

“We seek to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.” That is our mission statement here at Arrowsmith. We have that mission statement because it clarifies what we, as a church, are supposed to be doing. This is our purpose. This is the task that we believe God has called us to in the context of the Great Commission that Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 28:18-20: “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*” In these words Jesus declared our mission to be *making* and *maturing* disciples. We are to make disciples by *pursuing the lost* and *maturing the found* at home and abroad. Our mission is moving people wherever they are in their relationship with God (lost or saved) to where God wants them to be. In short, our mission is to make disciples by helping people *find Jesus* and *follow Jesus*. And we have defined that mission by declaring: “We seek to passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.”

Now, that being said, we need to ask the question: “Are we as a church - passionately proclaiming the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people?” The answer is: “Yes - to some degree. But to the degree that we are making a significant difference for the Kingdom of God - not so much.” The positive thing about that answer is that if we acknowledge that is true - then let’s make the sacrificial commitment to do what it takes to move people wherever they are in their relationship with God to where God wants them to be! Amen? The truth be told, current surveys reveal that 95% of churches acknowledge that they are not fulfilling their mission statement – whether it be because of the missional drift that always happens in every church over time or because of the distraction of conflict that occurs over change.

There is no church that is immune from mission drift or conflict over change. We know that because while Jesus did come to earth, and die in our place on a cross for our sins and rose from the dead, defeating sin and death – we still live in a fallen world and that fallenness still lives in us. We know that because the Bible speaks of mission drift and conflict over change in the early years of the church. The New Testament is full of letters to churches from the apostles about these things. That shouldn’t be a surprise because Jesus ordained the church be His physical presence on the earth - for the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission to make disciples by helping people find Jesus and follow Jesus. Last week, in Acts 10, we saw what that looks like, when the door to the gospel was opened to the Gentiles through the visions That God gave to Cornelius and to Peter. God’s direct divine intervention enabled Peter to overcome his inherent prejudice against the Gentiles and finally understand that “*God shows no partiality*” (Acts 10:34) when it comes to salvation. The coming of the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and those who had gathered with him - confirmed to Peter and the Jews from Joppa that had come with him - that the Gentiles were to be included as part of the church. So Peter had them baptized.

This morning we step into Acts 11 where Luke records how Jewish Christians in the church in Jerusalem reacted to the new Gentile followers of Jesus who had trusted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Having fellowship with Gentiles was a new experience for these Jewish Christians, who all their lives had looked on the Gentiles as pagans and outsiders. Tradition said that a Gentile had to “become a Jew” in order to be accepted by God; but now Jews and Gentiles were united in the church through faith in Jesus Christ. This is highly significant in that those who claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior cannot fulfill the Great Commission if they first cannot accept and love and get along with each another. In last weeks’ text we learned that whomever God accepts, we must accept - and whenever we do not accept those whom God has accepted, we are opposing God. In our text for this morning God’s Word describes three responses of the Jewish Christians to the Gentile Christians. In each one of these responses God will shows Christians ought to relate to one another – and how we can move people wherever they are in their relationship with God (lost or saved) - to where God wants them to be. Today we read that God blesses the church that practices the gospel principles of the Great Commission.

*Now the apostles and the brothers who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." But Peter began and explained it to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision, something like a great sheet descending, being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to me. Looking at it closely, I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has made clean, do not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. And behold, at that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel stand in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life." Acts 11:1–18*

1) God blesses the church that practices the gospel principle of accepting people whom God accepts. Luke tells us here that Peter no sooner returned to Jerusalem when he was met by members of the strong legalistic party in the church of Judea (who still demanded circumcision for conversion) and who rebuked him for fellowshiping with Gentiles and eating with them. Keep in mind that these Jewish believers did not yet understand the relationship between Law and grace, Jews and Gentiles, and Israel and the church. Most Christians today understand these truths because we have the Word of God. In Peter's day there were still many converted Jewish priests in the church who would have been zealous for the Mosaic Law - and there were many ordinary Jewish believers would have a difficult time making that transition. And these were not only a matter of their religion, but also of their culture, as cultural habits are really hard to break. The phrase "making no distinction" in Acts 11:12. comes from the same word translated "without hesitation" in Acts 10:20. Both Phrases mean "to make a difference." These legalists were making a difference between the Gentiles and the Jews after Peter had demonstrated that "there is no difference!" God had declared the Gentiles "clean," that is, fully accepted before God on the very same basis as the Jews—through their faith in Jesus Christ.

