

“The Characteristics Of A Healthy Church”

30 May 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call To Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Resurrection Hymn (See, What A Morning)

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Acts 11:19-30

Sermon:

My car was put through a series of tests last week (we call it the NCT) and it passed well. My car is healthy. Similarly, it is great to see human flourishing and health in life: children thriving, gardens blossoming, exams passed, degrees awarded, economies delivering, football teams winning trophies, you get the idea. It is not always the case in our world, but when it happens it is good.

The second half of Acts 11 describes a healthy church, the church in Antioch. Today, Luke introduces us to another movement of God centred in the city of Antioch. Following on from the story of Stephen and the scattering of the Christians because of Jewish persecution, we are told some of them travel towards the North and the West into Phoenicia (Lebanon) Cyprus and Syria. Antioch was the capital city of the Roman province of Syria. Antioch was significant, a large city, approximately 500,000 people, the third largest in the Roman Empire behind Rome and Alexandria. It was multi-ethnic and cultural, because citizenship was granted to those who could come and work in the city. So, the believers were meeting and talking with people from around the world, described here as Greeks (v.20) and we could widen that designation to Gentiles.

As we have noted previously (8:4) *“those who had been scattered preached the word, wherever they went”*, and in v.19 we learn they stayed within their own community of Jews (synagogue), *“telling the message only to Jews.”* Verse 20 marks a significant shift in emphasis that produced fruit. *“Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about Jesus.”*

So, the scene is set. Christian believers from Jerusalem speak of Jesus to those in the synagogues (fellow Jews), and other Greek-speaking Christians coming from Cyprus and Cyrene (North Africa, modern day Libya) converge on the capital city of the Roman province of Syria, Antioch, and speak to “the Greeks”. The Church in Antioch is a healthy and growing church (v.21) in a large cosmopolitan city from which we can learn. So, let us look at the characteristics of this church.

I. Partnership with God (v.19-21)

Last week, we saw that God gave Peter and Cornelius visions, or pictures, and we have in v.19-21 a wonderful picture of *“the Lord’s hand was with them”*. What a fantastic picture it is, thinking of God (anthropomorphically) helping, guiding, encouraging, adding power to their work. It is such an encouragement when someone lends a hand, stops and gets alongside, to help us complete the task. Such help makes us grateful and often we respond, saying something like, *“I couldn’t do this without you.”* Jesus used the picture of the vine in John 15

to teach us again in a picture that, *“No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine; apart from me you can do nothing”* (v.4-5).

What does God help them with? God helps many people believe in the Lord Jesus. They tell the message, the good news about the Lord Jesus, but the response is the responsibility of the Lord Jesus. God helps them turn to the Lord in repentance. *“God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life”* (v.18). The effect is dramatic, a great number of the Gentiles respond (v.21,24,26). A healthy church recognises it is totally dependent upon God for its life and witness. God blesses the evangelism of these unnamed evangelists within the church and their boldness. This change in policy, their pushing boundaries, of doing new things was significant and blessed by God as Luke confirms, the Lord’s hand was upon them. Let us pray for God’s hand to be with us, to help us chat freely about Jesus and pray for the Lord’s hand to be with us as we do so, that many will believe and turn to the Lord.

II. Wholehearted towards God (v.22-24)

“he encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts”

The spectacular growth, and the good news of many being saved reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem. They sent Barnabas to check it out! Remember Barnabas (4:36). He came from Cyprus, sold a field, gave the money to the Church, was well respected, and is the only person in the New Testament described as good (v.24). Barnabas’s work is to authenticate the work of God and he sees plenty of evidence of the grace of God (v.23) What is that evidence, what made Barnabas glad? The people within the church in Antioch were, *“true to the Lord with all their hearts”*.

They were kindred spirits with Barnabas, he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith. His character was evidence of God’s grace that had been recognised by the church in Jerusalem and the same character encouraged Barnabas when he observed the members of the church in Antioch. They were true, loyal, committed, followers of Jesus and similarly committed to the Church. Jesus captivated Barnabas and the believers at Antioch, they loved and served Jesus and their fellowship made Barnabas glad and encouraged. God blesses such corporate wholehearted devotion to His Son; and it results in a great number of people being brought to the Lord. They became Christians and members of the local church. This is dependent on the grace of God to us.

Seeing you all in church today makes my heart glad, and I encourage all of you to remain true to the Lord. We will continue to remain true as we contemplate, understand, and depend upon the grace of God to us in Jesus Christ. However, as I read this and imagined the enthusiasm and growth in the church in Antioch, I was saddened, disappointed and realised afresh how much we need the grace of God. We need to remind ourselves afresh of the grace of God towards us in Jesus, understanding his great grace towards us will warm our hearts, cause us to come alive and repent of our half-heartedness, our idols, our individualism, our love of the world, our selfishness. Will you gladden the heart of God and others in church by remaining true to the Lord with all your heart? Let us pray passionately for a greater understanding of God’s grace to us.

