

SUBJECT – THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH

This series of talks were given first at the Bridge Community Church & then at a Local Church Weekend in Scarborough, Yorkshire, 2005.

1. Reading Acts 1:1-14

John Stott writes this in regard to the Book of Acts – “Thank God for The Acts of the Apostles. The New Testament would be greatly impoverished without it. We are given four accounts of Jesus but only one of the early church. So The Book of Acts occupies an indispensable place in the Bible.”

Many alternative titles have been suggested for The Book of Acts –

- ❑ “The Acts of the Ascended & Glorified Lord”.
- ❑ “The Gospel of The Resurrection”.
- ❑ “The Acts of The Holy Spirit”.
- ❑ “The Gospel of The Holy Spirit”.
- ❑ “The Acts of The Holy Spirit in The Church”.

These titles highlight the three most important “actors” in the drama of The Acts of The Apostles –

- ❑ Jesus who said, “I will build my Church”.
- ❑ The Holy Spirit.
- ❑ The Church, which is made up of people.

Commentators on The Book of Acts have suggested a number of themes by which this book can be studied. e.g. We could take Acts 1:8 as a base & trace how the commission becomes a reality. But this weekend I want to take another theme that you find in Acts – this theme is about the two churches that much of the drama of Acts is weaved around – Jerusalem & Antioch. I will be emphasising Antioch in particular.

There is a lot of material around today about building church. *Ken Hemphill, a recognised authority on church growth within the Baptist Movement in the USA, writes in his book “The Antioch Effect” -“How many steps and keys and principles can there be? One-author lists three, another seven or ten or twelve ad nauseam. I’ve covered enough steps now to climb the Eiffel tower, and what do I have to show for it?”* Some of the material on building church is good, & we would be foolish to ignore such material. But my plea is this – The Book of Acts gives us a glimpse of how Jesus, with The Holy Spirit, went about building The Church with people – people like you & I. It is a story that we cannot ignore.

Quoting Ken Hemphill again – “Church growth is not produced by a program, plan, or marketing strategy. Your church’s greatest need is not a clearer understanding of its demographics, but a clearer understanding of its God. Church growth is not the result of any program or plan. Church growth is the by-product of a right relationship with the Lord of the Church.”

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When we come to look at the Antioch church we will find some unique statements concerning this church. First, the hand of the Lord was on the church, & as a consequence great numbers of people were being saved (see Acts 11.21).

Secondly, when Barnabas arrived from Jerusalem to strengthen the church, Luke noted that Barnabas saw the grace of God (see Acts 11:23). How does one see the grace of God in the church? Barnabas saw Jews & Gentiles enjoying fellowship together. Who would have believed that would have possible in the first century? Thirdly, the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch (see Acts 11.26). This speaks to their witness before the pagan community.

The question, which we will be seeking to answer as we look at the church in Antioch, is – What can we learn from this first-century church that will empower Castleford to greater fruitfulness in ministry & service?

I want to make just a few more comment about The Book of Acts.

1. The Writer of The Book – Doctor Luke.

Luke was a great man, & I don't use the word "great" lightly. He was a Gentile Christian who was a faithful labourer, with Paul, in the spreading of the Gospel. He was not an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus but through diligent research & investigation, he produced a two-volume work for a man called Theophilus & for us.

2. The Biblical Position of The Book – The Story Continuing.

The key verse here is Acts 1:1. Luke does not see his Gospel writings & the Book of Acts as two separate volumes.

John Stott writes this in his commentary on Acts – “the contrasting parallel he (Luke) draws between his two volumes was not between Christ & his church, but between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ. In his former book he has written about all that Jesus began to do & to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven...in this his second book (he implies) he will write about what Jesus continued to do & to teach after his ascension, especially through the apostles...Thus Jesus’ ministry on earth, exercised personally & publicly, was followed by his ministry from heaven, exercised through his Holy Spirit by his apostles.”

We will find that His ministry was not only through the apostles. Jesus uses unnamed people also to further the Gospel message.

3. The Real World in The Book – Problems Within & Without.

The world of Acts was a multi-god world. There were many godless influences around but Jesus built church in Antioch. It was a sinful & pagan city but Jesus was true to his word – “I will build my church.”

