

## WHEN GOD MOVES Acts 11:19-30

Well you're probably not going to believe this but they finally found it: the perfect church! Someone named a church "The Perfect Church" in Atlanta, Georgia. The old joke is that if you find the perfect church, don't join it because it won't be perfect anymore. So if you go to Atlanta, don't go to this one. The reality is that there is no perfect church, but the Antioch church that we're studying in Acts today is definitely one that sets a good example for others. Our vision as a church is to have **deep roots** in the Word of God and to **bear fruit** by passionately applying it to our lives for God's glory. A tree with deep roots below and fruit above is a stable, healthy, vibrant, refreshing tree. It's an Edenic picture of shalom – peace, prosperity, satisfaction. And today in the book of Acts is a good time to remind us of that vision because the church at Antioch just like that and **God is moving** among them. We're going to learn from Syrian Antioch some operational principles for us if we want God to move in church ours as well.

WHEN YOU GO TO CHURCH THIS SUNDAY AND YOU FEEL THAT OLD TEMPTATION TO POINT OUT WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE PLACE: THE COFFEE'S LUKEWARM, THE LIGHTS ARE TOO BRIGHT, THE TEMPERATURE IS WRONG, THE MUSIC IS TOO LOUD AND, OF COURSE, YOU DON'T KNOW THE SONGS.

REMEMBER IN THAT MOMENT, THERE'S A UKRAINIAN CHURCH GATHERING IN SUBWAY TUNNELS TO WORSHIP WHILE BOMBS BLAST OVERHEAD.

NO COFFEE, NO INSTRUMENTALISTS, NO LEADER PUSHING THEM TO WORSHIP, THEY'RE DOWN THERE IN REAL TIME AND IN REAL LIFE WORSHIPING THE KING ABOVE KINGS AS THEIR WORLD IS CRUMBLING DOWN.

*“19 So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word **to no one except to Jews alone**. 20 But there were **some of them**, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and **began speaking to the Greeks also**, preaching the Lord Jesus. 21 And **the hand of the Lord was with them**, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.*

### I. THE GENTILE EXPANSION. (VV. 19-22)

The last two weeks the author Luke has shown us how God divinely orchestrated this occasion where He made His **acceptance of the Gentiles indisputable**. He did that through the vision to Peter and Cornelius and by making their reception of the Spirit undeniable. And this is a pretty fresh reality for the Jews who are used to avoiding Gentiles. In verse 19, Luke rewinds the narrative a bit to 8:1-4 when the church was **scattered** as a result of **increased persecution**, and he tells us that most of these Jewish believers only spread the word to other Jewish communities abroad. They were, *“speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone.”* They naturally didn't reach out beyond the Jews. Hanging with Gentiles was still taboo. But not everyone felt that way, praise the Lord! There were **some of them** from Jewish colonies in Cyprus and Cyrene who when they reached this city of Antioch 300 miles north of Jerusalem, started sharing the gospel with Gentile **Greeks** as well! And God was with them as they did it.

Some of the scattered believers it says, went to **Phoenicia**, this a long, narrow strip of coastal territory northwest of Israel (Tyre, Sidon, Lebanon area). Some went to the island of **Cyprus**, which is where **Barnabas** is from. It's that large island 50 miles west in the Mediterranean. The city of **Antioch is the focus** though as it is recorded as the **first major church outside of Jerusalem**. And it's amazing that God does such a great work here because this place was about as pagan as you could get. There were around 16 Antioch's in the ancient world but this one was the big one. It was the **capital** of Syria and the **third largest city** in the Greco-Roman Empire with over half a million residents. It was called "Antioch the Queen of the East," "Antioch the Beautiful," and "Antioch the Great." One man said that if **Jerusalem** was about **religion**, and **Rome** was about **power**, and **Athens** was about **philosophy**, one might say that **Antioch** was about **business and immorality**. It was a place of pleasure and lust – a place people would vacation and retire. And it's going to become a prominent city in Acts and church history because after the apostles left, a seminary-like school was started there which known for it's literal method of biblical interpretation. Early church father Irenaeus (A.D. 125-202) said they interpreted the Bible plainly which meant a historical, grammatical, and contextual interpretation of God's Word and a future reign of Christ. The idea that the Church is the kingdom of God ruling in the world goes back to Augustine of Alexandria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Premillennialism dominated the Church's thinking for at least the first two centuries.<sup>i</sup>

But just try to picture this place. its main street was 4 miles long, paved with marble. Lining both sides of the street are large, marble colonnades.<sup>ii</sup> At night the streets are lit up which was rare back then, making for a unique night life. During the day you could relax in the spas or you blow some money on chariot races. It sounds like it had a very modern, cosmopolitan, cutting edge feel to it – kind of like these cities springing up overnight like Dubai. I don't know if you know anything about Dubai, but just like it, this place was **a worldwide melting pot of people and gods** as Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians all did business here. The gods were part of the reason for the immorality. 5 miles down the road was a pagan temple to Daphne where ritual prostitution took place. It was considered a religious activity. The priestesses acted out the story of Apollos and Daphne every night to crowds.

Understanding the cultural context of this place makes God's choosing to move in this city even more amazing. It tells us no nation or city is too dark or too far gone for the gospel. In fact, this place becomes **a strategic missionary hub for the church**. It's the "mother church of Gentile Christianity" and will prove to be an important center for faith and theological development for centuries to come.<sup>iii</sup> One would think that to be a Christian in this environment would be intimidating, but God is at work here! We need to note several principles here real quick:

### **God moves through persecution.**

This is something Acts is teaching us again and again. While we think persecution is the worst thing that can happen, God can use evil for good. Through it, the gospel is spread. Secondly, God is moving in a diverse culture and church. Diversity can often become a point of division, but this

church is handling it well and crossing those ethnic and cultural barriers we've been talking about the past couple of weeks. God is reaching **every tribe and tongue and nation** with the gospel.

**God moves through a barrier-crossing church.**

And we should note why they were able to be so unified with some much diversity: it's because they kept **the gospel of Christ and His mission preeminent**. That's a key to unity in any church. Nothing stops God from moving when His people are focused on Christ and on the right things. And notice who he used in v. 20 – "*some of them*". We don't even know the names of these people who reached out to the Greeks. They're day to day, ordinary people. They're nameless and faceless to us, but not to God.

**God moves through ordinary people.**

It shows us again that God is not just working through the apostles but seeks an **every member ministry**. Every member of Christ's body, every believer, is a minister who gives themselves to gospel advancement. These are **regular people like you and me, speaking the good news** – not from the pulpit but in everyday life, in the streets and markets where people hang out.

Notice the **hand of the Lord** is them. This is just a way of saying God's power was enabling them. The hand of the Lord being upon you can be a good thing or a bad thing – blessing or judgment. In chapter 13 it will be a bad thing to man who is seeking to turn people away from the faith. But here, the "hand" of the Lord is what enables this church to grow numerically and spiritually. And this is one of things I pray for often here: that God would make it clear to us that He is at work among us and it's not just us. I want us to continually sense in big and little ways that His presence and power is with us.

**God moves through a grace-dependent church.**

A church that relies not on themselves but on the power of God's grace. That's the only way that we'll be successful or effective. If ministry is done in *our* power, it leads to fruitlessness, regardless of the size of the church. But if done in *His* power, it will make a ministry eternally fruitful, regardless of the size. Why? Apart from Him, we can do nothing (John. 15:5). My pastor friend in Kansas texted me this morning, not knowing what I was preaching on, and said in relation to prayer, "*As we move heaven – God moves on earth!*" So the hand of the Lord is with this growing church and the **news of it reaches ears Jerusalem**. The leaders in Jerusalem want to verify it because they no doubt still have some concerns about this Gentile expansion, so they send **Barnabas** which seems strategic because he himself is from Cyprus.

