

Session #6

Antioch: The Model Church Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

Church: the word evokes emotions that range from love to hatred. For many, “church” is a building or an organization. It represents a corporate reality that is associated with structures, programs, budgets and obligations. George Verwer, founder of Operation Mobilization, has cynically suggested that the contemporary church could be characterized by slightly changing the words of the old hymn *Onward, Christian Soldiers*.

*Like a mighty tortoise, moves the church of God;
Brothers, we are treading where we've often trod;
We are much divided, many bodies we,
Having different doctrines, not much charity.*

*Sit here then ye people, join our useless throngs:
Blend with ours your voices, in a feeble song.
Blessings, ease and comfort, ask from Christ the King,
With our modern thinking, we won't do a thing.¹*

But is this the only way to think about the church? Must we cynically conclude that the church is like Noah's ark: we couldn't stand the smell on the inside were it not for the storm on the outside!

Thank God, there is hope for the church. In our day, some are rediscovering the power of church as it ought to be. One of those people is Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Community Church.

There is nothing like the local church when it's working right. Its beauty is indescribable. Its power is breathtaking. Its potential is unlimited. It comforts the grieving and heals the broken in the context of community. It builds bridges to seekers and offers truth to the confused. It provides resources for those in need and opens its arms to the forgotten, the downtrodden, the disillusioned. It breaks the chains of addictions, frees the oppressed, and offers belonging to the marginalized of this world. Whatever the capacity for human suffering, the church has a greater capacity for healing and wholeness. No other organization on earth is like the church. Nothing even comes close.... That means that in a very real way the future of the world rests in the hands of local congregations like yours and mine. It's the church or it's lights out.... Don't bother looking elsewhere. The church is it. (pp. 21-23).²

¹ George Verwer. *Come, Live, Die*. (pages 91-92).

² Bill Hybels. *Courageous Leadership*. Zondervan. 2002.

I. A Bad Example: Matthew 23.

George Barna tells us there are 35 million Americans who say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and yet have no involvement in a local church. Add to this the great number of people for whom “church” basically mean pew time on Sunday morning and you begin to see the magnitude of the problem today. But before we attack the “un-churched,” let’s admit that much of what they say about the church is true. Many have fled because they’ve been hurt. Others don’t “go” because it is simply so irrelevant. Jesus understood people like this.

A. Spiritual abuse and malpractice.

In Matthew 23 Jesus attacks the Pharisees for establishing a religious system that is dysfunctional and abusive. He highlights three characteristics of such a “church.”

1) A preoccupation with **performance**.

They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them (v. 4).

Churches that abuse are performance-driven. People are measured and judged not by their hearts but by whether or not they meet the performance standards that the church has set. Such standards are nearly always outward behaviors that are easily measured.

- Spiritual standards (daily devotions, church attendance, Bible study, witnessing, etc.).
- Moral standards (drinking, entertainment, wealth, etc.).
- Family standards (schooling, dress, activities, divorce, etc.).

The constant message in such an environment is: **Try harder!**

The dangers in such a church are usually related to:

- Legalism.
- Perfectionism.
- Manipulation.
- Guilt-induced performance.
- Unhealthy emphasis on submission to authority.
- Sense of duty, obligation.

The community of faith that Jesus envisions is radically different.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

Key questions:

- Is your faith characterized by joy...or a sense of duty?
- Is your faith spelled D-O? Or is it spelled D-O-N-E?
- Is your faith a burden to bear... or a song in your heart? (Do you carry it or does it carry you?)

2) A preoccupation with **image**.

- *Everything they do is done for men to see... (v. 5).*
- *Woe to you hypocrites.... You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and self-indulgence (v. 25).*
- *You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean... (vv. 27-28).*

In abusive churches:

- It is more important to look spiritual than to be spiritual.
- It is more important to hold an office (title, position) than to be worthy of it.
- People wear masks and pretend.
- No one dares to say what they are really thinking or feeling.
- There is a disconnect between Sunday and Monday... between church and home... between church and work...
- The goal is to please men and the man-made standards they have established... rather than God (Gal. 1:10).

In such a church, people obsess over the question **How do I look?**

Key question:

Which is more important: that I love God and please Him or that my brothers think that I love God and please Him?

3) A preoccupation with that which is **secondary**.

Woe to you hypocrites.... You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness.... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel (vv. 23-24).

- a) In abusive churches the **main thing** is no longer the main thing. Their priorities are in the wrong place. Their value system is upside down. They major on minors... and minor on majors.

- b) Churches like this are easy to recognize.
 - i. On the one hand, they place **enormous** emphasis on things such as: music styles, programs, technology, being cutting edge, clothing, politics, spiritual gifts, liturgy, political correctness...
 - ii. But on the other hand, they place **little or no** emphasis on things such as loving one another, honesty, integrity, living holy lives, humility, considering the needs of others as more important than my own, etc.

Key question: Have I kept the main thing the main thing?

Conclusion on Matthew 23.

Confronted with an abusive religious organization, Jesus became visibly upset. He was **angry!** And his sermon is a scathing denunciation of all religious organizations and their leaders who fail in their God-intended purposes.

1. He pronounces **seven woes** upon such a system (vv. 13, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29).
2. He calls those who are responsible for such a “church” by a frightening list of pejorative names:
 - a. Hypocrites (vv. 13, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).
 - b. Sons of hell (v. 15).
 - c. Blind guides (vv. 16, 24).
 - d. Blind fools (v. 17). (MOROS – see Matthew 5:22).
 - e. Blind men (vv. 19, 26).
 - f. Whitewashed tombs (v. 27).
 - g. Snakes, brood of vipers (v. 33).
 - h. Murderers of prophets and righteous men (vv. 29-36).
3. Matthew 23 helps us to better understand what Jesus wants His church to be:
 - a. A **safe place**.

The door to the church of Christ is as broad as the grace of God. You are welcomed here not based on performance, economics, status, ethnicity, gifting, looks or any other worldly value. You are accepted by grace, God’s grace. Grace is on tap here. Love flows freely and makes everyone feel secure.

- b. A safe place to examine a **dangerous message**.

Although the place is safe, the message is not! The Gospel of Jesus will rock your world. You will be constantly called to repentance, surrender, obedience and change. In the true church, the message will

insist that the main thing remains the main thing: faith, hope, love... holiness... pleasing God, not man... God looks on the heart... performance is important only in that it reveals the heart.

- c. A place where people can be **authentic** and **real**.

The church of Jesus Christ should be the most real and authentic environment on earth! Here we take off our masks. We don't play games here. The only people who feel uncomfortable here are those who have come to pretend, impress others, and hide from the truth.

- d. A place where **sinners** are welcomed and **hypocrites** are shunned.

Jesus did not get upset over the things that so often make us angry (interruptions, disrespect, misbehaviors, accidents, etc.). But confronted with religious hypocrisy, Jesus became irate. Why?

1. Religious hypocrisy is often a cover for **selfish ambition**. In these "churches" people invoke God's name in the hopes of advancing their personal agenda.
2. Religious hypocrisy makes **sinners** feel unwelcome... the very ones for whom Jesus came! (v. 13). These "churches" are ultimately places filled only with those who want to play church.
3. Religious hypocrisy ensures that ultimately those who lead the church will be shepherds who **use and abuse** the sheep... thinking the sheep are for their benefit (not vice versa!) (see Ezekiel 34).

TABLE TALK

1. Have you ever been part of an abusive, dysfunctional church? Describe your experience.
2. What about LCC? What would Jesus say about us? Would he be angry? Or pleased?
 - a. Are we performance-driven?
 - b. Are we preoccupied with image?
 - c. Do we major on minors?

The church is supposed to be a safe place where people can examine a dangerous message. What can we do to ensure that is a reality in our own church?

II. A Good Example: Antioch (Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3).

To understand what Jesus wants his church to be, we need more than doctrinal teachings; we need a model. But where is a model church to be found?

- Not **Jerusalem** – seat of the religious establishment.
- Not **Rome** – seat of the governmental establishment.
- But Antioch.
 - i. A mostly Gentile city.
 - ii. The 3rd largest city of the Roman Empire (500,000 population).
 - iii. The nucleus for the world Christian movement.
 - Believers were first called “Christians” here.
 - Cross-cultural missions was born here.
 - Paul’s home church... where he gave his reports after his missionary journeys.

Nine characteristics of this model church.

1. A **Spirit-led** church.

The body of Christ at Antioch was able to **hear God’s voice**. When the Spirit prompted them, they heard and obeyed (13:2).

The church was also led by the Spirit in that leadership came through ***the gifts of Spirit*** more than through positions and organizational flow-charts.

- The church was founded through the gift of evangelism (11:20-21).
- Barnabas exercised the gift of encouragement (11:23).
- Barnabas and Paul were teachers (11:26).
- Prophets predicted a famine (11:27-30).
- The church was apparently led by prophets and teachers (13:1-3). Where were the elders, pastors, and deacons?

Antioch understood that the gifts of the Spirit were given not for personal gratification but for **service** to others.

2. A **loving** church.

Antioch was a living illustration of what Jesus had predicted: *By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:35).*

The fellowship (Greek: koinonia = communion, participation, shared life) in the church at Antioch was much deeper than pot-luck dinners and coffee and donuts. They shared their very lives with one another.

3. A **unified** church.

Unity in Christ does not mean **uniformity**. At Antioch the unity in love they experienced took place in the midst of enormous diversity.

- **Ethnic and cultural** diversity.

There were persons from Cyprus (island in the Mediterranean Sea) and Cyrene (North Africa) and Greeks as well as the local citizens of Antioch (11:20). Simeon was called “Niger” (13:1) probably because he was black.

Such a congregation would have been a blend of color, customs and languages.

- **Social and economic** diversity.

We know that at least one member of the congregation had connections with the aristocracy. Manaen had been “brought up with Herod the tetrarch” (13:1). This may mean that he was Herod’s foster brother.

Such a congregation would have been a blend of economic classes, educational backgrounds and social standings.

- **Theological** diversity.

In the congregation were groups of both Jews (Judaism) and Gentiles (eastern religions, mythology, paganism, etc.). These had all come to faith in Jesus Christ but each group would have had its own religious baggage.

Such a congregation would have been a blend of worship styles, liturgical practices, moral understandings, family life, understandings of spirituality.

The challenge at Antioch was not just to preach the Kingdom of God... but to **model it!** In Christ, all walls of division are broken down and we are invited to join the family of God, where:

- * *There is neither Jew nor Greek (race distinction),*
- * *neither slave nor free (social and economic distinction),*
- * *male nor female (gender distinction),*
- * *circumcised or uncircumcised (religious distinction),*
- * *barbarian or Scythian (cultural distinction)*
- * *for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11).*

4. A **worshipping** church.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said... (13:2).

The reference here to worship is so casual, unassuming you almost get the impression that they did this all the time. Thanksgiving, praise, meditation, songs of adoration, petition, prayers, confession; this is what Antioch Church loved to do. Though it is possible to worship alone, Antioch discovered the richer blessing of **corporate** worship.

It is significant that the first **missionary** movement came out of an experience of worship. Something similar happened to Isaiah, when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. In worship he overheard God talking to Himself: “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” And Isaiah said, “Here am I. Send me.” (Isa. 6:1-8).

5. A church that produced **saints**.

The Great Commission had stated well the mission of the church:

*Therefore go and **make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey** everything I have commanded you. (Matt. 28:19-20).*

Antioch was true to her mandate. She was a teaching church, a disciple-making church.

- *Barnabas... encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts (11:23).*
- *For a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people (11:26).*

It is no accident that it was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (or “Christ-ones”) (11:26). Their lives were qualitatively different so that outsiders were reminded of the character of Jesus Christ.

The task of the church is not to produce “converts,” members or even men and women who behave ethically. The mission of the church is to produce godly men and women. People whose lives are qualitatively different than the rest of society.... men and women marked by **holiness**.

6. A church that produced **leaders**.

Barnabas went to Tarsus and got Paul, bringing him to Antioch for some on-the-job training (11:25-26). It was during this internship that Paul was formed as a leader in the church. Antioch made Paul even more than Paul made Antioch.

If the church is going to be what God intends, she must understand that leadership training is not just about finding someone to usher or make coffee. When the Spirit of God fills a heart it makes us dream for more than that. Leadership training is forming men so they will to **change the world!**

7. A **caring** church.

When a famine occurred in Judea, the believers in Antioch took up an offering and sent relief (11:27-30). Each person gave “according to his ability” (11:20).

Antioch was not only concerned about the spiritual needs of others. She was involved in ministries of **compassion** that brought help to physical and material needs as well. Following the model of Jesus, she ministered to the entire person.

8. A **missionary** church.

Antioch was herself the fruit of missions. Missions was in her spiritual DNA. Antioch understood that her role was not to be some sort of religious club. Neither was it to be just a hospital where sinners and wounded people could find help. No. God had blessed her so she could **bless others**. She existed to serve. Her primary role was to pray, to give, and to go so that the whole world could hear of God's love and salvation.

It was Antioch that sent out the first missionaries to take the Gospel to all peoples, nations and races (13:1-3; 14:26-28). And when the missionary team was put together, the church discovered that she was sending forth her very best: Barnabas and Paul.

9. A **persecuted** church.

The church of Antioch was born in a situation of persecution (11:19). The members of this church understood that to follow Christ would, by definition, put them in conflict with the **world**, the **flesh** and the **devil**. Persecution was not considered as something strange. It was to be expected.

Then (Paul and Barnabas) returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said. (Acts 14:21-22).

The true church recognizes that persecution is not a mark of shame, but of honor.

They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. (Acts 5:40-41).

E. Stanley Jones describes how this works.

The Christian faith is founded on the cross. The cross is defeat and you cannot defeat defeat; you cannot break brokenness. It turns the defeat of calvary into the Victory of Easter morning. Jesus didn't bear the cross, he used it. So opposition becomes opportunity. (The Reconstruction of the Church. P. 123).

TABLE TALK

1. Of the nine characteristics of the church at Antioch, which one speaks the most to you. Why?
2. Think about how LCC measures up to these nine characteristics. Where are we the strongest? Where are we the weakest?
3. Chose one characteristic and ask God to help you to enhance that characteristic in the life of our church. Ask your brothers to pray for you as you put your thoughts into action.