III. Disciples of Jesus (v.25-26)

“The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.”

They were so into Jesus as it were that the locals nicknamed them “Christ people” or Christians and as you know that name has become the primary designation of disciples of Jesus ever since. When Barnabas sees the work of God; he looks for help and thinks of his friend Saul of Tarsus, who was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (9:15) and together they disciple the new believers, which included a whole year of instruction. A disciple is a learner and a follower, the aim of discipleship is to become a mature and equipped follower of Jesus. The way this happens is by being with Jesus (Mark 3:14) and the primary way we are with Jesus is by being taught and being in fellowship with fellow Christians. A healthy Christian, a healthy church, is a well-taught church, one that knows Jesus and understands his will. Note that the teaching programme was well attended. *“Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.”*

What evidence does society see that we might be called Christians? What evidence is there that we are learning and being taught about Jesus? Such are the marks of healthy disciples of Jesus. Though the church members were first called Christians at Antioch that was not their preferred title, though it did come to stick. Can you remember the other names the church used to refer to themselves?

- Brothers (and sisters), family
- Disciples (learner and follower)
- Saints (holy)
- Christians (a Jesus person)

Each has an important role to play in highlighting aspects of a healthy disciple. When you go to the doctor for a check-up, they will use different criteria to assess your health or otherwise. If one criterion for healthy discipleship is enthusiasm for learning through the teaching of the scriptures, how healthy are we? Let us pray that we might know the grace of God to teach us more of our saviour and his will for our lives.

IV. A Generous Concern for Others (v.27-30)

“So, the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability to send relief to the brothers and sisters living in Judea” (v.29, ESV).

We are told that some prophets came down from Jerusalem to speak. These men were important figures in the church (13:1-3). Prophets are those who speak the word of God, these men were able to fore-tell the future, gifted by the Holy Spirit, they are undoubtedly lively, energetic, and possibly focus on the signs of the second coming or the end times. Famine being one of those signs, as Jesus reminds the church, *“there will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven” (Luke 21:11).*

Luke’s concern here is not about end times; he highlighted that the church in Antioch listened to the prophets, took the word from God about the threat of an impending famine seriously and immediately thought how they might help their brothers and sisters of the church in Judea (Jerusalem) and they were moved to generous action.

They are motivated by an outworking of their unity in Jesus. The church is Jesus’ body on earth and when one part suffers all suffer. Their response is corporate, a church gift! It originated in the desire of the disciples in Antioch, it was voluntary or of free will as we say, and each gave according to their ability to pay.

The gift is given from church to church, within the family. Saul represents the church in Antioch and Barnabas represents the church in Jerusalem. Note that the gift is received by elders in Jerusalem, this is the first time we have been told of the church being led by elders and not the Apostles.

The mark of a healthy church is a generous concern for others within the family of God. This too is a mark of our understanding of the grace of God. By grace God has blessed us with material gifts, by grace he has brought us into his family, calling us children of God. By the gift of the Holy Spirit, we experience that unity, love, and compassion and when we exercise a generous ministry of concern for others, we proclaim the health of our faith. Let us pray that we will be generous and have a deeper desire to share with each other in our needs.

When I take my car for the NCT I get quite nervous, I don't like to think about the consequences of failing the test! The time, money, and inconvenience of putting the faults right, which is nonsensical really because doing so should produce a better and safer car. The Bible contains this description of the Church in Antioch as an example or standard of a healthy church, which became the centre for worldwide mission. By considering the church we get to run the rule over ourselves as a church.

Are we:

- aware of the Lord's hand on our lives?
- wholeheartedly committed to Jesus and his church?
- desiring to learn of Jesus as disciples?
- generous towards others in the family of God and others in need?

We rejoice and are glad where we do see such healthy growth and we seek the grace of God to continue and where we are aware of failure and shortcomings, we remember God's grace and seek grace because we know of his desire to grant us repentance unto life.

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Let us take the summer months to invite God to help us work through any shortcomings he reveals to us.

Praise: Great Is The Darkness

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: Come People Of The Risen King

Benediction

Discussion & Application:

Identify an area of your hearts that needs to be changed so that you can be more wholehearted. Ask for God's grace to grant repentance unto life.

What practical steps can you take to grow in your knowledge of Jesus?

What areas of need are you aware of? How can we respond with practical generosity?