

July 19, 2020

“The Church God Is Making”
Acts 11:19-26

FCF: Uncertainty as to why we are here

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The Lord has made clear His plan for His people.
(anchor) We should long and labor for that.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Forrest Gump - a slow-witted but kind-hearted man from AL who unwittingly influences several defining historical events in the 20th century United States. One of the most memorable scenes in the film is when Forrest learns his mother is dying and goes to visit her ([READ quote](#)):

Forrest Gump: Why are you dyin', Momma?

Mrs. Gump: It's my time. It's just my time. Oh, now, don't you be afraid, sweetheart. Death is just a part of life. It's something we're all destined to do. I didn't know it, but I was destined to be your momma. I did the best I could.

Forrest Gump: You did good, Momma.

Mrs. Gump: Well, I happened to believe you make your own destiny. You have to do the best with what God gave you.

Forrest Gump: What's my destiny, Momma?

Mrs. Gump: You're gonna have to figure that out for yourself. Life is a box of chocolates, Forrest. You never know what you're gonna get.

Forrest Gump: [*narrating*] Momma always had a way of explaining things so I could understand them.

It's a great scene. And it raises a point we would do well to consider. Why are we here?

Over the last few weeks, we've been in the book of Acts and considered both the work God is doing and the change He is bringing. Now let's think about the church God is making.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Acts 11:19-26](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

The vision given to the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation includes, among other things, a glimpse of the church ([READ Revelation 7:9-10](#)). For a Christian, that's hard to argue with. We see it right there in the Bible. But, given what we see around us, it's hard to envision. So, many of us resign ourselves to having to wait. Little wonder then we have a divided church.

But think with me. Is it not possible that what we are now should be shaped by what we will be then? After all, where we are heading is a reflection of the Lord's desires, an outworking of His plans and purposes. He has destined us to be a multi-cultural technicolor assembly. This is what we see is coming as we look out over the horizon. And Acts 11 shows us that, as we look back to the past, we see the same thing. It's not just our future that is marked by this doxological diversity. It's our past as well. And here we are, right in between the two. What should we take from this? The Lord has made clear His plan for His people. We should long and labor for that.

“How do we see this in the text?” In these three ways. First, in the initiative at Antioch. Second, in the assessment of these events. And then, third, in the identity of the disciples.

I. THE INITIATIVE AT ANTIOCH

First, let's look at the initiative at Antioch, the church's founding ([READ Acts 11:19-21](#)).

A) Clear Movement

There is a clear outward movement going on here, something that was unprecedented.

1. Geographic

Geographically, the gospel is spreading north from Jerusalem to Antioch (southern Turkey). This was the capital of the Syrian province, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, a population of a half million. Antioch had a palace, hippodrome, aqueduct, baths, theaters, temples, and a great colonnaded and marble-paved road. Olympic-style games were hosted. This was a major city.

2. Cultural

But this was not just a geographical move. It was a cultural move as well. The gospel was going now from Jewish Christians to Greek-speaking Gentiles. Walls were coming crashing down.

B) Great Effect

All of which was having great effect not just upon the church but upon the community.

1. The expansion of the church

Luke speaks to the expansion of the church as more from outside the church came to believe.

2. The hand of the Lord

And the reason was “the hand of the Lord was with them” - an expression referring to both the presence and power of God at work. Which can only mean that He was pleased to do this.

Think of it. This initiative at Antioch points to the Lord’s expansive plan for His people.

Illustration:

Something was happening these folks had never seen before. And it drew them in. It’s been a while but Mister Rogers is popular again. There have been a few documentaries and a major feature film. And the consensus is clear. It wasn’t brilliant puppeteering, flashy sets, or CGI effects. No, Mister Rogers simply made goodness attractive. And that draws people in.

Application:

Something was happening at Antioch, something compelling. These people were tasting of the forgiveness of sin, transformed lives, a new and deeper joy. They were experiencing and witnessing to a unity enriched by diversity. That drew people. And it was all the Lord’s doing.

The Lord has made clear His plan for His people. We should long and labor for that.

II. THE ASSESSMENT OF THESE EVENTS

That takes us to the second point, the assessment of these events (**READ Acts 11:22-24**).

A) Who This Was

The leadership in Jerusalem saw a need to check this out. So they sent Barnabas.

1. The background of Barnabas

Who was this man? His name means “son of encouragement.” And that was fitting. He was the one who took Saul under his wing early on. And look at how he is described here. He is the one chosen for this task. And he shows himself to be (**READ Acts 11:24a**). Quite a commendation.

