

The other day in the university capstone class that I teach for business-school seniors, we were talking about the strategies of top organizations—whether those organizations be businesses, nonprofits, or churches. Whoa, you might say? ...Churches? ...Churches have *strategy*? Yeah, that's right, every church has a strategy—because even a lack of strategy is most especially a failing strategy from the very start!

Let's go a step deeper in that regard. A previous Whitestone podcast episode's title was this: "the average Christian is...average!" And you know what's true, too? *The average church is just average, too.* That means that there are churches that range from *below average* to *just plain wrong*. And, of course, that also means there are churches that are *above average*, even *excellent*! But, alas, no church is perfect.

Well, when we were addressing the issue of Christian missions in the global church, a student stated that "churches aren't tasked with doing missions, it's individual Christians who are." My response was simple: go read about the church at Antioch in the New Testament, captured mostly by Luke in the book of Acts.

And that exchange led to this episode titled *9 Key Pointers for Us from the Church at Antioch*. That's right, the church at Antioch highlighted in this episode can very deeply inform the leaders of any church since—in every place and in every era!

Now there's some very interesting benchmarking that follows here. So, what I'm going to do is simply lay out nine key pointers in a summary survey of key happenings at the church at Antioch. The big picture result is that gleanings from those sketches reveal a church that was very effective at fulfilling strategy and in the proper handling of operational issues, opportunities, and events that arose. Happily, by the leading of the Holy Spirit, Luke captured very key elements of that in his narrative in the book of Acts.

Before we get started, the first thing you might be saying is this: well, the churches receiving epistles in the New Testament often needed correcting, yeah, like the Corinthians or the Galatians! And that's right: God directed Paul, for example, to address local churches that were drifting or going the wrong direction.

But the sketch of the church at Antioch is very interesting, nuanced, and instructive *in very positive ways*! The unfolding story of Antioch revealed a church amazingly on-target with key strategic and operational priorities and responses. So let's take a look, much in the sequence that Luke does in the book of Acts.

From the very first, the early church in Jerusalem was growing by the thousands, starting with three thousand added right off the bat, then a later mention of five thousand men being believers. You see, *God keeps score as to the number of believers aligned with Him*! This is a noteworthy fact in and of itself, because it's quite common in modern Christian circles to disdain church growth or downplay numeric increases in believers or, yes, even criticize a church that's welcoming to people seeking after God.

But very soon, there was persecution of the church at Jerusalem: disciples were arrested and beaten a couple times, then Stephen was stoned and killed. That happened with a young Pharisee named Saul standing by approvingly. Right, the very young man Saul who later became known as the Apostle Paul.

One key facet of this era was that, early on, the persecution of the Jerusalem church led to the spread of the faith elsewhere. And one of the cities where it spread both *to and from* was Antioch of Syria. Antioch reportedly boasted a population of a couple of hundred thousand and a concentration of wealthy Jews. Now, here's Acts 11:19..."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." But the very next verse, Acts 11:20 is a powerful blockbuster of news: "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."

And that's the first key point: the church at Antioch was comprised of both Greeks and Jews—the Holy Spirit led hearing believers in the Jesus Way in true diversity. That's right, the New Covenant was demonstrably for all ethnicities, and that in a city outside Jerusalem—Jesus's Acts 1:8 command in action!

So, next comes the second key point: God revels in great numbers of people believing and turning to Him! Yes, God is pleased with growth in His Kingdom! Here's what the very next verse says, in Acts 11:21: "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord." There God goes again, right there in His Word: reveling in the great numbers who believed, turning to the Lord!

And that leads to the third key point. Jerusalem, the geographic start of the Church starting with just believing Jews, took careful note of this diverse growth at Antioch! Acts 11:22-24 says, "The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord." Yes, there God is again: His Kingdom is adding a great many citizens—including Gentiles!

Then, the fourth key point is this: the Jerusalem church specifically sent Barnabas, "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith," a mature leader, to Antioch to do the work of the Lord. Appropriately, Barnabas wisely exhorted the diverse work at Antioch which deepened and broadened the great adding of believers.

The fifth key point is Barnabas' Spirit-led bringing the immensely talented Paul to the hungry, on-fire church at Antioch. Here's Acts 11:25-26: "So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people." By the leading of the Holy Spirit, this was Barnabas's active calling of Paul into service, and it sparked perhaps the most effective ministry in world history, at least ministry this side of Christ Himself!

The six key point is that "names mean something." Here are the last few words of Acts 11:26: "...And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians." The early church was no longer "just Jews," and certainly not just Gentiles or Greeks; the body of believers in the church at Antioch became known as...Christians!

Next, the seventh key point is that the church at Antioch led the way in individuals' free-will supporting of the church in Jerusalem in a time of famine, when "the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea." That's in Acts 11:29.

The eighth key point is that the leadership at Antioch played a significant role in refuting legalistic Judaizers—and that obediently helping establish the New Covenant as a better covenant. (Hebrews 8) Paul wrote to the Galatians (2:11-12) of his correction of Peter as to Peter's dining only with Jewish believers when he visited Antioch. And then there was the council gathered at Jerusalem, where Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to testify as to the amazing happenings at Antioch with Gentiles...with Peter and James then endorsing their "Antiochian" position that circumcision was indeed not needed in the New Covenant.

Last but not least is the ninth, very powerful key point about Antioch: it became a pioneering, missionary-sending church which has been the gold standard for the entire church to this very day. Indeed, the church at Antioch created the template for global outreach in its launching of missionary journeys!

So, let's recap these nine points about the great church at Antioch. First, intentional, true, voluntary diversity. Second, God-lauded, great growth in new believers near and far. Third, a model carefully noted by the Jerusalem church and created for all churches—then and now. Fourth, Barnabas astutely bridging relationships across churches. Fifth, Barnabas' timely and astute calling of Paul into Antiochian leadership. Sixth, the name "Christian" bridged across the divisive chasm between the names *Jews* and *Gentiles*. Seventh, believers' free-will support of a sister church. Eighth, the correcting of the Judaizers' and Peter's wrong practices. And ninth, Antioch's powerful pioneering of multiple, very effective missionary journeys.

Here's the thing: the church at Antioch was positioned to *and worked to become* a strategic center for spreading the gospel to cities around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. And the example of that church has anchored and inspired countless churches and missionaries and senders of missionaries since. How about you and your church: do you rightly aspire to making a modern, "Great Commission" church? Well, the model of the church at Antioch would be an excellent place to start...and then dwell: *simply stunning!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Take a look at the church at Antioch's world-class pioneering of missionary efforts (see Acts, chapters 13-18). Now, in order to pave the way for effective, later "foreign missions," how important was it that the leaders at Antioch first established true diversity between Jews and Greeks in their church...that their local church grew in great numbers...that they squelched Peter's segregation of eating only with Jews...that they supported needy Christians in Jerusalem with free-will offerings...and that they changed the course of the early church at the Council at Jerusalem with the reports that Paul and Barnabas were able to extol? Discuss the importance of a whole package of right practices.
2. Do you believe classic Christian missions is designed to be a church-level commitment and endeavor—or that it's expected to be foundationally only at the instigation of the individual believer? Discuss.
3. In many modern churches—if uttered at all as operational—the word "missions" often seems to be synonymous with "foreign travel to another country by church members"...and that sometimes without regard to any real witness for Christ and Him crucified and deep spiritual discipling! Does your local church work to follow the model of Antioch, especially regarding the fruitful, repeated commitment to missionary proclamation of the Gospel and the making of disciples? Discuss. How about you personally as part of your local body? Discuss.