

Series: "Church the Way It's Supposed to Be"

Sermon #9

"The Church At Its Best"

Acts 11:22-29; 12-13

Introduction: In 1949, Dr. R. S. Beal, pastor of First Baptist Church in Tucson, Arizona preached one of his greatest sermons to his large congregation. His closing comments are so relevant to the church of our day. He said, "Surely a world at its worst demands a church at its best."

I am in total agreement with that statement, and if it was true in those days, how much more true is it in our day? In the day of drugs and debauchery, murder and misery, illegitimate siblings and illiterate students, as well as corrupt politicians and compromising preachers, as never before "a world at its worst demands," and may I say deserves to see, "a church at its best."

Someone has well said, "There is no fear that the church will not succeed; but, that it will only succeed in things that really do not matter."

This was certainly not the case of the early church. They succeeded in the minor things, but also in the major things as well. ***It was church at its best.***

Today, we enter into a transition period of the book of Acts. There is a **change of person**, because the emphasis moves from Peter to Paul. There is a **change of purpose**, because for the first time, the gospel is deliberately and purposefully preached to the Gentiles. There is a **change of place**, because the city of Antioch now holds center stage.

The church began in Jerusalem and has spread to other cities such as Samaria, Damascus, Caesarea and now Antioch. From Antioch, the apostle Paul would take the gospel to the rest of the known world. In fact, Paul would write of it in Romans 15: 19, "**So that from Jerusalem...I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.**"

The church at Antioch is first mentioned in Acts 11 and as we look at this glorious work of God we see ***The Church At Its Best*** for several reasons.

Outline

1. **The Task Employed**
2. **The Truth Embraced**
3. **The Testimony Enjoyed**

The city of Antioch was approximately 300 miles from Jerusalem, and was the 3rd largest city in the world, next to Rome and Alexandria. It was the melting pot of 5 cultures, the Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arab and Persian.

While it was a wonderful city, it was also a wicked city famous for its worship of Daphne. Throughout the world "the morals of Daphne" was a euphemism for all sorts of depravity. Antioch was the Las Vegas of the 1st century.

Yet, it was in this wicked city that a certain distinction identified this group of believers. That distinction was due to:

1) ***The TASK EMPLOYED***

The Christians at Antioch were focused on sharing their faith. The task they employed was the task of evangelism, and they did it in a wonderful fashion.

In **11: 19**, they preached "***the word to none but unto the Jews only.***" In verse **20**, they "***spoke unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus.***" As a result, in verse **21**, because of their evangelistic efforts, "***the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord.***"

Apparently, this church understood that its primary purpose was to share the message of the crucified, buried, risen, ascended, and glorified Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, every believer was involved in the task of evangelism. The early church did not hire a staff member for the work of evangelism. But, EVERYBODY told ANYBODY that God's grace could turn a NOBODY into SOMEBODY!

In our day, many churches have become like the Dead Sea, which takes in, but having no outlet, never gives out. Yet, the fact of the matter is that it matters not what else we do, how well we do it, or how nice it looks. If we are not reaching men, women, boys, girls, red, yellow, black and white for Christ, then it means absolutely nothing.

There are 2 basic kinds of evangelism: what we say with our lips, and what we show with our lives. Both are important, but the most effective form of evangelism is when the two coincide with each other.

I read about a fellow who came to the altar one night to accept Christ. The pastor came down to speak to the man, and the man told him of his desire to be saved, then said, "Pastor, I watched how you lived, and I listened to you preach and I noticed that the two matched up!" What a witness!

2) **The TRUTH EMBRACED**

A couple of weeks ago we focused on the important role Barnabas played in the early church, particularly the church at Antioch. As the church began to grow, the Jerusalem church sent him to investigate.

When he saw what was happening, in verse **23**, he saw **"the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord."**

He didn't keep the excellent progress report to himself, but he sent for Paul to come and help further disciple the young believers in the things of God. Then, we read in verse **26**, **"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."**

The church at Antioch understood that its purpose was not only to *measure decisions*, but to *make disciples*. Thus, Paul and Barnabas spent an entire year laying a foundation, and making sure that these believers were rooted and grounded in the truth of God's Word.

