

Missionary Churches

by Keith Malcomson

A missionary Church is one that is prepared, trained, and sent by God to fulfill His mission to the world.

Scripture: Acts 1:8, Acts 8:1, Acts 11:21, Acts 11:24, Acts 11:26, Acts 13:1-2, Acts 14:26-27, Romans 1:14

Topics: "Missions", "Church Growth"

Description

Keith Malcomson preaches on the importance of a missionary-minded Church, using the example of the Church in Antioch from Acts 13:1-2. He emphasizes the need for local Churches to be prepared, trained, and led by the Holy Spirit to send out missionaries who are willing to sacrifice and minister to the Lord and the lost. The sermon highlights the characteristics of a pioneer, gifted, Christlike, ministering, sacrificial, supportive, and revived Church, drawing lessons from the early Church in Antioch and the missionary movements it birthed.

Transcript

Acts 13:1-2, "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 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."

In this hour, more than at any other time, when true missionaries are needed, we must discover what Biblical method God has ordained to prepare, train and send missionaries who will be effectual in fulfilling what the Lord has called them to.

Recently together with my wife, I visited the small town of Herrnhutt in the east of Germany built by the Moravians in 1722. After a period of deep dispute amongst them which almost lead to the separation and scattering of the whole community, they entered a period of deep heart searching during which the Lord dealt with them in deep conviction for a period of three months.

It was at a communion service on the 13th August 1727 that the Spirit of God was outpoured upon them in a most powerful way. As a result the love of God was shed abroad in their hearts and a prayer and missionary Movement was birthed.

Of the first 29 missionaries sent out, 22 were killed, but for every one killed two more stepped up to take their place. Under the leadership of Count Zinzendorf over the next 30 years 300 missionaries were sent

out from this small community. During that time this community never grew bigger than about 600 people.

Backed by a 24 hour prayer watch, missionaries set out two by two, sometimes taking years to reach their destination mission-field on foot and by boat. Some went forth only armed with shoes on their feet - no organisation, financial resource, strategy or cultural knowledge. What they did have was a local Church which acted as their missionary base. What drove them was a love for Christ, a burden for souls, a commission from Christ and faith in the promises of God.

This was the unique result of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon a local Church. We could trace other such incidents in Church history where missionary movements were birthed out of local Churches which impacted cities, nations and peoples, but let's return to Scripture for our pattern.

Antioch

Antioch of Syria was the third biggest city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria with a population of at least three hundred thousand. It was a truly cosmopolitan city made up of a great diversity of cultures, tongues, religions and trades.

A Temple was erected in the city to the worship of the Caesars of Rome. At one point Julius Caesar placed a statue of himself in it in order to be worshipped. Even in ancient secular society it was known as an immoral city. The Jewish population of the city was estimated at about forty thousand which certainly held an influence in the city, with many Gentiles attending the various synagogues.

1. A Pioneer Church

After persecution broke out in the city of Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen the believers were scattered in every direction evangelising as they went (Acts 8:1). The mark of these persecuted believers was not self preservation or self-pity, but a desire to evangelize.

These believers were scattered into the "regions of Judaea and Samaria" with some travelling north to Phenice, Cyprus and Antioch, but they preached to the Jews only until they reached Antioch when "men of Cyprus and Cyrene" began to evangelize the "Grecians" (11:19-20). This was about eight years after Pentecost and 300 miles north of Jerusalem.

It was at Antioch that these normal rank and file believers broke free from the bondage of Judaism and held forth the free offer of the gospel to all without prejudice. They preached the Lord Jesus. Christ was their message not gimmicks, strategies or self-esteem.

"And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (11:21). It was unnamed, unknown believers who pioneered and planted this new Church made up of both Jew and Gentile as one new body of believers. Some today would make us think that only apostles pioneer new Churches, but that is not so.

News of this reached the Church at Jerusalem and so they sent Barnabas who was originally from Cyprus. He traversed the whole area from Jerusalem until he reached Antioch. Under his powerful and encouraging ministry many more were added unto the Lord (11:22-24).

When Barnabas saw that the Lord had visited the Gentiles in such a powerful way he remembered the call to the Gentiles which was upon Saul of Tarsus and so departed to Tarsus to find him. They both returned

to Antioch together where they led these believers into unity of fellowship and taught them how to gather together as God's people (11:25-26).

