

“The First Christians: Not Who You Might Think” September 18, 2022

May, 2005. I am about to graduate college, and I have no clue what I am going to do with my life. And, you know how people always ask you as you approach graduation, "Hey, what are you going to do after you graduate?" And I got tired of saying, "I have no idea; stop bothering me." So, I just started answering, "I'm going to Outback Steakhouse to get a steak." And, I said that for a couple reasons. First, because I had just turned 23 and hadn't realized yet that Outback's steaks aren't very good. But, more significant was the fact that I didn't know what was next for me. I did have a strong suspicion that God was leading me towards full time ministry, but I didn't know what shape or form that would take. I had been leading a large ministry on campus the previous year, and a really close friend said to me, "Adam, you know I've never seen you care about school at all. Ministry is the first time I've seen you actually eager and excited to do work."

At the time, I did know that there was a group that was considering moving to Columbia, SC to start a church. I grew up in Lexington, and my prayer right around graduation was, "God, I am ready for you to send me anywhere. I'm just not going to Columbia. So, anywhere else is great." SO, while I was interviewing with churches and looking into ministry I agreed to help the group that was planting in Columbia. Temporarily. Well, after a short while I was very certain that God was calling me to be here, to give my life to a church plant called Midtown Fellowship. And early on, we really didn't know what we were doing. We were a bumbling, fumbling mess. We were clueless, reaching out to anyone and everyone for help, guidance, direction, tips, tricks, anything. And, due to an unreal amount of grace and help from God, we are still here plugging along. I was reminiscing about all of this about a month ago because we actually had some leaders from another church come visit so they could learn from us. So, I'm sitting watching as they ask our staff questions and pick our brains on how we do things, and I'm thinking, "If these folks could've seen us 15 years ago they would have said, 'You know what, we're gonna try to learn from another church, I think.'"

We've not just been able to become a bit more established as a church, but we've also been able to plant 5 other churches along the way. With all of this, we find ourselves in a long line of church plants throughout history. Today, we actually learn about the first ever true church plant. The first time that a group of Christians started a church in a new location. Today, we are studying a passage about the church in Antioch. We've talked about this church before, so I will try to add some additional commentary as we read for those of you with excellent memories who recall when we've talked about this passage before.

With the church we will look at today, the church of Antioch, we read about what was arguably the greatest city movement in the Bible, and we get no names of the people who started it. They are just called "them."

-This was the first church plant among the gentiles...non-Jewish folks. If you are Jewish and you are a believer in Jesus, then you are a messianic Jew. You trace your faith back to Jerusalem and Pentecost. But, all the rest of us who are not Jewish in ethnicity, trace our faith back to Peter's vision in chapter 10 and this church in Antioch.

-These Antioch followers of Christ were the first to be called "Christians." Until then, Jesus's people were talked about as a Jewish movement called "the Way."

-They are the first church to send out missionaries to go plant other churches. The rest of the book of Acts is mainly the story of the church planting movement started by the church in Antioch. So, let's read through and I'll make some points along the way, and then we will end with one big idea.

Acts 11:19-30

19 Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

This is a reference to what had happened back in Acts chapter 6 and 7 when Stephen is killed. We've already read through all of that, but let me remind you of one thing quickly.

Acts 8:1

1 And Saul approved of his execution. And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

Except the apostles. That's an important phrase. Luke makes sure we realize that the first carriers of the gospel out of Jerusalem were not the apostles, but the ordinary Christians. Luke doesn't tell us what the apostles did when they stayed, so the only reason he would include that detail is to put the focus on what those who left did. They carried the gospel outside of Jerusalem. The first time the gospel expanded beyond Jerusalem, it was carried not by the apostles, but by unnamed Christians. This is the secret sauce for why there are over 2 billion followers of Jesus on the planet today. The church grows not just by the preaching of a few anointed apostles, but when every believer is filled with the Spirit and testifies to the gospel where God has placed them.

