

The Urban Church

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- [0 : 01] Well, let me say a word of welcome to all of you, especially if you're joining us for the first time. My name is Tommy. I'm the rector of this church, and so we're delighted to have you. We're going to have a little time that we spend looking at God's Word together, and then we are going to have a baptism, which is something that we are very excited about.
- It's one of our absolute favorite things to do. If I haven't had a chance to meet you and you're new, let's talk after the service. I'd love a chance to shake your hand and say hello. And for the men who made it back from the men's retreat, well done you.
- Well done you. That's impressive. In 2010, there was a famous, really priceless painting of Picasso's called The Artist, and it was hanging in the Met in New York.
- It's about six feet tall. And there was an art class happening, and one of the participants of the art class sort of stumbled and lost her footing and slammed into this painting and tore a huge gash right into the middle of it.
- Maybe you remember this happening. Imagine that you come in the museum the next week and you see that painting and you see that large gash in the painting.
- [1 : 14] I assume you probably wouldn't blame Picasso for that, right? I assume you probably wouldn't blame the painting for that. I assume that you would assume that something had happened to that painting.
- It had gotten messed up and it needed to be restored, which it was restored. They took three months of painstaking work to restore it back to the original beauty of this masterpiece.
- The point of that is to say this. I think that there is a similar kind of thing that happens when we consider the church, right?
- When we see things happening in the church, such as moral failings by prominent leaders or abuse and scandals that are then covered up or any of the other things that we could name that are very real wrongs that happen in the church, there can be a temptation for some people to say, well, see, that's the problem with the church or that's why I don't believe in God.
- But in the same way that I would say we shouldn't blame Picasso or the painting for what happened to it, I would humbly suggest that it doesn't make sense to blame God or to blame the church for the fact that there are times when the church is used and abused and mistreated and damaged for all kinds of reasons, right?
- [2 : 35] Some unintentional, many intentional. Because as we look at Scripture, the church is, in fact, God's masterpiece. Everything that Jesus did, everything that He accomplished in His life and His death and His resurrection was not just to accomplish individual salvation.
- It was to establish a community, which is the church, which is God's plan A for the world. And there is no plan B for the world. And so I think the question that we should ask is the same question that a person looking at that painting should ask.

What was the original artistic vision for this masterpiece? What should this look like? And we're going to ask that about the church this morning, and I think there's no better place to look than Acts chapter 11, this is where we see for the first time the gospel come to a major city center and a church is established in the heart of the city, perhaps the world's first urban church.

Antioch is no small city. It was the capital of Syria, the third largest city in the world at this time. And the reason that this church is so successful and becomes a launch pad for mission all around the world is because it had within it certain characteristics that you don't often see together in the same church.

And so this is not an exhaustive list that we're going to look at, but there are certain characteristics that are held together in tension in this church that I think were the key to its effectiveness.

[4 : 07] So let's pray, and then we're going to look at three of them. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you that you are always present, that you are always at work in our lives, that your word is living, that it is active, that it never goes out and returns to you void.

It accomplishes everything that you set out for it to accomplish. And we pray now that we might sit under your word, that you might open our hearts, that we might receive what you have for us this morning. Lord, for our good, but chiefly for your glory, we pray that you would do your work in us through your word.

In Jesus' name, amen. So the first characteristic that we see in this church in Antioch that is so wonderful is that it is what we would consider to be lay-driven, leader-supported.

Now, what do I mean by that? Well, the word lay is simply an old word that means anyone who's not ordained. So a lay person or the laity, that refers to people who are not ordained, ordinary Christians.

And one of the first things that we learn about the church in Antioch is that it was started by lay people, ordinary Christians who are simply trying to follow Jesus faithfully in their daily lives.

[5 : 25] And these are not people who had a master plan to go plant a church in a major urban center. These are ordinary Christians who are fleeing persecution, and they just happen to wind up in Antioch looking for a safe place to root down, right?

I don't know what brought you to D.C. Could be a job, internship, school, marriage, whatever. Multiple, all of the things on that list brought me to D.C., right?

Years ago. But what this shows us is that we can have our reasons for coming to a place like D.C. or Antioch, and then God can have His reasons for bringing us where He brings us.

So they didn't come here planning to plant a church. What happens is that they end up in Antioch. They're fleeing persecution. We don't even know their names. All we know is that they started telling people about Jesus.