The pioneer spirit that birthed this Church continued and grew into a great missionary spirit. It is worth noting that in the Book of Acts only those individuals, groups and Churches which carried the great commission forward have their story recorded. No matter how weak or insignificant the individual, or how small the Church, the Holy Spirit records such.

2. A Gifted Church

At Antioch we get given a unique inside view of local Church leadership. We read of the number, names and ministry-gifts of these local elders. These five men were gifted as "prophets and teachers." Barnabas was gifted as a prophet and Saul as a teacher (Acts 13:1; Eph.4:11; Acts 4:36; I Cor.14:3; I Tim.2:7; II Tim.1:11). It says much for Barnabas that he was able to recognise that Saul's calling and ministry would compliment his own and that it would be needed at Antioch.

Although the Church was pioneered by the people it was not led by the people. Gifted elders are granted by God to lead the local Church (20:28). The Lord first provided these two gifted men, Barnabas and Saul, for the edifying and maturing of the Church at Antioch and then raised up three others who were gifted in a similar way to lead God's work in the city.

Leadership was not just picked or voted in; gifted ministry was first granted by God then recognized as well as made room for by the other leaders and the local believers. True ministry is a gift from God. Only the Lord can grant it. Unless a man is actually gifted by God he cannot lead God's people. It takes some form of gifting from God in order to handle and minister God's Word.

Here was a healthy maturing Church to which the Lord had granted two of the five distinct ministry gifts. Because of their faithfulness in this, the Lord would later grant them a third ministry gift, that of apostle, to aid them in their missionary task.

The gifted leadership of this Church were also free from all racial and cultural separation. In this list of five men the first listed is Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus who was very likely converted on the day of Pentecost or in the days that followed. Listed second is "Simeon that was called Niger." Because there were others in the Church called Simeon, they therefore called him Niger, which means 'black in complexion.' The third mentioned was "Lucius of Cyrene." Cyrene was in North Africa (Libya). These facts seem to reveal that two of the five leaders were African, which was one of the three areas, that the pioneer Christians of this Church were drawn from (Acts 2:10; 11:20).

It was under such gifted ministry that the assembly at Antioch was prepared and moulded to be a missionary Church. Within a very short period of time the ministry of God's Word moulded them into a vessel for God. Preaching and teaching is not for the purpose of keeping a Church going from week to week for forty years in order to eventually get people to Heaven; no, it must produce something, change something and result in something.

The Church is God's chosen vessel and vehicle to carry the gospel to distant nations and unreached peoples. A healthy Church is a missionary Church. If a Church is spiritually well its vision will reach further than its own village, town or city.

3. A Christlike Church

It was after Barnabas and Saul had gathered the Church and taught them for a year that we are told: "And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (11:26). Because of the manner of conduct and the life of these followers of Christ the population of Antioch nicknamed them Christians. The name means 'anointed ones' or 'followers of the anointed One' (followers of Christ). They were not named after human leaders but after the one who they spoke of constantly. They carried something of His character and lived the message of their Lord out in daily life.

Barnabas and Saul were both godly men. They were Christlike in character, motive and ministry. The fruit of the Spirit was very evident in both of their lives. For such men to be prominent as the first teachers of the Word to this Church gave great power and credibility to the message preached. This was not religious hypocrisy, it was living reality. They not only preached the Word, they lived the Word. Their lives were an example of what was taught.

It is no wonder then that a godliness of life was produced in this Church in such a manifest way that unbelievers were forced to call them by this beautiful name of Christians.

What a Church is in character it will carry forth in missionary activity. Godliness in the local Church is vital to the health of foreign missions and the spread of the gospel. The Lord will only want to transport, spread and use what represents Him in character. The leaders of the local church should also take great care concerning who they sanction and support in the work of carrying forth the gospel, or who represent them on foreign mission fields.

4. A Ministering Church

At its beginning the Church at Antioch received outside gifted ministry from another Church, first through Barnabas, then Saul, and then later Agabus. Every Church, like a new child will stand in need of ministry in order to see it established, but it is never God's will for a Church to stay in a place of constant receiving without giving out.

