The Church in Antioch

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Preacher: Robert Murdock

[0:00] Well, it's really nice to be with you today in Westerhales. I've passed the building lots and actually dropped into a service or two over the last years that I've been back in Edinburgh, and it's nice to have the opportunity to do this pulpit swap with John Lowry. Also nice to see Karen, who was a student at the Faith Mission College when I was principal there, so that's just a delight to see and hear Karen in action. If you have a Bible, can I invite you to turn with me to Acts 11? If you don't, don't worry. I'll try and read it as helpfully as I can. Acts chapter 11, and we'll read from verse 19, and I am reading from the NIV. I'm not sure what you typically use, but I'm reading from the NIV.
Now, those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men of Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the church in

Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. And when he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch.
For a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. During this time, some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, one of them named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. This happened during the reign of Claudius.
The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders of the church in Jerusalem by Barnabas and Saul.
[3:03] And we'll end our reading there at verse 30. I'm sure you've heard these people that follow Jesus referred to as interesting names over the years.

But the name of Jesus over the years is the name Christian, or Christ's Ones. It has a Latin ending, and Christians. And it was used to describe these followers of Jesus for the first church, or in the city, rather, of Antioch. You can read about that in verse 26. The first time described these followers of Jesus was in the city of Antioch. Now, I don't think that the disciples...what?
We should take this messianic title, Christos, and we should apply...the disciples would have decided, we should kind of adopt this holy name and use it to describe our book of Acts. You'll see that they already had enough names in circulation. Words like disciples, believers, were all used to describe these followers of Jesus. And the last thing I think the disciples felt, name. Also, I don't think that the Jews living in Antioch would have...was a loaded term from an Old Testament perspective, as it was looking forward to the coming of them, signified Christos, Messiah. I don't think that the Jews would have taken this messianic title and used it to describe the followers of Jesus either.
Now, what I think happened to Antioch, the ordinary Joe Bloggs like you and I, just the Bill and the John and the Peters and the Stuarts that lived in Antioch, whoever they were, they decided that these followers of Jesus would be aptly described by the use of the term Christian. Now, I don't think that they knew much about Jesus, these people. I don't think that they were familiar with the Old Testament.
I don't think that they knew much about the gospel stories. I don't think that they heard much about the historical Jesus. I don't think the ordinary people who lived in Antioch knew much about Jesus,

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actually. But they knew that these Christians were not worshipers of the gods that they worshiped. [5:30] And in Antioch, the goddess that was worshiped was a goddess called Daphne. And, of course, in Greek mythology, Apollo fell in love with Daphne. And in Greek mythology, he pursued her across the face of the earth. And she cried to her father to help her escape the clutches of her pursuer in Greek mythology. And he turned her into a bay tree. And just outside the city of Antioch, there was a temple built, and it was dedicated to the worship of this Greek goddess, Daphne. And I think certainly in the height of its heyday or in the height of its power, the men of the city of Antioch would reenact Apollo's chasing of Daphne. And they would gather in the center of Antioch, and then they would begin to chase these sacred priestesses that served in the temple of Daphne out to the temple courts, where all kinds of sexualized worship would take place.

Now, I think the ordinary people of Antioch just noticed that Christian women didn't want anything to do with that stuff, that Christian men avoided that kind of stuff like the plague.
And when you spoke to these followers of Jesus, the term Christ was always on their lips if you poked them, they spoke about Jesus. They spoke to Jesus, the one that they called the Christ. They tried to live their lives in a way that honored Jesus and, you know, sort of reflected something of the attributes of Jesus. They praised He. Even in their meetings, they were singing songs of praise to Jesus, this one that they called the Christ. And so, I think the ordinary people of Antioch decided we should call these people Christians, Christ's ones, because Christ seems to be the center of their lives. Christ seems to be the one that they're consumed with, that they're in love with, that they sing to, that they talk to, that they praise, that they live to honor Jesus. The Christ is what we should call these folks Christians. Now, I find that hugely challenging as I think about the people that I interact with. Don't you? Like, what do people call you? What kind of stuff are people, what kind of things are people saying about you in your street, in your workplace? Here's grumpy, grumpy head again.
Here's that miserable sod again. What kind of stuff are they saying to you? Here's that cantankerous rascal you couldn't get on with if you tried. I mean, would anyone ever say, here's a Christian.
[8:35] Here's somebody who just talks about Jesus, whom he calls the Christ or she calls the Christ, and he talks to him, he talks about him, he tries to live his life in a way that reflects him and pleases him. Here's a Christian. I was interested to notice recently that the Methodists were called Methodists because the young men who became Methodists kind of grew out of a group in Oxford called the Holy Club, and these young men were so methodical, they started to call them Methodists. I was also interested to notice that when Harry Ironside was traveling in China many years ago, wherever he went to speak, they would introduce him as the Yasu Yan, the Jesus man. And I thought, what a great introduction to anyone, eh?

Here's the Jesus man that's going to speak to us. Well, the ordinary folk of Antioch looked at these followers of Jesus and said, we're going to start calling you Christ's ones, because we see that Christ dominates your life. And the challenge for me and for you is, what are people saying about us?
Well, I've got four things I want to lift out of this little passage that I've read to you from the founding of the church at Antioch. And the first point that I want to just camp on is that they had an exciting beginning. The second point is they had an encouraging visitor. The third point is they had a dynamic leadership. And the fourth point is that they had an outward focus. So, that's the four things that I want to camp on in regard to the church at Antioch. But first of all, I'd like us just to think about the fact that they had an exciting beginning.
So, I don't want to bore you with a whole bunch of historical information, but it is interesting just to think a little bit about Antioch for just a minute or two. Antioch was founded by one of Alexander the Great, his generals. His kingdom was eventually, Alexander the Great's kingdom and was divided amongst four of his generals. And one of them, Seleucus, founded this city called Antioch. And, you know, not many people get up and say, I'm going to found a city today. But he did, and he founded this city, and he attracted people to come and live in it with him by offering them equal citizenship. So, it doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, come and live in this city, and we'll all be equal citizens. And come they did from every art and part of the world.
And by the time that we read about it here in Acts chapter 11, it was the third largest city in the world. The only two cities that were larger than Antioch were Rome and Alexandria. So, it's the third largest city in the world. It has a population of about half a million people, 500,000 people.

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[11:52] And there are at least five different cultures represented or living together in Antioch. Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Semitic people, people from as far east as Persia. All of them have come together and are living in this cosmopolitan melting pot called Antioch. And, of course, Antioch was founded on the banks of the river Orontes, which led out into the Mediterranean Sea, because, and it became such an important city commercially, because it linked the silk and spice trades in the east with all of the cities around the Mediterranean basin. So, goods were transported into Antioch and onto ships and out into the Mediterranean and vice versa. Goods were being brought from Mediterranean cities into Antioch and traveling east. So, it became a really busy commercial center. And there were all kinds of people living in the likes of Antioch. There were dockers and there were bankers and there were hoteliers and there were business people and you name it, they were all living in Antioch. So, it became a really busy business center. Not only that, but it was also an entertainment center. They had the huge hippodrome in Antioch where people would half kill themselves racing chariots behind horses and people would come and watch these races. And then, of course, there's the Temple of Daphne where, you know, there was a whole seedy sexual underworld that existed in Antioch and kind of existed around the Temple of

Daphne. And people would come from everywhere just to join in that stuff, to get involved in that stuff. And it was to this city, this city of Antioch, that a group of Jews driven out from Jerusalem, originally from Cyprus or of Cyprus descent, arrived and decided, we're going to start sharing the gospel here. And we're not just going to share it with Jewish people in the synagogue. We're going to share it with everybody that we meet, Greeks, who have no background whatsoever in the Hebrew Scriptures.

We're going to start telling them about Jesus. And, of course, they're not apostles, this group that have arrived in Antioch. They're not apostles. We're not even hardly told their names. We don't know who founded it. They're nameless. They've never been to a gospel coalition conference on how to go about church planting. All they've got is a message and the love of God burning in their hearts.

That's all they've got. And persecution driving them out of their home city. And they arrive in Antioch, and they start to proclaim the good news of Jesus, and a worshiping community, a church is born.

