

The Church at Antioch
Acts 11:19-30

Joel 2:21-32
Romans 10:1-17
Psalm 34:1-10

This morning we are going to be picking up where we left off in Acts chapter 11, starting in verse 19 and going to the end of the chapter. Last week in the first half of this chapter that we went through was the retelling of Peter's account with the Roman Centurion, and the vision that he had while praying showing him that the Gospel message was for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. There was no longer to be this ritual separation, for Christ has now come and fulfilled all of the rituals, traditions, and practices that were set in to place which was to serve the purpose of preparing the people and instructing the people about Christ are no longer necessary. They have faded, and have been replaced by a better covenant in the blood of Christ, and established upon better promises that are not predicated upon our own abilities to keep them.

So let us go ahead and read our passage this morning, starting at verse 19, and going to the end of the chapter. (Read Acts 11:19-30) Again we see this morning Luke recording how the gospel keeps spreading reaching out further and further away from Jerusalem. And again is noted that it was the persecution that arose after Stephen was stoned that caused these believing Jews to flee Jerusalem and as they did so, they shared the gospel everywhere they went. But now Luke gives another detail he has not given as he has recounted these events, he says that they went preaching the word only to the Jews. Then he notes that some men, from Cyprus and Cyrene also preached to the Hellenist. There is some debate as to who these Hellenists were, but it is most likely they were a part of the same group that was mentioned in the earlier chapters, a sect of Greek speaking Jews, who were likely at one time sold and served as slaves but now being freemen have returned. In these first few verses here this morning, we are seeing the first accounts recorded of the gospel being taught by unnamed ordinary believers, not just the apostles.

There can be an idea even today that the ministry of the gospel is largely left up to the pastors and the missionaries. But the truth of the matter is that we are all teachers, preachers, and missionaries of the word of God. In the kingdom of God there really isn't the distinctions that we see in the Jewish faith, for all are priests, all are missionaries, and all are teachers. For God said that he will make for himself a nation of priests, a people who will minister and teach their neighbors, their family, and their friends the word of God. Now this does not mean that God doesn't, or hasn't raised up men at certain times to acts as leaders, or given men wisdom to teach the finer things of the faith, but it is not limited to these men only, but rather we are all given not only the ability by the holy spirit to learn and the grow by the reading of the word, but also the call to share to all those around us.

And this is what we see in this account of these people who have fled Jerusalem, they are not apostles, they are not scribes, or priests, but merely believers who are sharing the hope that they have in Christ with those who will listen. And it is by this gospel outreach, by these unnamed men that the gospel arrives in Syria and a church is founded in Antioch, which was the 3rd largest city in the Roman empire, and which became the central hub and base for further outreach into the Gentile nations. Luke records these events not necessarily in a chronological order, but it seems his focus is more upon the geographical regions and how the word which is the central so called character in the book of Acts, is a powerful force which as gone out into the world, and as the word of God and the gospel message spreads throughout the regions, it leads to the creation and growth of churches, and localized bodies of believers who gather together and worship.

This next phase as it were, of the progress of the word of God's spread across the world is neither organized by the church in Jerusalem, nor is it directly inspired by Peter's preaching to Cornelius. While Luke has chosen to point out a few key events and focus upon those, there are many untold accounts of the gospel being shared and spread among the people, again by unnamed believers. But it would seem by the flow of Luke's narrative here, it suggests that the theological outcome of the gospel outreach to Cornelius has opened the flood gates for the gospel to be given to the Gentiles. And that is what we see is happening in Antioch, up until this point the gospel was largely only preached to the Jews, but here in Antioch we see in verse 20, that there were some when they came to Antioch preached the word and many Gentiles came to believe, and just like with Cornelius and his household we get affirmation here is well, that the Lord is working and blessing this ministry and is sovereignty going about calling his children to repent and believe for it says in verse 21. "And the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord."