If what it receives is received in a healthy manner it will soon have a desire to minister to others. A Church merely centred on itself and its own needs is at best immature or at worst dysfunctional. Within a short time the Church at Antioch arose in ministry.

First of all when they heard of the great famine which would come: "Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea:" This Church began to minister of its finance to aid the needs of another Church. This was not merely guided by a need or compassion it was directed by the Holy Spirit through the prophet Agabus (11:27-30; 12:25). Many Churches through human sympathy have become ambassadors of social action instead of carriers of the gospel and God is not in it.

Secondly, "they ministered to the Lord" (13:2). This is indeed the highest ministry of all. But without ministry to other believers and to sinners such spiritual ministry is revealed as empty. This ministry unto the Lord seems to have been a short period of time when the Church gave itself unto fasting unitedly to the Lord.

Their whole focus was ministry unto God. It was not man or need-centred ministry, but God centred ministry. It was not for the purpose of receiving something, but to give themselves unto the Lord in such a manner as to satisfy His desires alone. This was not a one-off act, but was a way of life and was the spirit

which breathed through the life and motive of this Church. This was their foundational ministry.

Amidst such ministry a missionary vision, burden and commission was birthed that was to be very fruitful. Time spent in ministry to God is never wasted. Amidst such ministry the Lord will minister through us to others.

Thirdly they ministered to the lost. "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" (Act 13:2).

Note, "as they ministered." This was the key to their missionary success. From ministry unto God the Holy Spirit directs the ministry towards the lost. He commanded "separate me" and immediately they returned again to a time of fasting and prayer specifically aimed towards this new ministry to the lost.

And when they had "...laid their hands on them, they sent them away." The next verse says: "So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed..." (13:3-4). Here is the Holy Spirit working in unity with a local Church in ministering to a lost world.

They had a debt to pay. Having received salvation and forgiveness from their sins by the grace of God they now realised they were debtors to a lost world. They could not sit back and enjoy their salvation only thinking of their own future as a Church; there was a lost world to reach and true ministry meant giving their best (Rom.1:14-15).

5. A Sacrificial Church

The initial price of their willingness to obey God in becoming a missionary Church was the sacrifice of their most mature, able and gifted labourers and leaders. The tradition of today's Church is to send the youngest or those who are not vital to the function of the local Church; but the Early Church sent the mature sacrificially. Although Paul did visit certain Churches for only a short period of time, his travels were long and active.

The initiative came from God. It was maybe 14 years before when Christ met Saul on the Road to Damascus and saved him that He also called him as a chosen vessel to preach to the Gentiles. All of these years had been preparation. The Lord will take much time in preparing His best vessels and may even hide them for many years and as they function in the local Church that they are prepared for ministry. Before going forth to minister abroad a missionary must prove himself in the local Church. If he cannot function there then he will not function as a missionary.

Barnabas and Saul had known the call of God to the gentile world for many years. Their ministry at Antioch was a mere beginning but they had a willingness to wait upon God in order that He might prepare them in a local Church setting for this task. They also waited for confirmation of the call to come through the local Church by the Spirit of God.

This Church did not control the ministry of these first two missionaries. They were "entrusted", that is released, to the grace of God (14:26). In other words they were in God's hands, in His care, and under His guidance. They were not Antiochian missionaries; they were Christ's missionaries sent forth and led by the Spirit of God.

The word "sent" in our English version mentioned in verse 3 and again in verse 4 of Acts 13 is actually two different Greek words. In verse 3 it is concerning the Church sending them. This is the word apolu■

meaning to free fully, release or to let go of. But in verse 4 it is concerning the Holy Ghost sending them and this is the word *ekpemp* meaning to commission.

6. A Supportive Church

Antioch became the host Church for missionary-evangelism to the whole Gentile world. To support such a task did not mean that many, if any at all, went beyond their own locality. In prayer, encouragement and as a base of fellowship, they stood with Saul and others, in this great task. This is a primary task and responsibility of the local Church.

After three years of service at Antioch, Barnabas, Saul and John Mark set out on their first mission trip. We are told that: "...they had been recommended to the grace of God for" this specific "work." The word "recommend" used here means to surrender, to yield up, or to entrust. This Church had faith, confidence and an expectation that the Lord would guide them and use them (14:26). This act was one of real release as well as support and agreement.