Back to chapter 11

20 But there were some of them,

"Some of them." No names given. "Those who were scattered" preached wherever they went. This stands out because it's different from what you will see for much of the rest of the book of Acts. When God's people go to a city to start a church, you'll know their names for the most part. Saul and Timothy and Barnabas pull up, and then people start to get saved. And, oftentimes, you know their names. We're gonna get to a part of the book in the coming weeks where Saul and his squad pull up in Philippi, and you not only know their names, but you also know the names of the people who get saved first in Philippi. Here in Antioch, in this story, we get none of the names of the people that first came to Antioch and shared the word, and we get none of the names of the people that become believers while in Antioch.

20 men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

Hellenist means greek-speaking non-Jew. Gentile. Greek person. This is the first mention of the early church reaching out to non-Jewish people. I'm just gonna go ahead and get this over with here, early in the sermon. We're taking the fall to focus specifically on mission and our calling as God's people to be missionaries wherever we are. What does it say they did to the Hellenists? They spoke to them.

Raise your hand if you have ever heard the quote "preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words." It's falsely attributed to St. Francis of Assisi. He didn't actually say it though, so don't speak that evil on him.

"Preach the gospel, if necessary use words." is a lot like saying...
"Feed the hungry, if necessary use food."

You can serve the poor. Help the poor. Love the poor. But, to feed them you'll need food. You can love people. Serve them. But, the gospel is news. It's a news report about something that someone else has done for them. It can only be spoken. If tomorrow I go and cut my neighbor's grass for him, he might look out of his window while I am out there and say, "Wow, what a cool act of kindness. I am so grateful that Adam is cutting my grass." But, he won't look out the window and say, "Oh my gosh,

I just realized that Jesus of Nazareth died for my sins 2,000 years ago.” He can’t know that unless I tell him that.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22 The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad,

He saw the grace of God. What is that about? How do you see grace? He saw these Greek believers. He saw these people who had previously been far from God brought near. He looked around at all these believers and said, “Look! God has been gracious! He’s moving! He’s saving! This is beautiful.”

One of the things I try to remind us of every now and then is that when you look around this room right now, you are looking at miracles. Because of the work of God in these other people's lives, we are gathered together as a spiritual family. In spite of all that is different about us. Think of all the things we’d probably be doing right now instead of being here on a Sunday had Jesus not intervened in our lives. You being here instead of somewhere else you’d rather be is a miracle. Now, some of you are only a miracle once per month, but...The believers around you right now are all miracles. You are looking at grace when you look around the room. One of the privileges of my role in our church is that I get to know many of your stories; where you’ve been and what you’ve been through. And, I get to see God work in your lives over time; slowly, progressively sanctifying each of us. It’s visible grace.

23 and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, 24 for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.

A great many people were added. Second time that’s mentioned. So, we have a huge movement happening here. A massive amount of people are coming to faith.

25 So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

We believe that this was actually derogatory initially. It was a way of making fun of these followers of Jesus, what up until then had been called “followers of the Way”. These folks' lives were being changed in such a way that outsiders began to call them “little Christs.” Because, they were actually that different and distinctively Christ-like. I believe one of the best ways to impact your neighbors is for them to get an up close and personal view of how Jesus is changing your life. The goal for our church is not to have attractive events and services, Our goal is to have attractive people, being changed by God and scattered all over the city. That’s how we want to get people's attention.

27 Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). 29 So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

The Holy Spirit miraculously shows them there will be a famine and that people will be in need, so they decide together that they will all give what they can to help their fellow Christians who would be in need. God sets all this up as a way of making sure his people are taken care of. And, this church in Antioch decides they will be sacrificial and generous. They are intentionally meeting the practical needs of others.

Then, later in Acts 13, we get just a bit more about this church in Antioch...

Acts 13:1-3

1 Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Leadership: 2 from Africa, 1 from the Middle East, 1 from Asia Minor, 1 from the Mediterranean.