And the Holy Spirit began to work. And a lot of people started coming to faith. And before long, you have this young, thriving church in the heart of the city. And yet, this grassroots, Spirit-filled movement was not totally leaderless.

[6 : 36] Barnabas comes down from Jerusalem. Very important. In order for this church to survive, it has to be connected to the larger church. It has to be connected to a larger body where there can be support and accountability.

So often these days, we see what goes wrong when churches have no source of accountability outside themselves. But notice that Barnabas doesn't just arrive and say, Well, you know, good job, normal people.

Step aside the professionals here. That's not his approach. Barnabas' entire ministry is to encourage the ministry that is already happening, is to encourage what the people there are already doing.

And then he raises up other leaders who do the exact same thing. And you have to admire Barnabas here. Because there can be a temptation, especially in a situation like this.

If you're a leader like Barnabas, there can be a temptation to want to be the star of the show. And certainly there are many churches that get built up entirely around one personality.

[7 : 46] They become a kind of cult of personality. But we know enough about Barnabas to know he is humble enough to realize, It is not about me. It is not about Barnabas.

It's about what God is doing. And in any church, in any organization, but especially the church, a good leader's job is to make themselves less necessary, not more necessary.

So what does he do? He raises up other leaders. He has a good friend, Paul. Paul is much more highly educated than Barnabas, perhaps much more gifted than Barnabas, the kind of leader that might make most leaders feel threatened.

And yet Barnabas is not threatened by gifting and talent. And he travels a hundred miles to Tarsus to recruit his friend Paul to bring him back to help encourage and support and strengthen the ministry there in Antioch.

And that's exactly what he does. So we have this wonderful balance here in Antioch. We have leaders who provide oversight and direction.

[8 : 52] But when it comes to the ministries of the church, such as evangelism or caring for those in need, the whole community takes part. And when you see that, you say, that is a healthy church.

It's what we might call an every-member ministry culture. Everyone is involved. Everyone is necessary. When someone doesn't show up, there are things that don't get done, because every single person has a vital part to play.

And this is such a powerful corrective for us today as we look at the church in our time and place. As we said, so many churches are built around a charismatic leader.

They are leader-driven, not lay-driven. Congregants are basically audience members who come to watch a performance, to support the leader and buy their books.

And this is the opposite of how the Apostle Paul thinks about the church. His favorite metaphor in the Bible for the church is the human body, where he says no part is superior to any other part.

[10 : 02] What matters is that every single part is serving its purpose. And the way a body works is that every part, right, every cell, every organ, has to do its part to serve the whole.

And this is extremely important as we think about what it means to be a part of a church body. Because if we are all like parts of a human body, that means, among other things, that the best way for me to get my needs met is to focus on meeting the needs around me.

It's very counterintuitive. But if we are, in fact, like a human body, then the more I seek the well-being of the body, and the healthier the body is as a result, the more then I will get my needs met in return.

The more I give myself away, the more I will gain myself. We are like a human body. And there's a tremendous blessing that comes with serving in a local church.

If you want to grow in your faith, if you want to develop deeper friendships and community, this is how it happens. There's no secret way for that to happen.

[11 : 15] There is no... It is not rocket science, right? This is how the church is designed to function. The more you are involved and serving and giving yourself to the broader community, the more you are going to grow in your faith.

If you're here primarily to take, if you are in a place where you just want the church to meet your needs, there really is not a category for that in Scripture.

That's really not what it means to be part of a church community. And this is an important thing for us all to be reminded of, because I know for some of us, this might be the first church you've ever really been a part of.

And there's not a lot out there, other than places like this in Scripture, that tell us what that should actually look like. And so it's important to understand what we mean by being involved in a local church.

So we say, well, what does this look like? Well, it means on a basic level that every single person who calls Advent their home should be actively involved in serving in some way.

[12 : 19] If you're here from another church, I would strongly encourage you, if you're not actively involving and serving in that church, to go back to that church next week, and to get involved.

This is what it means to be part of a church body. So for example, if you go to Church of the Advent, what does this look like on a practical level? I'll give you one example. Right? The next time Kirsten and Heather reach out and say, we need people to love and serve our kids or our youth, then the thing that you do is say, yes, I will do that.

What do you need? And there's a whole lot of different ways that you can serve. But simply saying yes and then showing up and doing it. And why do you say yes? Not because I said you should, or not because you think you should, or not because you're doing anybody a favor.

The reason you say yes is because you need to say yes. It's because you need it for yourself. You realize this is what it means to be part of a church community.

