

ANTIOCH AND THE CHARACTERISTICS
OF A WORLD-CHANGING CHURCH
ACTS 12:25-13:4

I.

In 1806 a group of students at Williams College (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAMS COLLEGE) in Massachusetts formed a prayer and Bible study group. Today Williams College is a very expensive, elite college. This year it was ranked by US News and World Report as the number one undergraduate liberal arts college in the country. The leader of the prayer group in 1806 was a farm boy from Connecticut by the name of Samuel Mills. He and the other young Christian men met frequently in a grove of maples near the campus for discussion and prayer. Their desire was to make an impact on the world for Christ.

One day on their way to the meeting they were caught in a thunderstorm. They sought refuge from the wind and rain at the side of a haystack. There they had a time of prayer for the lost people of the world. At the end of their prayer time they had further discussion which resulted in a group decision to become America's first foreign missionaries. (HAYSTACK MONUMENT)

In 1810 these men were involved in the first annual meeting of the first foreign missionary society in the United States, which was held in Connecticut. (FIRST AMERICAN MISSIONARIES) In 1812 the mission society sent these five American missionaries to India. In the next fifty years this society sent out 1,250 missionaries to various parts of the globe.

We are the heirs of this missionary movement which can be traced back to this "Haystack Group." According to the Center for Global Christianity the US has sent out 127,000 of the world's 400,000 missionaries. We also provide about half of the finances for this world missionary effort. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Wouldn't it be great to have this kind of positive impact on the world that the Haystack Group had? The truth is that we can. We may not all head overseas. But maybe some of us could. As a church family we could have more impact on the world than most of us have ever dreamed, and perhaps we already are having more impact than most of us realize.

(PROJECTOR ON--- ANTIOCH 02) The church at Antioch in Syria in the first century had such an impact upon its world. In some ways it was a very ordinary church. It was begun by people whose names are not even known to us. Back in #11 of Acts we read this description of its beginning in vv. 19 & 20: **"Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20 But there**

were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus..”

So the guys who started this church were refugees. At least some of them didn't come originally from either Israel or Syria. But they started preaching to Gentiles, and many of them came to trust in Jesus as their Savior and Messiah. News of this advance of the gospel reached Jerusalem. The leaders of the church there sent Barnabas off to see what was going on and to encourage the spiritual development of the new Christians..

(CYPRUS ANTIOCH) Barnabas was from Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean off of the coast from Syria, from where some of the founders of the church at Antioch had come. So he had a natural tie with the leaders of the church. Most importantly he was a godly guy. After a time he went looking for Saul Paul in Tarsus. When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch to help with the ministry there. For several years the two of them preached and taught in Antioch. (PROJECTOR OFF)

The rest of the Book of Acts is devoted, in a sense, to what was accomplished through the outreach of this one local church. This church's missionaries would bring the gospel to much of the Roman Empire. In just a few generations the official religion of Rome would become Christianity. That tremendous change can be traced historically to the activity of the church at Antioch. So this morning we are going to look at the characteristics of this church which are described in the passage before us. Hopefully we can discover some principles that might increase the effectiveness of our own congregation in having an impact on the world.

I.

The first characteristic of the Antioch church that I notice in v. 25 of #12 and the first verse of #13 is that **THE CHURCH WELCOMES DIVERSITY**. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE CHURCH WELCOMES DIVERSITY) Verse 25 serves as a link between #11, where Luke last talked about the church in Antioch, and the description of the activities of the Christians in Antioch that begins now. In #11 we saw that the church at Antioch had sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem with a financial gift to help the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were experiencing the effects of a famine.

Verse 25 speaks of the return of Barnabas and Saul, which was Paul's Hebrew name, to Antioch from Jerusalem. Mention is made that John Mark came along with them. We saw earlier that after Peter's escape from prison in Jerusalem, he went to the home of Mark and his mother to report to Christians who were praying there for him. Other New Testament references indicate that Mark was the cousin of Barnabas. Mark, besides becoming the author of a gospel account that bears his name, will figure into a key missionary decision that is made a bit later.