*23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; 24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And considerable numbers were brought to the Lord. 25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*

## II. BARNABAS VISITS ANTIOCH. (VV. 23-26)

And what does he see? **He sees the grace of God at work.** I love that. God's grace is obviously invisible, but he can tell by the way people are being saved and are hungry for the Word, that God is moving. And even more astounding to Jews is that God is doing it all without Jewish rituals of any kind – they probably don't even know much about what's in the Law of Moses. They don't dress like Jews or talk like Jews or have refined Jewish mannerisms, but they're praising God! And Barnabas is a man of grace who doesn't let these strange, newborn believers with their differences get in the way. He lives up to his name, the "**Son of Encouragement**," by encouraging these new believers to **remain true to the Lord**, a fitting encouragement in a pluralistic city full of false gods and immorality. He encouraged them to surrender their lives to Christ, to have a Romans 12:1-2 type of **surrender moment** where they say, "*My life is not my own. I am a living sacrifice for God and I will learn His ways and live for Him.*" He does this because God is going to continue moving through a surrendered, faithful church.

### **God moves through a surrendered church.**

People who are dedicated to Christ – who have a single-minded, firm resolve to follow Christ and have a real heart devotion to Him. And it appears they responded well to his encouragement because people start to identify these disciples by a new name: **Christians**. Right here in Antioch is where the term "Christian" was originally coined and it appears that it wasn't self-designated. It was likely outsiders who **identified** them this way because that's who they talked about and how they lived. There are varied opinions over the proper way to define the term "Christian" but overall it just has the idea of "belonging to the party of Christ". Being a "Christ followers" or "Christ's people". They preached Christ and imitated Christ and He is what they have become known for.

### **God moves through people who know their identity is in Christ.**

The reason I say this is because those who put their **identity** in their work or their family or their stuff/possessions, are less likely to follow Christ wholeheartedly because when you're a Christ follower, a disciple, you might lose some of those things for His sake. Like Barnabas and Saul, you might be called to leave what used to be your identity. You don't live for the world. Putting our identity in the fleeting and temporal worldly things is what leads to so much mental and emotional angst. It's also critical in the universal Church or a local church that is made up of several nationalities and cultures to **see each other as in Christ**. Before anything else – race, gender, social status, nationality – **we're Christians** and part of the same body of Christ.

And new Christians, notice in verse 25, needed **training and instruction**. They needed to get **grounded in God's Word**, especially in those first few years as a believer. God moves and speaks through His Word.

### **God moves through Bible teaching.**

Sometimes the importance of teaching is downplayed in churches, but we need to remember that without roots in God’s Word, there is no fruit or the fruit is rotten and the tree is bound to fall. In a pluralistic world, we need to know what God’s Word says so we aren’t blown to and fro and know how to operate correctly before God. But as Barnabas goes to teach, he knows he can’t do this alone so he makes the short jaunt to **Tarsus** to get **Paul** and they give themselves to discipleship and instruction in this church for one year, grounding them in the Word. Warren Wiersbe wrote, “*When the saints are grounded in the Word, they will have a strong witness to the lost, and there will be balance in the church between edification and evangelism, worship and witness, teaching and testifying.*”<sup>iv</sup> That’s a balanced church.

*27 Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem [topographically in elevation, though heading north] to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. 29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.”*

### III. THE GENTILE RECIPROCITY. (VV. 27-30)

Some prophets come down from Jerusalem and one of them named **Agabus** prophesies that a great **famine** is coming on the whole empire and the Jerusalem church is really going to feel it because they’ve been ravished by persecution.

And ancient historians like Josephus do record severe famines across the empire between 44-49 AD, which was during Claudius’ reign.