This is actually how I'm going to grow in my faith. If, you know, showing up and giving some of my life and my energy and my time and my love and my attention to the next generation of Christians, that's how I'm going to grow.

[13 : 32] One of the best ways to grow in your understanding of the Bible is to have to teach the Bible. I mean, take it from me. I often think one of the only reasons, one of the only ways that God knew He could get me actively reading Scripture in an ongoing way was to put me in a position where I had to stand up and teach it.

This is how we grow. We give ourselves to the body. The same could be said for the welcome team, the production team, our prayer ministries, the list goes on and on and on. If you want help figuring out what this looks like for you, I would love to talk to you about it.

Any of us would. So the first characteristic of this church that I think makes it so effective is that it is lay-driven, but it has support from godly leaders.

It's not a cult of personality. It's not leader-driven. Every single person is actively involved in serving and ministering in the church and to the broader community.

That's the first thing. The second characteristic we see is that this church is both outward-facing and it's also Christ-centered. It's outward-facing and Christ-centered.

[14 : 35] Because of its proximity not only to Jerusalem but also to Asia and to Africa, Antioch was an incredibly diverse, pluralistic, multicultural city. It really was unprecedented at this time.

And the city had at least 18 ethnic quarters representing different ethnic groups that were called Antioch home. And they had actually built walls.

This city was built around 300 B.C. And they had actually built walls to keep these ethnic quarters separate from one another because of all the infighting between the various groups.

So to keep the peace, they just kept them separate. And so some of the Jewish Christians fleeing persecution when they ended up in Antioch, it says that they only wanted to interact with other Jews.

And you know, that makes sense. I think especially in times of crisis, we can tend to want to seek out what is most comfortable and most familiar. And so that makes sense if we understand human nature.

[15 : 40] But what's really amazing about this account is that there are also Christians who are facing the same crisis and yet somehow they stay, they remain outward facing. They never lose sight of the mission given to them by Jesus to bring the gospel to the nations.

So they're willing to share the gospel with just about anybody who's willing to listen. And because these Christians were outward facing, they begin developing relationships and sharing the gospel across ethnic and cultural lines.

And the gospel begins to transform the city because as people come to faith in Christ, in all of these various ethnic quarters, people are coming to faith and word is spreading.

And then these Christians start to go over the walls. Because they want to all meet together to worship Christ. And you have this unprecedented, diverse community rising up where people are going over the walls to worship together for the first time in history.

And if we look a couple of chapters later in Acts chapter 13, we see the impact this has on that early church. As we look at the leadership structure of this church, there's incredible diversity.

[17 : 00] The leadership body of the church in Antioch has people representing three continents and four ethnic groups. You have to understand, this is centuries before diversity was something that people valued or pursued.

The only reason, arguably, that diversity matters to people today is largely because the Enlightenment stole the clothes off Christianity's back. How is it possible to have such diversity and yet still to have such unity?

Why did the infighting that happened everywhere else not happen in this early church? How could they have such unity, even among the leaders? It's a very, very pressing question.

And the simple answer is, because the gospel transforms how we see ourselves and how we see other people. Paul in Galatians chapter 2, verse 20 says, here's the impact of the gospel on my life.

I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. What he means by that is that Christ has become a new foundation for his entire identity.

[18 : 14] Christianity. The other things that used to define us before we became Christians, things like our race, our gender, our culture, our ethnicity, our class, our politics, those things don't go away, but they all take a massive step back.

Right? The new center of your life becomes Christ. Therefore, when a Christian meets another Christian, even if you're from very different places, even if you have nothing in common culturally or politically, even if you can barely communicate across a language barrier, you discover a common foundation in Christ, and it makes relationships possible across all kinds of social and cultural barriers.

I remember experiencing this for the first time. It really struck me. We, years ago, we had a partnership with a church in Rwanda, and I went, we went to Rwanda, and I really wanted to go and to meet the pastor of this church personally, and so I traveled out to Nagatari, and he met me and gave me a big hug, and he could, we could barely communicate.

I speak no Kenya Rwanda, surprisingly, and he speaks English enough, but we, through broken French and English, we were able to communicate to a certain extent, and the first thing he wanted to do was to tour me around the village, and so then he takes my hand, and we start walking around his village, and we spend the next maybe three, four hours just him telling me about everybody in the village, right, and we're holding hands the entire time, and I'm talking fingers interlocking, holding hands, and I, my wife will tell you, I just don't like to hold hands.