After an eventful, fruitful missionary trip of about two years they returned to Antioch having "fulfilled" the work that they had been "recommended" to. During this trip Saul had changed his name to Paul and had taken the lead in the apostolic band. Upon their return to Antioch we read that they "gathered the church together" and over a period of time and meetings "they rehearsed" or told in detail "all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles." (14:27). Testimony was a vital part of the return input to this Church. A Church can only truly support when it truly understands and rejoices in the work intelligently.

We are told that "they abode long time with the disciples" at Antioch (14:28). This covers a period of three years during which time these missionaries functioned fully in the affairs of the local Church. "Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also" (Act 15:35).

The desire to go forth on a second missionary journey was initiated by Paul. After the sad disagreement and separation between him and Barnabas: "Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God." (Act 15:40). After another very fruitful three year missionary journey they return to Antioch once more (18:22). No doubt Paul again functioned in the life of this local body during this time but this was not his primary concern, the foreign fields most certainly were.

After a period of about several months referred to as Paul having "spent some time there", we are told that he "departed" on his third missionary journey (18:23). This is the last record we have of Paul being, dwelling or ministering at Antioch.

Antioch was a source of fellowship, encouragement and a place of rest for those involved in the missionary task, especially Paul. This reveals that such ministries can function effectually in his home Church while the focus of their work is in the "regions beyond."

The local Church must be a suitable place for returning missionaries. Such missionaries ought to feel the support and agreement of the Church at such times. Only a Church that sees the missionary task as an extension of their work will do so.

7. A Revived Church

A revived Church is a Spirit-birthed, Spirit-filled and Spirit-led Church. From the very beginning the mark of a genuine work of the Holy Spirit was upon the Church at Antioch. In its conception and early growth and health no man could take the glory; it was a work of God.

The Church at Pentecost was birthed in revival. From the beginning of the record of the Book Acts the spread of the gospel was to be by individuals who had received the power of the Holy Ghost which would make them witnesses to the surrounding regions and eventually "the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8).

The first pioneers who reached Antioch had come from a revived Church at Jerusalem which was still under the mighty influence of outpourings of the Holy Spirit. Their testimony and witness was the fruit of such a revived Church.

Barnabas was a man "filled with the Holy Ghost" (11:24) who had experienced a full blown revival in Jerusalem and who under that influence was carrying forth the Gospel to other regions. A revived Church is made up of revived members and revived leaders. It is believed by some that during Barnabas' first visit the Church was 1,000 strong. Such addition was surely accomplished in a spirit of revival.

When we see all this as well as the purity, sensitivity to the voice and guidance of the Spirit, and the willingness to send forth Spirit-filled labourers there can be no doubt that it was a Church in revival. A dead legalistic, worldly or carnal church would never function in such a healthy manner.

When the Holy Spirit is allowed to work in a spirit of revival the result will always be the sending forth and spread of the gospel. A mark of revival is missionary activity. The fruit of revival is the extension of God's kingdom. Every revival in history has resulted in hundreds and thousands of missionaries going into the harvest fields. The latter rain was always sent in order to bring in the harvest. The result of this revival spirit in Antioch was the sending forth of missionaries.

A Church in revival will send out revived labourers who will in turn bring revival through their ministries. As these Book of Acts missionaries travel we see the fruit of outpourings of the Holy Spirit. When Paul went to Athens with the gospel, there was little response and only a small ingathering. But when he went to Ephesus he experienced a mighty revival. As you follow his journeys it is very evident that he was filled with the Holy Ghost and power.

Antioch was a revived Church and a wonderful place for the battle-scarred general of missionary endeavour to return to and amidst love, prayer and encouragement to be prepared to go forth once more. I believe that again amidst a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit that the Lord will raise up many small obscure Churches to be His vessel in fulfilling the great commission.

Conclusion

The great need of this hour is for missionary envisioned Churches. The reason why the quality of students going to Bible Colleges and of Missionaries going to foreign fields is so poor is a reflection on the terrible famine in local Churches across the western world. We have money, organisation, strategies and committees, but we have lost the principles of a local healthy Church that makes it suitable as an instrument to aid the fulfilment of the 'Great Commission' which after all is the singular commission given by Christ and the vision and example handed down from the apostles to us who live in this generation. May God help us to come back to the pattern of a healthy missionary Church.

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