Now, I don't know how they did that. Did they stand on street corners and proclaim the good news of Jesus? Did they knock on people's doors? Did they just spend time with people who weren't Christians, who were, you know, more familiar with the temple of Daphne than with the temple in Jerusalem? Did they just spend time with them and go to the beach with them and sit and talk to them, drink coffee with them?

[15:28] The truth is, I have no idea. Did they start a mums and tots? Did they get a shop front and start to hold meetings and invite people in the way that Paul did in Ephesus to reason the gospel with and discuss the gospel with them? The truth is, we're not told. But somehow, a group of people walked into the third largest city in the world and decided, we are not going to be, we are not going to be thermometers. Ever seen a thermometer when you were young? Your mom put it under your tongue, and then she pulled it out, and it told you, told her and told you the temperature of your body.

They decided, we're not going to be thermometers. We're not going to blend in thermostats. We're going to change the temperature in the room. We're going to change the temperature with the gospel. And that's exactly what they did. They walked into Antioch, and this church was born, and it became the most vital in the first century, and it became the hub of mission in the first century. And it was established by home city because of persecution. And I just want to say this to you. I just want you to, I want to say this to you. Power of God unto salvation to everyone that believe it. It doesn't. The gospel itself is the power of God, and it revolutionizes lives. Story after story about how the gospel has revolutionized lives. When I was a pastor of a church in Canada, one was a chap who had been an AIM missionary in Tanzania. Anybody got it? He planted a church along with a team of people amongst the Deagle people in Tanzania. 100% Muslim team moved into the community and planted a church. Anyway, his kids got to education in secondary school, so he came back to Canada, and he became one of our associate pastors. And he hated being in the church. He came up and said, a member of our church said, listen, I've been out working for the government census forms that weren't filled in properly. And I met a lady, she said, and she's going through chemotherapy.

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And I said to her, you know, her garden was a mess. Grass overgrown, hedges overgrown. I said to some of the men of the church to come and help you with your garden as you go through your treatment.
The woman said, well, I don't mind. The pastor decided, I'll do that. And every week he went down and he cut her grass. And whenever, he never said anything to her, just, and at the end of the summer, she came out and she gave him a glass of water. And she said to him, and he said, because God has helped me. And if you give me the opportunity, God has helped me from, as we read the Bible together, would you be willing to do that? And she said, I would. And he nearly fell off her porch. And for the next number of weeks, months, he sat down with her every week when he was down cutting her grass and tending to her garden. And they read a Mark's gospel. And she came to put her faith and trust in Jesus. And she eventually, I just want you to know that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes. I could spend the rest of the time telling you story after story about how the gospel is the power of God. I was speaking at a conference in Toronto, and a man came up to me afterwards. This is a true story. This happened. And I had spent a good chunk of my life in Belfast and around there. And he said, I'm from Dublin. So my ears were, he said, I was a missionary with the
[19:11] Mormon church in England. And I was on my way, the ferry from Liverpool to Belfast. And I was driving through the, walking through the street station to get the train home to Dublin. He said, I was carrying my two suitcases. I had my badge on. And a man pulled up at the side of the road, and he wound down the window. And he stood at the pavement side where I was, and he looked at me straight in the face, big bushy beard, he said, and a red Sierra car. He said to me, what are you doing, son? He said, no church will ever get you into it. Jesus is the only way to heaven. And he rolled up the window and drove off. And he says, that tormented me. For the next two weeks, I went home to Dublin. And then, at the end, I couldn't bear it anymore. I went to a local brethren and said, I walked on the door, and they let me in, and I said, who is this Jesus? And how can I become one of his disciples? It's the power of God unto salvation. So this group arrive in Antioch, and they share the good news of the gospel, and people are in Antioch. So I want to encourage you, as you try to reach out, as we think about the area of the city where God has placed us, as we try to hold out the good news of Jesus,