So the founding and creation of the Antioch church, was not by an organized mission outreach by the church in Jerusalem, but was a natural, organic growth of a body of believers merely by the preaching of the word through those who had fled persecution in Jerusalem. And as it says, "the Lord was with them," it is clear that this gospel spreading among the gentiles was the work of God. And again we see Luke closing out this statement of the gospel ministry by saying, "a great number believed and turned to the Lord. I think this has is the 6th mention by Luke of the multitudes, or many being added to the Lord through the ministry of the gospel since Pentecost. And just like with the other accounts, when word reached Jerusalem of a new body of believers gathering and growing an Apostle is sent to see what exactly is going on.

As we see in the text in verse 23 it says, "When he came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad." The news of the belief of the Gentiles was confirmed by Barnabas and he rejoiced to see many who have come to believe upon Christ. And it says, that he stayed to encourage them to continue in this faith, to grow, and to learn more, and infact he called to Paul to join him in this endeavor and they stayed there in Antioch for a year, teaching and preaching to these new believers, and it is here where the term Christian is first found to have been used to define these who follow Christ. This new community of believers has made such an impact on the city of Antioch that there was a need to identify them as an entirely different group, the title Christians that was given recognized the fact that this growing faith was a new phenomenon, never before has there been such a faith that would bring both Jews and Gentiles together.

In these few verses here, here is a subtle yet powerful statement made by Luke, again showing the legitimacy of this gathering of believers in Antioch. In verse 26, he says that Barnabas, and Paul assembled with the church there in Antioch for a full year. This was the first time that Luke has used the word church to describe a gathering of believers, uoutside of the mentioning of the Church in Jerusalem. In doing so he has created a parallel, drawing a direct line between to the 2 and putting the 2 up for comparison, showing that through God's sovereign work these gatherings of believers were equal in status and significance. A little side note here, is the use of this term Church by Luke, also shows that it is a term that can used to geographically define a group of believers. By that I mean, there are some today who do not like the terminology of church being used to describe a local body and instead ascribe it to always mean the larger eternal body of believers. But we see in the example here, that Luke uses the term to denote 2 different groups, and while doing so equates them into one, they are still yet 2 distinct separate groups, 2 seperate bodies of believers, but united as one in Christ. This Shows that the Gentile Church is just as legitimate in purpose and function as the Jewish believing Church in Jerusalem.

Again there is no distinction in the family of God for those who believe. Yet there is a great importance to the local body, to the assembling and gathering of believers together. We are not to be as some, who see themselves as a member of the larger eternal church without distinction, without a local expression and feel that there is no need to attach themselves to a local body. This is not a biblical standard, and in fact, as we all know those who are of this faith desire the assembly, and the company of one another for it is there that we find strength and encouragement as we journey through this life. We are not called to be islands unto ourselves, but to come together as one body, to nurture, and nourish each other, to grow in faith together, to bear one another burdens, and to exhort one another, driving one another to grow in our understanding. This can not be done without the local church, without gathering and coming together, without being involved in one another's lives. Without the local community, without the fellowship of the saints, those who think such gathering and community is unnecessary, ultimately wither away, without the nourishment from the local body.

Paul likewise taught of the importance of the local body of believers, of the assembling and coming together in his letter to the Hebrews. He said, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another to stir up good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more so as we see the day approaching." Let us consider one another, and stir up good works, we are to be an assembly of God's people, who stir up love and good works, who strive together in this faith, lifting each other up, helping and supporting one another in brotherly love. Scripture is full of such exhortations that there is no justification to forsaking the assembling together of a local expression of the church.

Romans 12:10 "Love one another in brotherly affection; seeking to outdo one another in showing honor."

1 Thessalonians 5:11 "Therefore encourage one another and build another up, just as you are doing."

John 13:34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; just as I have loved you, you love one another."

Ephesians 4:32 "Be kind to one another, forgiving one another as Christ forgave you."

1 Peter 4:8 "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins."

Ephesians 4:2 "With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love"

Romans 13:8 "Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another fulfills the law."

And Galatians 5:13 "For you were called to freedom, brothers, only do not use your freedom for the opportunity of the flesh, but through love serve one another."

