

Acts 11:19) Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. 20) But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21) The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. 22) News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. 23) When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, 24) for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord. 25) Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, 26) and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch. 27) In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28) One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the reign of Claudius. 29) Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. 30) They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 13:1) Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2) As they were worshiping 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 they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

Our journey through the Acts of the Apostles and What Matters in the Church brings us to **The second major turning point in the church's future = the influence of one church.** The severe persecution that scattered believers away from Jerusalem resulted in clans of refugees evangelizing the seacoast communities to the north in Phoenicia. Others fled to the large Mediterranean island of Cyprus. Those travelling farthest north arrived in Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman empire, exceeded in size only by Rome and Alexandria. With an estimated population of between 500,000 and 800,000, Antioch was a "*multicultural stewpot*" of Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, and Italians – a cosmopolitan city of religious pluralism (Iorg, *The Case for Antioch*, p. 15). Positioned on the Orontes River, Antioch nestled around a large harbor, making it a multiethnic, seaport city. Because Antioch was a strategic city,

the church at **Antioch originated as a strategic church**. This church inspires us because the church's future in our 21<sup>st</sup> century timeline must thrive in an urban community context. The current American mission field resides in cities much like Lafayette, LA.

**Antioch is also the church where Saul the persecutor became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles**. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, immediately he needed help. So, he went to Tarsus *to search for Saul, and when he found him he brought him to Antioch*. The narrative here is compressed and selective, and without Paul's testimony in Galatians chapters one and two, we would not be aware that approximately ten years would elapse from when he fled to Cilicia in Acts 9 to when Barnabas searches for him here from Antioch. The word Luke used for "search" (*anazeteo*) means "*to seek out*", implying that Barnabas encountered some difficulty in finding him. But he did find him, and *for a whole year they met with the church and taught great numbers*. From Antioch forward, Saul becomes Paul, the Apostle – church planter, missionary, evangelist, the author of numerous epistles written to churches, one-third of our New Testament (see Acts 13:9, "*but Saul – also called Paul*")

**Antioch is also where they were first called Christians**. (26). This is the first time the term *Christian* is used in the Bible, and occurs only two other places in the New Testament – Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. In all three instances, it is a designated name used by outsiders. New Testament believers never referred to themselves as "Christians." They preferred terms like *believers, disciples, or brothers*. *Christianous* means "*little Christs*" or "*imitators of Christ*." (Hemphill, *Empowering Kingdom Growth*, p. 268). Evidently, in Antioch, the lifestyle of the first believers made such an impression that they were "*first CALLED Christians*", implying a designation given to them by those observing their lifestyle. (Polhill, page. 273) The lifestyle of the first Christians was radically infused by the unexplainable so that they were referred to as those who imitate Christ.

Have you ever said this or had this thought? "*We're only one church – what can one church do?*" The case study of the Antioch church demonstrates the power of one church. Let me ask you another question: When's the last time you were able to say with confidence, "*The Lord is blessing our church?*" What does God's *blessing a church* look like? The Antioch church provides a unique case study of the evidences of God's blessing. In Antioch,

**1. Evidence of God's blessing is identified as God's Hand**. As the scattered, persecuted Christians settled in Antioch, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus, Dr. Luke confirmed that "*the Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.*" (21)

- In the Old Testament, the phrase “*the hand of God*” or **God’s Hand defined either deliverance, judgment, or blessing**. Exodus 13:14 – “*In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘By the strength of his hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the place of slavery.’*” A description of God’s deliverance. 1 Samuel 5:6 – “*The LORD’s hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod. He terrified the people of Ashdod and its territory and afflicted them with tumors.*” A designation of God’s judgment. Isaiah 41:20 – “*so that all may see and know, and consider and understand that the hand of the LORD has done this.*” A depiction of God’s blessing.

Luke’s description of God’s Hand in Antioch offered a testimony to God’s blessing: *The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.* (21) The Antioch church, in a community of left-outs, opt-outs, and locked-outs, experienced phenomenal and incredible growth – large numbers responded to the preaching and witness of the gospel and turned to the Lord. The phenomenon was defined as God-initiated, supernatural power.

- Which leads to a question: **Is God’s Hand of blessing evidence of supernatural power or human activity?** We defined “supernatural” earlier in the Book of Acts, underpinned by the summary statement in Acts 2:43 – “*Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.*” *Wonders* describe the marveling that takes place by those who witness a miracle. *Signs* provide the intent of God’s supernatural activity, which is to demonstrate spiritual truth. Supernatural involves unexplainable and undeniable evidence – “above natural.” Because “*with God, nothing is impossible*”, I submit to you that it is impossible to believe in a sovereign, almighty God and at the same time NOT believe in supernatural power.

