

22 October 2017

A Tale of Two Churches
Acts 2:43-47; 11:16-30; 13:1-3

For six weeks now, we have been reflecting on the purpose of the church. But every church is different. Even from the beginning, churches had their own personalities. For instance, there was First Church of Jerusalem. We read about her in Acts 2, verses 43-47.

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Of course the Book of Acts says a great deal more about the church in Jerusalem than just these verses. Almost half the book is concerned with what happened in that church. I just chose to read this short passage because it captures the spirit of excitement and commitment there. It describes a powerful sense of community, people gathering daily, caring for each other, sharing everything that they own. The report of their mutual love had spread throughout the city, with the result that new people were joining them every day, finding there what they realized they had been looking for all their lives. They spent time daily in worship and praise. Plus they had potlucks.

But let me go back before this snapshot and give you a bigger picture of the church's first years. The church began on the day of Pentecost. Jesus' disciples were gathered together in prayer when, suddenly, they were all filled with Holy Spirit, began performing amazing signs, and went out preaching in the streets. At the end of that day, they had a church of three thousand members. Not a bad launch for a church start. Their success immediately attracted opposition from the religious establishment, who tried to shut down this new cult, but the authorities were blocked at every turn. The problem was that the apostles kept demonstrating divine power – healing people who had been lame from birth, for instance, or strolling out of prison in the middle of the night – in ways that the established church couldn't match. The Jerusalem church grew, and they became even more famous for their charity than for their miracles. No one who joined the Jerusalem church went hungry. Their members pooled their possessions and fed hundreds of widows and orphans every day. One man, named Barnabas, sold a field and gave it all to the apostles to support their works of mercy.

As they grew, they did face some challenges. They had to weed out some casual members, people who pretended to be more committed than they really were, and they had to deal with some factionalism. In the meals for their widows, for instance, those who weren't originally from Judea thought they were getting smaller portions than the others. The apostles summoned seven trustworthy men from the church and said, "Can you deal with this? We apostles need to focus on teaching and prayer." So they invented a second level of leadership, called deacons, to cope with the administrative complexity of the growing church. To summarize, then, within just a few years of that Pentecost, First Church of Jerusalem had thousands of members, an active feeding ministry (granted, they primarily fed their own members, but remember that was a *lot* of people), significant financial resources, an influential

place in society, and an organizational flow chart that included not only twelve apostles in teaching and pastoral roles, but seven diaconal administrators. What can I say? Impressive.

One weird thing happened after the apostles appointed the deacons, on account of their needing to devote themselves to prayer and all that. At that point, the deacons seem to become the driving force of the church. One of them, named Stephen, goes out preaching and is so effective that the religious authorities feel the need to shut him up for good. They stone him. One young Pharisee, named Saul, assists with the stoning. That execution leads to further attacks on the church. Christians are threatened and jailed, and many of them scatter. Another one of the deacons, named Philip, leaves Jerusalem and starts preaching to non-Jews, to Samaritans and Ethiopians. And eventually, the scattered Jerusalem Christians make their way up to a city in Syria called Antioch, and start a church there.

We read two passages from Acts, first from chapter 11, verses 19-30 and second from chapter 13, the first three verses.

¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, and they spoke the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰But among them were some men of Cyprus and Cyrene who, on coming to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. ²¹The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord. ²²News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he came and saw the grace of God, he rejoiced, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast devotion; ²⁴for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were brought to the Lord. ²⁵Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they associated with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians'.

²⁷ At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. ²⁹The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

***13** Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. ²While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

So here's a second church. Antioch is started by refugees from Jerusalem, but seems to take off. The leaders in Jerusalem send Barnabas – remember him? The one who gave so generously? – to check it out, and Barnabas is so excited that he goes off to find Saul to bring him there. Now, I need to explain this. Yes, this is the same Pharisee Saul who had helped at the execution of Stephen, but since that time, he had had his own miraculous encounter with Christ and had become what would soon be called a Christian. He had gone to the church in Jerusalem, but – understandably, perhaps – they had been suspicious of a trap from this former persecutor of the church. Only Barnabas had believed him, so Saul had left. Anyway, when Barnabas sees what's going on in Antioch, he goes straight off to get Saul, and the refugee church accepts Saul without

question. He and Barnabas become key leaders there. The church even takes up a collection to send to Jerusalem, when they hear about a famine there. And then one day, as we read in chapter 13, the leaders at Antioch are praying together and come to the collective decision that God has something else in mind for Saul and Barnabas. They lay hands of blessing on them and send these two key leaders away.

Two growing churches, but there are some interesting differences. When the Jerusalem church grew, the leaders added on. They increased the size of their ministries and took on more staff to run them. When Antioch grew, though, they subtracted. They sent people away, and not just any people, but their two most valuable members. From a management standpoint, that sounds like a terrible idea. You never see the apostles in Jerusalem sending leaders away – at least, not on purpose. The few who did leave town only did so because they had to. So at the very least, it would appear that the two churches had slightly different priorities.

Let me finish these two churches' stories. Saul and Barnabas, not knowing exactly where they were going or what they were to do, hopped on a ship and started talking about Jesus in every town they came to, both to Jews and then to Gentiles and finally mostly to Gentiles. Saul took the Gentile name Paul, in fact. They planted churches in Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece, and visited Italy, and maybe even Spain, and the churches that they started followed Antioch's pattern and went out and started more churches. The result of all this is that, unless you are an Egyptian or Ethiopian Christian, you can trace your heritage back to the church at Antioch and that prayer meeting when they sent Saul and Barnabas away. And what about the church in Jerusalem? Well, in the year 70, the nation of Judea rebelled against Rome, and the Romans marched into Jerusalem and reduced it to rubble. The surviving members of the church of Jerusalem gathered together and, as a group, moved across the Jordan River to a city called Pella, to start over. We know that much from early church writings, but after moving to Pella the church is never heard from again.

First Church of Jerusalem is the church that every seminary student today dreams of leading – the megachurch with huge programs, a large budget, supporting an extensive staff, and serving thousands of people. Today we might call it Saddleback Valley or Willow Creek or Church of the Resurrection. And it was a great church. It changed thousands of lives.

What it didn't do, though, was change the world. Antioch Church did that. By listening to God and not focusing on its own growth or survival, by looking outward at the world around them, by training individuals in faith and then not holding on to them but sending them out to train others in other places, they altered the course of history. I suppose that that original church in Antioch has also disappeared by now, just as the church of Jerusalem has. The fact is, all churches die eventually. What we learn from these two churches, though, is that what matters is not how impressive a church gets to be before it dies; what matters is what it leaves behind.

I sometimes think Christians don't really believe in life after death. I don't mean heaven and eternal life – most of us are good with that. I mean that we don't appear to believe that life will continue on this earth after we're gone. We seek results that we will see in our lifetimes. In our churches we make five year plans, as if for some reason the next five years were more crucial to the Kingdom of God than the next five hundred. But Antioch shows us how to make a five hundred year plan: listen to God, change lives one at a time, keep looking outward. Amen.