There is no suggestion here of fear in Peter in this confrontation. He had been following orders from God; and the Spirit had clearly confirmed the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter told them his entire experience from beginning to end; and, when he was finished, the Jewish legalists dropped their charges and glorified God for the salvation of the Gentiles. However, this did not end the matter completely. In Acts 14:26–15:2 we will read that this same legalistic group debated with Paul about the salvation of the Gentiles. Even after the Jerusalem Conference, legalistic teachers continued to attack Paul and invade the churches he founded. They wanted to woo the new believers into a life of strict obedience to the Law. Sometimes the question is asked: "Can legalistic Christians be genuine followers of Jesus Christ?" Well, sometimes they can, but they will not understand God's grace and will not experience the joy of the freedom we have in Jesus. In his defense against the legalistic Christians in Acts 11, Peter presented three pieces of evidence: the vision from God (Acts 11:5–11), the witness of the Spirit (Acts 11:12–15, 17), and the witness of the Word (Acts 11:16). None of these legalistic men had seen the vision, but they trusted Peter's report, for they knew that he had been as conservative orthodox Jew in his personal life he was not likely to go to the Gentiles on his own. "When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.'"

The witness of the Spirit was crucial, for this was God's own testimony that He had saved the Gentiles. Peter had to go all the way back to Pentecost to find an example of what happened in the home of Cornelius. This suggests that a dramatic baptism of the Spirit, accompanied by speaking in tongues, was not an everyday occurrence in the early church. Cornelius and his household received the Spirit the moment they trusted Christ. This is our pattern today. When questioned, Peter asked: "*Who was I that I could stand in God's way?*" The legalists had no answer. From beginning to end, the salvation of the Gentiles was the work of God's sovereign grace. God gave them the gifts of repentance and salvation. Christians are to accept one another and not dispute over cultural differences and matters of personal opinion. Some of the Jewish Christians in the early church wanted the Gentiles to become Jews, and some of the Gentile believers wanted the Jews to become Gentiles! These kinds of attitudes create conflict and division in the church – as well as cause the church to drift from its missional purpose.

God blesses the church that practices the gospel principle of accepting people whom God accepts.

*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. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 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. Acts 11:19–26*

2) God blesses the church that practices the gospel principle of the Great Commission of *encouragement through discipleship*. Here we read that followers of Jesus Christ were scattered abroad during Saul's persecution of the church (Acts 8:1), some of them ended up in Antioch, which was the capital of Syria, which is 300 miles north of Jerusalem. Antioch was the third largest city in the Roman empire, behind Rome and Alexandria, having more than 500,000 residents. It was a center for commerce and a major crossroads for travel and trade between Europe and Asia and the Orient. This made the city a melting pot of various races, including Jews, Romans, Syrians and other Gentiles. The city was well-known for its sexual immorality. Five miles outside of town there was a shrine where worshipers of Artemis and Apollo pursued their religion of pleasure with temple prostitutes.

It is significant that when God picked a city that would become the center for propagating the Great Commission. He picked a cosmopolitan, morally corrupt city like Antioch. In this secular, pagan, immoral environment, Christians began telling the simple and life changing gospel message that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners, that whoever believes in Him receives forgiveness and eternal life as free gifts from God. The same gospel that is the power of God for salvation to the Jews, proved to be the power of God for salvation to these pagan Gentiles as well. The founding and prospering of the church at Antioch was arguably one of the most significant events in the history of Western civilization. It led to the distinctiveness of the Christian church apart from the Jewish synagogue, in that it blended together in one body both Jews and Gentiles. It was here that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. From Antioch, the church launched the first mission to Europe. You and I conceivably would not be Christians today had it not been for God's blessing on the Antioch church.

