write it down, pass it to the front in just a moment, and we can pray about it together. On the other hand, maybe you are not yet a Christian. The Bible describes the conversion experience as being ***"born again."*** The new birth happens at the point of baptism. Jesus Himself referred to it as being born of water and the Spirit. If you have any questions, we would love to talk with you and get together sometime this week, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: [church@fourlakescoc.org](mailto:church@fourlakescoc.org)