Verse 1, then, of #13 tells us, **“Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul..”** The term “church” literally means “called out ones.” The term was used by the Greeks of public assemblies. In the New

Testament it once refers to a public assembly. Another time it is used of a gathering of the Hebrews in the wilderness in their escape from Egypt. In all of the other cases it refers to the followers of Jesus. Sometimes it refers to a local group of Christians. Sometimes the term is used in reference to all Christians everywhere. We use the term “church” at times to refer to the building in which we meet. We also use it of our Sunday morning service. But in its normal New Testament sense the church is always a group of Christians.

This particular local church had a diverse congregation. We saw earlier that Gentiles had been added to it by the preaching of the Jewish Christians. This preaching had been done primarily by Jewish Christians originally from the island of Cyprus and from Cyrene in North Africa. So there were Jews and Gentiles in the church. The Jewish evangelists had lived in Jerusalem, but they were not natives of Jerusalem. They were from Africa and Cyprus. They were refugees, having left Jerusalem as a result of the persecution which began with the execution of Stephen. No doubt some of the members of the church were native Jews from Antioch who also responded to the preaching.

The background of the Gentile Christians is not described, but historians tell us that there were Persians and Greeks and Romans and Arabs who lived there. One scholar identifies 18 distinct people groups who lived in Antioch. (Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 158) These groups did not socialize with each other. Often fights broke out among them. The Jews avoided contact with all of these Gentiles as much as they could. But now the Jewish Christians found themselves in the same church as these Gentiles.

Their diversity was reflected in the composition of their leadership. Verse 1 does not specifically call them the leaders of the church, but that is implied. We know from our previous study that Paul was an apostle of Christ, and Barnabas was a leader also. The term that Luke uses to describe the men in v. 1 is “prophets and teachers.” Notice that no one is called the pastor of the church. There was a plurality of leadership.

Elsewhere the Apostle Paul lists “apostles and teachers” among the spiritual gifts. So as prophets and teachers these five men were possessors of spiritual gifts not holders of an office. It is not clear if some of them had the gift of teaching and some of them had the gift of prophecy or if all of them possessed both gifts.

Notice especially that these guys were a diverse lot. We have seen from earlier in the book that Barnabas was a Jew from the tribe of Levi. He apparently was wealthy. For he earlier sold a tract of land and gave the proceeds to the apostles. He was from the island of Cyprus, and he was known for his encouraging attitude.

Simeon has a Jewish name. But his other name was Niger, which is Latin. So he also may have come from somewhere outside of Israel. The term “Niger” means black, or dark. It came into Spanish as *negro*, and eventually into English as Negro. So Simeon was probably a dark skinned guy.

Lucius also has a Latin name. The lack of any Hebrew name may mean that he was a Gentile. He was from Cyrene in North Africa, which means that he is another immigrant.

“Manaen” is a Greek name. It is the equivalent of the Hebrew name Menahem. The fact that he was brought up with Herod the tetrarch would also indicate that he was Jewish and that he was a native Hebrew. Herod the tetrarch was Herod Antipas who killed John the Baptist and who had Jesus hauled in before him on the day of His crucifixion. He was the uncle of Herod Agrippa, whom we looked at last week, and he was the son of Herod the Great who killed the baby boys in Bethlehem in the Christmas story.

The term used to describe Manaen’s relationship with Herod is actually *suntrophos*, which can legitimately be translated as “foster brother.” Boys of high breeding and social standing were often brought into the palace to be raised with princes of the same age. So Manaen came from a high social standing and was about the same age as Herod Antipas. Herod was born in 20 BC. So Manaen at this time would have been in his late 60s. He was an older guy then.

Finally there was Saul who becomes better known to us as Paul. He was from Tarsus in Asia Minor. He was a Roman citizen but also a kosher Jew. He was the intellectual with the rabbinical education. By personality he was an aggressive go-getter.