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The call to us is to be in partnership with Jesus. This weekend I trust we will see a little of what that means. We are to be involved with Jesus in building church – it involves praying, working, travelling, relating, standing, confronting, witnessing, discipling, obeying, dying, changing, suffering, meeting together. These things tell us that we don't only have to be involved with Jesus, but with each other & people outside the church also.

4. The Person that made the difference in The Book – The Holy Spirit.

Luke was a Holy Spirit man. He didn't know Jesus personally but through research & interviews with the first disciples, he found the key to the ministry of Jesus on earth – the Holy Spirit. In Acts he continues to emphasize the Presence & Power of the Holy Spirit.

Howard Marshall in his commentary on Acts writes – “Luke particularly stresses the importance of the Spirit in the life of the church. The Spirit is the common possession of every Christian, the source of joy & power...The Spirit guides the church in its choice of leaders & in its evangelistic activity to such an extent that Acts has sometimes been described as the book of “The Acts of the Holy Spirit”.

5. The Challenge of The Book – God is Serious about Mission.

God is serious about –

Matthew 28:18-20 “...Therefore go & make disciples of all nations...”

Acts 1:8 “...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...& to the ends of the earth”

Matthew 16:17-19 “... I will build my church, & the gates of Hades will not”

2. Reading Acts 1:8

As I have said, I want us this weekend to focus on the church at Antioch. Before we get there, we are going to mention a few things about the Jerusalem church. As you read The Book of Acts you notice a change of emphasis from Jerusalem to Antioch. Antioch becomes the focus of reaching the world with the Gospel.

Let's take a look at the Jerusalem church from Acts chaps 2-15. We are going to do this under three headings –

□ Things To Make You Mad About the Jerusalem Church.

- The continuing emphasis on circumcision (see 15:1-5).
- The split loyalties that continued in the church (see 15:5).
- The lack of consistency in Peter (see Gal 2:11-13).
- The spirit of centralization.
- The seeming lack of mobility of the apostles.

Selwyn Hughes writes – “The church at Jerusalem never quite got over being

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Jewish. While Jewish history was clearly an essential prelude to New Testament Christianity, some of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem failed to sense what God was really doing in forming a single new humanity in Christ, & for a while hindered rather than helped the growth of the Church.”

□ Things To Make You Sad About the Jerusalem Church.

- The failure to carry on the cross-cultural ministry of Jesus.
- The failure to see that Jews were to bless all nations with the Gospel.
- The issue of spiritual versus political Kingdom (see 1:6).
- The failure to take up Acts 1:8.
- The poor attitude to Paul (see 9:26).

□ Things To Make You Glad About the Jerusalem Church.

- The apostles preached Christ (see 2:14-36)
- The apostles suffered for His Name (see 5:41-42).
- Quality people were produced in Jerusalem e.g. Barnabas.
- They were a growing church (see 2:41, 4:4; 5:14; 6:7)
- They withstood Satanic attacks from within & without (see chap 5).
- The church & its leaders had a continuing experience of the Holy Spirit.
- Jerusalem was a caring church.
- The able missionaries that were scattered (see 8:1).

Why this change of focus from Jerusalem to Antioch? Acts chap 8 is an important chapter in the unfolding of the purposes of God in reaching the world with the Gospel message. Persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem. We are told about the Christians being scattered (see 8:1 & 11:19) beyond the boundary of Jerusalem. This scattering serves to spread the Gospel to many different nationalities.

Although we are not told why the focus of mission moves from Jerusalem to Antioch, it has not stopped some Bible commentators giving their ideas. For these commentators, the breaking out of persecution against the church in Jerusalem is a pivotal event. They see this event being used by God to move his people out of Jerusalem, so that Acts 1:8 could be fulfilled.

Let me give you some quotes from these commentators -

Kevin J.Conner - “The Vision of an Antioch Church” – “The Lord allowed persecution to come against the Church at Jerusalem in order to scatter the seed of the Word. In scattering the disciples, the Lord scattered the Gospel seed.”

Don Richardson - “Eternity in Their Hearts” – “Hundreds of millions of Christians think that Luke’s Acts of the Apostles records the 12 apostles’ obedience to the Great Commission. Actually it records their reluctance to obey it.”

