

April 26, 2020

REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Acts 11:19-30

*(9 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

One of the things that you hear often during this time when our entire world is reacting to a pandemic and many of our lives have been changed is that it is a good time to examine what is important or fundamental in life. There are many families right now who are sitting and eating dinner each night with their children thinking, “How did we ever get away from this?” And that’s just one example among many that could be listed. Sadly, it has taken a pandemic for many of us to stop and evaluate what we look like and what we’re doing. The reality is, though, that evaluation of ourselves or times to remind ourselves of what is important and fundamental should be consistent in our lives. As we pray, “Lord, search my heart,” it can even be daily.

And as I’ve noted before, such times of evaluation of who we are and what we’re doing as a church are necessary as well. They might reveal that we’ve drifted ever so slightly from our mission, might not be approaching things in the most biblical way possible, or simply need to adjust some practices so that they are best. Since the Reformation, this has always been stressed in the church, which is why the affirmation of the Reformers was not that this reforming of the church was one time only but rather that we are always reforming in light of the Word of God. And my prayer is that this is true of Cornerstone Community Church as well.

That’s why, as we began this study on the book of Acts I said that a study through this book is so helpful. Specifically in that first sermon in our study, as I looked at Acts 1:1-14, I noted that the reason that this book is helpful in refocusing us on some things as a church is because Acts records for us the Lord’s final instructions to the church in the days before he ascended, the birth of the church on the day of Pentecost, and the earliest believers fulfilling the mission that the Lord instructed them to be about. Moreover, Luke constantly re-centers or refocuses us on what the church—carrying out its mission—is supposed to do and be.

Well, this morning, we come to one of those moments where Luke is refocusing us again on what we’re to be and do as a church. Therefore, this morning we have one more opportunity to conform ourselves more closely to the Word of the Lord and his vision for the church. That glimpse of the church’s mission comes in 11:19-30 as we see the church carrying out their mission after this time of persecution had broken out after Stephen’s death. Specifically we see the mission of taking the gospel to the Gentiles not only continue on but greatly prosper in the city of Antioch. What do we then learn about the mission of the church in these verses? I’ll name five things, briefly. First, the mission of the church requires the faithful proclamation of the gospel by its members.

**The mission of the church requires the faithful proclamation of the gospel by its members**

As much as it seems like I've noted this throughout our study and we see it in the text, if we're honest, it's easy for us to forget, isn't it? It's remarkably easy to go through a day, a week, or a month, and realize only at the end that you've not been looking for opportunities to speak the gospel to others. And for a people who have been called to Christ and told to be his witness in the world, we need to make sure that we don't lose sight of the need to speak the gospel faithfully as a church. Let me show you why I'm noting this point as we look at the text.

Luke picks up right after that time he referenced in Acts 8 when after Stephen's martyrdom persecution broke out and everyone except the apostles were scattered and left Jerusalem. Picking up there, Luke writes, "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. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord" (vv. 19-21).

So, as everyone is scattered, they go about preaching the gospel, wherever they go. And almost everyone focuses exclusively on preaching to Jews. And that makes sense. Jews would have had a category of the Messiah, would have been familiar with the Scriptures, etc. But some of these who are scattered decide that they're going to speak the gospel to Greeks as well, which is to say, Gentiles. And Luke tells us that a great number turned to the Lord.

This is the beginning of the church in Antioch, which is going to become an enormously important church in the life and mission of the church at large. And this is the point I want to make—this church was started not because of one glorious missionary or preacher that we read biographies about. It was started because of ordinary believers who had been scattered and dared to speak the gospel to Gentiles.

Brothers and sisters, the growth of the church isn't founded *solely* upon the faithfulness of its pastors to preach the gospel. That is crucially important. But the growth of the church is founded in the members of the church speaking the gospel wherever they go. The reach we have as a collective whole is much greater than the reach of any one person. And this has always been how the church has grown, throughout history.

But let me point out one other thing about the men Luke speaks of here; we don't know their names. Do you see that? Luke tells us they were some men from Cyprus and Cyrene, but that's all we know. We know of a number of names of prominent believers in Acts—Paul, Barnabas, and even Luke himself. But we don't know the names of these men, who played such an important role in the start of this important church. And I think the Lord saw fit for it to be that way because the mission of the church is carried out across the ages through the faithful speaking of the gospel by Jesus-obeying brothers and sisters who may never stand behind a pulpit, will never be a keynote speaker at a conference, who'll never have a YouTube following, and who may be buried in unmarked graves. Most of the glorious work of the church throughout history has been done through people whom we don't know. But the grace and

work of God through their simple obedience of speaking the gospel is great and will be known in eternity.