Here is why that is a big deal. When Antioch was built, they built a huge wall around it to protect the people of the city from outsiders. They also knew it would be a multiethnic city. There were Romans and Greeks there. There were lots of Jews because it was close to Israel; but, because it was close to Africa, there were a lot of Africans, and because it was close to Asia we know there were Persians, Indians, and Chinese there. So, inside the city they built at least 18 ethnic quarters. They didn't just build walls around the city to protect the city dwellers from the outsiders; they built walls within the city, high walls, between every ethnic neighborhood to protect the different racial groups from each other.

If there was an incident in a marketplace ... somebody insulted somebody else, somebody stepped on somebody's robe, or something like that ... the next thing you know, one ethnic group was out to kill everybody in the other ethnic group. The reason they had to have walls between the racial groups in Antioch was to protect the groups from each other. They needed fortresses inside of the fortress. The gospel comes to Antioch and something unbelievable happens. The five leaders in Acts 13:1, they represented three continents and four different racial groups. They were the teaching team. There was an experience of God that was so profound it was bringing people together across cultures. They were becoming friends. They were worshipping together. They were becoming a body. This is probably another part of the reason the world was forced to come up with another name for Jesus followers. At first, when the world saw the earliest Christians, they were all Jewish, and they were worshipping a Jewish Messiah. The Ephesians were worshipping the Ephesian god, and the Greeks were worshipping the Greek gods, and the Romans were worshipping the Roman gods, and the Jews were worshipping the Jewish God. They had to come up with a name for it, so the world called them Christians.

2 While 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." 3 Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

How would you like to have the Apostle Paul as one of the teaching pastors in your church? You think you would be inclined to want to keep him around, to keep him leading and teaching your church? These are their best, highest capacity leaders, and they send them out so that others might be blessed. Their willingness to send people out, to have gospel goodbyes as we've called it before, begins the church planting movement that most of the rest of the book of Acts is about.

It's important to note that this is descriptive and not prescriptive. It doesn't say that this is what we must do, it's saying that this is what they did. But, with that said, there sure is a lot to like about their example. There is a lot about this church that has shaped who we want to be as a church.

A church that plants other churches. Yep.

A church that intentionally seeks to meet practical needs of people around us and in our city? Yep.

A leadership team and a teaching team? Yeah.

We aren't creative. We did not invent the idea of a teaching team with multiple people who all handle parts of the preaching. We stole that idea from Antioch.

There are all sorts of things we could talk about and apply. Today, I want to encourage us with just one big point.

21 And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

The hand of the Lord was with them.

I remember when we first started Midtown, early on as people were getting involved and coming around and coming to faith. I was talking to an older Christian man whose daughter had become a member. He asked me, "Adam, why do you think people are coming on Sundays and getting into LifeGroups and beginning to serve others? Why do people want to be a part of Midtown?" I thought for a second and while I was thinking he started answering his own question...which I hadn't realized was apparently rhetorical. He said, "It's not because you all are doing anything all that unique. You're just trying to be what the Bible says the church should be. It's not because the preaching is that great." (And I thought, "agree to disagree.") "It's not because you run some incredible programs. It's not because the music is that great. It's not like you guys are spectacular leaders." At that point, I was about to say, "Hey listen, you're just being mean and this is starting to hurt my feelings, so I'm gonna walk away now before you start talking about how I'm also weird-looking." But, before I could say anything, he said, "People are here because God is doing something. And, people want to be where God is doing something."

I want that to be what you say about your LifeGroup. God is doing stuff. People are changing and growing. People are confessing and repenting of sin. God is working. Folks aren't comfortable with sin like they used to be. Folks who used to be disinterested are reading and learning. We've got some new people starting to get involved. Some folks who aren't believers are coming around. I want this to be what you'd say about your neighborhood or with your coworkers or the other moms at the park. God is doing something. People are asking me questions about God.