I just want you to know that we are in the world. Secondly, they had an exciting beginning. Secondly, then, they had an encouraging, the church in Jerusalem heard about what was happening in Antioch, which is north towards on the coast. And they heard all about what was happening in the church in Antioch, and they decided to check this out. I mean, people are being converted here and taking their place as equals in sending someone to check this out, and so they decided that they would send Barnabas. Now, we know a little bit about the book of Acts. We know that he was a Levite. He came from Cyprus, actually. So he was from over a native of Jerusalem, so he understood a little bit about the pressures and struggles of being an immigrant. But he was a very generous individual. This guy had a heart just for people, because he sold, brought the money to the leaders of the church in Jerusalem and said, here, I don't need this money. I'm not putting it into my pension. I'm an angel advisor to invest. Why don't you just take this money and use it for kingdom purposes in extreme need within our church family? Why don't you take this money and use it? So, very generous man. We also know that his name had been changed from Joseph to Barnabas earlier in the book of Acts because he just was an encourager. He's the kind of guy you'd love to sit beside in church on Sunday morning because you know that when the service would be over, just lift your spirits. Sometimes you think, oh, I don't want to sit beside that person because I think they'll suck the life out of me.
Person you'd love to sit beside, just to hear him sing, just to somehow be near him as he listened to the sermon of the encourager. We know that. We know that he was a reconciler from Acts chapter 9, verse 26. Remember when Saul was converted and he came to touch Saul? And I can understand that.
If my husband had been murdered or executed by the helm of it, I wouldn't have wanted to sit beside him in church on Sunday. But it was Barnabas who took him by the hand and brought him to the church.
If God has saved him, we need to accept him. We don't get to choose who God admits into his family. That brought him to the apostles. So this is the chap that the church in Jerusalem sent down to the church as it navigated the early days of its existence and as it tried to establish its that they

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sent. I don't think anybody, I don't think everybody in the church at Jerusalem in Antioch, because I don't think that the meetings in Antioch looked like the meetings that were being held in the temple. These people walked out of the temple of Daphne with all of the church.
[23:12] I think the meetings in the church in Antioch looked hugely different from what Barnabas arrived and we're told a couple of things about him. I could spend forever on this, but we're told, first of all, he's just glad when he saw what the Spirit of God was doing, what the grace of God is.

God, by His grace, was doing in Antioch, transforming lives, drawing people around and sweeping them into His kingdom. We're told that he was glad. There's something really exciting. I remember my good friend John Shearer tell me the story about, I don't think he was the pastor, but he told me this story, so he's responsible. In the Gorbals in Glasgow, I've driven through the Gorbals a few times. I think it's a great name. I mean, I think it would have appeared in Narnia or somewhere, but the Gorbals, this guy got saved from the Gorbals and he came to church with a huge table, and he walks into the prayer meeting on a Wednesday night, and he says to the pastor, he says, in this book, there were three boys thrown in, and God protected them, and they came out, and there wasn't even the smell of smoke on them. Did you know that was in this book? Oh, yes, the pastor says. He came back the next week, and he said, did you know that in this book, there was a man thrown into a den full of because God protected them? Did you know that was in this book? Oh, yes, he says, I knew that was in this book.
I mean, there's something really fresh about meeting. It's so exciting, and then we kind of culture them, but Barnabas comes to this church. These people are swept out of the temple of Daphne into the king. Barnabas was just glad. His heart skipped a beat as he saw what God was doing.
In Acts 11, verse 23, he encouraged them to keep going, to remain steadfast, and to do. Now, some of the folks from Jerusalem would have come with a bunch of rules for these new converts. You'll need to stop eating certain foods. You'll need to start observing Jewish dietary laws. You'll need to... There would have been some people in the church of Jerusalem would have come with a bunch of rules, but Barnabas came and asked to the Lord, cling to him, because Barnabas knew that the pull to go back to the temple was huge in the lives of these people, and he just wanted them to press on with Jesus. He just wanted them steadfast in their walk with Jesus. That's what Barnabas wanted.
[25:54] He wanted them, and he was full of... It says in verse 24, it tells us that he was a good man, and he was full of the Holy Spirit. Just a good man. He wasn't a grumpy, cantankerous, awkward. He was a good man of the Holy Spirit were dangling from the branches of his life, and he was just thrilled that these converts to go on with Jesus. He didn't want them to go back. I heard... I think it was where I heard the story, but I heard about during the hippie days in San Francisco, a guy comes in, and he's got flowers in his hair, and flowery shirt, and big bell bottoms, and bare feet, no shoes, and big necklace in the church. And of course, everybody's dressed in a suit and a tie, not that there's anything wrong with a suit and tie, but everybody's... See, the church is packed out.