Let's be those people. Let's just be faithful to preach the gospel as a mass of people to the masses of people out there in the world, just as we live our everyday lives. That's crucial for the mission of the church, and that's the first note I want us to see. Second, the mission of the church requires churches being planted.

### **The mission of the church requires churches being planted**

Perhaps this is obvious, but I want to make it clear. This group of people in Antioch who believed were brought together to form a church—the church at Antioch. Luke mentions it specifically as Barnabas and eventually Paul show up, he writes in v. 26, “For a whole year they met with the *church* and taught a great many people.” When he returns to the church at Antioch in chapter 13, he's going to begin that chapter writing, “Now there were in the *church* at Antioch.” There was a church planted at Antioch, not just a scattering of believers.

Why is this crucial for us to note? It's crucial for this reason—the mission of the church continues in other regions of the world where the gospel is taken *through the church*. In other words, we could send someone to an area, armed with the gospel, and that person could faithfully preach and even see conversions, but unless those believers are then brought together, baptized, and function as a church, the work of the church will not continue from that place as the Lord intends. In other words, if we think the work of missions is merely to see conversions, we're missing a fuller, more glorious picture of what the Lord intended.

He wants us to preach, see conversions, and then baptize those converted, and in a context of a local church—where they have oversight, accountability, love, care, and teaching—he wants us to teach them to obey all that Christ commands. In other words, Jesus' discipleship plan requires there to be churches. Moreover, the way we ensure that gospel work continues in an area, even after we're gone is through the planting of the church.

This reality has had an enormous impact on your pastors. First, it's focused us on what is the work of missions. There are a number of good things that could be done in the name of missions, but as we train and equip people to be sent out into areas where the gospel needs proclaimed and the church needs to be present, we are doing this to the end that healthy local churches might be planted. In fact, a couple of years ago Tom mentioned in an elders' meeting that possibly we should put a moratorium on the term “missions” or “missionary” and instead start saying, “church planting” or “church planter” so that we might have in our minds what we're aiming for in missions.

Another effect this reality has had on us as pastors is in thinking about the future of the church here. One reason we train guys interested in pastoral ministry, work to make sure our confession statement is carefully crafted, have membership classes and take membership seriously—among other things—is because we want this church to long outlive us and for a long

time carry out faithfully the mission that Christ has given his church. The mission of the church requires churches, and where churches don't exist, it requires the planting of churches. Third, the mission of the church requires believers committed to edification.

### **The mission of the church requires believers committed to edification**

I could have used the word “discipling” here, but sometimes that might have conjure up just a one-on-one picture in your mind, and I didn't want that. I want us to have a picture of the church as a whole, working together in each other's lives so that we being built up in Christ-likeness.

Instantly, as the church in Jerusalem gets word of what's happened in Antioch, they act in order to make sure those new believers are being built up or edified. Luke writes, “The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch” (v. 22). The Jerusalem church knew these believers needed edification, so they sent one of their best—Barnabas. Luke tells us that he was a “good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (v. 24). But it was worth sending one of their best because that's what the mission of the church requires, and it's why we must continue to be willing to send out individuals from us who are treasured to us. We've done it with tears in our eyes and with cost to ourselves because we understand the mission is larger than our local church.

And when Barnabas got there, he did three things that are a model for edifying others. Luke tells us in vv. 23-26, “When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 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.”

Here's the three things I want to highlight. First, when Barnabas saw these professing new believers, Luke tells us that he was glad. Now, someone could counter by saying that when someone professes faith in Christ, it is simply that—a profession—and since we will only see if this profession is genuine as the person perseveres in the faith, we should temper our excitement when we hear news like this. But, brothers and sisters, as true as it is that faith is only saving faith if it perseveres, that's not the way a believer responds to someone who professes faith. We don't say, “Well, she's lived a rough life, we'll see.” No, we rejoice. We're glad. Love hopes all things and believes all things. Our first response should be to rejoice.

But also look at the second thing Barnabas does. Luke tells us that he “exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23). In other words, just as we do not reserve our rejoicing, nor do we hold back in stressing the need for perseverance. Remember the seed that quickly sprang up only to die in the heat or thorns? We rejoice and then we exhort in perseverance, just as Barnabas models here.