If I get to pick one thing that I want to be a characteristic of our church, that's what I pick. For the hand of the Lord to be with us. For us and others to see and know that God is doing things here. I would argue that nothing else really matters if you have that, and nothing else matters if you don't have that. When lives are being changed, when people are finding freedom from sin, when marriages are being restored, when people are meeting Jesus...that's the stuff that matters. Everything else is just trying to lead in that direction.

Like, we meet in an old cinder block warehouse that used to be a nightclub, and I'm preaching from the old VIP area platform. And, if the hand of God is with us, then we just need space...we can basically make anything work. There are dying churches all over America with beautiful facilities. If God is moving, a cinder block warehouse will do just fine.

And when the hand of the Lord is with us, that's when ordinary faithfulness can become eternally significant.

At LifeGroup last week we had our time to review the mission and pray for people. Someone talked about being a mentor for a boy at his daughter's middle school. His mom is worried and thinks he might be getting bullied. Someone else talked about being a coach for their kid's baseball team. He found out a kid on the team was receiving racist taunts and threats, and he was trying to figure out how he would address it. Someone else talked about their neighbor who was thinking about leaving his family and what those conversations had been like. Be involved in the lives of other people. This is what we do. We get out there and get involved in the lives of other people. No guarantees what difference we will make. We just do it. We coach, we meet neighbors, we join PTA. We mentor. It's not flashy. It doesn't require massive talent or giftedness or ability. It requires ordinary faithfulness. Regular Christian stuff done by regular Christians. It's God's job to make it count. It's God's job to make it eternally significant. The Spirit of God works through ordinary Christians being ordinarily faithful.

You don't have to be especially good or gifted. The Holy Spirit makes things significant that otherwise wouldn't be. You don't have to be Michael Jordan. Or Scottie Pippen. You can be Jud Buechler. That's a little mid-90's Chicago Bulls reference for ya.

This is actually a big deal to me, and it's because it's a significant part of my story. God used something incredibly insignificant to change the course of my life. I grew up around church. My mom and dad are believers. But, other than them, I didn't know very many regular people who loved Jesus. I knew lots of weird people who loved Jesus. And, that was not very appealing to me. So, I really didn't want much to do with it. I got to college, and one day I went to the student area to study. It was packed. There was a seat next to a couple of guys that I had played pickup basketball with a few times at the gym. They seemed like normal guys, so I went and sat with them. We were like, "Hey, good to see you again" or whatever. I sat down and looked over, and one of them had a book open in front of him. And, it was a Bible.

I said, "What's that?"

He said, "It's the Bible."

"What are you doing with it?"

He said, "I'm reading it."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because I'm a Christian."

"But, you seemed normal."

Over time we became friends and God used it, over time, to totally change the course of my life. I am absolutely not here today if that day doesn't happen. And it was nothing. Guys playing basketball and then reading their Bible in a student common space. But, the hand of God was with them. And ordinary things are not insignificant when the hand of God is with you.

This church in Antioch didn't get their names in the Bible. They are called "some of them." They cause us to all be referred to as Christians for the rest of history because of their faithfulness. They jump start the entire gospel spreading to all of western civilization by sending out Paul. Their reward is in heaven. Not from having their names called in the Bible. Jesus called their name. And that was enough for them.

You and I might not be Paul or Barnabas, but we can all be "them." In the story of God, I just want to be included as "some of them." Some of them started a church in Columbia, and the hand of God was with them. Some of them sacrificed time and energy and leadership ability and money. Some of them shared the gospel with their neighbors and saw people come to faith. Some of them served the vulnerable in the city simply because Jesus first served them.

That's my invitation for you today...would you be willing to be "some of them?" Your name won't be in the Bible, but the hand of the Lord will be with you. Will you be "them" in your LifeGroup? Will you take responsibility and do everything you can to see that group formed into the image of Jesus and effective in reaching people around you? Will you be an ordinarily faithful Christian, put yourself out there, and trust that the hand of the Lord is with you...and that God will use you as He sees fit?