

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (22-6-1997 Guisborough Evangelical Church)

A missionary-minded church  
Acts 13:1-12; 14:23-28

### Introduction

Early Christianity is a “tale of two cities” – Jerusalem and Antioch in Syria. Jerusalem was very much a church concerned with home missions, whereas Antioch’s concern was with foreign missions. It is from Antioch that Paul embarked on his missionary journeys. This church took more seriously than ever before the last command of Jesus to take the Gospel to the entire world. Antioch became the second greatest metropolis of the church, and mother of Gentile Christianity.

We are going to see what we can learn from the church at Antioch, which was a centre of such widespread missionary activity. What sort of church was it? How did it function? What motivated and empowered it? Then we will look beyond the church and human factor to the unseen head of the church, His place in the church and programme for the church. There is a very practical aim in this – to see how our church could be used of God in the way the Antioch church was used.

### A cosmopolitan church with a world-wide vision

Antioch church had a very mixed membership – Syrians, Jews, Greeks and Romans. Even the leadership was mixed – Barnabas was a Jew and a landowner from Cyprus, Paul was Jew from Tarsus who was a trained Rabbi and tentmaker, Lucius was from Cyrene in Africa, Simeon was also a Jew though his name suggests he moved in Roman circles and the additional comment “called Niger” suggests a dark complexion, and Manaen had been brought up in aristocratic and courtly circles, trained with and reared with King Herod (who had executed John the Baptist).

These five men had different backgrounds, different races, and were from different countries, but they were together in Christ. This wide spread of differences must have given the church great width in outlook and spirit. Any narrow parochial outlook would soon disappear in this atmosphere. The result was a worldwide vision.

Churches today in large cities, or in seaports, or in university cities where there are many foreign students, have a similar advantage in their perspective. What can a church without these advantages do to develop a worldwide vision? Missionary magazines, Missionary prayer letters, missionary speakers, mention in public services, raising missionary matters at the prayer meeting are some ways to propagate this. Churches belonging to a denomination often have a denominational missionary society to provide them with missionary links. Independent churches have to use initiative and make more effort to create links with missionaries, to keep their eyes open to what is going on abroad so that they do not become narrow and insular. Of course if one or more of the members or families answers a missionary call, that obviously involves the whole church. Everyone needs to have their eyes opened to look up to the fields waiting to be harvested – Africa, Americas, Far and Near East etc, as well as in own locality. Broaden mind and deepen sympathies.

It is important for us to be precise about these matters – that 36,000 out of 38,000 countries have no resident evangelical witness. The Gideon's are at work in 146 countries. Of 6500 languages in the world, possibly up to 200 have yet to have New Testament in their language. There are 48,000 mosques in Afghanistan, but not one church. Open Christian witness is not allowed. In 30 years the Jehovah Witnesses have grown by 500%, outnumbering evangelicals in some European countries. There are 30,000,000 street children without family contacts. 140 aircraft in 25 countries flying over 30,000 hours per year in direct support of missionary work. [Note that these statistics were noted in 1997, and will be very different today.]

Such details need to be known so that our prayers are informed, so that we have some idea of the scope and scale of the work that needs to be done. These are not trivialities we are called to pray for. How much missionary reading do we do, and how much missionary praying? If we don't, who will?

### A well instructed church

Prophets and teachers were present at the church in Antioch, and we are given the names of five of them. Prophets were not attached to any particular church, but were wandering preachers who had given their whole lives to listening for God's Word and then taking it to fellow men. Teachers were men in the local church whose duty was to instruct the new converts in the Christian faith.

It is vital for health and outreach that any church be carefully grounded in God's Word. It is no use telling people to believe unless we tell them what to believe, why, what will happen if they do or don't. One of the reasons why so many Christian churches are ineffective is because the people in them don't really know where they stand.

Eight teachers are named in Acts as playing part in its instruction. Often other words are used connected with instruction – exhort (used 7 times), teach (16 times), prophesy (4 times), confirming (3 times). Ignorance of God's Word, will and work leads to a lack of missionary interest and zeal. Knowledge of God's purposes removes opposition, dispels apathy, and rouses evangelistic effort. Bible teaching and Bible study are essential in cultivating a missionary spirit.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Moravian Brethren in Saxony were outstanding missionary pioneers. They carefully studied 1 John section by section, and were given a vision of the wondrous love of God in Salvation. Their hearts were melted, and some offered their lives to missionary work in the West Indies to evangelise Negro slaves (willing to become slaves to enable them to do this.) Then the flame of missionary zeal grew, and others went to other lonely and difficult parts of the earth – Canada, Tibet, Central Africa, and Australia. Theirs is a shining example of simplicity and missionary endeavour.

If we grasp the truths of faith – universal sin and awful eternal consequences, the wonderful work of atonement accomplished on the Cross, freeness and fullness and power of Salvation, the exclusive claims of Christ, the command of Christ to spread this good news – they have a revolutionary effect on our lives, giving, praying, service and interests.

