

The Antioch Attitude

One of the great disasters of history took place in AD 1271. Nicolo and Matteo Polo (the father and uncle of famed explorer Marco Polo) were visiting Kublai Khan, at that time a world ruler over China, India and all of the Far East. He was convicted by the story of Christianity as Nicolo and Matteo told it to him and said: “Send me one hundred men skilled in your religion, and I shall be baptized. And when I am baptized, all my barons and great men will be baptized, and their subjects will receive baptism too. So there will be more Christians here than there are in your part of the world.” However, nothing was done for about thirty years. Finally two or three missionaries were sent – too little, and too late! It baffles the imagination to think what a difference to our modern world it would have made if China had welcomed the message of the Bible in the thirteenth century and the culture of the Orient had been oriented toward Christ. These men missed an incredible opportunity, and God’s purpose for their time was delayed and frustrated.

It is all too easy, due to misguided priorities or mislaid passion, to miss the purposes of God in any generation. If we want to elude that error in our time, we must be diligent to follow the lessons of the Word of God exactly. But one of those incredibly important principles in God’s plan for His church is almost universally overlooked. It is tucked away in one of several summary statements found in the book of Acts:

Acts 6:7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

There it is, as plain as day. Did you see it?

Acts 1:8 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

The church was promised POWER in Acts 1:8. The Holy Ghost was given primarily to empower an expansive evangelism effort that would impact their city and region (Judea) and then quickly expand to include a cross-cultural witness (Samaria) and – ultimately – a global presence. However, the narrative contained between Acts 1:8 and Acts 6:7 covers a period of about ten years. During this time, the Jerusalem church was blessed with divine visitation, miracles of healing and holy boldness – and they grew in spite of persecution, opposition, and even internal disputes. Their growth rate is impressive by any standard – 3000 people in Acts 2:41, 5000 men in Acts 4:4, multitudes of men and women in Acts 5:14, and even a great company of Jewish priests in Acts 6:7.

But it all happened inside Jerusalem!

Jerusalem certainly enjoyed the rich blessings of the Lord during the church’s first decade, and many souls within her walls did come to salvation during that span of time. But what about the 99.9% of people in the world of their day who did not live in that one city? And what about the other cultures that God specifically told them to reach? All of these issues beg us to answer a similar contemporary question: How many blessings does the church have to receive before she is ready and willing to wholeheartedly fulfill the Great Commission left by Jesus Christ?

One of the great dangers when we transition from a struggling small congregation or movement to a successful larger entity is that we tend to lose our cutting edge and even our dependence on God’s power. We become self-centered instead of God centered, more reliant on human programs than biblical principles, and more focused on ease than on evangelism. In many of our conferences, campmeetings, conventions and church services, the attention then becomes centered on our “Jerusalem” – that it may grow and prosper so that it may continue to minister to *us!* We have “received power” (the first promise of Acts 1:8) but we have not “become witnesses” (the second promise of Acts 1:8). And the second promise is more significant than the first, because the real test of any visitation of God is whether it results in evangelism.

Mark 16:15 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

This issue was at the heart of a philosophical and spiritual battle within the early church. They started out in obedience to Acts 1:8, but stopped too soon. They wanted to reach out in Jerusalem – *among their own kind* – but they did not really want to go to the ends of the earth, or even to Samaria for that matter! The Jerusalem church needed a complete reversal in its thinking. They wanted God to “restore again the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6) so they could sit in Jerusalem and have the nations come to them, but Jesus wanted them to leave their comfort zone!

Luke 14:23 And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled.

The seemingly natural desire of many Christians to stay within the warm confines of the church is not the will of God! On the contrary, He desires to lead us, even prod us and push us outside of our four walls to become His witnesses in the world. Statistics show a nearly universal trend for Christians to disconnect from unsaved people the longer they are around the church. But that’s not the way the Jesus or Paul did it! They were not isolationists; they were compelled to impact their culture with the gospel.

Matthew 11:19 The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.

1 Corinthians 9:22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

But so what if the church holds these faulty concepts? So what if we are not as evangelistic as we should be? So what if we tend to have “church for the church” because it is more familiar and comfortable? The troubling answer is found by contrasting Acts 1:8 with Acts 8:1 ...

Acts 8:1 And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The ten-year “honeymoon” was shattered with the martyrdom of Stephen and the intense persecution led by Saul of Tarsus – suddenly, disciples were being scattered everywhere. But while things grew worse in Jerusalem, great things were beginning to happen in Judea and even in Samaria. In one swift act of persecution, God had forced obedience on His church and compelled them to mobilize. Stephen’s death probably resulted in more obedience to the Great Commission than any other single event in the history of the early church, and was even a major factor in the conversion of Paul.

