

Becoming A Model Church

By Santiago Lange



When I first became a committed Christian about 40 years ago, I started attending a small congregation in Springfield, Illinois (USA). I remember thinking to myself, “This IS the church to be!” While not perfect, I truly admired this loving congregation.

After studying the book of Acts I added another church to my „favorite congregations list“, the church at Antioch. The Antioch church was a growing, ministering, evangelizing church. Antioch was in the first century AD the third largest Roman city. Surely there was considerable corruption in the buzzing metropolis, but that didn’t stop the Christians who lived there. As the New Testament witnesses, they boldly shared the love of Jesus.

What made the church in Syrian Antioch so remarkable? Here are a few thoughts...

The first outstanding trait that stands out was its wide DIVERSITY.

We see this reflected in the “church staff“. In Acts 13:1 we read:

“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: *Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.*”

This is not just another Biblical list of hard-to-pronounce names. It is a roster of church leaders that indicates a great diversity of backgrounds. Barnabas was from the island of Cyprus. He was a Levite, a Jewish priest. Then there was Simeon, who also had the name, Niger, which was a Latin word meaning “black-skinned.” Some scholars think he was Simon, the man forced to carry Jesus’ cross. Third mentioned is Lucius who was from Cyrene, a region west of Egypt on the coast of Africa. It was men from Cyprus and Cyrene who first went to Antioch and began to teach the Greeks (Acts 11:20). Lucius was a missionary, a church planter, and was probably one of the founders of the church at Antioch. Lucius is also a Roman name so he was a Gentile, brought up in Roman culture. And then, there was Manaen, a member of high society who had grown up with Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. In fact, the Greek word in verse one that we translate as “having been brought up with” can literally be translated “foster brother.” So Manean and Herod Antipas might have been not only playmates as children, but members of the same family which would have made Manean a prince. And then we have Saul with his impressive education and rabbinical training.

To summarize, we have a Cyprian Jew, a black man named Simeon, a Roman Gentile from Cyrene, an aristocratic prince, and a highly-educated rabbi, that’s staff diversity! This inclusiveness was reflective of the entire church’s make up. That is an admirable trait of the Antioch church, because that’s what every congregation should be like, a snapshot of the entire body of Christ where as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor

free, male nor female—all one in Christ Jesus.” The Christians in Antioch understood the lesson that Peter learned in his encounter with Cornelius. They knew that, “God is no respecter of persons.” (Acts 10:34)

The diversity and inclusiveness of the Antioch church was one of the reasons it grew so quickly. With such a wide variety of backgrounds this church was effectively equipped to reach out to the many ethnic groups that populated the city of Antioch. The Christians in this church could go to the Jews and Greeks and Romans, men, women—slaves and free and say:

“The gospel is for all people... not just Jews... not just Greeks.... not just men... not just women... not just slave... not just free. The ground is LEVEL at the cross! The gospel is for everyone and that means it’s for you. Let me tell you about Jesus!”

A lesson for us... there is no room for racial discrimination, cultural bigotry or identity politics. This leads me to a second thing admirable quality of the Antioch church.

MISSION was of prime importance.

From the very beginning the members of the Antioch church saw MISSION as a vital task. Everything they did: worship, discipleship, fellowship, ministry—everything revolved around this one foundational purpose. The staff and members of that church must have understood that witnessing—pointing others to faith in Christ—is a primary reason we are still here on earth. God has called us so that we can tell people about His love in sending His Son.

A lesson for us... we must engage with the communities around us, always exalting Christ and proclaiming his love for all of humanity.

A third thing admirable about the Antioch church is the fact that Christians there considered fulfilling the Great Commission a PERSONAL responsibility.

This was a church started through relational evangelism, through person to person engagement—and one that continued to grow in the same way. Christians in Antioch saw witnessing as their PERSONAL responsibility.

A lesson for us... mission has BOTH a communal and a personal ministry aspect.

A fourth admirable trait was the SPIRITUAL MATURITY of the Christians in Antioch.

This maturity was reflected in two of the congregation’s staff—Paul and Barnabas, who were the first missionaries ever to be sent out by a Christian church on a purely evangelistic mission. Their “spiritual maturity” was, for example, demonstrated in the way they responded to hardship. They didn’t seem surprised when things got rough out on the “missionary road.” In fact, they seemed to expect suffering and persecution and were still willing to face persecution in their gospel proclamation.

A lesson for us... our lives and assurance must be firmly anchored in Jesus.

There are good reasons for emulating the Antioch church. Perhaps, as Christians, we should all consider adding Antioch to our own personal list of remarkable Christian churches, as we

strive to embrace those same outstanding qualities of a “healthy church” in our own local congregations. We should do so not to be simply a church admired by others, but rather, so we will be a church that honor and pleases our Heavenly Father. □