Emperor	Year
Tiberius	15-35 AD
Caligula	35-41 AD
Claudius (11:28; 17:7; 18:2)	41-54 AD
Nero (25:11)	54-68 AD

This is the first mention of **prophets** in the New Testament. Like tongues and knowledge, prophecy was a **revelatory gift** that Paul said would cease (1 Cor. 13:8). But at this time it was a much needed gift because the revelation of the New Testament was still being written. There’s a lot of people, myself included, who really want to see the gifts like prophecy or tongues or healing in action today but the NT explains why we don’t see these genuine, bonafide, indisputable works of the Spirit like we see in Acts. It’s because as Ephesians 2:20 puts it, these men appointed by God to **the office of apostle and prophet laid the foundation of the Church and now we’re building on it**. Remember, what was taking place here was a **massive transition in God’s program** with the **gospel**, the **birth of the Church**, and the **New Testament** being written. And God was affirming this massive shift and revelation through the signs and wonders. Now, the NT tells us it is not sight, but **faith** in God’s promises and the eschatological hope of His return that becomes the supreme characteristic and emphasis of the Church age. Those who claim fresh revelations today are almost always suspect, their prophecies are ambiguous, questionable, or even dangerous and opposed to God’s written revelation. That’s why we stick to the Word of God. The written revelation is all we need (Is. 8:20).

The point of the prophecy was not to satisfy curiosity about the future but to **stir the people to service by sending relief** for the church in Jerusalem. And this is neat: the Jews brought salvation to Gentiles and now Gentiles **reciprocate** that by providing for the Jews in Jerusalem. This is fantastic because **reconciliation between Jew and Gentile becomes evident in word and deed**, indicating ethnic and cultural barriers have been crossed! The Church is one despite being different places.

### **God moves through a generous church.**

I think we have to take home from this that God moves through a generous church. A church that is self-focused and only invests in itself is going to stagnate. There's nothing wrong with having a building fund and making this building a hospital and inviting place to be, but we do with the mission and outreach in mind always. We should also consider our brethren around the world suffering hardship and persecution. The last verse is there to show us that they put their money where their mouth is. They took up a collection and followed through on it. Titus tells us this is one of the ways we bear fruit is through good deeds (Titus 3:14).

One of the terms in this last sentence that is of interest is the term “**elder**”. The word elder is used for the first time here in relation to the church leadership. “*Elders and scribes*” has been used to refer to Jewish leaders that typically oppose the church, but now the church has elders – showing us that the church is becoming increasingly complex and authority is being transferred from the apostles to appointed elders. Wherever Paul established churches he appointed faithful, mature, qualified men to be the elders (shepherds and overseers) of those churches (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22). They lead by example with love for the saints, protecting, providing, and caring for the overall direction and health of the church.

### **God moves through shared, godly leadership.**

I said in our journey through Titus that for a church to go anywhere, it needs faithful men who don't go anywhere.

In sum, this passage reveals **another key church community where God is working**. It shows us that **nothing stops God from moving when His people are focused on Christ and His Word and His mission to make disciples**. It's a church with deep roots that's bearing fruit. Perfect? No. But they have a real, genuine heart commitment to the Lord. And that is something that communion was designed to cause in us. As sinners, our hearts continually want to go astray after worldly things but communion reminds us of Christ's sacrifice for us and how we are called in Him to walk worthy of that sacrifice. We examine our hearts, confess our sins, and resolve to remain true to the Lord (Acts 11:23). Like Barnabas, I want to encourage you today if you've never believed on Christ, do so today. Accept Him as your Savior. And like Barnabas, I encourage all of us to surrender – to resolve to remain true to the Lord.

---

<sup>i</sup> Andy Woods, *Ever Reforming*, chapters 1-2.

<sup>ii</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), 358.

<sup>iii</sup> Steven Charles Ger, *Acts: Beginning in Jerusalem...* (online commentary), 165.

<sup>iv</sup> Wiersbe, 359.