

"Becoming a World Communion Church"

October 4, 2020

Overarching theme: In 2020, FUMC will be a **GO** church!

Instructions:

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

Core Point:

The past is the past. There is nothing that can be done about it. The past can only be used to gain wisdom for the future. What can change is the future. When we, as God's people, are willing to follow God in our daily lives, God will make a good way in the future. The way may be bumpy at times and have curves, but the process will be filled with God's love and grace.

Acts:

Acts is a companion volume to the Gospel of Luke, continuing the story of Jesus' followers and tracking the church's growth after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Both books are written by the same author and addressed to Theophilus. The writer's name isn't given in either book, but early tradition names the author as Luke, doctor and companion of Paul. Whoever the actual author was, these works contain no specialized medical language or otherwise reflect a doctor's touch. They do reveal an educated writer of considerable literary skill and extensive knowledge of Jewish and Greco-Roman history, religion, and society.

Theophilus was likely a prominent Roman citizen who supported Luke's project. He may have funded Luke's research, writing, and publication. Luke dedicated his work to Theophilus but by no means writes only for him. The broad range of characters and places within the story of Acts suggests a wide audience and Greek-speaking Jews and God-worshipping Gentiles who want to know more about the Christian faith and community. Acts is a historical-theological narrative. It interprets the significance of God's work through Jesus Christ and his followers in the power of the Holy Spirit as they transition from a fledgling group of Jewish Christ-followers in Jerusalem to a global, multicultural mission testifying "*about the good news of God's grace.*" -adapted from the CEB study bible, pp 215 (NT)

Reflect on these Scriptures:

Acts 11:19-26 CEB ¹⁹ Now those who were scattered as a result of the trouble that occurred because of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They proclaimed the word only to Jews. ²⁰ Among them were some people from Cyprus and Cyrene. They entered Antioch and began to proclaim the good news about the Lord Jesus also to Gentiles. ²¹ The Lord's power was with them, and a large number came to believe and turned to the Lord. ²² When the church in Jerusalem heard about this, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he arrived and saw evidence of God's grace, he was overjoyed and encouraged everyone to remain fully committed to the Lord. ²⁴ Barnabas responded in this way because he was a good man, whom the Holy Spirit had endowed with exceptional faith. A considerable number of people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ Barnabas went to Tarsus in search of Saul. ²⁶ When he found him, he brought him to Antioch. They were there for a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching large numbers of people. It was in Antioch where the disciples were first labeled "Christians."

Acts 13:1-3 CEB The church at Antioch included prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon (nicknamed Niger), Lucius from Cyrene, Manaen (a childhood friend of Herod the ruler), and Saul. ² As they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Appoint Barnabas and Saul to the work I have called them to undertake." ³ After they fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on these two and sent them off.

Commentary

When Jerusalem hears of the founding of this new mission in Antioch, they dispatch one of their own – Barnabas – not to assess or confirm what had taken place but to collaborate with the missionaries already at work (see 8:14-25). The decision to send Barnabas as Jerusalem's emissary makes sense for two reasons: (1) He is from the same Cypriot community that produced the founders and unnamed leaders of this Antiochene congregation (so 4:36; 11:21), and (2) his spiritual authority is practically demonstrated by his earnest submission to the community's apostolic leadership when sharing his possessions with the needy of the community of goods (see 4:36-37). He also ably defended Saul's conversion and calling before its leadership council (see 9:27). In the present text, Barnabas's positive profile is expanded by his characterization as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (11:24; see 6:5, 8; 7:55; cf. Luke 23:50), all familiar features of the prophet-like-Jesus, whose authority is concentrated on the task of testifying to the risen Jesus as Messiah.

While previous clues in Acts have shaped the reader's anticipation of Barnabas's successful ministry in Antioch, where "a great many people were brought to the Lord" (11:24b) under his ministry, what happens next is full of irony: "Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and... brought him to Antioch" (11:25-26a). His patronage does not take us by complete surprise, however, since earlier Barnabas

had “brought Saul to the apostles” (so 9:27) and probably was among those who encouraged him to return to Tarsus for further preparation (cf. 9:30). Here it appears that he acts on his own without the approval of either Antioch or Jerusalem. But from the imagined perspective of the Antiochene parishioners, who knew nothing of what transpired on the Damascus road, their pastor’s bold initiative must have seemed shocking: This Saul was the primary reason why they had “scattered because of the persecution.” Their implied forgiveness and later their generosity to the endangered Judean church disclose character fashioned by the “grace of God.”