I don't, I'm not a hand holder, I'm, I'm happy with hugs and other things, but hand holding is just not in my, you know, that's not my vibe, and so, I'm walking around with Pastor Deo interlocking fingers, hot and sweaty, for like three or four hours, right, in this tour.

[20 : 24] Here's the most amazing thing, it felt completely normal and natural. After about five minutes, I forgot we were even doing that, I just completely lost myself in the experience of seeing Nagatari through Deo's eyes, and the thing that really struck me about that experience is that here I am with this man on the other side of the world, we can barely communicate, completely different culture, ethnicity, completely, we could not be more different, right, and yet this man radiated Christ, and some of you have met him and you know exactly what I'm talking about, and because of that, I remember it striking me as we're walking down the sidewalk, I feel like I have known this man my whole life, I feel like we grew up together, and then it struck me, I have, I feel like I have so much more in common with this man than I do with my own biological family members who are not Christians, and I realized it's because we have a common foundation, we are family, and that is the kind of experience, that is the kind of experience that you have, that you can have because of Christ, when Christ gives you a common foundation, and this is how the church in Antioch was able to have such unity and diversity at the same time, because on the one hand, they're outward facing, meaning they are focused on sharing the gospel across all social and cultural barriers.

Everything they do is oriented toward bringing the gospel to people outside of their community, and yet they are also Christ-centered, which made it possible for them to have unity across all of those barriers.

In fact, I think this is why when Barnabas shows up, it doesn't just say he encouraged them in a general sense, he gives them a very specific encouragement. statement, stay true to Christ.

Keep your focus on the Lord Jesus Christ. That's his message. And I think it's in part because he shows up and he sees all of this, these diverse people, and he's amazed, and he thinks the only thing holding this group together is Christ.

Stay focused on Christ. This is how it works. And again, you know, I think this is why. I think they heard his message, and this is why this is the place where followers of Jesus first come to be known as Christians.

[22 : 55] Those people are so focused on following Christ. They're Christians. They're little Christs. They're Christ followers. And this is a surprisingly relevant corrective for us as a church in a place like D.C.

for a couple of reasons. I mean, I think, honestly, I think there can always be a temptation in the church to turn inward. Right? There can always be a temptation to want church to be safe, to want it to be comfortable and convenient.

If we feel overloaded and overwhelmed and we've got demanding jobs or young children, we want church to be the one place that feels safe, comfortable.

We want it to be easy. I do think, honestly, this is ramped up since COVID. There's so much happening out in the world.

I just want church to be the one comfortable, easy thing in my life. I think we begin to lose sight that the church is in fact a missionary outpost that exists to bring the gospel to the city.

[24 : 11] There's this, along with that, I think, ever-present danger on the other end of the spectrum where Christ ceases to be the center of our common life.

You know, everybody these days, I think largely because of the impact of Christianity on the modern West, really wants diversity and there's a lot of good that comes with that. But you see some organizations that make something like diversity into their central highest ideal.

often what happens in those cases is that you may end up with a community with people who look different but they all are exactly the same politically. It's not true diversity.

Antioch shows us actually what is possible when you have a church that is truly outward-facing and it's also Christ-centered where everything they do is aimed at bringing the gospel to people outside the church, where people come to worship expecting and hoping that they will run into first-time visitors, that there will be guests, that there will be people there who have no idea what's going on, who are completely disoriented, who don't know when to stand or when to sit or when to talk or when to not talk or when to respond or when to not respond, who think it's all weird.

And there are people who come to church knowing there's going to be people like that and they want to actively engage those people and help them feel more comfortable. Right? So they're truly outward-facing and yet they share a common identity in Christ that runs deeper than any other defining characteristic.

[25 : 33] So they have both diversity and unity. So, so far, as we've looked at Antioch, what are some of the things that we might include in God's vision for His masterpiece, the church in a place like Antioch or D.C.?

So far, everybody's involved, lay-driven, leader-led. Also, they're outward-facing but also Christ-centered and so they can have unity and diversity.

Lastly, we see that this church is both spiritually maturing and socially engaged. This is a young church full of new converts.

Barnabas realizes that they need to be encouraged to grow into maturity. So he goes and he recruits Paul and together they spend the next year preaching and teaching in the church.

It's a kind of spiritual boot camp. And you can imagine it wasn't just once a week. They're probably doing this daily. It's a spiritual boot camp. The point is very clear here.

