

ANTIOCH: A MISSIONARY CHURCH

Rev. Lawrence Baldrige

October 11, 2009

AC 13:1 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. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

AC 13:4 The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

When I joined the Garrett Baptist Church in 1960, I joined what was then called a ‘Missionary Baptist Church.’ That term was a derisive term by some, but I learned to love the term ‘Missionary’ for it meant and means very much to me. And although I love the term Baptist as well, I do think the term Missionary is more descriptive of what it means to be a Christian. I often joke with friends of mine about the differences in our denominations, but if we are truly missionary there are few differences. Whenever I have been on an international mission tour I have been aware of the sameness of most churches which are there to win people to Jesus Christ and to disciple them to be ‘fishers of others.’ Missionary service in Jesus’ Name is the same the world over. And we go because we know that the human condition, apart from Christ, cannot be changed to know God or know the righteousness of God.

That said, when we come to these verses in Acts 13, the charging and commissioning of the first church to send missionaries, we see a church that truly can be called a ‘Missionary Church,’ the Antioch Church. The Antioch church is our pattern for missions today. The qualities of that church should resonate with every ‘Missionary Baptist’ and with every organization that bears the name “Missionary.” Let us look at these qualities in the hope that our church will have the same qualities as the church at Antioch.

The first quality of the Antioch church was PRAYER. The Antioch Church was a PRAYING CHURCH. Verse 2 tells us that while they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to them. Then we find in verse 3 that they continued praying and fasting, and when they finished their prayer service they laid hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Prayer is a natural quality of humanity, and every religion has some kind of prayer or prayer rites. Prayer seems to be about as human as breathing. I recall that when I was a young boy my two older brothers were in a car wreck and almost killed. For the first time in my life that I can remember I prayed for them. A cousin of mine who had been in that wreck, later said that he was an atheist. I asked him what was the first thing he said as the car was rolling over the hill where they wrecked. He admitted that he said, “Oh, God!” He tried to say that that was just an expression, but I believe

that whenever we truly recognize our vulnerability, when we truly see how weak we are as human beings, when we face our mortality, we just naturally call upon God.

But the Christians at Antioch were not praying because they were fearful of death, they were praying because they were full of Life, of Eternal Life. They were filled with the Holy Spirit. Their prayer was celebration. They had been brought from death to life through the power of the Righteousness of Jesus Christ. Their prayer was called 'worshipping God.' They were celebrating salvation. They were celebrating deliverance. They were celebrating what God had done for them. You see, among the Jews, the priest and others who served the Temple in the Old Testament were celebrating deliverance. Many Psalms tell the story of God's deliverance of Israel from the enemies that beset them. The stories of the Patriarchs were celebrations of deliverance. The stories of Moses were reiterated and recited in Psalm after Psalm. They also made elaborate sacrifices upon the altar; but the wisest among them said that the sacrifices God desired were sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.

Always true prayer comes from the joy of a thankful heart and is indeed worship. True prayer does not ask God for favors but celebrates the favor already given of God. True prayer seeks God because He is God, because He is a Spirit, because He is Truth, and worships Him in spirit and in truth. True prayer is not a little child reaching up to take candy from the hand of God, but is a child of God taking the Hand of the Heavenly Father. True prayer is Fellowship. True prayer is getting one's life in tune with the music of heaven. Because we cannot know God's will for our lives by the power of knowledge or of reason, we reach beyond reason to the Logos of the Universe, to the Living God Himself and there we find Reason beyond reason.

The presence and the power of God were indeed a part and parcel of the church at Antioch. And if we want to be a 'Missionary Church' we must also be a PRAYING CHURCH.

THE CHURCH OF ANTIOCH WAS ALSO A FASTING CHURCH and the members were worshipping, or ministering to the Lord and fasting when God spoke to them. Then, before they commissioned the first missionaries they fasted and prayed. In an old commentary, Matthew Henry writes: "Religious *fasting* is of use in our ministering to the Lord, both as a sign of our humiliation and a means of our mortification. Though it was not so much practiced by the disciples of Christ, *while the bridegroom was with them*, as it was by the disciples of John and of the Pharisees; yet, after the bridegroom was taken away, they abounded in it, as those that had well learned to deny themselves and to endure hardness."

In both the Old and New Testaments fasting was to deny oneself food for a time in order to give one's self to prayer and devotion. Fasting was a way of saying: the spirit is more important than the body; a way of acknowledging that we are primarily spirits and not just bodies; a way of gaining true self awareness in the Presence of Almighty God. As Matthew Henry suggests, fasting is a means of humbling ourselves before God, and a means of gaining endurance before God.

One thing he suggests that one must fully agree is this—fasting is a way to learn self-denial. I would even say that self-denial is the essence of fasting; and even if it wouldn't fit the exact definition of fasting, self-denial is one of the things we need desperately to practice in the modern church.

A missionary church, if it is to be like Antioch, must practice fasting also. Jesus did. We must spend time ministering to God and not just feeding the flesh. Most Christians throughout the world do fast, as indeed do most of the major religions of the world.

But to be like the Antioch Church we must surely practice self-denial. We need to get off our couches and onto our knees. We need to have more fellowship with God and less with the television set. God is a Living Being, but the TV god is only a projection of life. Live TV is still just dead electronic images coming to us through wires and microwaves and booster systems. We need to turn off the TV and turn on God! To some of us that would be harder than denying ourselves food. We are TV addicted.

We could fast a couple of times a week and use that money from our act of self-denial to help the homeless, to help orphaned children around the world, to help missionaries reach out to the lost in foreign countries. While I don't want to confuse religious fasting and self-denial, certainly we can do both and better reach the world for God.

If you do not think prayer and fasting are both important I remind you that Jesus cast out an unclean spirit and said, "This kind cometh not out but by prayer and fasting." Some scholars say that fasting should be left out of this text because older texts leave it out. But prayer and fasting are so closely tied together in Scripture that I believe it fits in quiet well, don't you?

To be like the Antioch Church, to be a Missionary Church, we must be a PRAYING and a FASTING CHURCH.

Furthermore we must be a LISTENING CHURCH, for such was the Antioch Church. The Zondervan Reference Library gives these interesting words: 13:1 At Antioch there were five "prophets and teachers" in the church. The Greek particle *te* (untranslatable) was used in antiquity to connect word pairs, coordinate clauses, and similar sentences, thereby often distinguishing one set of coordinates from another. Probably, therefore, we should understand Barnabas, Simeon, and Lucius, who are introduced by the first *te*, as the prophets, and Manaen and Saul, who are grouped by the second *te*, as the teachers--with prophecy here understood to include "forthtelling" as well as "foretelling" and teaching having to do with showing OT relationships and implications.

If this is so, according to scholars, one of these prophets heard the Spirit's message and gave this message to the group. What was the message? "Set apart Saul and Barnabas for the work whereto I have called them." God had already called Saul and

Barnabas to be missionaries. He was telling the Church at Antioch it was time to set them apart for their work. The leaders of the church heard the word of the Spirit of God through that prophet and believed that word.

They were a missionary church because they heard the word of God. Do we have a listening church? I remind you that this was done before the many commandments to go in Jesus' name were given to the entire body of Christ. We need to listen to Scripture. What does God's Word say? What does the Bible tell us to do? Then when we read these commands of Scripture how can we not do them when we remember that Jesus said, "If you love me keep my commandments."?

I believe the Holy Spirit still speaks! I believe He speaks through Scriptures! I believe the Holy Spirit also speaks through people! If I didn't believe that why would I preach? If you will carefully look at this 13th chapter of the book of Acts you will see that the church was Led by the Holy Spirit and empowered to proclaim and to go by the power of the Holy Spirit. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ⁴ The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.

When I was first awakened to missions the Holy Spirit spoke to me through a missionary from the Philippines who spoke at a mission conference in Cedarmore. I committed my life to missions. I later married a daughter of missionaries to Brazil. We served for 32 years as North American Mission Board Missionaries, and have gone to Brazil, Mexico and Romania as short term missionaries. This year was my 16th summer to serve in Romania. What I am trying to say is this, the Holy Spirit spoke to me through a missionary. I heard through him the Spirit of God telling me to be a missionary, too. A missionary church is a listening church. We need to hear God just as Isaiah did in the 6th chapter of his magnificent book. And we need to cry out to Him, "Here am I, Lord, Send me!

If a church is to follow the pattern of the Antioch Church it must be a PRAYING CHURCH, a FASTING CHURCH, a LISTENING CHURCH, and finally, a DOING CHURCH.

The church at Antioch did what God said. I don't know about you, but I am something of a procrastinator. Even in getting ready to preach, I sometimes wait till the last minute to get down to the business of getting a sermon. But when I get into it, when I really get started, it is a wonderful blessing for me. God just pours His love and knowledge through me, and I think of things to say that I would not otherwise think, were not the Spirit of God telling me what I should think and say, and how I should interpret Scripture. I have decided that I should make the Nike commercial my watchword, "Just do it!" Instead of sitting and dreaming we ought to be like the Early Church, up and doing!

Young Isaiah became the great Prophet of God because he did what God commanded. The early church won the Roman world to faith in Christ because they quit dreaming and started doing. Saul became Paul because, instead of doing his will, He started doing the will of God. I look at Joseph and know we should dream; I look at Paul and know that we should do. The church should be made up, I suppose, of dreamers and doers. But the church cannot lean back on its laurels and do nothing for God. We are called to dream great dreams and to do great things.

THE CHURCH AT ANTIOCH WAS A PRAYING CHURCH, A FASTING CHURCH, A LISTENING CHURCH, AND A DOING CHURCH. This poem tells us that we should be a doing people:

A Psalm of Life
What the Heart of the Young Man Said to the Psalmist
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act,--act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;--

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.