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Ross Paterson – “The Antioch Factor – The Hidden Message of The Book of Acts” – “The marginalisation of Jerusalem’s role was not random or accidental It was for a specific reason. Its logic states that the ultimate purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ is to reach out to a dying world with the good news of salvation. Jerusalem did that with real excellence & success locally...but it did not desire to do it in all the world.”

What can we take from all this for ourselves? While there were many positive things about the church in Jerusalem, we cannot ignore the fact that it did cease to be the frontline church of its generation.

From this change of focus in Acts, I can think of two questions/issues which may be relevant for us today as we seek to fulfil the Great Command & the Great Commission.

- *Are we allowing aspects of our culture to influence how we do church?*
- *Has familiarity stopped us going where we have not gone before?*

3. Reading Acts 11:19-26 & 13:1-3

We are now going to look at the Antioch church & the question we are seeking an answer to is this – **What can we learn from this first-century church that will empower Castleford to greater fruitfulness in ministry & service?**

In March 1986, Selwyn Hughes produced an Every Day With Jesus (E.D.W.J.) called “The Marks of a Christian Church.” The Antioch Church was the subject of this E.D.W.J. & twelve features were highlighted. They were –

1. The Christians at Antioch embodied the spirit of the Everlasting Christ.
2. In the Antioch Church there was a strong sense of corporateness.
3. In Antioch there were people of different backgrounds & ministries were held together in unbroken fellowship.
4. Antioch was a caring church.
5. In Antioch there was a right climate in which those with special abilities could be prepared for leadership.
6. The Antioch church knew suffering.
7. In Antioch there was a ministry of encouragement.
8. The Antioch practised evangelism.
9. Antioch had a strong & vigorous lay ministry.
10. Antioch give attendance to spiritual disciplines.
11. In Antioch the voice of The Holy Spirit was heard.
12. Antioch had a worldwide vision.

Kevin Connor, in his book “The Vision of An Antioch Church” highlights fourteen features about the church in Antioch –

1. A Biblically founded Church
2. A Church with a Senior Leader

3. A Church with a Ministry Team

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4. A Church that taught & trained disciples
5. A Church where the disciples were first called Christians
6. A Church which had a balance of ministries
7. A Church that ministered to the Lord
8. A Church that practised Prayer & Fasting
9. A Church that allowed the Holy Spirit to speak
10. A Church that Received & Responded to the Prophetic Word
11. A Church that Believed & Practised the Laying on of Hands
12. A Church that Received Revelation of the Tabernacle of David
13. A Church that Became a Great Evangelistic Missionary Church
14. A Home Church for Paul & Other Ministries.

What a Church – remember, this is a church that Jesus was building. A Church where the Holy Spirit was working. A Church where people were the bricks.

I have given you those two lists to show what local churches can be like. I believe that local churches today can be Antioch's. I trust the above lists highlight that we are involved in a serious business but it can also be a very fulfilling & an exciting business.

I am not going to go through either of the lists I have mentioned above – sigh of relief – but I am going to highlight, what I feel, are some key features of the Antioch church.

Remember the question we posed –

What can we learn from this first-century church that will empower Castleford to greater fruitfulness in ministry & service?

Background Information - Antioch was founded in 300BC by one of Alexander the Great's generals. He named Antioch after his father & its port, Seleucia" (15 miles away west along the navigable river Orontes) after himself.

Over the years Antioch became known as "Antioch the Beautiful" – because of its fine buildings, paved marble main street with trees & fountains & lighted streets at night - & "the Queen of the East" – because of its cosmopolitan population. Although it was a Greek city by foundation, its population came to consist of Jews, Indians, Chinese, & Persians.

Antioch was absorbed into the Roman Empire in 64BC & it became the capital of the imperial province of Syria. As a result, Greeks, Jews, Orientals & Romans formed the mixed population of what Josephus called "the third city of the empire", after Rome & Alexandria. Its population was approximately 500,000.

Bible Commentator James Boice writes – "It was here in this cosmopolitan, commercial & most corrupt city that a great church was established."

But, Antioch was also a wicked & idolatrous city. In addition to each national grouping having their own gods, Antioch had their own deity called "Daphne." The

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worship of this god included immoral practices. Warren Wiersbe says that Antioch was perhaps second only to Corinth in its wickedness.