Luke tells us that here that the church leaders in Jerusalem who had a responsibility to "shepherd" the scattered flock, recognized their flock now included Gentile congregations as far away as Syria. Apparently the apostles were ministering away from Jerusalem at the time, so the elders commissioned Barnabas to go to Antioch to find out what was going on among the Gentiles. This proved to be a wise choice, for it was there Barnabas lived up to his nickname, "*son of encouragement*" (Acts 4:36).

Acts 11:24 gives us a spiritual profile of Barnabas, and he appears to be the kind of Christian all of us would do well to emulate. He was a righteous man who obeyed the Word of God in daily life so that his character was above reproach. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, which explains the effectiveness of his ministry. That he was a good man of faith is evident from the way he encouraged the church and then encouraged Saul. Christians and churches need people like Barnabas to encourage them in their growth and ministry. How did Barnabas encourage these new Gentile believers? For one thing, Barnabas rejoiced at what he saw: *“He came and saw the grace of God, he was glad.”* Worshiping with Gentiles was a new experience for him, but he approached it positively and did not look for things to criticize. It was a work of God, and Barnabas gave thanks for the abundance of the grace of God.

Barnabas also emphasized dedication of the heart, soul and life as he taught the people the truths of the Word of God. The phrase *“remain faithful to the Lord”* does not suggest that they were to “keep themselves saved.” The phrase is rather a reflection and reminder of Joshua’s admonition to Israel in love God and walk in His ways and obey His Word and serve Him with their whole hearts. The phrase *“remain faithful to the Lord”* means that we belong to God alone and that we are cultivate our devotion to Him and Him only. In the context of the Great Commission, the *“encouragement”* Barnabas provided for the church was *“discipleship”* – *“to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”*

There were two wondrous results from Barnabas’ work of encouraging discipleship in Antioch. First, the church’s witness made a great impact on the city so that, *“a great many people were added to the Lord”* (Acts 11:24). When followers of Jesus are grounded in the Word, they will have a strong witness to the lost, and there will be a balance in the church between edification and evangelism, worship and witness, teaching and testifying. Second, the growth of the church meant that Barnabas needed help; so he went to Tarsus and he humbly enlisted Saul (now Paul) because Barnabas knew that God had commissioned Saul (now Paul) to evangelize the Gentiles. *“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.”* God blesses the church that practices the gospel principle of the Great Commission of the *encouragement of discipleship*.

*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). 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 hand of Barnabas and Saul. Acts 11:27–30*

3) God blesses the church that practices the gospel principle of the spontaneous, generous giving. These *“prophets”* Luke writes of here were Christians who ministered in the local churches and revealed the Word of God. That they came to Antioch from Jerusalem indicates that there was close fellowship between these two churches. One of the prophets, Agabus, predicted a coming famine. The church’s response was to spontaneously and sacrificially give toward the relief of the believers living in Judea, and to send the gift with Barnabas and Saul. God will bless a church that sees a need - and quietly, spontaneously, without pressure, gives to meet that need. The famine easily could have hit Antioch as well as Judea. The Gentile church in Antioch could have said, *“We need to look out for our own needs; let the Jewish brethren take care of themselves.”* But they trusted God and gave to meet the needs of others. God will pour out His blessing on a generous church. God blesses the church that practices the gospel principles of the Great Commission of accepting people whom God accepts, encourages through discipleship, and spontaneously give generously. God’s Word tells us that when we commit ourselves to living out these gospel principles - we will be fulfilling the mission of the Great Commission, and relate with one another with less conflict during times of change, as we move people wherever they are in their relationship with God - lost or saved - to where God wants them to be. May the Hand of God be with us so that great numbers will believe and turn to Jesus Christ! Amen?

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