The great Methodist preacher, W. E. Sangster, often expressed his concern over the spiritual ignorance of today's Christian. He traced the problem back to the pulpit and concluded, **"All the evidence goes to show that a great deal**

of Protestant preaching for a generation past has been on marginal things. We have been toying with trifles and ensnared by novelty, instead of feeding our people on the strong meat of God's Word." [1]

Today, the church has failed greatly in the area of discipleship. We spend all of our focus on *getting them in* without *growing them up*! While we are commissioned to *reach* them, we are also commissioned to *teach* them. Yet, the sad tragedy is that many Christians, who have been saved for a number of years, have a limited working knowledge of the truth of God's Word.

For example, there are many people, in this very church, who are Baptists, but have no idea as to the basic doctrine of the Baptist church. They say that they know what they believe, but they have no idea why they believe it.

As a result, we have produced a generation of "milk" Christians whose spiritual life is a "mile wide and an inch deep." One woman said to her pastor, "It is so nice to come hear you preach and not have to think about anything."

That may be nice, but it is also tragic. The result is that churches are full of Christians who are so shallow in their understanding of the faith that they fall prey to every new idea and novel teaching that comes along.

That is why I repeatedly emphasize the importance of a daily time with God in the Word, and in prayer. When you come to church, I will try my best to make sure that I root and ground you in the Word, but then it is your responsibility to build on that foundation if you desire to be a good Christian, a godly Christian, and a godly Christian.

These early believers were concerned about their evangelistic discipline, as well as their ecclesiastical doctrine.

3) **The TESTIMONY ENJOYED**

Luke makes an unusual statement about this group of believers. He says in verse **26**, **"And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch."** Amazingly, in the midst of a city filled with iniquity, idolatry, and immorality, these believers were given the unique distinction of being called **"Christians first in Antioch."**

The people of Antioch apparently noticed something all-together different, and distinct about these vibrant believers. R. Kent Hughes said, *"The people of Antioch composed a label for the new vessels into which the new wine of salvation had been poured."* [2]

Thus, seeking a new term to describe them, they took the Greek name for "Messiah," and added a Latin suffix, producing a hybrid word we pronounce today, in English, as **"Christian."** [3]

The suffix *"lan"* literally means, "Belonging to the party of," or, "transacting business in the name of." In other words, these believers exhibited such character and commitment that they were easily recognized as those belonging to the party of Christ, and transacting business in the name of Christ. What a testimony!

We live in a day where the term "Christian" has become one of the vaguest epitaphs in the English language. During the British colonial era, the term "Christian" became synonymous with Englishmen in India, regardless of how godly or perverted the man was. If he was an Englishman, he was considered to be a "Christian."

Today, everyone that you talk to, witness to, or bump into, claims to be a "Christian." The popular secular ideology is that anyone who is not a Jew or a Muslim is a "Christian."

But, ladies and gentlemen, according to God's standard, a "Christian" is someone who has had their sins forgiven by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ; their name written in the Lamb's Book of Life; their eternal destiny secured and settled in Heaven; and, their life is marked by distinction, difference and devotion.

A Christian is, recognized by the outside world, as someone who belongs to the party of Christ, and transacts business in the name of Christ. A Christian is someone who life has been changed by the grace of God. A Christian is someone who has a desire for the things of God. A Christian is someone who follows the Son of God to further the kingdom of God.

A Christian is known by How He Lives and How He Loves. A Christian is known by his word, his walk, and his witness. A Christian is known by his faith and focus.

I think of the Sunday school teacher who was teaching his class the importance of living out the Christian life before the world. He asked the class, "Why do you think that everyone thinks I am such a great Christian?" A little boy raised his hand and said, "Because they don't know you very well!"

The great general and leader, Alexander the Great, once learned that in his army was a man named Alexander, but he was a notorious coward. Alexander the Great, who conquered the world when he was just 23, called the soldier before him and asked, "Is your name Alexander, and are you named for me?"

The young soldier replied, "Yes sir. My name is Alexander and I was named for you." Alexander the Great asked him, "Have you displayed courage or cowardice on the battle field?" The young soldier admitted to displaying cowardice. Then, Alexander the Great said, "My son, either change your behavior or change your name!"

May God help us to be who we are. May God help us to live up to the name "Christian." May God help us to live out our calling in fearful, fruitful and faithful service.

May North Jacksonville say of us without any reservation, hesitation, or equivocation, "Those people at Gardenvue Baptist Church are not just church members, but they live in such a way that they must belong to the party of, and transact business in the name of Christ. They are "CHRISTIANS!"

Secondly, I want you to move with me to Acts 13. It is there that we not only see the distinction that identified the church, but: