



A Great New Church

Acts 11:19-30, 13:1-3

August 13, 2006

The Scripture for today tells of the beginning of a great new church, the church in Antioch. But I have a question for you: when does a church get too old? Fifty years? One hundred years? Two hundred? When a church becomes old, it faces a crisis of identity and a crisis of purpose: is there a place for an old church? Can God have any purpose for an old church? When a church is pushing a hundred and fifty like ours, does God just walk away from it?

The way denominational executives talk sometimes, you would think that's exactly what God does. Denominations check their statistics and see that more baptisms and more numerical growth take place in new young churches, so they put more of their energies into starting new churches that will grow quickly. But sooner or later, all new churches grow up. They go through their own childhood and adolescence and maturity. What is to become of them then?

When Mike Queen was being sought by First Baptist Church in Wilmington to be their pastor, he asked them a tough question: "How does your community see you? What do they think of your church?" The answer: "They say three things about us. They say we are old, cold, and downtown." And Mike's answer was, "One of those three things we can change." And together, Mike and that congregation have become a warm and inviting church. When I go out visiting those who have visited our church, I am very pleased to hear them talk about the warm welcome most of them find here. We have a long history. We are downtown. But we are warm.

It is true that many older churches have forgotten their first love: to bring the Light of the World into the lives of their neighbors. They have devolved from ministry to maintenance, from service to "serve us." But if a church will remember its first love, and be intentional about evangelism and loving in service in its community, then it is possible to be old and downtown, yet also to be warm and growing. By the grace of God, it is possible for a great old church to become a great new church again.

A little later this morning we will look at the church in Antioch and be reminded of our first love for the gospel. But before that, I think you'll be interested to learn what the Bible says about aging in people, and then to apply that to old churches. Frank Stagg was a great seminary teacher who wrote a book titled, The Bible Speaks on Aging. He surveyed the whole Bible for every reference to aging, and he learned this great truth: being older does not automatically make you wiser. For example, after Noah made it through the flood, what did he do? He got drunk and embarrassed himself. And after

David built up his kingdom and began to enjoy his seniority, what did he do? He had a foolish affair, and then had his lover's husband killed, and then covered it up.

From biblical examples like that, Frank Stagg learned that “The direction of a life and not its duration is decisive for its quality.” “The quality of life improves with aging or deteriorates with aging, depending on what qualities are built into it: attitudes, disposition, values, principles, goals, purposes, etc.” (Stagg, p. 182) I think the same is true in a church. As the years go by, a church will improve or deteriorate, depending on its attitudes and values and goals.

From the Bible, Stagg also learned that “It is not so important to know how old you are as it is to know how you are old.” (Quoting Jack Ossofsky, p. 180) We can rephrase that for churches: it is not so important to know how old a church is as it is to know how a church is old.

And from the teaching of Jesus in John 12:25, Stagg found this wisdom for getting older: “If we try to save ourselves, we self-destruct; if we are willing to lose ourselves to God and other people, we find life.” (Stagg, p. 187) That's true for churches, too.

Ever notice how some people seem to be just “born old,” while some older people stay fresh and young in spirit? One survey of people over sixty and not in institutions showed that:

- 27% were found to be *enjoyers* of their senior years,
- 53% were found to be only *survivors*, and
- 20% were found to be *casualties*, unable to cope with life.

(Stagg quote, pp. 184-185 from Research & Forecasts Inc. of New York for Americana Healthcare Corporation)

I think that is just as true of churches as it is of people. I would say that seven out of ten older churches are either merely surviving or are downright casualties. But there are older churches, maybe three out of ten, that are able to thrive and enjoy life in Christ together. There are older churches that are willing to lose themselves to God and others and thus find life.

By the end of the New Testament, some churches were already dealing with the challenge of aging. In Revelation, John addressed seven churches about the challenges they faced. To the church in Ephesus John wrote, “you have abandoned the love you had at first.” (2:4b)

But great old churches can become great new churches when they remember their first love: a love for the gospel that sets people free from sin and death; a love for the gospel that sends people following after Jesus to serve broken people in a broken world.

One of the greatest churches in the New Testament was the church in Antioch. It was in a great city, in size second only to Rome and Alexandria. In the city there were a

good number of “God-fearers,” people who worshipped God but did not practice all the customs of the Jewish tradition. In fact, the city had a lot of people who were curious about spiritual things. And since Antioch was a major Roman center of government, it was a secure and peaceful place located at the crossroads of a good transportation by sea and land. All of factors would be important in the formation of the Antioch church.

Meanwhile, the persecution in Jerusalem had unwittingly spread the believers across the whole region. The gospel was “like a wildfire—stamp on it in one place, it will ignite in another.” (Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary on Acts, p. 105) And when some believers came to Antioch, that’s exactly what happened. (Read Acts 11:19-30)

And so a great new church began. And in its story, we can glean the things that make for a great old church, too.