Thus this was a diverse church with a diverse leadership. This is a reason why Antioch was a more missionary-minded church than was Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church was all Jewish. At a number of points in the Book of Acts we see that this church had a certain segment that maintained legalistic Jewish attitudes. Often this group was questioning the acceptability of Gentile Christians. It is hard to have a church that is sold out to evangelizing Gentiles when there are still struggles going on within it about the acceptability of Gentiles in the body of Christ.

Boulder City is a fairly homogeneous community ethnically. So it is somewhat challenging to have an ethnically diverse congregation. But when we do have newcomers who are ethnically or demographically different from most of us, it is good to make an extra effort to make them feel welcome. For diversity in a congregation is a great witness to the watching world.

The last congregation which I pastored was a small church. We lived in an upper middle class white community in Connecticut. But our town was right next door to an old industrial city. At one point I went through the list of our members and regular attendees and found that 25% of our people were first generation immigrants

On one occasion we had a special concert, and we had several visitors from a liberal, politically correct church in town. After the service I had a conversation with one of the people from this other church, and he made a comment to the effect that we certainly had a diverse congregation. He also had this puzzled look on his face. My interpretation

of what was going on in his mind was this: "I come from a liberal, progressive church. Yet our members are all white. You guys are theologically conservative. You are supposed to be intolerant and narrow-minded. How is it that you have Hispanics, blacks, Asians, and Jews in your congregation? He did not understand the power of Christ. Diversity in our churches can be a positive witness to a watching world.

II.

The second characteristic that I notice about the Antioch church that contributed to its world-changing success is that **THE CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES**. (II. THE CHURCH IS DEVOTED TO...) We find that born out in vv. 2 & 3 of #13. There are three spiritual activities that are identified in these verses. First, mention is made that these leaders were ministering to the Lord. That is a broad description that could potentially include a variety of activities. It is perhaps helpful to know that the original Greek word here was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the activity of priests in the temple in Jerusalem. So perhaps the historian Luke was referring to spiritual activity that relates more directly to worship, to things like prayer and praise and singing.

The second activity is more specific. It is fasting. The Old Testament commanded the Jewish people to observe only one fast. That was in connection with the Day of Atonement. But pious Jews in the first century were in the habit of fasting twice a week. During daylight hours they refrained from eating food. The New Testament contains no commands for Christians to fast. But on a few occasions in both the Old Testament and New Testament we see godly people doing it. These Christians apparently carried over this practice of fasting into their Christian lives. Notice that they were fasting both before and after the call from the Holy Spirit came to set apart Paul and Barnabas for missionary work.

Then thirdly there was prayer. Prayer was probably part of the activity of the leaders in ministering to the Lord. Luke also says that it was something that the Christians did when they sent out the missionaries.

The church that God used to impact the world was devoted to the practice of spiritual disciplines. We provide the forums for Bible study and worship and prayer. We have a Wednesday morning church prayer time by Zoom. Let us know if you would like to join us for that. The issue is whether we will participate in these activities and make them a regular part of our lives. For it is only a church that is practicing the basic responsibilities of the Christian life that the Lord is going to use in any significant way. It is also individuals who engage in these spiritual disciplines that the Lord will use in significant ways.

III.

The third characteristic that I notice in these verses is that **THE CHURCH IS MISSIONS-MINDED**. (III. THE CHURCH IS MISSIONS-MINDED) This is the first local church to send out foreign missionaries. The question is: How did this church develop a missions-minded mentality? I suspect that there were several factors that were involved.

First, there was a direct, supernatural call from God for these Christians to send out two specific individuals as missionaries.

Second, Paul was one of the leaders of this church. We saw earlier that at the time of his conversion the Lord Jesus Christ had specifically told Paul that he was going to be an apostle to the Gentiles and that he would be sent far away to do it. To have a dynamic church leader in their midst who had a direct call from Christ to be a missionary had to have an effect on the Antioch Christians. Given that Paul was also a teacher, no doubt he said some things in his teaching about the responsibility that these church members had to bring the gospel to people outside their own immediate sphere of influence.

