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CITY IS CHURCH'S GREAT PROBLEM

Dominating Civic Life in Diminishing Degree; Needs Broadminded Leadership

The International Sunday School Lesson for May 7 is "The Missionaries of Antioch," Acts 11:19-30

By William T. Ellis
The Bible, like the human race, begins with a garden and ends with a city. Christianity got its name and its world vision in a city, and a big heathen city at that. Everybody knows that the Church's greatest present problem is that of the modern city. Broadly speaking, the Church is suffering a defeat in its centers. She is dominating civic life in a diminishing degree. Where problems are thickest, there churches are fewest. Worse yet, the Christian leader with a civic sense and spirit is rare almost to the degree of invisibility. Most ministers in great cities think in terms of their own parishes. It is notorious that no movement or leadership has ever been able to get the New York pastors together for active co-operation in any city-wide Christian service. Each is overwhelmed by his own parochial problems. A need that unites most other needs in our modern church life is for a leadership that will think in large units.

The City Problem Not New
There is overmuch wailing about the new problems which have been created for the Church by the modern city. This lament seems to assume that Christianity was constructed in units of rural congregations. Frankly, this is nothing less than absurd. The Christian Church began in Jerusalem. Its first notable victories were won there, in the face of such opposition as is found nowhere in Christendom today. The greatest conquest of the early Church was in the third city in the Roman empire, Antioch, with its half-million residents.

Now Antioch was no modern Philadelphia, predisposed by tradition and aptitude toward Christianity. The utterness of its heathendom is glimpsed in "Ben-Hur," with its pictures of the abominations of the Grove of Daphne, five miles out of Antioch. It was from this great heathen city that Christianity received its name; and it was in Antioch that there began the missionary enterprise for the conquest of the cities of the old world.

In Antioch a vast number turned to Christ. That result was won by laymen, average folk who had been scattered from Jerusalem by the persecutions that arose over the martyrdom of Stephen. As they went they preached. The brands that had been sent flying far and wide by the foot of persecution each started a fire in some new place. Those early disciples were like the modern Korean Christians, who sometimes move their homes and their businesses to new communities for the Gospel's sake. The first and final dependence of the kingdom has been upon the "witnesses" who bear testimony, wherever they may be put, to the new life that is in Christ Jesus.

New Light On Old Places
One is surprised when he realizes how cosmopolitan was the early Church. We find the dispersed disciples going to Cyprus, the British island in the Mediterranean, where now troops are garrisoned, and about which the warships are sailing to-day; and to old Phoenicia, the maritime nation lying along the upper coast of Palestine and Syria; and to the great city of Antioch. Antioch has recently sent into the world because of the marvelous defense which its Armenian Christians made for fifty-three days on a mountain outside of the city against the attacking Moslem hosts.

The personal life of the Church at Antioch, which as the biggest city in the whole region became the natural rendezvous of fugitives from Jerusalem, was even more cosmopolitan yet. We find among the names: Lucius, the Cyrenean—all students of geography identify Cyrene as within the modern Tripoli, which Italy lately seized from the Turks—and Manach, the foster-brother of Herod; and Saul from the university city of Tarsus, and Simeon the Black—who may have been the Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus; and Barnabas of Jerusalem.

With such leadership the new church at Antioch could not be parochial or provincial. It had to think in terms of the then known world. The sympathies and contact and outreach of the Church membership ran as far as the Roman dominions. Intolerance was impossible to these men blazing with the zeal for the crucified Christ. It was easy for them to slip over the fence of Judaism and carry the Good News to the Gentiles. Their breadth of vision made it impossible for them to be held by the narrow prejudices of Judaism. So their converts among the Greeks grew with such rapidity that the news was quickly carried to the mother church at Jerusalem.

A Radical Revival
That news from Antioch upset the Jerusalem leaders. They were conservatives, and solicitous for the preservation of the type. The fear of heresy had gripped them. It was with sincere and pious alarm they learned that the Christians exiled to Antioch had preached to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

Little did they know that this fact chronicled the high water mark of the history of the Apostolic Church. One

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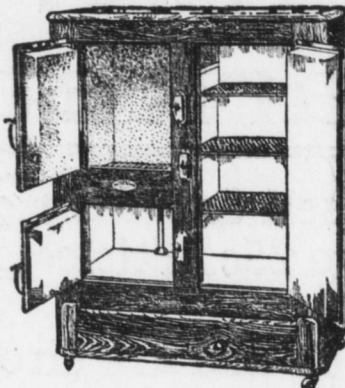
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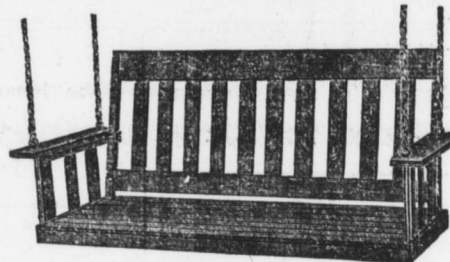
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commentator calls this simple statement of the preaching to the Greeks at Antioch "the climax of the Book of the Acts." It records in few and simple words the beginning of a new era. The truth was established and sealed by the Spirit that Christianity was no longer for the Jews alone, but for all the world.

In somewhat of a panic, the Jerusalem leaders sent their star preacher, Barnabas, down to Antioch to set the Christians straight, and to safeguard their orthodoxy. But Barnabas was bigger than his mission. He saw that the hand of the Lord was with Antioch Christians, and he was glad. No heresy-hunting for him among men who showed the Spirit of Christ. His religion was so vital that he recognized the real test of discipleship. Would that the Barnabas spirit might dominate the great religious meeting of this month of May, some of which are perturbed over heresies and ecclesiastical procedure. It is the spirit of Christ that marks the disciple of Christ. This is the one and only test. If Christ has sealed a man or a cause, no church can unseal it.

There is a beautiful portrait of Barnabas in this lesson, a miniature that belongs high in the gallery of the heroes of faith: "For he was a good man and was full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." No wonder that the Record continues, "And the number of believers in the Lord greatly increased."

Churchman With City Sense
It is part of my duty to watch the trend of the times, especially in religion; and to study the strength and weakness of organized Christianity. I do not hesitate to say, unequivocally, on this appropriate occasion, that the need of needs of the Christian Church in the year 1916, excepting only the need for a baptism in the Holy Spirit, is the need for more Barnabases—leaders who are big enough to meet the new conditions with commanding strategy. The Church needs a leader for leadership with a city sense, and with a nation sense.

We suffer more from the smallness of the saints than from the bigness of the sinners. We are not thinking in large enough terms; for where we should look for great national leaders we find chiefly ecclesiastical politicians, stepping softly about their own concerns. Place-holders, place-seekers and partisans are easier to find than self-effacing men of vision who know the greatness of the hour and the difficulty of the task. Only the Barnabas spirit, which put aside all preconceptions and all self-interest, and dared to do heroically the thing that the occasion called for, will serve us in this destiny-laden day.

A Man for a Big City
What Barnabas found in Antioch sent him posting off to Tarsus for Saul. He knew his own limitations. The great man is one who understands how to use other men. Conditions in Antioch called for the gifts peculiar to Saul. So Barnabas got him, and they had a great revival that lasted for a year, and that has left its impress upon the Christian Church down to this very hour.

If Antioch had needed a Billy Sunday, or a Graham Taylor, or a John R. Mott, or a Charles Stelzle, Barnabas would have sought him out. He had no preconceived notions that made him try to thrust the new life into the Antioch Church into the iron mold of his own prejudices. He wanted to meet the city's spiritual needs. If city-wide cottage prayer meetings could do this, or a tabernacle evangelistic campaign, or an industrial or social crusade, Barnabas would not have hesitated. If Sunday night services in a theater would draw men who would not go to the synagogue, to the theater Saul and Barnabas would go. If a union service of city churches in the Auditorium would meet a special need, Barnabas would have provided it. If a masterly publicity presentation in the city press was the most useful medium for carrying the Message, we must be sure that Barnabas would have found the money for that. Did it seem as if the people would be more responsive to a great concerted musical presentation of the Gospel than anything else? Then Barnabas would have called in the Charles M. Alexander of his day. Whatever would

bring Christ nearest to the thought and heart of the city was a good move for Barnabas. Present-day innovations are often challenged, not with the question "How will it present Christ to this city," but "How will it affect my own congregation?"

Winning a New Name
Some merry Roman jester one day called these zealots, who were creating such a furor in Antioch, "Christians." Probably all the young bloods in the bath laughed over the well-coined word, and themselves later used it in derision. The followers of Christ had not so named themselves. They called one another "believers," "brethren," "disciples," "Followers of the Way." The appellation "Christians" was first affixed in scorn, but quickly welcomed by those who prized the precious Name which it enshrined. That word "Christian" is the one known product of Antioch which remains to this day. It is the greatest word in the world. To be a Christian means more than to be rich, or to be great, or to be learned, or to be powerful. As a small mirror reflects a large landscape, so this designation, applied in scorn by enemies, reveals about the Antioch Church. They were not called "Sculptors" or "Barnabites," but "Christians." They had kept Christ to the fore and themselves in the background. That is the test of preaching; does it make people talk about the preacher, or about his message?

Glowing, Growing, Going
Three merry events stand out in the experience of the Antioch Church. The first was that it gave the new name to the disciples of Christ. The second was its bountiful gifts to the Church in Jerusalem, which had been overtaken by a famine. Then, as now, the Land of the Lord was calling to the people of the Lord for succor in dire need.

Most notable of all—and here, too,

the Antioch Church's experience corresponds to a present mood of Christianity—those disciples sent out missionaries to the known world. Antioch was a mother church. It is a great distinction for a congregation that produces preachers and other congregations. There are such churches with wonderful records. Many a church has sent out swarms that have been more productive than the mother live itself.

Barnabas and Saul began in Antioch the work which is going on to the present hour. Their successors

may be found to-day on the borders of Tibet, in the innermost jungles of Africa, on the blood-stained uplands of Armenia, amid the tumult in remote China, upon the islands in the South Seas. The missionary character of the Christian Church was determined once and for all in Antioch. No church is apostolic that is not speeding its ministers to the unevangelized. When Christians are glowing and growing they are sure to be going. The fulfillment of the last command of Jesus is the first condition of fullest church success.

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