[26 : 38] There is no substitute for strong preaching and teaching of God's Word. There is no substitute for people gathering together and study Scripture. There's no substitute for classes and books and other resources that help us understand the Bible and theology better.

You simply cannot grow into maturity if that is not a high, central priority in your common life. God's Word has to be central. And at the same time, this is a very socially engaged church.

And that simply means that they are aware of and responsive to the needs in the community around them, in the broader world. One of the other church leaders, a prophet named Agabus, raises awareness about a coming famine.

He says, this is going to be a serious problem. We need to prepare. We need to make sure the people around us, our other churches, are prepared because there's going to be a lot of people coming who have a whole lot of need and we need to be ready to meet those needs.

And so he puts the Word out. They gather together as a church and decide to send financial assistance back to the church in Jerusalem. Even though there's persecution there, they're like, we got to get some help there.

[27 : 48] And what's amazing here is that everyone gets what they can. This is not just delegated to the mercy ministry team. This is not just a few wealthier people who have more disposable income.

This is not just people with the spiritual gift of generosity. This is everyone. Everyone gives what they can according to their means. And this kind of generous social engagement is a big part of how the early church had such an impact on the Roman world.

It wasn't just the preaching of the gospel, although that was necessary. It was the preaching of the gospel paired with incredibly self-sacrificial love and service to the broader community.

The historian Rodney Stark writes this. He says, Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems.

What does that mean? To cities filled with the homeless and the impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments.

[29 : 00] To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.

We just talked about that. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services. That is God's masterpiece.

That's what it's supposed to look like. As with our previous two points, this offers, I believe, a much-needed corrective for the church today. Unfortunately, I think many churches tend to emphasize one or the other of these two things.

You sometimes see churches that emphasize theological formation and discipleship. They have lots of great programs for their members, but they're not very involved in meeting the needs of the surrounding community.

Or you see churches that do a lot of work in the community, but their discipleship is very thin. It's very shallow because it's not a priority. And the problem in either case is that you have a very unbalanced view of the Christian life.

[30 : 15] The truth is we need both. We need the inward spiritual growth in our faith into maturity. But that, the entire purpose of that is that it can express itself in the outward dimension of the Christian life, in the fruit that we bear, in the way that we love and serve our neighbors.

You need the inward and the outward. You need both. It's a balance. There's much more we could say about this amazing passage.

I want to bring this together though. This is what I believe we are called to be as a church in a place like D.C., which is arguably very similar to Antioch in certain ways.

Arguably, cities like D.C. that have emerged now in recent history have much more in common with a city like Antioch than they do with many of the cities and places that people have lived in all of the intervening centuries.

In terms of application and relevance, we are very, very, very close to many of the realities that this first urban church faced. But I believe that the qualities that made that church effective are the same qualities that we need in our community.

[31 : 33] My desire, our desire, is that we would be lay-led and leader-supported. Where the leaders are here to support and equip people to serve. And where the biggest problem we have is that our ministries have to turn people away because we have too many volunteers.

Stop calling me and ask if you can volunteer. We have no more room for you. Find another way to serve. Where we are outward-facing and Christ-centered.

Where we all share a common identity in Christ. and yet where if this is the first time you have ever darkened the door of a church, you already know even though there's a lot here that I don't understand, I have been so warmly welcomed by so many people that I feel like this is a place I could belong and be for the rest of my life.

And I would love to figure out all this other stuff. That we are called to be a church that is spiritually maturing and socially engaged.

Where we do have strong preaching and teaching and small groups and classes and Bible studies. And yet we are so invested in the surrounding community that even if people disagree with our beliefs, they feel loved and cared for by our community.

[32 : 56] Let's pray. Lord, may we never forget that all of this is a result of your work and your ministry and your presence.

There would not be a church in Antioch had your Holy Spirit not empowered the faithfulness and obedience of your people. And the same is true for us.

The only reason we are even here is as a result of your goodness and your blessing and the presence and power of your Holy Spirit in our midst. So we pray now that what would be impossible for us would be made possible through you.

That through your Holy Spirit you would restore that which is broken in us. Those gashes that may have been torn in the fabric of the canvas of our community.

And that you would restore your vision for your masterpiece not only in our church but in churches all throughout this city. That your manifold wisdom would be put on display.

[34 : 05] That the truth and the power of your gospel would be made irresistibly compelling through the common witness of the church the body of Christ. And it's in his name that we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.