2. The significance to the text

Why is that significant? It’s always wise to consider the source. That is, to know who it is giving critique or commendation. Here, we have an accredited man weighing in on what he saw.

B) How He Responded

And so the idea is that we really need to listen and take heed to how he responded here.

1. With gladness of heart

Note the gladness of heart as Barnabas “saw the grace of God” - which is worth considering.

2. With an exhortation

And it gives credence to whatever he speaks to them, to this exhortation he gives. In essence, Barnabas is saying, “This is a beautiful thing here. A really good thing. But we have a really great enemy. So be watchful. Look to the Lord and stay in the fight.” That’s what he tells them.

Do you see it? The assessment of events points to the Lord’s plans for His people.

Illustration:

When do you have to exhort someone? They’re tempted to give up against the odds. They’re struggling to keep going towards a goal. So we urge and implore. We exhort them.

Application:

Gospel work brings kingdom expansion. Kingdom expansion means a retaking of enemy occupied territory. That retaking brings what? Resistance. Movement towards any doxological diversity inevitably brings opposition from that unholy trinity of the world, the flesh, and the devil. That’s why it’s so hard. That’s why it’s such a struggle. That’s why we’re exhorted.

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III. THE IDENTITY OF THE DISCIPLES

That brings us to the third point, the identity of the disciples (**READ Acts 11:25-26**).

A) Where This Came From

It’s worth considering where this designation as “Christians” came from.

1. The prior references

The followers of Jesus were first called this at Antioch. Up to this point, Luke has referred to them as “disciples,” “saints,” “brothers,” “believers,” those “being saved,” people “of the Way.”

2. The people of Antioch

But here we see the unbelieving onlookers referring to them as “Christians.” Some have said this was intended to be derogatory. But other scholars say this was simply a descriptive term.

B) What This Meant

Either way, think about what it meant. Think about the implications of being called this.

1. What they were not

It’s clear the Christians in Antioch were seen by outsiders as being neither Jew or Gentile. They were seen as being followers of neither Herod or Caesar. They were something else entirely.

2. What they were

They were seen as a whole new thing. So much so that a new term was needed to describe them. It was clear they had an identity that was more foundational than any other earthly category.

Do you see it? The new identity of the disciples points to the Lord's plans for His people.

Illustration:

The quest and discovery of identity is a key part of some of our greatest tales. "Who is this person?" "Where do they come from?" I'm not suggesting that the recent *Star Wars* trilogy is going to go down as one of the great myths. But you do see that theme with Rey - really the key figure. Who is she? Is she a nobody, just an abandoned orphan? Or is she someone else?

To learn that she is the granddaughter of the evil Emperor was nearly devastating for her. But then, to realize that Leia had known this all along and had trained and embraced her still, that was ennobling and emboldening. "Rey who?" she's asked at the end. "Rey Skywalker."

Application:

My apologies if you haven't seen *The Rise of Skywalker*. Here's my point. Christian, your new identity in Christ gives you a new way of answering the question, "Who are you?" Jesus is now your identity. And that must now be, over all else, the most important thing to you.

That gospel identity brings unity. And that is our hope for racial harmony. It is the only thing that can be. And we must press this. The moment we confuse our identity with anything else - age, size, color, class, skills, occupation, politics, genealogy, tribe, heritage, or history - the moment we put any of those first, we have fallen into idolatry and we have betrayed the gospel.

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CONCLUSION:

A book I commend to you - Aaron Layton's *Dear White Christian: What Every White Christian Needs to Know About How Black Christians See, Think, and Experience Racism in America*. In it, he gives an analogy that's helpful to consider as we are tempted to think, "Well, God has said we are one already so we shouldn't have to work at this." Layton harkens to Paul's words in Ephesians 5 about how God has made the husband and wife one flesh and reminds us that there is a practical side of marital oneness that has to be worked out ([READ quote](#)):

Anyone who has been married for more than a week realizes that if there is going to be any unity between a husband and a wife, it will take intentional hard work (communication, understanding, apologies, and forgiveness, etc.). Generally, married couples realize they are supposed to operate as a unified couple...They know marriage takes work and even though the Bible presents a husband and wife as one, the husband and wife must work to truly live as one...The truth about true unity within the ethnically diverse body of Christ is that we have to do some hard, intentional work.

Put another way, God has made us one but we need to live out of that oneness. And that's hard.

It takes hard, intentional work. It will mean sacrifice out of love. It will demand the laying down of our preferences, desires, and rights. "What might that mean?" you ask. A world of things. It's a question worth asking and taking with humble open hands to the Lord in prayer.

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