James Kelso wrote, “Here where all the gods of antiquity were worshipped, Christ must be exalted.”

FIRST FEATURE OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH THE EMPOWERING PRESENCE OF GOD

We will be highlighting two expressions from Acts chap 11.

1. **The Hand of the Lord (Acts 11:21)** The Ampl Bible translates verse 21 this way – “And the presence of the Lord was with them with power.”

Jack Hayford, in his Bible Handbook, says this in relation to the figurative use of the term hand in the Bible – “The hand: means by which a work is accomplished.” It speaks of strength & power. Let’s now think of it spiritually.

Ken Hemphill writes – “When the hand of the Lord is on or with someone, the activity is supernaturally empowered & successful.” Remember what we read – “The Lord’s hand was with them, & a great number of people believed & turned to the Lord.”

In the Bible we see that God’s Hand is a –

- ❑ Powerful Hand – see Josh 4:24
- ❑ Purposeful Hand – see Ez 37:1
- ❑ Protecting Hand – see Ezra 7:9
- ❑ Providing Hand – see Ps 145:16

I am sure that there are many more “p’s” you could use to describe God’s Hand. Remember, God was all these things, & much more, to these unnamed men who went to Antioch with the Gospel.

I want to now bring this truth of “The Hand of God” into a New Testament setting. *F.F. Bruce, in his commentary on Acts, makes this point regarding “The Hand of God” – “this expression can sometimes be taken as a metaphor for the Spirit of God.”* I think we can say that these men knew the presence & power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

How can I know “the Hand of God” in my life? How can our churches be “Hand of God” churches? The clue, I think, is to remind us what these unnamed disciples were doing – they were taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. Church growth is a divine activity & the challenge is for local churches to be in a right relationship with its Head, Jesus.

2. **The Grace of God (Acts 11:23)** The Ampl Bible translates verse 23 this

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way – “ When he arrived & saw what grace (favour) God was bestowing upon them..”

What did Barnabas see? He didn't feel it in his spirit but saw something of God being revealed. Several things come to mind – he saw people being converted; he saw a church where opposites were in fellowship. Whatever, he saw the grace of God. ***D.L. Moody said, “The grace of God is the soil out of which all great service for God grows & develops.”*** How much did Antioch help Paul to grow in his ministry because it was a Grace Church?

What does a Grace Church look like? What attitudes & behaviours mark out a Grace Church? What does a Grace Church emphasis?

Ken Hemphill writes – “When a church is touched by the grace of God, you will see healing of relationships & supernatural kingdom living. When the God of the universe indwells a people, you will always see evidence of the grace of God.”

We see in Antioch this tremendous combination of Power & Grace. It is a combination that has already been highlighted in the Book of Acts (see 4:33 & 6:8). It is a striking combination, which Campbell Morgan describes as “sweetness & strength”. Antioch was a church that enjoyed the Empowering Presence of God.

SECOND FEATURE OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH THE DISCIPLINES PRACTICED BEFORE GOD

What was it like to be part of the church in Antioch? Would we have been happy to be part of such a church? Would we have “thrown our lot in” with such a church? What disciplines did the leadership team in Antioch structure the church around?

- 1. It was a Teaching Church***
- 2. It was a Prophetic Church***
- 3. It was a Worshipping Church***
- 4. It was a Praying Church***
- 5. It was a Fasting Church***
- 6. It was a Sending Church***
- 7. It was a Preaching Church***

Jesus builds great churches – churches that continue to do & teach what he started when he was on earth.

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THIRD FEATURE OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH A PASSION FOR THE LOST

Jim Cymbala in his book “The Church God Blesses” writes – “The great Christian church in Antioch was begun, surprisingly, by some unknown & unnamed “men from Cyprus & Cyrene.” With no New Testament yet written, surrounded by hostile Jews & Romans, with no benefit from legalized religion or formal church buildings, with no apparent source of income, with no printed materials or sound systems or choirs or seminary training, anonymous believers started one of the most dynamic congregations of the Christian era.”

What did these men have? What was the beat of their heart? What was it that drove them to Antioch? The only answer that I can think of is this – They had a passion for the lost?