### A spiritually alive church

Antioch was a vigorous and progressive church. There was no stagnation or standing still. **The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch** (Acts 11:26). They were given this nickname possibly because the heathen kept hearing them talk of Christ, and this acted like a magnet to draw hearts, and monarch to rule lives. There was rapid extension of the Gospel because of the earnestness and zeal of these people.

Sir William Ramsay of Aberdeen, archaeologist and New Testament scholar, said that this church was a familiar subject of talk, gossip and scandal in the city, because it was making such an impact, baring a vigorous testimony. A strong home mission is the best preparation for foreign missions. The spiritual life was strong in the church; there was ministering, worshipping and fasting, and this was the occasion when the Holy Spirit spoke to the church. In an atmosphere of service, worship and prayer, earnest seeking God's will, the conditions are right for growth and expansion.

The church at Antioch was generous, not only concerned with own welfare, but also giving to the church at Jerusalem in light of impending famine. When the opportunity came, they were inclined to give generously – and this would suggest they would have done the same for Christian missions, as the church at Philippi did. Missionary and evangelistic interest in the church is a good indication of spiritual life and vigour. Spiritual life and progressive spirit leads to a concern to preach the Gospel. When the spiritual life in the home church declines, the first place where it is noticed is on the mission field where its representatives are serving.

Missionary work which is real and genuine is not something we put on for a special occasion as a show. It should be a spontaneous overflow of a spiritual life which cannot be held down, a natural spill over from the warm spiritual vigour of the church.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century revival saw the start of modern missionary movement under William Carey and birth of great denominational societies. The 1859 Revival directly led to great inter-denominational faith societies, including CSSM (later known as SU), the Salvation Army, Open Air Mission, Keswick Convention. When Moody and Sankey were in Britain in 1882-82, there was a deepening of missionary interest especially in universities, e.g. the "Cambridge Seven" who were outstanding young missionaries to China, directly as a result of Moody's work. Similarly, evangelistic campaigns in this century have produced a flow of candidates for the mission field and ministry.

It was no accident that in the Old Testament when Isaiah saw the Lord in the Temple he heard a voice which said "**Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?**" (Isaiah 6:8). It was no accident that from the Antioch church where they ministered, worshipped, fasted and prayed, vigorous missionary work ensued. It is no accident today that when the spiritual temperature goes up in a church, people hear the Lord's call. Hudson Taylor said that the way to get labourers for the field was not through elaborate appeals, but through earnest prayer to the Lord, and a deepening spiritual life of the church so that men should feel unable to stay at home.

So with getting money to help fund missionary work, this increases if there is less solicitation for money and more dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit, and deepening spiritual life of the church.

### Responsiveness to the Holy Spirit's leading

While the church was in this spiritual state, the call of the Holy Spirit came to either the leaders or more probably to the whole church, "**Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.**" (Acts 13:2). Note that the call was to the church. So often we think guidance about the future is a matter of the individual's contact with the Lord. But here the church receives the direction, and through them to the individuals. Note also the immediate obedience of the church. There was nothing selfish in their attitude. The call came for the best and most able and beloved leaders to leave and go elsewhere – and the members were willing to give them up. No question of "What about the heathen at home?" "Why should we lose the best men to the mission field?" "We need them here." No, the best leaders were given up at once, without complaint, and gladly. They had a valedictory service, laid hands on them, and sent them away.

Laying on of hands is a scriptural practice. It did not impart special grace which was not there before. Nor did it give a special qualification. But it was an expression of fellowship between the church and Barnabas and Paul, recognising them as their delegates, and identifying themselves with them. The church was not bestowing status or gift, but recognising Christ had already gifted them. So churches continue this practice of laying on of hands when missionaries are sent out, for the same reasons. In the person of the missionary, the church itself is going after the lost. **They had been committed to the grace of God for the work** (Acts 14:26). And on their return **they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them** (Acts 14:27).

The call of the Holy Spirit and mention of all God had done through them gives a real clue to the source and direction of missionary work. It should not be about individuals having a bright idea, or a church making its own plans and working out a program. It is essentially God's work through individuals that He has called and gifted. Here is the thrust throughout Acts. Hence the reason why some think the book would be better named, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit". Pentecost brought the church into being, and every step of the way it was under the Holy Spirit's authority. He filled the leaders with Himself, and directed them on where to go, who to speak to, and it was He who opened and closed doors. **It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us** (Acts 15:28).

Missionary work is not merely or even primarily a human enterprise. The Holy Spirit is the initiator, the controller, the superintendent and the empowerer. But His method of working is through men and through the church. God uses men. The church looks for better methods – but God looks for better men. The great need is not for more machinery or novel methods, but men whom God can use. The spirit flows through men, not through methods. "I am going to evangelise China, and I'll do it through you if you'll walk with me" (Hudson Taylor) "Without God, men cannot. Without men, God will not" (Augustine).

## Conclusion

The church at Antioch was a wonderful model. It had a worldwide outlook. It was well taught, spiritually alive and responsive to the direction of the Holy Spirit. If we do not have a missionary spirit, we are not a New Testament church. The church is not a social club or haven of rest. It is called to be missionary minded. We all have a responsibility here, no matter how old or young. Go. Pray. Give. All else is way down the list of priorities.