In a similar way we are blessed to have people in our midst like the Woods who have served as foreign missionaries in Brazil. We also have Don Moberger and Kathleen Hill who serve as home missionaries in the area of prison ministry. Charlie Pappas recently returned from a missions trip to Zambia. These people sensitize us to our missionary responsibility.

Then, thirdly, this church was missions-minded because it was a spiritual church. Its leaders, and probably many of its members, were ministering to the Lord and fasting and praying. They were engaged in the spiritual disciplines. They were developing close relationships with the Lord. It is impossible to develop a close relationship with the Lord without coming to realize that He has a heart that earnestly seeks the lost. English missionary Henry Martyn, who served in India in the early 1800s, observed, **“The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions, and the nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we must become.”**

It cost a lot for the Antioch church to send out Paul and Barnabas as foreign missionaries. These two guys may have been the most gifted and dynamic leaders in their congregation. Now they were leaving. Certainly the church must have made a financial commitment to them as well. There were poor people in their midst, and there were other ways that money might have been spent in the local church. But the church recognized that bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth was a priority to the Lord. So they made it their priority as well.

As a church we spend about 20% of our general offerings on the work of missions. There are other ways in which this money could be spent. There are good things on which it could be spent. But if we are going to be a missions-minded church, a church that wants to have an impact upon the world, we will keep missions finances a priority.

Another reason why the church at Antioch was missions-minded was that it was a church of immigrants. Most, if not all, of the prophets and teachers listed in v. 1 were from other parts of the Roman Empire. At least some members of the congregation were refugees from Jerusalem. This meant that they had friends and relatives in these other places who were not followers of Jesus. The Christians had a natural interest in seeing that the gospel was brought to these people in these other places. In fact the first

stop on the missionary trip of Paul and Barnabas was going to be Cyprus. That was the home of Barnabas and several of the other Jewish Christians who had been involved in bringing the gospel to the people of Antioch.

The more connections that we have with other parts of the world, the more likely we are to develop a missionary concern for those places. Tuning into news reports about other countries is one way to cultivate that interest. Another practical thing that we could do as families or as single individuals is to pick one of our missionaries and give extra attention to that person or family. Our missions chairman Rob puts out a monthly report on all of the updates from our missionaries. You can ask him for a copy to find out about them. Most missionaries are pretty good at communicating with people who write or send e-mails to them. They love to hear from supporters. They like to know that Christians are praying for them.

IV.

This church at Antioch welcomes diversity. It is devoted to spiritual disciplines. It is missions-minded. Last of all, **THE CHURCH IS SPIRIT-DEPENDENT**. (IV. THE CHURCH IS SPIRIT-DEPENDENT) It depends upon the Holy Spirit. The church's mission outreach was the result of the calling of the Holy Spirit. Verse 4 says that Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the Holy Spirit.

How did the Holy Spirit communicate this? We are not specifically told. But v. 1 says that there were prophets in the church. I suspect that the Holy Spirit communicated His will to one or several of these prophetic spokesmen. In Ephesians #2 Paul later said that apostles and prophets were the foundation of the church, which leaves the implication that once the foundation was laid the need for prophets passed away. Of course the Holy Spirit is still around, and there are other ways in which we can recognize His working and His preparation of individuals to be missionaries.

But notice especially that these missionaries were called by the Holy Spirit. The idea of going overseas did not originate with Paul and Barnabas. It was not the church's idea. It was God's idea.

The church was obedient to the Lord's direction. According to v. 3 they fasted and prayed and laid hands on the two individuals and sent them away. The immediate context involves the leaders of the church of Antioch. The other Christians in the assembly were probably involved in this commissioning of the missionaries. At the end of this first trip we are later told specifically by Luke that Paul and Barnabas gave a detailed report of their work to the whole church. So it seems likely that the whole congregation was involved in sending out the missionaries and supporting them.

Our English translation of the last part of v. 3, however, does not do full justice to the stress on the sovereign work of God in the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries. For the original Greek word at the end of v. 3 actually means "released" rather than "sent." The church, or at least the church leaders, simply released the men that God had called.

Notice then at the beginning of v. 4 that it says that Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the Holy Spirit. Luke is using a different Greek word here than what he used at the end of v. 3. This word in v. 4 does mean more literally "sent." So the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas. The church released them, and the Holy Spirit sent them.

All of this has significant implications for how we view the needs of church ministry. If we are going to be a Spirit-dependent church, we are going to pray for and depend on the Lord to provide not only missionaries but also other kinds of workers. Instead of going around the church trying to guilt people into doing certain jobs, we trust God and ask Him to bring along gifted people.

In regard to missions work, it would be a great thing to do to pray that the Lord might raise up a missionary from our own congregation. That could dramatically affect our perspective and interest in missions work. Perhaps the Lord would raise up one of our young people. Maybe He would touch one of us adults.

The focus of this passage is on the characteristics of a world-changing church. But in order for a church to have a world impact it is necessary that the individuals within it also have these characteristics--- that they welcome diversity, that they are devoted to spiritual disciplines, that they are missions-minded, and that they are Spirit-dependent.

At the same time we need to be aware of the positive impact that our church is having. We have three ladies in Fortleeza, Brazil, for whom we are the primary means of financial support. All three are involved in the Good News Club program. Brazil has public schools that allow for religious teaching during school time. (UIRES) Uires is a single lady who visits several schools and presents the gospel to elementary school kids. Rosemary (ROSEMARY) just became a widow. She also goes into a couple of public schools each week and teaches kids about Jesus. Tiana (TIANA) was married to a pastor. She has three kids. The last one has just left home. Her husband died several years ago. She also goes into public schools and presents the Good News Club program. (PROJECTOR OFF)

I have already mentioned Don, who is a chaplain at the Clark County Detention Center. He oversees over a hundred volunteers who go to the jail weekly to lead Bible studies. Kathleen Hill does a similar thing in the juvenile corrections facilities. Before that she was the chaplain at the state women's prison.

Charlie Pappas (CHARLIE PAPPAS) got his spiritual grounding in our church. We see him occasionally. He just returned from another missionary trip to Zambia.

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Harry (HARRY BEARD 03) was a guy like that. He did not come from a Christian family. He came to faith in Christ as the result of watching a Billy Graham program on TV. He started coming to my church in Massachusetts when a friend invited him. He had a college degree, but he had a low level job at a mental hospital.

Harry started studying the Bible on his own. He became active in church. I got him involved in helping out with the youth group. In a summer discipleship group he had to read a missionary biography, and he started thinking about being a missionary. He heard people with New Tribes Mission talk about the work that they did with tribal people in remote spots around the globe. He was intrigued. God seemed to be directing him.

Harry went to jungle camp. Then he went to language school. There he met the woman who would become his wife. He went off to Thailand as a missionary. His parents thought that he was crazy. Harry married his wife in Bangkok. (HARRY BEARD 02) They spent several years learning Thai. Then they were sent to a remote village in northwestern Thailand. There they spent several more years learning the Pwo Karen language. Eventually they started a church in that village. (HARRY BEARD) They were involved with two other couples in providing the first printed material ever produced in their language. It was the New Testament. Today there is a thriving church in Mae Pae that is planting churches in other communities in their tribal area. In most ways Harry and Audrey are very ordinary people, but they exhibit the characteristics described in our passage. They have been greatly used by the Lord. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Who knows what impact we might have as a church and as individuals if we devoted ourselves to these same simple, Biblical principles: Welcome diversity--- different kinds of people with different kinds of backgrounds. Be devoted to spiritual disciplines. Be missions-minded. Be Spirit-dependent. Want to have an impact on the world for Jesus? Focus on the basics, and pray for the big picture.