I’m not at all advocating the elimination of human activity – planning, organizing, and strategizing. The question is – how much of God’s blessing do we attribute to human activity? Do we sense God’s hand of blessing on First Baptist Lafayette, and if so, do we attribute it to supernatural power or human activity? Or to think of it this way – if God removed His Hand from First Baptist Lafayette, would we keep on doing what we’ve always done? Exponential church growth that sticks is evidence of God’s supernatural hand of blessing.

**2. A second Evidence of God’s blessing involved God’s Grace.** As word of the supernatural activity in Antioch filtered back to the “mother church” in Jerusalem, they sent Barnabas to investigate. First introduced in Acts 4, Barnabas was a Cypriot Jew, nicknamed “*son of encouragement*”, described as an example of the Jerusalem believers who sold property and possessions so that no benevolent need would go unmet. In Acts 9, after Saul’s salvation experience, followed by his escape from a threatening mob in Damascus, the disciples in Jerusalem at first

rejected him as a follower of Jesus. Barnabas intervened and verified Saul's conversion and call experience. (9:27) Here in the Antioch event, Luke described Barnabas as "*a good man*" – a term he only used one other time to describe Joseph of Arimathea, one of Jesus' pallbearers. Not only "*a good man*" but a man "*full of the Holy Spirit and of faith*" – the same descriptor of Stephen, one of the seven selected servant leaders in Acts 6. When Barnabas arrived in Antioch – "*he SAW the grace of God*" – an interesting choice of words. In the New Testament, God's grace is referred to most often as God's mercy received and experienced, especially related to salvation. We are saved as an act of God's grace extended to us through the death and resurrection of God's one and only Son Jesus. But here, Barnabas SAW the grace of God. What did Barnabas see that convinced him he was witnessing the grace of God through supernatural power?

- **Evangelistic harvest and revival** = *large numbers of people were added to the Lord.* (11:24) Evangelistic harvest and revival is always a sign of supernatural activity. While we rejoice and give thanks when one person is born again and gives testimony in believer's baptism, if real revival were to break out at First Baptist Lafayette, resulting in large numbers turning to the Lord and being added to the church, I promise you that other churches would take notice and send investigators. Steve Horn might even send someone from the LA Baptist Convention to investigate the supernatural phenomenon!

- **Benevolent generosity.** Simultaneous to the evangelistic harvest, a prophet from Jerusalem – Agabus – informed the Antioch Christians of the impact of a great famine in Judea. The Antioch church responded by sacrificially and spontaneously collecting an offering: "*Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea.*" (11:29) Benevolent generosity is always a response of supernatural activity.

- **Congregational unity.** Acts 13 described a congregational meeting of the Antioch church = "*As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting...*" (13:2) As the Jerusalem church, the Antioch church displayed a strong sense of congregational unity – one accord, koinonia, best portrayed in a worship service. A unified, worshipping church is always a sign of supernatural activity.

- **Missions focus.** As the Antioch church worshipped, directed by their "*prophets and teachers*" – Barnabas, Paul, Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen, their congregational unity resulted in a unified decision that would change their world and ours. The Holy Spirit intervened with unusual instructions: "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" (13:2) As the result of their prayer and fasting, the church selected Barnabas and Saul as their missionaries, and the entire second part of Acts narrates three missionary journeys led by Paul and his missionary companions. **Missions Focus** is always a sign of

supernatural activity. Antioch sent out 40 percent of its leadership team to proclaim the gospel to other cities, plant new churches, and make disciples in new regions. How's that for a new paradigm?

When people look at First Baptist Lafayette, do they SEE the grace of God actively demonstrated and evidenced by evangelistic, revival-centered harvest, benevolent generosity, congregational unity, and missions focus? Is that what you see?

My entire life as a Baptist, first as a church member, then as a pastor and denominational leader, and finally as a seminary professor, I've heard two statements used in every size church and in every kind of community context:

*"We've tried that before and it didn't work!"* and *"We don't do it that way here!"*

Well, here's my dilemma: If we can't do anything we've tried before and we can't do anything we've never done before, WHAT CAN WE DO? I've got a suggestion: We can yield and submit ourselves to God's Hand and God's Grace. I long for the day when unchurched and spiritually lost people can drive by our churches and fall under conviction. I'm starved for the day when the community outside the church will be filled with awe and holy terror by what they see happening inside the church. I'm hopeful for the day when the church is the talk of the community, not because of shameful activity, but because of supernatural activity.

**Insanity = *"doing what you've always done and expecting different results."***  
**Can you live with that?**