And finally, Barnabas taught them to obey the Lord. He actually went and got Saul, most likely because Saul had told them how the Lord had appointed him to be apostle to the Gentiles, and here was a church that included believing Gentiles. And Luke tells us that for a whole year Barnabas and Paul stayed with that church and taught them. We evangelize, and when someone professes faith, we rejoice, exhort them in perseverance, and then teach them the Scripture. That's what edification looks like. That's how you build up the church.

And what was the result? At Antioch they are first called Christians. Now, most likely that term was used by those around them in a mocking way. But what they were saying is that you're like Christ, little Christ followers, or the like. But what they mean mockingly, we hear encouragingly, don't we? It means the believers there were being conformed to the image of Christ, being made like their Lord. This is the goal of edifying one another. We edify each other because we're members of one body and long to see our brothers and sisters become more like Christ, which leads us to our next point. Fourth, the mission of the church requires cooperation among churches.

### **The mission of the church requires cooperation among churches**

The next thing we see happen in Antioch is that some prophets come down and tell that a famine is coming. Here's what Luke writes: "Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 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)" (v. 27-28). So Luke is telling us that not only was this prophesied, but it actually happened—in the days of Claudius.

But what's key here is how the church at Antioch responded. Luke continues, "So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (vv. 29-30). The church at Antioch decided they should help the church at Jerusalem, and they did, by taking up a collection of money—each one giving according to his own ability—and sending it to Jerusalem by the hands of Paul and Barnabas.

What's so glorious about this picture is the willingness of this young church to help the church in Jerusalem. Now, I don't know why Antioch would have been in a better standing than Jerusalem during this famine. But whatever the reason, Antioch was ready to act. And this was a serious act. From what I've seen, Antioch was about 300 miles from Jerusalem, which made it about a fifteen day journey. In other words, there was no easy and natural connection between Jerusalem and Antioch—except that there were believers in both places. Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to Antioch to make sure the believers at Antioch were built up in the faith, and now Barnabas was being sent by Antioch back to Jerusalem to make sure the believers there were financially cared for during the famine.

This is cooperation, and it's an utterly biblical idea. It is not a Christian attitude to see ourselves in some kind of competition with other like-minded churches. Rather, we see that as a people

united to the same Christ, we are about the same mission. This is why we have sent out men to pastor other churches. It's why we pray for other churches in our Sunday morning services. It's why we've partnered with churches in supporting the work of church planters and the like. Cooperation among churches is not only beautiful and good but necessary if we're going to fulfill the mission that Christ has given to his church. Just this last week I heard from two churches who are supporting church planters who have come out from our church, had another conversation about members from another church coming and taking part in our internship, and had yet another conversation with a brother, saying that I wanted to send one of our interns to his church on a Sunday in order to see how they do things there. We're a team. We're all united to Christ. And a church that is seeking to fulfill the mission of Christ, we must be in cooperation with other like-minded churches. Let's never lose sight of the need for God-honoring cooperation among churches. And, finally, the mission of the church requires the power, presence, and blessing of the Lord.

### **The mission of the church requires the power, presence, and blessing of the Lord**

To this point you might think that I'm suggesting that if we do all these things—make sure we're going about telling people about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection; planting churches; edifying each other; and cooperating with like-minded churches—that the mission is certain to be successful with us, but this would be to miss one necessary key. We need the power, presence, and blessing of the Lord.

It shouldn't be missed that right in the middle of this section about the glorious work that happened in Antioch, Luke tells us in verse 21, "And the hand of the Lord was with them." Without the hand of the Lord our works are sure to fail. Therefore, in the midst of all of this, we must be a people of prayer, crying out to the Lord for his presence, power, and blessing in our lives and efforts to carry out his mission. There is no substitute for his power, presence, and blessing and nothing we can do to manipulate it.

So as a church—right now scattered about in our homes—there's nothing that keeps us from praying. Let us then pray, even now, even this morning in front of our computers and televisions in the midst of a pandemic that the Lord would keep us focused on our mission and grace us with his presence, power, and blessing so that we might be a faithful witness to him in the world and a church like Antioch, from where the gospel was launched throughout the Gentile world. That's what can happen when some unnamed, forgotten believers simply seek to obey the Lord while the hand of the Lord is with them. May that be true of us as well. Amen.