The message hidden in these events is both awesome and fearful – God loves lost people so much that He will allow *anything* to happen in order to reach them. God is not primarily committed to successful ministries or even great churches; He is primarily committed to the Great Commission. Thus, if we will not “GO” (Mark 16:15) God only has two alternatives to move us from our “Jerusalem comfort zone” –

- **PERSECUTION**, to drive us out, or
- **SUBSTITUTION**, to find someone else who will go willingly!

It is not that the Jerusalem church rejected the Great Commission outright; it is just that they could not seem to manage the kind of vision required during this period of church history. So, God used persecution first (with some results) and then substitution when they continued to resist. Here is the firsthand account:

Acts 11:19-21 Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.

Antioch was a predominantly Gentile city, and it is *inconceivable* that the Christians who ended up preaching there should ignore all but a miniscule minority of Jews, assuming that they were the only ones God wanted to save. But that is exactly what they did, because their vision was limited only to the religious culture they already identified with. Thank God there was a second group (from Cyprus and Cyrene, not Jerusalem) that followed the will of God and targeted their efforts to reach the Greek majority of Antioch’s population – ***and the hand of the Lord was with them!***

This was a moment of destiny, when the church at Antioch was born. It was not just a few transplants from the Jerusalem Jewish subculture, but some sinfully irreverent, biblically illiterate Gentiles who came to know God. This moment is why the Apostolics would soon be known as those who “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) in the first century; this moment is why there is a church at all in the twenty-first century.

Jerusalem never did know how to deal with revolutionary revivalists like the Apostle Paul, who continually jumped fences, ignored protocol, and broke tradition to win the lost. That’s why they sent him back to Tarsus to “cool off” when he first appeared in Jerusalem with wild tales of a life-changing encounter with God and wild ideas about evangelizing those pagan Gentiles. And that’s why Jerusalem never got to send out history’s greatest missionary – instead, that honor fell to the church in Antioch because they had a missionary heart.

The Jerusalem church was unwilling to change to reach the culture of the world around it; instead, they demanded that the Gentiles essentially become Jewish before they could get saved. Sadly, the same thing happens today when churches insist that people speak their lingo, conform to their customs, like their music, agree with their politics, and observe a thousand unspoken traditions before they can “join the club.”

Precisely because change is so uncomfortable, most churches just want to touch their Jerusalem and leave it at that.

The Jerusalem church was richly blessed and doctrinally sound, but God still turned His attention to Antioch because Jerusalem would not embrace His command to witness to the world. Jerusalem held on to their resources and blessings, but Antioch accepted that God had the right to demand of them anything or anyone He wanted to use. They also accepted that the Great Commission was at the very TOP of the Lord’s priority list. Today, Great Commission churches continue to defy the status quo. No matter what they achieve they never feel like they have arrived, because there is always one more soul just beyond their borders that needs to hear about Jesus Christ.

Acts 11:25-26 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, **he brought him unto Antioch**. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. **And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.**

There are really only two New Testament church models, the Jerusalem Church and the Antioch Church. We have to be one or the other – and the choice is ours. The Antioch church was full of risk-takers, change-agents, and radical revivalists. They reached for *everyone* and *anyone*.

“But what will the other Christians think?” That’s not the question that begs to be answered. **WHAT WILL JESUS THINK?**

C.T. Studd: “Some wish to live within the sound of church or chapel bell, I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.”

The greatest danger is always at the edge (where the church meets the culture). But so is the greatest opportunity for rescue and redemption. The New Testament church lived “on the edge” – never safe, always one step from disaster if God didn’t intervene! Jude felt the tension:

Jude 1:22-24 And of some have compassion, making a difference: And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh. Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy,

Many Apostolic people have gotten too comfortable with the status quo. Church has become a comfortable place, a place that is always the same ... same friends, same events, same songs, same sermons, same faces, same size, same methods, and same results! That mentality is an affront to God, who called us to impact our culture with the gospel.

“I want an Acts 2 church, where we preach the Apostles’ doctrine!”

Acts 2 is not the whole pattern for the early church! We also need:

- An Acts 3 church where miracles happen at prayer meeting
- An Acts 4 church where our services are literally shaken by God’s power
- An Acts 5 church where we have church from house to house
- An Acts 6 church where saints take on ministry so pastors can seek God
- An Acts 7 church where ordinary Christians are used powerfully by God
- An Acts 8 church where we reach people of influence for God’s kingdom
- An Acts 9 church where we see religious people powerfully converted
- An Acts 10 church where we are willing to reach people who not like us
- An Acts 11 church where even persecution spreads the gospel
- An Acts 12 church where God gives miraculous answers to prayer
- An Acts 13 church where we send out people to do missionary work