

The Church That Jesus Is Building.
The Expanded Church. - Pastor Roger Ridley
Gretna Baptist Church, Gretna, NE, May 15, 2005

Looking back over the past few years, our plans for a building have changed drastically. At first we were trying to squeeze into a 1½ acre lot on the south side of town with a small 2 level building. We were then told that we probably couldn't afford anymore than just a basement to start with. But now, we have 5½ acres of land, and are getting started with a 9,900 square foot building, with a plan that will allow us to expand in the future.

By nature, I have always been one to resist change. Change can be uncomfortable. You get use to doing things a certain way, and feel a sense of control. But I am excited about the changes that have taken place regarding the building plans of our church. They emphasize that change can be for the better. Don't you agree?

If we can see that with the church that we are building, then I especially want us to see that with the Church that Jesus Christ is building! It is of far greater value.

Depending on our willingness to change, we will either *limit* His building plans through us, or we will *open ourselves up* to the plans for expansion that He has in mind.

We find this illustrated very well in the expanded church of Antioch, found in Acts chapters 11-14. Looking in on this expanded church, I want to bring **four changes** to your attention that helped them to adapt to the **Bigger** Church that Jesus is building.

I. A Change In People.

Take a look at Acts 11:19-21...

There is an unbelievably *huge* change that is brought to our attention in these verses. It's significance cannot be exaggerated. Did you notice it?

Verse 19 tells us that as the Jerusalem church scattered, due to the persecution that erupted following the martyrdom of Stephen, that those scattered saints went everywhere preaching the gospel, but only to Jews. There were some exceptions, and chapters 8-11 tells us about them. But generally, those that were scattered from the church in Jerusalem *only* sought to evangelize fellow Jews. To take the gospel to non-Jews, or Gentiles was unthinkable to most.

It wasn't that they didn't know better. While Jesus was still with them, He made it clear that His plan was bigger than a Jewish Church, or a *homogeneous* Church.

Do you like that word - *homogeneous*? It means *composed of parts all of the same kind*. Jesus had in mind a worldwide Church, made up of all kinds of people. Remember in Matthew 28, His commission was to *all* the world. Remember in Acts 1:8, His final charge was to take the gospel in the power of the Spirit to *the ends* of the earth.

Even in the first 18 verses of chapter 11, the leaders of the Jewish church were forced by God, to accept that God had granted repentance to the Gentiles, but they didn't like it, and they sought to marginalize it. They would accept some token Gentiles into the faith, if they had to, but they were not about to get carried away with the idea.

Even later, after the apostle Paul had planted Gentile churches all across the Mediterranean world, the Jerusalem leaders still wanted them to look like, talk like, and act like Jews. Look at Acts 21:18-24...

The advice of those well-intentioned saints just about got Paul killed on the spot, and did get him imprisoned for a long time to come. In their thinking, going to the ends of the earth meant reaching Jews all over the world, and sharing Christ with them. They had *a limiting perspective* of the Church that Jesus is building.

The Church as a whole continues to suffer from the same mentality. We want to take Christ to the world, but we want everybody to look the same, to talk the same, and to act the same. We want them to be *just like us!*

Take a look at the average local church. Generally, it is filled with clones. Take a look at our church. We are made up of people that look alike, and talk alike, and act alike, and we like it that way!

Please don't get me wrong. There is not necessarily anything wrong with what we've got, but if our vision is no larger, then we will *limit* the building plans of Christ through us.

There is a better way to think, it's the way Christ wants us to think, and we find it in verse 20...

These men were open to a bigger plan, the plan that Christ had from the start for His Church. Instead of reaching out to people just like them, they reached out, with the gospel, to new people, people different than themselves. And notice in verse 21, the hand of the Lord was with them, and a *great number believed!*

That's the kind of plan the Lord is ready to get behind. *He is ready to get His hand in that kind of work!*

To some degree that's what we've done here. So many, both in our fellowship of churches, and in this community have thought that we wanted to start a Baptist church in Gretna by gathering together Baptist people in the area. Let me assure you that was never our intent. Our intent has always been to take the Word of Christ to whomever will receive it, and let Him build His congregation from it. I want to believe that's what has happened. I want to believe that we are where we are because *the hand of the Lord* has been in it. And I believe that if we keep that kind of mentality that *the grace of God* will continue with us, and the Lord will use us in the kind of expansion He has in mind.

II. A Change In Name.

Look at verses 22-26...

Antioch was the very first place that Christians were called Christians. In Jerusalem, they were identified with Christ, but they were also seen as an extension of the Jewish faith. They were all Jews, they were still going to the Temple, and still following all the Jewish customs.

The Church in Antioch was not just a Jewish church. The congregation reflected the wider community. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome and Alexandria. From its founding, it had a mixed population of Greeks, Macedonians, Syrians, and Jews (see *Cities of the Biblical World* by LaMoine DeVries, pages 345-350). The congregation that made up the church in Antioch was ethnically mixed, and so it could not be identified as a *homogeneous* ethnic group. Instead, they were identified, by outsiders, by their message, and the One they professed to follow.

To be called a Christian in those days was special. You knew who you were, and others knew who you were. Today, we have just about destroyed all of its original meaning. Today, it's not enough to say that you are a Christian. You must define what you mean, and you must get a definition from those who use the term with you. Just about everyone I meet says that they are a Christian, but I suspect that most of them have a different idea than I do.

It would be nice though, to have people say of you and me, that we are what Christians *should be!*

Why were these people called Christians?

1. They were preaching the Lord Jesus. They were telling people that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one reaches God or heaven but by faith in Him (John 14:6).

2. They were preaching a *whosoever* message. By that I simply mean that they believed, and they were preaching that Jesus is for *everyone*. They did not limit their message to people just like them.

3. They had purposed in their heart to cleave unto the Lord. I get the impression from a lot of professing Christians today that they are Christian in name only, or by convenience, but not by a purposed heart, because they don't cleave very well to the Lord.

4. They were disciplined in the teachings of Christ. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus said to the apostles *teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded*. And so, when Barnabas and Saul were assembled with believers in Antioch, they taught them what to believe, and how to live it.

These four things set the members of the Antioch church apart from everyone else in the city, these things identified them as Christians. These are still good qualifiers for Christians today. Can you say that they are true in your life?

Have you personally trusted Christ as your Savior?

Are you encouraging others to trust Christ as their Savior?
Are you taking the message of Christ to people different than yourself?
Have you purposed in your heart to cleave to Christ?
Have you placed yourself under the teachings of Christ, and sought to apply them to the way you live?

If you can answer yes to all those questions, then as those who were first called *Christians* accepted that as a worthy name, then so can you.

If you cannot, then own up to your shortcomings, and purpose in your heart to *cleave* unto the Lord.

III. A Change In Leadership.

Look at Acts 13:1...

It is important to notice that these names are different than what we have become accustomed to in the New Testament up to this point. These are not the apostles, and the elders that had stayed behind in Jerusalem. Who, as Paul later mentions, in Galatians 2:9, seemed to be pillars. Many today like to think of Peter as the head of the Church, but even at this early point in the expansion of the Church you would have had a hard time convincing the Christians in Antioch that was the case. For leadership, the church of Antioch looked to Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul. A change in leadership had taken place.

There is only one Head of the Church, it is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Ephesians 1:22 says that He is *the head over all things to the church*. Colossians 1:18 says that *he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence*. Jesus Christ alone is the Head of the Church, and He alone is building the Church. You and I must *never* forget that!

But, as we learn in Ephesians 4:11, He has provided leaders in churches *for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*.

Leaders are not intended to be permanent fixtures. They are intended to train others to do the ministry, and to move on as the Lord directs.

Which brings us then to the final change I want you to notice in our passage:

IV. A Change In Direction.

Look at Acts 13:2-4a...

Everyone that has anything to do with church knows the importance of these verses. They are the start of missions as we know it today. But it may be that our emphasis on missions from this passage causes us to overlook something of great value. This is a local church with a readiness and willingness to reproduce.

The church in Antioch started, in a sense, without walls. It wasn't limited to just one kind of people. It reached out to all kinds of people. And from this point, Acts 13:2-3, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, it grows without walls. It is not limited to one location. They do not think that they have to be the biggest church in the Mediterranean world.

Remember, that's what the church in Jerusalem was thinking for a while. It took persecution to get them to do what they should have been doing all along. That wasn't needed in Antioch. They were ready and willing to reproduce. And so, instead of just growing in one place, they began to grow all over the Mediterranean world with the planting of new churches. They opened themselves up to the **bigger** Church that Jesus is building. They did not *limit* the plan of Christ through their ministry.

Our church will grow far larger if we send people out to plant more churches than if we just try to keep everyone and build a bigger building.

As an additional thought, notice who they sent under the Spirit's direction. It wasn't people that they thought they could spare. It was their best leaders, Barnabas and Saul, who had taught them the things of Christ. Because of this, I have always believe that a local church that gives their best, will continue to receive the Lord's best. But a local church that tries to keep what they've got will only shrivel up and die. Let's always give our best for the Master!

Conclusion: The changes that we have given our attention to in this portion of Scripture are extremely important to each of us, and our congregation at this point in our development. We are constructing a building. The temptation is to see that as the end product, as having arrived. And if we are not careful, it will be hard to look beyond it's walls once they are up. Let's always be open to the changes that the Lord has in mind. Adapting ourselves, and our congregation to the **bigger** Church that He is building