In any case, the result is stated in pregnant terms: “and in Antioch the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ ” (11:26c).⁴³⁵ Why does Luke add this aside to an otherwise sparse account of the formation of this important congregation? While the origins of the designation “Christian” may well be the outsider’s pejorative for the disciple of Christ, its connotation in this narrative setting is more neutral: It simply recognizes the *differences* between the Antioch and Jerusalem congregations. Surely there is a sociological difference between the Antiochene congregation, constituted by a mixture of Jewish and non-Jewish believers from various places, and the Jerusalem congregation, which continues to symbolize the restoration of the whole household of historic Israel and is constituted by Jews only (see 21:17-26).

Chapter 13 begins with a catalog of the leaders and their offices “in the church at Antioch,” which signals a turning point in the narrative to the mission God has given this congregation. I doubt that this reference to Antioch’s “prophets and teacher” indicates a departure from the organization of the Jewish church,⁴⁶² since the Twelve and Seven also engaged in teaching and prophetic ministry. If anything, it establishes the identity of those within the congregation who act as conduits for the Holy Spirit to make clear God’s will for the congregation. More interesting is the cultural and social range of the leadership as evinced by the roll of names (see 11:19-20): “A Levite from Cyprus, a black man, a North African from Cyrene, a boyhood friend of Herod Antipas and a Pharisee educated under Gamaliel were acknowledged to be spiritual dynamos.”⁴⁶²

– adapted from the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Vol X, 175-189

This week – Becoming a World Communion Church.

We read in Acts 11 that some Jews from Cypress/Cyrene, inspired by the Holy Spirit, began crossing boundaries and reaching out beyond the Roman partitions designed to separate different ethnic groups in very diverse cities like Antioch. Rome did this to keep order, thinking that if diverse groups interacted, culture clash and violence would inevitably result. But as Christ-followers began sharing the good news about the Lord Jesus (“one new humanity” news – Ephesians 2:15), for the first time in human history, we see a multi-ethnic community gathering in peace! This extraordinary gathering is given a label by the greater Antiochene

community – they are called CHRISTIANS. Who were Christians? That multi-ethnic community that follows Christ, the prince of peace.

We get a glimpse of the ongoing journey of this group in chapter 13, as the leaders of the Antioch church are gathered for prayer. Scholars can discern from their names and points of origin that they are from Europe, Africa and Asia. The first Christians were a multicultural community at every level. They were a world communion community.

We are part of the church today because Christ followers in Antioch broke down partitions and barriers to share the love of Jesus. The multicultural Antioch church is our DNA and the heavenly, multicultural vision of Revelation 7:9 is our destiny. But during the past 2000 years, the Christian movement has been slow at best to follow the lead of the church at Antioch.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously commented some 60 years ago that Sunday mornings were among the most segregated hours in America. While progress has been made in some churches, if national surveys are accurate Dr. King's observation remains largely true.

We have some work to do if we are going to live into our Jesus-given DNA and destiny to be a world communion church, particularly at a time when divisiveness seems at an all-time high. But this work is critical, for the Christian movement is called to be a World Communion Church.

Questions to Ponder for accountability in the group:

As you think about this passage, how can you respond to this Scripture:

1. One of the great challenges of the earliest Christian movement was to be neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor male or female, but all "one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Why was this such a challenge for them? Why is it such a challenge for us?
2. Think about the people that you do life with. How much diversity is represented in your deeper connections (family and friends)? How are you affected by the diversity (or lack thereof) in your life? What might be a good next step for you in this aspect of your life, practically speaking?
3. In a very divisive cultural context, what are some of the ways that we can heal old racial and ethnic wounds? How can we be part of the solution rather than part of the problem in the world today?
4. What are some next steps that FUMC can take to become a 'world communion church' and be more representative of the diverse community in which we live?

Activity for the life of a disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMC.
2. Ponder and pray on this Scripture this week: Acts 20:24
Acts 11:19-21 CEB *"Now those who were scattered as a result of the trouble that occurred because of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. They proclaimed the word only to Jews. ²⁰ Among them were some people from Cyprus and Cyrene. They entered Antioch and began to proclaim the good news about the Lord Jesus also to Gentiles. ²¹ The Lord's power was with them, and a large number came to believe and turned to the Lord."*
3. Consider what you can do this week to help break down barriers that divide by sharing the love of Christ.
4. Stay tuned for opportunities to engage in 'Vital Conversation' groups designed to help us listen and help heal racial tensions and injustice.