And there are another 100 verses like these, showing the importance not only of the local assembly, of the local expression of the body and bride of Christ, but also the importance of that conduct of that local expression to be rooted in the love for one another just as Christ himself loved the church. Christ's love for his church, which he calls his bride, is what drove him to the cross. He died, for her, shed his blood for her, so that she may be bound together in him, and it is this sacrificial love that we as believers, are to express toward one another. Jesus commanded that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, he said, "The first of all commandments is Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these.

And Paul building upon this concept laid down by our Savior said in his letter to the Romans “Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves one another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not covet. And if there is any other commandments, are all summed up in this saying, namely, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does not harm to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.” And if we are to live as such toward our neighbors, how much more so should we strive to live as such with our brothers and sisters in Christ? Who being the adopted children of God, heirs to the everlasting inheritance, bound by the everlasting covenant in Christ's blood, and redeemed sinners just as we are. Far too often it seems the church is defined by its strife, by scandals and betrayals, by leaders with selfish ambitions, and greed seeking power over the congregation. In fact in some cases it is the complete opposite of the community and local expression of the body of Christ we see in scripture.

The concept of biblical growth within a church is an organic God lead phenomenon, not brought about by programs, or an attempt to appeal to the nature of mankind as we see so many do today. The examples we see of these local bodies of believers gathering together in scripture are simply coming together, worshipping and teaching scripture, sharing the gospel and it is God who is adding to the church. This new church in Antioch sprung up because of the faithful ministry of God's children, doing what God's children do....share the hope that is within them. And as we see here in verse 21, as we often do throughout acts... it says, “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.” It was God who was adding to this church, to this local body of believers. Not some celebrity speaker, or special ministry, but simply God working through his word being taught.

As David Peterson noted about this church in Antioch in his commentary on Acts, he said, “Church growth took place because the Lord's hand was with them, when we see that the Lord is both the subject and object, the source and the goal of evangelism, we have to repent of all of our self-centered, self confident concepts of the Christian mission. Furthermore, growth in size of a church is closely linked to the growth in maturity, not just simply by its outreach program.” In other words, the reality is that many churches today have it wrong. Sure, they may have a vibrant outreach program, but when it comes to the nourishment of the body they are lacking...there becomes such a focus on growth and outreach that there is little to no spiritual meat being fed to the fellowship, there is little to no spiritual growth within the church, leaving at best starving Christians, and at worse a social gathering hub of the self righteous and deceived. This ought not to be, but rather the focus of the local body of the church should be first upon Christ, and the ministry and support of the body, that is the other members who come and gather in faith to worship. And it is they, who do the outreach.

The church's function is to be a support system, a place of growth and encouragement among the saints, and it is the saints who are to outreach within their own community, and in all these things keeping Christ first and foremost. This is how the church grows, preach the word, grow in the grace of God and it is he who will add to it. In the last few verses of our passage this morning, we see an expression of this ministry of the church, one of the main functions of a local body of believers.. which is to love and support others. When a prophet came and foretold of a great famine that was coming throughout the world...the church gathered and gave of their means in support of others who were suffering. Verse 29, says “Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”

In this way again, this church in Antioch is mirroring the church in Jerusalem, for after pentecost when that church was established and gathered each was giving of their means as they could so that none would go without and suffer. And here we are seeing this same expression on a larger scale, for it isn't just the local body, but they are sending aid to others.

So while there is definitely an importance within the local body, there is also an importance in the universal expression of the body as well. For the reality is that we are all in this together, and in times of need should be seeking to edify, encourage, and help one another, and it is through such ministry and opportunity that we are able to share Christ's love to one another...and that really is what it is all about, sharing Christ, and by his grace, living in love toward one another, forgiving one another, encouraging each other, ministering together, and reflecting Christ's love outward to our communities. This is what should be the defining factor within a body of believers...not their music ministry, their coffee shops, or children's programs...but rather the love that we have for our savior, and by reflection of that love, the love we have for one another. And it is God who sees, and it is God who will bless and provide. Striving to keep Christ the center, the purpose, and the reason for all things, and being ready to minister as he gives opportunity. Let us, strive to be this people, to be those who are known by our love toward one another, let it be the love of Christ that defines us, and may it be Christ shining through us that others see.