Walks his way down the aisle, and trying to get people to budge. Nobody will budge up. Nudging each other, look at what's coming into church now. And you know what he did? He walked right up to the front and crossed his legs, and sat and waited for the pastor to begin preaching his sermon, right in the middle of the aisle. And across the back and down the aisle, and everybody's saying, watch this, watch this. Jimmy will fix them out. Jimmy goes... Jimmy came down the aisle, he shook his hand, and he sat cross-legged beside him, because he wanted to be a... He knew that the tool to go back to the world was huge. And here was one man that wanted to be a blessing his way, by God's grace, out of this world and into that world. Barnabas, to help your church in the fledge in its days as it begins to establish itself. Well, John told me not to be... So, I'll be very quick with my last two points. The other thing is the dynamic leadership in the work of this church. Full steam ahead. He's preaching on Sundays. He's leading Bible studies, drinking warmed milk with them.
He's just going absolutely flat out, and he says, I think he came to a place going. I'm going to kill myself. I need help in the work of this church. And so, he begins to think, who could I get who would come and complement my gifts? Who's expositor and teacher and could ground these new converts in the things of the faith? I know someone who knows the old... Give his hand.
Saul of Tarsus. And Saul had been years earlier, and no one had heard anything about him. And it was Barnabas who went to Antioch and gave him his first opportunity in ministry. I need your help in this church in Antioch. Come and help me here. And huge numbers are converted. I mean, what a team. Don't you think? What a team. Barnabas, I mean, this is the man that would write the book of

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Romans and Galatians and Philippians and Thessalonians. The theological mind this young man had, as he comes to help Barnabas in the work of this church, had read on to chapter 13. You'll be thankful we ended at chapter 11. But if we'd read on to chapter 13, this church on the shoulder and said, I want you and not the church at Jerusalem to be the church that sends out missionaries. And the two are Barnabas and Saul. There's not just two of them involved in the ministry of this church. There are three of this church. Not five deacons, five preachers to the vision of Barnabas. [29:27] Sometimes we think of Barnabas as kind of a Santa Claus figure with a big white beard, and we think to ourselves, in my estimation. And he brought Saul of Tarsus to this church to help him.

Don't you long for people with just a wee bit of vision now and again about what God could do? I long for people with vision. Like I was reading the other day, I have to do some stuff in preaching, and I was reading the other day about this. Tim Keller went to Manhattan. And by the time he retired, there were 5,000 people meeting in several locations throughout Manhattan. Vision. Lastly, they had an outward focus. So Agabus comes down from Jerusalem to the church at Antioch, and he says to them, you guys should do something to help these poor Christians in Judea. You've never met them.

You come. They're Hebrews. You're from a Greek background, but they are your brothers and sisters in Christ. And over here, there's a group of his children have got nothing. He would expect the children over here to do something. My kids came home from school, and I heard that one of them had forgotten their lunch, and the rest helped them. I would have been furious with them. We belong to the same family, I would have said. You just let them go all day without a bite to eat. You couldn't even have given them the biscuit in your box. That's how the heavenly Father looks down as he sees that over here we've got all this stuff, but over here there's a group of his children. This is a church with an outward focus. You know, one of the things that really kills a church is looking inward, inward, inward all the time. We never think about anything outside the four walls. This speaks to it about the needs of others in other places, and they do something about it. And that's, I long for the,

I've spoken too long. Don't tell John. I apologize profusely. I'll try and be shorter tonight. Please come back again. Everyone needs compassion, then I'll come back and close in prayer.

Lord, thank you for your word. It always instructs us and encourages us and sometimes challenges us, and we pray that you'll write it upon our hearts and bless us as we fellowship together, and we pray that the grace of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with us all now and forever. Amen.

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