

Faith Pulpit

Three Principles for Biblical Church Growth, Part 2

Dr. Luke's account of the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19–30) yields three principles for Biblical church growth. The previous issue of the *Faith Pulpit* explained the first principle: “Reach Out To The Lost” (11:19–21). The believers in Antioch shared the good news of Christ with their neighbors, “and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord” (11:21).

Reports of church growth reached the believers in Jerusalem. Earlier they had sent Peter and John to Samaria (8:14). This time they sent Barnabas to Antioch (11:22).

Barnabas was the logical choice for three reasons. First, Barnabas was a Cypriot (Acts 4:36). He could best relate to the “men of Cyprus” (11:20). Second, Barnabas was generous. He owned a piece of property, sold it, and brought the proceeds to the apostles (Acts 4:37). This was an important character trait for the man who would investigate the swelling church ranks in Antioch. Many a pastor upon hearing of growth elsewhere, jumps to premature conclusions. Maybe the pastor is jealous; maybe he is overly skeptical—not Barnabas. After arriving in Antioch and seeing the grace of God, he; “was glad” (11:23). Third, Barnabas was an encourager. Barnabas' name was really Joseph; but, being a man of consolation or encouragement, the apostles surnamed him Barnabas. His new name meant Son of Encouragement (Acts 4:36).

II. Disciple All Believers (Acts 11:22–26)

A. Instruction for Personal Sanctification

Barnabas lived up to his reputation. Upon his arrival in Antioch he “exhorted them all” (11:23). The word “exhorted” is the verb form of the noun “consolation” (Acts 4 4:36).

Barnabas did not simply preach to felt needs. Instead, he encouraged all to resolutely “cleave unto the Lord.” The word “cleave” means to “stay with.” Such a charge involves both lingering at Calvary and mortifying the flesh. Barnabas preached the message of personal separation. He announced, as it were, “Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good” (Romans 12:9).

This was important because of the 20th Century-like immorality in the city. The Roman satirist Juvenal once complained, “The sewage of the Syrian Orontes has for long been discharged into the Tiber.” Antioch was situated on the Orontes river, whereas Rome was situated on the Tiber—more than 1,300 miles to the west. Despite this great distance, Antioch’s decadence still impacted Rome.

The goal of a church’s teaching and preaching ministry should be the personal sanctification of all believers. Some have argued that a church cannot concentrate on both teaching and evangelism. Allegedly, an irreconcilable disparity exists between doctrine and zeal. At Antioch they rejected such a philosophy of ministry. They implemented both an earnest outreach endeavor and an uncompromising educational program, “and much people was added unto the Lord” (11:24).

B. Instruction by Example

Barnabas not only vocalized a call to sanctification, he also modeled the process. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith (11:24)—quite a resume. He lived his own messages and thereby closed the door to duplicity. Biblical church growth requires godly leadership, and Barnabas met the standard.

Barnabas functioned best as a team player. Disdaining self-aggrandizement, he went to Tarsus seeking for Saul. Barnabas selected Saul for three possible reasons. **First**, Barnabas knew Saul personally. Earlier, he had introduced Saul to the apostles (Acts 9:26). **Second**, Barnabas watched as Saul talked and argued with the Hellenistic Jews (Acts 9:29). Saul’s ability to contend with Hellenized individuals made him ideally suited for the cross-cultural ministry at Antioch. **Third**, Barnabas may have known of Saul’s Temple vision. After returning to Jerusalem from Damascus, Saul prayed in the Temple and there fell into a trance. The Lord said to him, ‘Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles’ (Acts 22:21). Since Barnabas was the one who had taken hold of Saul and introduced him to the apostles, Saul may have shared with him the content of the vision. Years later, Barnabas realized that he needed a man with a special call to Gentile ministry; so Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch in A.D. 43.

C. Instruction with Patience

Barnabas and Saul met with the believers in Antioch for an entire year. In these many gatherings they “taught much people” (11:26). This indicates patient teaching on the part of these two men. Biblical church growth is usually a gradual process. It takes patient, faithful exhortation “with all longsuffering

and doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:2). They did not activate trendy programs or quick fixes. Their curriculum remains unknown to us; but, if Paul’s epistles provide any indication, they taught doctrine and practical Christian living.

Church members talked so much about Christ that eventually outsiders began calling them “Christians.” The name stuck, and we bear it today. The title means “belonging to the party of Christ.” For example, in those days the Herodians supported the Herods. Likewise, the Christians followed Christ.

III. Love the Brethren (Acts 11:27–30)

A. Knowledgeable Care

In A.D. 44, prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch; Agabus was among them. Agabus later predicted Paul’s imprisonment (Acts 21:10–14), but at this time he foresaw a series of famines that would occur throughout the Empire. These took place during the reign of Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41–54). He was the Caesar who expelled the Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2). Suetonius, the Roman biographer, explains that the Jews were banished because they were disputing over one name “Chrestus.”

Agabus foretold a coming famine. He informed the Christians of Antioch so that they could respond. Many anonymous Christians attend growing churches. They come to the large services, but they never organically unite with the assembly. They do not function like an integral member of the body. Then, when facing real needs, they do not feel free to disclose those needs. Needy Christians miss out on experiencing God’s love expressed through caring Christians. Caring Christians miss out on expressing God’s love through their giving.

B. Familial Care

Paul would later express the basis for this kind of relief ministry. He wrote, “For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things [i.e., of the Jews], their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal [or material] things” (Romans 15:27). He also wrote, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Galatians 6:10).

Caring for other Christians is not a luxury; it is an element of authentic Christianity. Christ said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). Biblical church growth cannot take place when Christians are complacent about the needs of the brethren. Our familial love declares to the world that we are His disciples. Maybe many unchurched people view the church with skepticism because they have never witnessed an outpouring of love within the Christian community.

C. Sacrificial Care

Rather than respond to Agabus' prediction by hoarding their own wealth, the believers in Antioch determined to send assistance to the brethren in Judea. Each believer in Antioch gave "according to his ability" (11:29).

This display of Christian love greatly influenced Paul. One day he would write that each Christian should give "as God hath prospered him" (1 Corinthians 16:2). He would also write that a Christian should give "as he purposeth in his heart" (2 Corinthians 9:7). Demonstrations of Christian love require sacrifice and determination, but this should not surprise us. Each aspect of Biblical church growth demands great effort and resolve.

Sometimes church members know of pressing needs within the family, but they fail to respond. Such a church has forfeited its sense of community; it no longer functions as a body.

At Antioch evangelistic zeal, solid Bible teaching, and sincere Christian love united together to produce Biblical church growth. By A.D. 48, the Antioch church would develop into a missionary-sending church (Acts 13:1–3). In this way it would reach out even more. Truly, "the hand of the Lord was with them" (11:21).

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