THE HAND OF THE LORD (11:21)

With all the natural advantages that the location of Antioch gave them, nothing would have happened without the “hand of the Lord.” Verse 21 emphasizes that “the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers...” That was one key for a great new church: being formed, filled, and led by the Spirit of God.

And that is the key for greatness in our old church. All of the other natural advantages of our location and our history -- our heritage, our traditions, our great resources – none of that will amount to much, unless the hand of the Lord is with us. An old church can continue to grow into greatness if it continues to be formed, filled, and led by the Spirit of God. All of our spiritual disciplines of praying, reading, and waiting upon God make us ready and open for God’s Spirit to come into us.

THE LEADERSHIP OF GOOD PEOPLE, FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND OF FAITH

One of the first ways the hand of the Lord touched the church in Antioch was to send Barnabas there: a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. As I read the story of this church, I am impressed by two things: 1) what great leadership came to this church, and 2) how open the believers were to new leadership from outside. It was an open church, open to new people wherever they came from culturally and racially. And that church called upon the gifts of all of them. They welcomed Barnabas and Agabus from Jerusalem, and even Saul from Tarsus.

One great way that God blesses an older church is through the leadership of good people, full of the Holy Spirit, and of faith. A key to the health and growth of an older church is the degree to which it welcomes the leaders that God sends that church. A church that is closed off to new people will never let them use their gifts. In my experience here, by the way, I have seen this church include many young new leaders. That is good, because we have more and more of them, and they are wonderful. Our

Vacation Bible School was overflowing with great new leadership that gave me great hope for the future of our church. A big part of our future story here will depend on whether we call upon them or not. I pray that we will!

GOOD TEACHING AND NURTURE

When Barnabas came to that brand new church in Antioch, one of the first things he did was to go find another great teacher, Saul (whose Greek name is Paul). Then together “for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people.” (11:26b) Now that these new Christians had experienced the presence of Christ in their lives, they needed very much to understand the mind of Christ for their daily living. Being Christian is experiencing the presence of Christ. But it is also having the facts and the understanding. Without understanding, a new Christian and a new Church would not last long, for “Here is a faith so strange, so against the grain of our natural inclinations, that only by careful instruction and long-term nurture can it be apprehended in the lives of those who would believe.” (Willimon, 107)

Today, to understand and follow the mind of Christ is to go against the grain of much conventional wisdom. It is to take up the kind of wisdom that the world calls foolish. An example: in older churches, the longer one is in a community, the easier it is to adapt to the community’s way of thinking. But when older churches let their minds conform not to the world, but be transformed by the mind of Christ, we rise above our communities into newness of life. For example, this city has become used to extreme wealth and extreme poverty living side by side for generations. If you live here long, you begin to accept it, and to believe that’s how it’s always going to be. But the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 creates a different mind in us: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40) That brings us to one more quality that made Antioch a great church:

THE ABILITY TO SEE AND RESPOND TO HUMAN NEED

One of the new leaders that Antioch welcomed was a prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus. He could see that a great famine was coming to Judea, the region he had just come from. When Agabus predicted that famine, his hearers had already been studying the way of Jesus for a year. Their response was a no-brainer:

The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did...(Acts 11:29)

Prophetic leadership and prophetic words lead to prophetic ministry. Remember how the Jerusalem church began? “...they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” (Acts 2:45) Now, after a year in instruction in the teachings of Jesus, the Antioch church is making the same good beginning. Their conversion was proved by their charity.

Once again, this is not the way of the world. Centuries later, a Roman Emperor named Julian (the Apostate) complained, “It is disgraceful that when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans (Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people (Roman pagans) lack aid from us.” (Willimon p. 109)

Generosity to the poor is not the way of the world. But it is the way of Jesus, and of the church that follows him. It is the way of new churches beginning right, and it is the way of old churches that continue on track. Garland Ricks told me he was working at Hope Station one day preparing food bags and boxes for the poor. He was thinking of First Baptist as he was working, and he was puzzled as to what is our place in this community. As he placed cans of foods in the boxes, he asked himself, “What does First Baptist do? What does First Baptist do?” And then he looked at what he was doing! And he thought of the many other members of the church who scatter out through Wilson doing things like he was doing. Any church that has a heart for the hungry and the helpless of Wilson is being an Antioch kind of church in a Wilson kind of town. Any old church that can still see need and respond to it has a bright future.

When we look at a new church like Antioch, we wonder if God has a purpose for an old church like ours. A great old church can grow into a great new church if it grows like the Antioch church:

- Formed, filled, and led by the hand of the Lord,
- Open to good leaders, full of Spirit and faith,
- With good teaching and nurture for new believers,
- And with the ability to see and respond to human need.

Remember this, great old churches can become great new churches when they remember their first love: a love for the gospel that sets people free from sin and death; a love for the gospel that sends people following after Jesus to serve broken people in a broken world.

-- Douglas E. Murray