Ross Paterson writes – “The Holy Spirit is making a very strong point here. Antioch was not born from the evangelistic ministry of some famous apostle or evangelist. It was not a monument to one man’s ministry. No one man’s name was written over the front door of the church. Antioch’s genetic structure contained a vital core element – it was the church of the ordinary people. Nobody took the credit. It was born out of anonymous men & women who had little to distinguish them except for one key factor – they loved Jesus & wanted others to love Him too.”

There is a question I want to ask at this point – what theology of evangelism should be at the core of every local church? A theology from which our evangelistic programmes can be born & developed. A theology that ignites passion but also encourages perseverance. (The following headings are taken from a book called “Building A Contagious Church” by Mark Mittelberg).

A THEOLOGY FOR EVANGELISM –

- 1. PEOPLE MATTER TO GOD***
- 2. PEOPLE ARE SPIRITUALLY LOST***
- 3. PEOPLE NEED CHRIST***
- 4. PEOPLE NEED ANSWERS***
- 5. PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY***
- 6. PEOPLE NEED CULTURAL RELEVANCE***
- 7. PEOPLE NEED TIME***

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4. Reading Acts 11:25-26 – What is a Christian?

It was at Antioch that the disciples of Jesus were first called CHRISTIANS. In the New Testament, believers were known by various designations –

- They were called “Disciples”
- They were called People of “The Way” (see 9:2)
- They were called “The Sect of the Nazarene” (see 24:5)

In the above passage, believers are called “CHRISTIANS” for the first time (see 26:28). *The Companion Bible comments on this verse by saying – “Though the Name may have been given first by the Gentiles in mockery, the usage of the word by the Holy Spirit indicates that its real origin was Divine.”* Please note – they didn’t call themselves “CHRISTIANS” but others gave the name to them.

We can breakdown the word “CHRISTIAN” as follows –

- “Christ” – Anointed One, Messiah
- “ian” – belonging to, coming from, being involved in or being like something.

Thus a Christian is a person belonging to Jesus Christ; came from Jesus Christ; involved with Jesus Christ & is like Jesus Christ in speech & actions.

We are now going to look at the following statement – *“If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”*

The two questions that we are now going to discuss are as follows -

What is a Christian?

What evidence can you present to convict you of being a Christian?

Discussion Topic For Groups –

a. Topic – What does a GRACE CHURCH look like?

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Think about what attitudes & behaviours would mark out such a church – leaders & people.

Think about what such a church would major on in its teaching & preaching programmes.

Think about what would be the guiding principals of relationships within the church.

Think about what would be said & thought about those outside the church.

b. Scriptures to Help You – (not exhaustive)

“For it is by grace you have been saved” Eph 2:8

“Freely you have received, freely give” Matthew 10:8

“The Word became flesh....full of grace & truth” John 1:14

“Grace & truth came through Jesus Christ” John 1:17

“God....gives grace to the humble” 1 Peter 5:5

“Each one should....serve others, faithfully administrating God’s grace.... 1 Peter 4:10

“The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly....”

1 Tim 1:14

c. Things That People Have Said About Grace -

“There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less” – Philip Yancey

“Grace focuses on who God is & what He has done, & takes the focus off ourselves.” Jackie Hudson

“Grace hath brought us safe thus far & grace will lead us home.” John Newton

Grace is God “extending special favour to someone who doesn’t deserve it, who hasn’t earned it & can never repay it.” Charles Swindoll

“Where the grace of God is missed, bitterness is born. But where the grace of God is embraced, forgiveness flourishes.” Max Lucado

d. Would You Like To Be Part Of A Grace Church? (also tell us why)

Discussion Topic For Groups –

We have just talked about about seven evangelistic values for a local church. Consider how strong you think these values are in your life & in your local church. Next, list one or two steps you can take to deepen the values you think

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are weakest. The goal is not to induce guilt or point the finger at anyone but rather to produce focused thinking & creative solutions that will help you & your church become more ready to reach lost people for Christ.

1. PEOPLE MATTER TO GOD

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

2. PEOPLE ARE SPIRITUALLY LOST

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

3. PEOPLE NEED CHRIST

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

4. PEOPLE NEED ANSWERS

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

5. PEOPLE NEED COMMUNITY

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

6. PEOPLE NEED CULTURAL RELEVANCE

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value:

7. PEOPLE NEED TIME

Present strength of this value:

Steps to deepen this value: