

WHAT GOD EXPECTS **OF CHURCHES**

“I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it!” (Matthew 6:18)

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PREFACE

During my first trip to India in 2006, I began teaching on a subject which has long held my interest due to its great importance for pastors and churches: namely, what does God expect of pastors and churches? We may have many ideas on this topic, but a desire to serve and follow Him should lead us to His Word to gain insight as to what we shall have to answer for when we stand before Him. What are we to do to hear “well done good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23)? We, like Paul, want to be able to say, “I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7).

In 2011 I wrote a book called “What God Expects of Pastors.” Now I have completed “What God Expects of Churches.” This is an important subject, not only in India but in the USA and around the world. Jesus established His church for certain reasons and has high expectations of it. Therefore, it is of vital importance for us to know and understand what these are and what He expects of His church today.

WHAT GOD EXPECTS OF CHURCHES

Many churches today claim to be “A New Testament Church.” They want to get back to what the early church was like. But the early church had as many problems and difficulties as the church today. The church at Corinth had many sins, and 5 of the 7 churches addressed in Revelation 2-3 were criticized by Jesus, some quite severely. They, like us today, sought to be a church faithful and obedient to Jesus. But what does Jesus look for in a church? What does God expect of churches?

When one wants to find how best to have something work, they check with the one who made it. Those who have manufactured my car, my computer or my refrigerator give me directions as to how to get the best out of it. I would be foolish to not study and follow their directions. The same is true of the church. For something so very important, we must assume God has given us His guidance in His Word. There He tells us about a healthy, growing church for us to use as an example. As we look at the church in Antioch we can see what God expected of them, and what He still expects of churches today.

ANTIOCH

The church in Antioch was the first church started outside Jerusalem. It had an excellent reputation and was strong for several hundred years. It was the first church to have Gentiles as members. It sent out missionaries which spread the church in the West into Europe and ultimately America. Its missionaries also served churches in the East as far as India and were instrumental in keeping Christianity alive in India for many hundreds of years. The roots of most churches throughout the world today go back to the church in Antioch. (see Appendix 1: A Short History of the Church in India)

Antioch was located 300 miles north of Jerusalem. It was the capital of Syria and Cilicia and one of the most strategic population centers of its day. Founded in 300 B.C. by Seleucus Nicator after his victory over Antigonus, the city was named Antioch in honor of his father, King Antiochus I, a Seleucid (Greek) king descended from Seleucus – one of Alexander the Great’s generals who divided up the Greek empire when Alexander died in 323 BC. It was known as Syrian Antioch to distinguish it from the other cities also named after Antiochus I.

Under Greek rule, Antioch became a large important city. Later, when Rome took over, it continued growing in size and importance, eventually even becoming a military winter quarters under the emperor Trajan. It was the third largest city in the world behind Rome and Alexandria, Egypt. About 700,000 people lived in Antioch, 100,000 of whom were Jews or Gentile proselytes to Judaism. There were more Jews living in Antioch at this time than in any city outside Judea.

Because of its location and varied past, it was a meeting place for Greek culture (from the west) and Oriental culture (from the east), a crossroads for those traveling and doing business in Europe and the Orient as well. Being an intellectual, cultural, and commercial center which could



boast of eighteen various ethnic groups as residents, this city of the ancient world earned the reputation to be called “the Queen of the East.”

Unfortunately, Antioch was also known for its immorality. The corruption was so bad it even had a negative effect on Rome 1,300 miles away. It was a city that needed the gospel in a great way, and the church grew strong in Antioch. Only Jerusalem had a larger impact on the growth of Christianity in the early centuries of the church.

What made the church there so strong and effective? By looking at this first church outside Jerusalem, this first church of Gentiles and Jews, we can see what God is looking for in a church and what we need in our churches today.

I. FAITHFUL SHARE THE GOSPEL Acts 11:19-21

Acts 11:19 Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. 20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Suppose that when Jesus returned to heaven He met Gabriel, and they started talking. Perhaps Gabriel might say how great it was that Jesus paid for everyone's sin by dying on the cross, but then he asked, “Do the people know what you did for them?” Jesus would answer, “Some do.” And then maybe Gabriel would ask, “How do others find out?” Jesus might answer, “I told Peter, Andrew, James and John to tell others, and they will tell others, and they will tell others, until everybody knows.” Maybe Gabriel would ask, “What if they don't tell others? Maybe they will fail.” Then Jesus would have to say, “I don't have any other plans, I am counting on them to tell other people.”

He counted on the Christians in Antioch, and they responded. Today, He is counting on us. We are told in Romans 10:17 “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.” Also, we are urged on by Romans 10:14 “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” If we don't tell others, that would be the end of the Church in one generation. We need healthy growing churches to spread the message today. We can learn about that from the church in Antioch

Acts 11:19 says: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews.” God uses all things for His purpose (Romans 8:28). Here he used persecution, for it forced Christians to take the gospel to others outside their home area. God wants us to go out and take His word to others as well. We can take our trials and times of suffering as opportunity to talk to others about how God is working in our lives, how Jesus provides for us, and how our full trust is placed firmly in Him.

JEWS AND GENTILES For the most part, the Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who moved to Antioch spoke to other Jews, telling them about Jesus. Just like us today, they were more comfortable with people who were similar to themselves. And yet, the believers found a way to cross the cultural and language barriers found in Antioch and witness to Gentiles. Those Gentiles who believed then became witnesses for Christ within their own community groups. As a result, many

Gentiles responded to the gospel and became believers. After all, Jesus Himself had said they were to go to “all” nations and make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

Nicholas, an Antioch Gentile convert, was one of the seven Spirit-filled men chosen by the disciples to distribute food to the poor believers in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5). Perhaps, he returned to Antioch after the stoning of Stephen when the persecution began (Acts 8:1). If so, he would have spoken to other Gentiles about Jesus and helped spread the word.

It is interesting to note that the account of the church in Antioch follows the story of the conversion of the Roman Centurion Cornelius (Acts 11). God had opened the door for the Gentiles to come in. It took God’s divine intervention to make it happen. To prepare Peter to accept a new work of the Spirit, the Lord sent him a vision, and then by the Spirit instructed him to go with three strangers. They led him to the house of Cornelius, a Roman centurion, who desired to know God. As Peter spoke to the man’s household, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the new Gentile believers in that home. This demonstration of power, similar to that on Pentecost, convinced Peter and those who came with him that the inclusion of Gentiles was part of God’s divine plan.

However, many Jewish Christians did not want Gentiles in the church because they felt Gentiles should become Jews first, but that was not God’s way. Thus, the door was open for Gentiles in Antioch to become part of the church along with Jews.

These were not the first Gentiles to come to Jesus for salvation. The Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, who were both Gentiles, had taken the initiative in reaching out to Jews and had obtained salvation. But this is the first time we see Jews taking the first step and going to Gentiles with the gospel. (for more information see Appendix 2: Salvation)

COMMON MEN Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, records in Acts 11:20 that “men from Cyprus and Cyrene” went to Antioch to witness to Jews and Gentiles. Cyprus was not far from Antioch. In fact, Barnabas came from Cyprus and played an important part in the church in Antioch. However, these men Luke refers to are not named, though he knew who they were. Perhaps, God did not want them named so that we would not focus on them as particular individuals, but rather that we would see how He uses the common man to further His purpose. We tend to think of some men who do great works for God as being special and better than us, but the truth is that each of us is special in God’s sight. What they did was something any of us can and should do with God’s guidance and help. These were common men who had met the Lord and wanted others to know Him as well. It is comforting to note that the great church in Antioch was not started by an Apostle or some other important person from Jerusalem, but by common people sharing the good news with other common people. We can do that as well.

These men were not trained preachers. Luke makes that clear in Acts 11:20 when he says they “spoke” to the Gentiles. This is not the word for “preach,” it is the word used of those talking to others in normal conversation. They shared Jesus with those they came in contact with during the normal course of their day. They brought Him into their daily conversations with others.

If the spreading of the gospel or the functioning of the church depends only on the labors of full-time missionaries or pastors, ministry will be severely limited. But, if every person who has trusted in Christ as Savior and Lord feels the obligation of serving Him and of telling others the good news about Him, the gospel will spread, and the church will be built up. Every Christian should sense his or her responsibility to serve Christ and bear witness of Him. There is no better way to introduce others to Jesus than by speaking to those we know. They can see our lives and the difference Jesus makes. A changed life is the best advertisement there is for the gospel .

THE GOOD NEWS Notice, too, that Luke says they spoke about the “good news” (Acts 11:20) of Jesus. We have the BEST news in the world. Yes, our message includes the uncomfortable truth -

the bad news - of sin and judgement, but the good news we share - the best news- is about free salvation: forgiveness of sins, and freedom from shame and guilt. Make sure you focus on this good news when you speak to others.

These witnesses shared the good news about the "Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20). Calling Jesus "Christ" would not have meant anything to Gentiles, for only the Jews were looking for a Christ, a Messiah. But the people in Antioch understood the title "Lord." In fact, most believed that Caesar was lord (sovereign, savior, deity). Making Jesus equal to or greater than Caesar would eventually bring persecution, but they were faithful in their witness. We, too, must be faithful in proclaiming Jesus as Lord to those around us, even if they reject Him and criticize us. Not all will reject, some will respond and come to eternal life. What a joy and privilege it is to introduce someone to Jesus!

GREAT RESPONSE Because of their faithfulness, Luke says "the Lord's hand was with them" (Acts 11:21). There can be no real lasting success in anything we do unless it is empowered and guided by God Himself through His Holy Spirit. As a result, "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:21). Who were these people? Perhaps some of these Gentiles were "God-fearers" similar to the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius who, wanting to learn of the One True God, joined the Jews when they worshipped. Others who were not Jewish proselytes, but pagans, were open to the message of life because of their dissatisfaction with paganism. Many Jews turned to Him as well.

We see here an example of impressive church growth. From a small group of persecuted refugees, the church in Antioch saw large numbers of people come to Christ. In fact, three times Luke underscores the large numbers (Acts 11:21, 24, 26). As we have seen, the reason for the growth was simple: "The hand of the Lord was with them" (Acts 11:21). They were so successful that by the time the Nicean Council was held in Antioch in A.D. 325, there are reported to have been more than 200,000 Christian in Antioch, nearly a fourth of the entire population of the city.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY God has given me the wonderful privilege of helping many people come to Jesus for salvation. The people in the church I pastored faithfully shared their faith with others as well. We saw ourselves as poor beggars who had found a source of bread and wanted to tell other poor beggars how they could find it as well. However, very few in my church were gifted in evangelism. God had gifted me and my people to help those who had salvation to be able to grow and serve Him. I will explain more about this when I talk about spiritual gifts in chapter 6.

APPLICATION TODAY Using the principles that this church followed will not necessarily result in numerical growth, since God does not always grant numerical growth along with His blessing. And, we would be mistaken to conclude that God is blessing every growing church, since churches can grow by using worldly techniques or a worldly message.

Still, it is the responsibility of each one of us to share the good news about Jesus whenever we can. Look for opportunities, do not just wait for openings to come to you. Think of a frog and a lizard. How are they different in the way they find food? A frog sits and waits for an insect to come to it. A lizard, however, is always alert, searching and going after every possibility of a meal. Which are you more like in telling others about Jesus? Which is your church more like? We should be like the lizard (1 Peter 3:15). It uses lots of energy and even is willing to sacrifice its tail if necessary, but it never stops looking.

God is counting on us today to tell others the good news about Jesus; He expects this of Christians and churches. Healthy churches want to reach out to share what they have found. Despite opposition and persecution, godly churches share their faith. Leaders set the example in doing this and train up their people to do the same. Churches are to start new churches, reaching out to the community around them, praying both for the community and for those who are sent out. We

also are to evangelize by setting an example of living as Jesus lived and by speaking to others whenever we have an opportunity.

When our life and our words reflect God's grace, others are drawn to the Savior. This is another expectation God has for His church – living by grace.

II. REFLECT GOD'S GRACE Acts 11:22-24

Acts 11:22 News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. 23 When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. 24 He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Evidently, news about the great number of Gentiles coming to Jesus in the Antioch church quickly reached the leaders in Jerusalem. This was similar to the large scale conversion in Jerusalem after Pentecost, so the founding church wanted to make sure it was from God.

THE CHURCH Let's be sure we understand what we are referring to when we talk about the "church" in Jerusalem or Antioch. "Church" means a called out assembly, a gathering of a group of people (Acts 7:38; 19:32, 39, 41). It came to be associated with a gathering of Christians, and that is how we use the word today. The church is also called the "Body of Christ" (Colossians 1:18).

The church was not present before Jesus' death and resurrection. It was formed by God on the day of Pentecost (1 Corinthians 12:13). The church on earth will be taken to heaven when Jesus returns to take all Christians to heaven as His Bride (2 Thessalonians 2; Revelation 3:10-11; 19:7-9; 1 Thessalonians 1:10). So the church only exists on earth between Pentecost and the Rapture.

Jesus refers to the relationship of Himself to His church in many ways: as the Shepherd and His sheep (John 10), the Vine and the branches (John 15), the Cornerstone and building stones (Ephesians 2:19-21), the High Priest and kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2), the Last Adam and the new creation (Romans 5), the Bridegroom and His bride (Ephesians 5), and the Head and the body (1 Corinthians 12). In all these, we see Jesus as the leader and believers as a group who follows Him.

The term "church" is used in two ways in the Bible. One is for the whole Body of Christ alive on earth at this time. This includes all true born again believers, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. "Church" is also used for a local group of believers in one geographical location. This is the way it was used when speaking of the church in Jerusalem or Antioch. When we think of the church today, we often think of a building and the group of believers who meet there. In the early church, the people first met in homes. When the group got too large, some split off and started meeting in another home. Thus, the church in Antioch and Jerusalem consisted of many small house churches meeting throughout the city. There was no one large church building as we have today. So when we talk about the church in Antioch, we are really referring to many small groups meeting in various places throughout the city, each having its own leadership, but there would also be leaders that oversaw all the groups in the city. When necessary, they would get together for larger gatherings and events, but the basis of the church was the various gatherings in homes throughout the city. (for more information see Appendix 2: Salvation)

So the church in Jerusalem, the first church which began at Pentecost and continued to grow as the gospel spread, wanted to make sure that what was happening in Antioch was of God. The apostles who had lived and traveled with Jesus led the church, along with James, Jesus' brother, who had come to faith after the resurrection (Acts 1:14; 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Galatians 1:19).

MUST GENTILES BECOME JEWS? Many of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem thought it scandalous that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. The defining issue was circumcision. Since Christianity originated in the Jewish community and the first Christians were Jews they naturally, and yet incorrectly, concluded that the path to becoming a Christian included keeping the law and being circumcised. Yet, Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch had not first become Jews; neither were these Gentiles first becoming Jews. Would that be the case with all Gentiles? The leaders in Jerusalem needed to know what these common people without apostolic leadership were doing.

BARNABAS SENT TO ANTIOCH To find out what was happening and to take whatever measures were necessary to make sure it was from God, they sent Barnabas to visit. No better man could have been chosen. Barnabas was from nearby Cyprus, as were the ones who started sharing the gospel with Gentiles (Acts 11:20). He knew the area, the people and the culture. Some of them probably knew and trusted him as well. (For more information about Barnabas see Appendix 4: Barnabas, A Short Summary).

Barnabas is called “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24). We know he gave much money for the poor believers in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32-37). He was a leader, a servant, and a dedicated man of God. Both sides of the controversy trusted him. He was open-minded, positive, and encouraging – his name even means “encourager” (Acts 4:36). He was a good man who lived for Jesus.

Notice the Bible does not tell us if he was educated, intelligent, gifted or talented. He may or may not have been. What mattered to them, and to God, was that he was a man of proven character who let God’s Spirit fill and direct him. That is what God is looking for in leaders and in all Christians today as well. Often we evaluate ourselves or others by education, possessions, training or gifts, but God looks at the heart first of all (1 Samuel 16:7). Barnabas had a heart that desired above all else to faithfully serve Jesus. If that is our desire, and we rely on the Holy Spirit at all times, God will empower and use us for His glory.

Barnabas had a very important job, not just for the people becoming Christians then, but for all who would follow. This was a major turning point for the church. It could have split into two churches, one Jewish and one Gentile. Or worse yet, Gentiles could have been excluded and only those who were Jews by birth or conversion could have come to Jesus. Most Christians today are Gentiles! So Barnabas had a very important job to do.

How did Luke, himself a Gentile and the writer of the book of Acts, know Barnabas was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith? Early church historians said Luke came from Antioch. It could very well be that he was one of the Gentiles who had come to faith and was there when Barnabas arrived from Jerusalem. Thus, he was writing about the church in Antioch, and about Barnabas, from firsthand experience.

GOD’S GRACE SEEN God’s grace may be invisible, but how lives are changed by it can be clearly seen. Barnabas saw God’s grace operating in the church at Antioch (Acts 11:23). God’s grace changes lives; as it did in Antioch then, it still does today.

The opposite of grace is legalism. Legalism focuses on our own ability to earn and keep God’s pleasure by what we do or do not do (Luke 18:9). Self-righteousness (pride) is the basis for this. The truth is that we have no righteousness before God, neither can we do anything to impress or please Him, for we are guilty sinners deserving of judgment (Philippians 3:9; Romans 3:22; Psalm 16:2). But there is nothing we have to do, either, except love Him (Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). He has done it all for us. That is grace. We freely receive His undeserved love and favor, not because of anything in us, but only because of His love for us.

The emphasis of legalism is on our outer actions, not our heart. Legalism does not bring freedom, just more bondage. God is more interested in our motives than our actions. He wants us to strive to be like Jesus, starting in our heart. Salvation cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8-9), neither grace after salvation. It is freely given to those who humble themselves and simply receive it (Matthew 5:3; Isaiah 66:2). Legalism is motivated by pride and fear, grace is motivated by love. Which motivates you to serve Jesus? (for more information see Appendix 5: Law and Grace)

God's grace was clearly visible in Antioch as His salvation was freely accepted by Jews and Gentiles alike, who then worshipped and served together. It was here that society first called these believers "Christians", for they acted like Jesus (Acts 11:26). These Christians accepted God's grace and showed grace to others through their generosity in giving money to the believers in Jerusalem during the drought (Acts 11:27-30) and through their bearing each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2). Despite coming from different cultures and economic backgrounds, everyone was equally accepted in the Antioch church, for they knew they were equal in Jesus (Acts 11:18-21). Their leadership consisted of 2 Jews, 2 Gentiles (one a commoner, another a very rich man) and a negro from Africa (Acts 13:1). They all realized that what they had was by God's grace and nothing else. That is certainly what God expects of churches and Christians today as well! No wonder Barnabas was glad when he saw it.

BARNABAS REJOICED He was glad when he saw God's grace clearly evident in the church (Acts 11:23). True grace cannot be faked; it only comes from God's presence in a person's life. It is proof of salvation and is seen in a commitment to serve Jesus. This was true of both Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. Barnabas, himself a Levite (Acts 4:36), realized God was accepting Gentiles when they came to Him. God had not required them to first become Jews. If Barnabas had been one of the legalistic Jews from Jerusalem, he would have been horrified at Gentiles not first becoming Jews and keeping the Jewish laws. But Barnabas was a man who lived by God's grace, and so he saw the grace of God and rejoiced. No doubt he also saw a lot of imperfection in these new converts. New believers do not drop all of their pagan baggage the day they come to Jesus. A church made up of people from such different backgrounds as those in Antioch was bound to have some irritations and conflicts. But rather than focusing on the imperfections and problems, Barnabas focused on God's grace in saving these people.

BARNABAS ENCOURAGED THEM True to his name ("Son of Encouragement," Acts 4:36), Barnabas "encouraged" the new converts "to remain faithful (true) to the Lord" (Acts 11:23). The alternative of not remaining faithful to the Lord is often a temptation for believers (Acts 13:43; 14:21-22). We can fall from grace easily enough through sin and ungodly influences. The new Christians in Antioch came from a very ungodly culture and were still surrounded by it. They needed encouragement, and Barnabas was just the man to give it.

To "encourage" means to "inspire people toward greatness." The Greek word, "parakaleo," is the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). This is translated "the Comforter, Encourager." As God's Holy Spirit works in us as our Comforter and Encourager, He desires to also work through us to give hope and courage to others to persevere in their faith. As Barnabas did for the Christians in Antioch, we should do now.

Barnabas knew how to encourage others to see the best points in people. While others were at first suspicious of Paul, Barnabas knew how to look past Paul's previous actions - his history of persecution - and see the depth of love, determination, and faith in Christ newly born in him. Barnabas staked his own reputation on the truth of Paul's conversion when he served as an advocate for Paul (Acts 9:26-27). His encouragement brought the leaders of the early Christian Church to accept the former enemy of the Church (Acts 9:27). Ask the Lord to help you to see, encourage, and bring out the best in every person. Choose to focus on the parts of each life that are filled by the

Spirit, rather than the empty or negative characteristics. Choose to see the glass half-full, not half-empty.

Barnabas refused to give in to the prevailing discouragements in his circumstances. He went on two missionary journeys, despite a sharp disagreement with Paul, to help multiply the encouraging power of the gospel of Christ (Acts 11:25-26; 13:2; 15:35). Barnabas was not content to just encourage Christians nearby, but he carried the good news of Christ to any who needed it most. Ask the Lord to help you to take the encouraging message of Jesus to those who are prisoners of their own sins.

Barnabas also knew how to give people second chances, to be patient with their imperfections. Thankfully, Barnabas gave John Mark a second chance when Paul would not (Acts 15:3-16:10). We can thank Barnabas for encouraging John Mark in faith: later on, disagreements cleared and Paul asked for him, saying that John Mark was useful (2 Timothy 4:11); and John Mark wrote the gospel of Mark that has encouraged so many. Barnabas was not ready to give up on someone whom Paul considered an unreliable companion for a second missionary journey. Do not be too hasty to give up on people because of a few disappointing episodes. Remember how many times the Lord has given you another chance. Ask the Lord to help you encourage those who need a second or third chance.

GRACE ATTRACTS OTHERS A result of the grace shown in Antioch, and Barnabas' encouraging them to stay faithful to it, was that the church grew in spiritual commitment and attracted many others (Acts 11:24). These former pagans gave up their idols, their sexual immorality, their lying, and their corrupt business practices when they put their trust in Jesus as Lord. Others saw the change grace made in the lives of those who became followers of Jesus and wanted that for themselves.

One remarkable proof that the gospel is from God is that wherever it goes, it has the same powerful effect. The message does not need to be changed when it is taken to a tribe of primitive headhunters. It does not need to be intellectualized when it is taken to a sophisticated university crowd. Whatever their culture or background, people are all sinners who need to know how to be reconciled to God before they face Him in judgment. If we will tell the simple gospel message to the people we come into contact with, God will bless us with conversions.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY The church I pastored was a very loving and accepting church. They did not judge people, criticize or gossip. Many of the ones who came had problems and hurts in life, so they really appreciated Jesus' love and forgiveness. Having experienced God's grace in their own lives, they were willing to show grace to others as well. God seemed to send people who needed lots of love and help to our church. People in other churches knew it was a place people with problems could find help. We were a small church, but this was the ministry God gave us. We all had experienced God's grace in wonderful ways in our lives and were eternally thankful to Him for His grace. Therefore we were able to show the same grace to others in need.

APPLICATION TODAY God expects churches today to be characterized by grace. Everyone must be accepted and loved as equals. We must encourage and help each other. There can be no legalism, no focus on unwritten rules of how to act or talk. We are not to be critical or judgmental of each other, but accepting each other in grace as Jesus does of us. Our love must be unconditional, no matter the culture, education or income of the person. We must show grace to Christians who do not act exactly like we do. Everyone must be equally welcomed to our churches and shown the love of Jesus, no matter their age, sex or background.

Leaders can help their churches develop these qualities by their own example of showing patience, kindness, forgiveness and gentleness to everyone. That starts with our own families. We must treat each one in our family equally with love and respect, as Jesus treats us. We must be especially kind and patient to those who are struggling or who are different than us. Forgive those who hurt you immediately, even if they never apologize. Jesus does this with us and we must do it,

too, to be like Him. Do not criticize or judge others. Speak the truth in love when necessary, but only after prayer and self-examination. Never gossip or say negative or hurtful things about anyone. Welcome everyone. Treat everyone the same. Treat others as Jesus would treat them, as He treats you. That is what grace is all about. No matter how large or rich a church is, it will not be a healthy church that pleases Jesus if it does not do this.

Church leaders need to train and disciple the people to know how to do this as well.

III. TEACH & DISCIPLE BELIEVERS Acts 11:25-26

Acts 11:25 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, 26 and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

Because of the sudden, great increase in numbers (Acts 11:24), Barnabas knew the Christians in Antioch needed to be taught God's Word. He sent reports of the growth and activity in Antioch to the leaders in Jerusalem, but he stayed to help with the work going on there. If you want to know how to serve God, look for where He is working and join Him. That is what Barnabas did.

He knew the people had to learn God's Word to be healthy, growing Christians. He also knew someone he could get to help with the teaching – Paul. Paul, still called Saul at this time, had a great reputation as a Jewish teacher even before he became a Christian. (for more information about Paul see Appendix 6: Paul's Life Before Antioch)

LEADERS NEED HELP Barnabas was humble enough to know he needed help. He used his gifts of leadership and encouragement, but needed someone else to help with the teaching. A good leader knows his strengths and weaknesses, and allows for others to use their spiritual gifts to help in the ministry. A good leader is willing to ask for help, just as Barnabas did.

Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 19:1-19) about 3 or 4 years after Jesus died and came back to life. He spent the next 12 years growing in faith and understanding. Barnabas had last seen Paul 9 years earlier in Jerusalem, when he had encouraged the leaders to accept Paul as a fellow believer (Acts 9:26-29). All Barnabas knew was that Paul left Jerusalem for the safety of Tarsus (Acts 9:30). So, finding Saul must have been far from easy. It was a diligent, determined search for Saul—one which would not be terminated until Saul was found and persuaded to go to Antioch.

PAUL During these years Paul had been rejected by his family (Philippians 3:8) and had gone through many afflictions for his faith (2 Corinthians 11:23-27) while ministering in the area of Tarsus. Much of this was probably by Jews, because he was taking the gospel to Gentiles. Paul had been faithfully serving wherever he could. We must faithfully serve God in little ways and places before God calls us to greater service. If we are not faithful in little, we will not be faithful in much!

In addition, God was using this time to train and mature Paul. No one becomes a great leader overnight; it takes time to learn and mature. That is why Paul warns Timothy to not appoint new believers as leaders (1 Timothy 3:6). Growth is a life-long process and something God expects of all who will serve Him. Even a man as greatly used of God as Paul spent many years growing and learning before he was ready to lead others.

BARNABAS RECRUITS PAUL Barnabas and Paul knew each other even before salvation, possibly they were tent-makers together. A mutual trust and respect had developed. Barnabas had helped

Paul be accepted by the Jerusalem leaders (Acts 9:27). Now Barnabas needed Paul to come with him to Antioch, about 90 miles away.

THE BIBLE IS OUR ONLY AUTHORITY Barnabas and Paul taught God's Word to the people, not their own opinions or ideas. Neither did they entertain the people with stories or political statements. They knew God's Word was the authority for all they believed and did. When some Jewish Christians said Gentiles had to become Jews before they could have salvation, the Christians in Antioch turned to the Bible to see what God had to say (Acts 15:1-21; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible is the source of faith (Romans 10:17), cleansing (Psalm 119:9; John 15:3) and growth (1 Peter 2:2).

What Barnabas started with Paul in Antioch continued throughout the rest of Paul's ministry. When he entered a new city, he went to the local synagogue and started teaching God's Word. Some responded favorably, but most rejected his teaching, so he would leave with those who wanted to learn more and start a church in a local home. The main activity of that church when they gathered was the teaching of God's Word.

A church can grow in numbers without the people being taught the Word. But, it cannot be a healthy church unless God's Word is taught and followed. That means rejecting teachings which are not found in the Bible. False teachings include saying things like God will financially bless or heal everyone, salvation can be lost, we have to do things to earn or keep our salvation, and God is impressed by our rituals and traditions. God wants His church to be doctrinally pure (Romans 16:17 Galatians 1:6; Ephesians 4:14-15; 5:11; 2 John 9-11). He wants His church and His people to be holy and pure in all we think as well as what we do (1 Peter 1:14-16; Philippians 2:14-16). We must check everything against Scripture and make sure we are teaching only what God teaches (Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21; 1 Peter 4:11). God wants His church to be holy and pure (1 Peter 1:14-16, Philippians 2:14-16). Holiness and purity in our lives will remove selfishness, pride and self-centeredness.

PASTOR-TEACHER It takes time to learn God's Word and apply it to our lives. Paul had spent the last 12 years doing this. He and Barnabas spent the next year teaching in Antioch (Acts 11:26); not through simply leading a few Bible studies or sermons, but they systematically taught the Word to everyone. There were many things they could have done with their time to organize and lead this growing number of people, but teaching the Word was crucial. This is something God expects of His leaders: "feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

God promises to provide gifted teachers to feed believers. That is the job of the pastor-teacher. Some of those who lead God's people are gifted to pastor (shepherd) the people, which includes teaching them God's Word (Ephesians 4:11-12). As a shepherd, he is to care for, guide, and protect the people in the church. As a teacher, he is to feed the people with God's Word so they are strong and healthy spiritually. That is what Paul and Barnabas did in Antioch. Not only did the people learn about God, but also how to observe His commandments in their daily lives. Jesus commands this in His great commission when He says we are to "teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). (For more about this see my books "What God Expects of Pastors" and "Spiritual Growth and Discipleship" by Jerry Schmoyer)

Consider the difference between a strong and a weak cup of tea. The same ingredients, water and tea, are used for both. The difference is that the strong cup of tea results from the tea leaves' longer immersion in the water, allowing the water more time to get into the tea and the tea into the water. The longer the steeping process, the stronger the cup of tea. In the same way, the length of time we spend in God's Word determines how deeply we get into it and it gets into us. Just like the tea, the longer we are in the Word, the "stronger" we become. Learning the Bible takes a lifetime, not just one year. Paul and Barnabas were doing that. As they were teaching others God was teaching them.

And remember, the Old Testament was all they had at this point. It was still important for that to be taught and learned. Today, we often overlook the Old Testament and focus on the New. But, that was all the early church had. There are many important truths to be learned in it. Learning the important truths found in the Old sets the foundation for truly understanding the New. If it was good enough for the early church to use, it certainly is important for us to study and know as well.

While Paul was teaching the people, Barnabas was training Paul for ministry as well. Barnabas trained Paul, who then trained Timothy, who then trained others until the truth has come to us today (2 Timothy 2:2). Jesus did the same thing when He lived with His disciples for several years and taught them so they could then train others. Remember, it is better to train ten people than to do the work of ten people. But it is harder.

THE PROCESS FOR ALL LEADERS The first step in becoming a leader of God's people is salvation. We must receive God's free gift by grace, then decide for whom we will live: ourselves, or Jesus. Salvation has to do with our sin and where we will spend eternity, but the decision to become a disciple has to do with how we live our lives on this earth. If we choose to follow Him and serve Him, we must learn and obey His Word, and we will become more and more like Him. As we saw, growth takes time, but is necessary so that we may be better used by God to serve Him. Some He chooses to be leaders, such as pastors and teachers, who then pass on what they have learned to others who have a desire to know and follow Jesus. As leaders, we do not just learn facts about the Bible in our heads, we allow His truth to change our lives and make us more like Him.

'CHRISTIAN' When that happens others will notice, as they did with the believers in Antioch. Others noticed the believers of Jesus were living differently than the rest of their society, and so called them "Christians" (Acts 11:26) for the first time. The term refers to someone who belongs to "Christ" and distinguishes them from the rest of the people who worship Caesar. At first, it was a nickname given in contempt and mockery because they were different, but today the name should be worn in honor.

Prior to this, believers had been called several things. The first word used to describe them was "disciples," for they were intent on being learners of their Master Jesus. That name existed throughout the ministry of Jesus. Jesus also called His followers "sheep". "My sheep hear my voice..." (John 10:27-28). After Jesus ascended into heaven, the early believers started referring to themselves as "followers of the Way," referring to Jesus as the only way to God (John 14:6; Acts 9:2; 22:4).

One of the most common terms for believers is "saint" (Romans 1:7; 8:27; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 14:33; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Colossians 1:2, 12, 26; Ephesians 1:1; 2:19; 3:18; 5:3; 6:8; Philippians 1:1; Jude 1:3). This literally means "the holy ones", or "the set apart ones." A saint is not one who is perfect, but is one committed to or devoted to God, which describes all followers of Jesus Christ.

They were also called "believers" (1 Thessalonians 2:10). This does not refer only to an intellectual adherence to a set of facts, but to a joyous reception of the gospel.

Only later did they use the term "Christian." The term is only used two others times in Scripture (Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16), but evidently its use grew and became widely accepted. As Christians who know God's Word and live by grace, we must live and talk and act like Jesus. People will notice we are different.

This ought to make us reflect deeply on what it means to be called a Christian. It is more than a convenient word we use to fill in one of the blanks on a form. It denotes the important role that Christ is given in our life. Can people around us sense how much Christ means to us through our words and actions? If not, how can we be called Christians? What impact are we making on others for Christ?

A band member was once marching out of sync with the rest of the band. Someone inquired as to why, and they discovered that he was wearing ear plugs that played different music than the band was playing. Thus, he was marching to a different beat than everyone else. The early believers were marching to a different sound of music than the unbelievers around them, and we must do the same. Can others tell you are different because you are a Christian? If you were put on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

CHURCH ORDINANCES While we are talking about the church, what it is and does, we should mention the ordinances God expects us to observe. An ordinance is an outward way to visually teach an inner, spiritual truth. Practicing these does not earn grace or favor with God. They are an audiovisual to learn about God and His plan for us. The Jews in the Old Testament went to the Tabernacle to present their offerings and worship. Nothing happened just because they went there. It was what happened in their hearts as they saw God's plan for them revealed by the Tabernacle and sacrificial system.

The two ordinances prescribed by Jesus for His church are baptism and the Lord's Supper. They are symbols of deep spiritual truth, but are not necessary for salvation.

BAPTISM The Greek word "baptize" means to immerse and thus to identify, to associate with something. Our baptism pictures our dying and coming to life in Jesus. Going under the water represents death with Him, coming up from the water signifies new life in Him and His resurrection. Jesus commands it for those who follow Him (Matthew 28:16-20). Nothing magical or mystical happens when we are baptized, it is a way for us to publicly show others we are identifying with Jesus in His life, death and resurrection.

The early church baptized by immersion, for this is what Jesus commanded. There are different Greek words for "pour" and "sprinkle," but these were never used when referring to baptism. The Bible talks about going "into" the water and coming "up out of" the water (Mark 1:10; John 3:23; Acts 8:38), clearly showing they were immersed under water. John the Baptizer immersed his followers, even Jesus Himself. This is what the early church practiced for 400 years until some parts of the church started departing from the truth of the Word.

Baptism is something that is only for those who have put their faith in Jesus (Matthew 28:1-20), not infants (John 1:33; 3:28). Jesus and His disciples were baptized as believing adults (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11). The apostles only baptized believers (Acts 2:38-47; 8:13-40; 9:18; 10; 16:14; 15:32-34; 18:8-15; 19:17; 1 Corinthians 1:14-16). The New Testament church taught baptism for new converts (Romans 6:3-4; Galatians 3:2-7; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12; 1 Corinthians 10:1-2; 1 Peter 3:21). Paul was baptized after salvation, even though he had been dedicated as a Jewish baby (Acts 9:18; 22:16). Those baptized before salvation were baptized again after salvation (Acts 19:5).

Baptism symbolizes dying and coming back to life with Jesus, so one must be an adult to understand that. It always follows repentance (Acts 2:36) and faith (Acts 2:41; 8:12; Galatians 3:26-27). "Hear, believe, be baptized" is the order (Acts 18:8).

LORD'S SUPPER A biblical church celebrates the Lord's supper together (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Some churches did it weekly (Acts 20:7), but others less often – that is up to each church. Its observance is demanded by Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:24). The reason for doing this is to remember Jesus' death on the cross for our sin ("in remembrance of Me" 1 Corinthians 11:24) and to look forward to His return ("proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" 1 Corinthians 11:26). The elements remain bread and juice. Nothing mystical or magical takes place in them. It is a memorial, a symbolic representation - like baptism is. Because of its significance, those who partake are not to do so if there is unconfessed sin in their lives (1 Corinthians 11:27-28).

Likewise, using the correct elements in the Lord's Supper with a biblical understanding of them is important. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper at His last meal with His disciples as part of the Jewish Passover (Matthew 26:26-30; Mark 14:22-26; Luke 22:14-20). Unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine were part of the meal. Jesus indicated that the bread was symbolic of His body and the fruit of the vine symbolic of His blood. The unleavened bread symbolizes the purity of Christ, for He was without sin (Hebrews 4:15) and thus His body was an unblemished sacrifice for our sins. The juice from crushed grapes symbolizes the blood that Christ shed for us.

In partaking of the bread and the cup, Christ's disciples are to remember his sacrifice on the cross of Calvary as He gave His body and shed His blood for our sins. Baptists believe the Bible teaches that the elements used in the Supper are not literally the body and blood of Christ.

They are symbols of His body and blood. In eating the bread and drinking from the cup, a person does not actually partake of Christ's flesh and blood. Rather, it is an opportunity to obey a command of Christ and to recall His sacrifice for us, His presence with us, and His certain return (1 Corinthians 11:24-28). He expects this of His church.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY God has given me the ability to study and understand the Bible and to be able to teach it to others. I love to study and teach God's Word. Much of my ministry has consisted of teaching Bible studies, helping others grow, and preaching sermons. I have taught children, young people, and adults. Now I have the privilege of writing books as well. My driving passion is to see people understand God's Word, apply it to their lives so they become more like Jesus, and put Him before everything else. It has been a great and humbling honor to spend my ministry handling the precious Word of God, and I thank Him for allowing me the privilege of serving in these ministries. What a joy it is to share with others and see their lives transformed!

God provided me a wife and others in the church that could minister in ways I wasn't gifted. My wife is skilled in talking to people about Jesus. Others in our church were able to lead worship, something I could not do as well. Some were more outgoing than I was and better able to make new people feel loved and welcome. Like parts of a body, God put all of us together, using our different gifts to work together for His Kingdom (1 Corinthians 12:12-27).

APPLICATION TODAY God expects healthy churches to teach and disciple believers. Men and women of all ages, from children on, must learn God's Word. (For more information on how to do this see my book "Spiritual Growth and Discipleship.") There must be teaching times throughout the week, as Barnabas and Paul had in Antioch. Mature Christian women are to train the younger women (Titus 2:3-5). Pastors are to train future leaders as well (2 Timothy 2:2). Pastors are to receive a salary so they can concentrate their time and effort on teaching their people, without having to be otherwise occupied (Galatians 6:6).

The purpose of teaching the Bible is to change lives. Knowledge of the Bible should be lived out in our actions. Christians must become like Jesus, and that happens from the inside out (Romans 12:1-2). Others must be able to see we are Christians by the example of our godly living. Baptism is a public declaration of our commitment to serve God in all things; learning God's Word and partaking of the Lord's Supper serve to strengthen that commitment.

Pastors and churches in the United States, India, or wherever must seek God's will for how He wants them to minister and serve. Do not imitate other churches, no matter how large or successful they may be. You can learn from them, as we are learning from the church at Antioch, but God will direct you in the way He wants you to go. Listen to Him and follow Him, not others.

God expects churches today to faithfully share the gospel, reflect God's grace, teach and disciple believers, and to help others in need.

IV. HELP OTHERS IN NEED Acts 11:27-30

Acts 11:27 During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. **28** One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) **29** The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. **30** This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

We have seen what was happening in Antioch at this time. Some important events were taking place outside the city which affected the Christians there. They found out about it when some prophets from Jerusalem came to Antioch.

PROPHETS Until the completion of the New Testament, God still spoke to the people through prophets whom He spiritually gifted with a special ability (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11) to speak for Him (1 Corinthians 14:1-5). Sometimes they announced new revelation (Acts 11:27-28; 13:1; 15:32; 21:9-10), but mostly they proclaimed God's already-revealed truth, as a preacher or evangelist would do today. After the Bible was written and distributed, it became God's source of revelation and authority. The gift of prophecy was no longer needed (1 Corinthians 13:8) so it faded and is not a spiritual gift God gives today. Preachers and evangelists today proclaim His truth as prophets did in the New Testament. In the early days of the church in Antioch, God sent some prophets to Antioch because He knew how the people would respond to their message.

AGABUS One of these prophets was a special, well-known man (Acts 21:10-12). Through him, God revealed that a bad famine would hit the Roman Empire. It happened as predicted during the reign of Claudius Caesar. Historical records testify of a series of severe famines in various parts of the Roman Empire. One that took place in 45-47 AD devastated the crops in Israel so severely that many Jews died of hunger. God was warning the Antioch Christians that this would be coming.

SACRIFICIAL GIVING Word of this coming disaster spread quickly among the Christians from one house church to the next throughout the city of Antioch. They believed the warning and acted quickly. They knew of the persecution and poverty of the Christians in Jerusalem, so instead of concentrating their efforts on stockpiling resources for themselves if the famine hit them, they sent much-needed aid to the Christians in Jerusalem. This probably saved many lives. Agabus and the others did not tell them to do this; it was their natural response to the news.

The Christians in Antioch were not rich, they were average citizens who sacrificially gave what they could (Acts 11:29). All gave something; it was not just a few rich ones who gave. Even with the existing disagreement - that many of the Jerusalem Jewish Christians thought the Antioch Gentile Christians had to become Jews first - those in Antioch gave all they could. Though they had never met, all sacrificed for their fellow Christians in Jerusalem. They knew the Jews in Jerusalem had lost much when they became Christians and were rejected by their Jewish family and friends. Many were in poverty already, and a famine would be disastrous. Those with resources had an obligation to help (1 John 3:17-18).

The amounts they gave differed, but the fact they all sacrificed was the same. The giving was voluntary and according to the ability that each Christian possessed (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 9:7). That is how Christians should give today as well: sacrificially and in proportion to what we have. We are all called to be stewards of what God has given us (Matthew 25:14-30). It all belongs to God; He gives us some for our use and some to pass on to others. We are sinning, we are robbing God (Malachi 3:8-18), if we keep for ourselves what He gives us to pass on to others! Church leaders are to teach their people to give in this way by example and by teaching.

PAY FOR PASTORS Christians are to give financially so those who lead and teach them have money to pay the bills while they study and teach (1 Corinthians 9:11, 14; 1 Timothy 5:17-18; Galatians 6:6-10). God commands this. Pastors are to be given enough money to live on the same level as others in their community. They are not to be greedy and take more to become rich. Neither are church members to be greedy and expect pastors to live on less money than they themselves have.

GIVING MOTIVATED BY LOVE The Christians in Antioch demonstrated love for and unity with their brethren in Jerusalem by sending them some "relief" money. Luke previously documented the love and generosity of the Jerusalem Christians for one another (Acts 2:42; 4:32-35). Here he reveals that the Antioch Christians surpassed even their sacrifice by sharing with those they had never met. Church historian Tertullian records that the pagans of his time were saying about Christians: "See how they love one another and are ready to lay down their lives for each other." This love was clearly seen in the Church of Antioch. God expects that kind of sacrificial love and giving in all churches. Individually, as a church, we are to bear each other's burdens (Galatians 6:2; 1 John 3:17-18). This is another way God's grace was seen in operation in the Christians in Antioch.

BARNABAS & PAUL TO JERUSALEM The money gathered was taken to Jerusalem by Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:30). This was about AD 46 when a severe famine struck Judaea. Paul wrote about this visit in his letter to the Galatians in 2:1-10. During this visit, the leaders in Jerusalem reaffirmed Paul in his ministry to Gentiles.

As the Jerusalem church had ministered to the church in Antioch by providing leadership and teaching, the Antioch church now was able to minister to the Jerusalem church with financial aid. The one who is instructed in the Lord should help support the ones who instruct (Galatians 6:6). Luke probably included this reference to this relief to illustrate, among other things, the strength of the Gentile church outside Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. God was blessing, encouraging and working through this mainly Gentile church.

It must have been humbling for the Jerusalem Christians, the first church established, to become dependent on the Gentile believers from Antioch. The money was not flowing from the parent church to the church plant, but the other way around! This must have helped to bond the Gentile and Jewish Christians into one group as they faced this challenge together.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY As I mentioned before, the people in the church I pastored were very good about helping others in need. They would sacrificially give of their time and money to provide for anyone they could. They did not necessarily have a lot of money, but they gave sacrificially as God led them. Their giving of time and money has enabled me to travel to India for these many years. They care in their hearts for the pastors and people in India and will do anything they can to help.

APPLICATION TODAY Sacrificial giving is the natural response of a heart dedicated to God. We appreciate all we have and recognize it is from Him. Since it is His and not ours, we share it with others in need. Church leaders set the tone for this by how they treat their own possessions and money. Setting an example of sharing in our personal life is the start. Being generous with what the Lord has provided in our churches comes next. This includes using our time and skills to help others, not just our money.

Some churches hoard their resources, skills and time to focus on making their own church larger and more prosperous. God does not expect us to build our church – that is His job for He will build His church (Matthew 16:18). He expects us to faithfully share the gospel, reflect His grace, teach and disciple believers, have godly leaders, worship and pray, and help others in need. God generously provides for all our needs and expects this attitude of generosity from His church, for we are to be perfect in love even as our Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48).

In order for this to happen, a church needs godly leadership. But before we meet the leaders of the church in Antioch, Luke includes the account of Peter's miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12:1-19) and Herod's death (Acts 12:19-34). Then he gets back to what is happening in Antioch, for it has eternal, world-wide consequences, and his recording of God's work through them is not finished.

V. HAVE GODLY LEADERS Acts 13:1

Acts 13:1 Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul.

After taking the offering to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch. They brought John (also called Mark Acts 12:12) with them (Acts 12:25). He was related to Barnabas, and Barnabas wanted to train him for ministry. Barnabas had done the same thing with Paul, and would continue to train others for his whole life. Luke is making it clear that the Jerusalem church and the Antioch church are working together in unity.

CHURCH LEADERS As in Jerusalem, there were prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1; 11:27). As we saw, the function of a prophet was to preach, teach, and apply truth from God's Word (1 Corinthians 14:3). Sometimes God also revealed new truth through them, but that soon ended when the New Testament was completed. Teachers then, like now, communicated God's truth in a way those listening could understand and put it into practice in their lives.

We saw there were elders in the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). It was to these men Barnabas and Paul took the offering from Antioch. This is the first use of the word "elder" (Greek presbyteroi) in Acts. It can refer to older men (1 Timothy 5:1), or to officers in the church (Titus 1:5). The latter meaning is in view here, since official leaders would probably have been responsible to distribute the money. Evidently, the apostles had set up elders, even as they had set up "the Seven," in order to facilitate the ministry there. Elders were common in Jewish synagogue worship where they served as overseers. As time passed, this organizational structure became normal in Christian churches as well. The Gentile churches used the term "bishop" for this same role for that is the term Gentiles used for leaders. The term "Pastor" was used of this same office. It emphasized the gift of shepherding (Acts 20:28) by teaching and caring for believers. Paul sets clear qualifications for those who function in this way (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). God expects His church to be led by qualified, gifted, called men. If that isn't the case, then it isn't the kind of church God wants.

In each house church there were two or more men who comprised the leadership (Acts 14:23). There also were those new to the faith who were being trained to be future leaders. The duties of the leaders were to oversee all that happened in the church (1 Timothy 3:1). Leaders were to teach (John 21:17) and to guard doctrine (Titus 1:9). They had the authority to rule, but not dictate (1 Timothy 5:17). They were to be sensitive to the feelings of the people and consult the people when large issues came up. The goal was to have as much unity as possible among leaders and others when decisions were made.

Thus each church had a spiritual leadership composed of godly, spiritual, gifted and called men who provided spiritual leadership and overall guidance to the church. They were called Elder, Shepherd, or Bishop but the role, the qualifications and the duties were the same. They all refer to the one we call "pastor" today.

These leaders were assisted by those who helped with the physical work of the ministry. They were called Deacons, a word which was used for those who served by waiting on tables. Their purpose was to relieve the pastor/elder/bishop of physical tasks so they could spend more time in prayer and Bible study (Acts 6:1-6). They took care of the physical needs of the people in the church by helping widows and orphans, distributing food and money, and taking care of the needs of the places where they met. Some churches also had female deacons, called deaconesses, to help minister to children and women (Romans 16:11; 1 Timothy 3:11).

ANTIOCH LEADERS Five men are named as leaders in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1).

BARNABAS was a Levite and a godly man. We have already seen much about him.

SIMEON CALLED NIGER was a black man. Many believe he is the same Simon who carried Jesus' cross (Luke 23:26).

LUCIUS OF CYRENE was from North Africa, like Simeon. Some think it was Simon who brought him to the Lord and to Antioch. His name was a common Roman name, "Luke."

MANAEN had been brought up in the same household as Herod the tetrarch, perhaps as a childhood playmate. It was this Herod who beheaded John the Baptist and tried Jesus (Mark 6:14-19; Luke 13:31-33; 23:7-12). Thus, he was well educated and had a high social standing.

SAUL, soon to be known as Paul, was a very influential leader among the Pharisees in Jerusalem before becoming a Christian (Acts 9). Saul was the newcomer, the younger believer learning from the older, more mature leaders.

There is a great variety of age, experience, giftedness and cultural background among the leaders of this church. Rich and poor; younger and older men; Jew, Roman and African; some gifted to teach, encourage, evangelize and provide spiritual leadership. That is what God expects from His church.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY Sometimes in American churches the men who are made leaders are those with the most money or power. There is no problem with this if they are godly men first, but if they are not, then they should not be leaders. God blessed me in my ministry by having some very godly men serve with me and help me. They were loyal and faithful in helping behind the scenes and doing what needed to be done, no matter how hard it was. Others did not know what they were doing, but they were doing their best to work for Jesus. There were times we needed more leaders, but if candidates for those positions did not meet the qualifications Paul gives (1 Timothy 3:1-13; 2 Timothy 2:1-13; Titus 1:5-9), then we did not put them in places of authority. I trained men, working with them to help them grow to become good leaders, but that takes much time. Until we felt they were ready, we would rather have fewer leaders than have men not suited for the job. We have always had many good, godly women helping with the women and children. They would serve in any ways they could. Godly women are often the backbone of the church with their prayer, faithfulness and sacrificial work. Thank God for them!

APPLICATION TODAY Does your church have godly, gifted, qualified leaders, men who work together as a team? Are they training others to be future leaders? Do they serve the church and not have the church serve them? That is what God expects. (For more information see "What God Expects of Pastors" by Jerry Schroyer.)

One final lesson we learn from the church in Antioch is the importance of worship and prayer. Not only did they gather to listen to God speak to them through the teaching of His Word, they spoke to Him in worship and prayer

VI. WORSHIP & PRAY Acts 13:2-3

Acts 13:2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

WORSHIP Evidently it was the practice of this church to spend time in worship when they gathered together. No one had to tell them to do this, it came naturally to those who loved and followed Jesus. When we give thanks to God we recognize the great and wonderful things He has done, but when we worship we give honor to Who and What He is. Thanksgiving depends on our recognizing and approving of what He is and does. Worship, however, recognizes God in His glory no matter what He does.

FASTING Not only did they worship, but they regularly fasted as part of their worship and prayer. They humbled and denied themselves to more completely focus on God so as to more clearly hear from Him. Worship and prayer were more important than food to these people. Fasting was a regular part of Judaism, and this practice carried over into the early church as well. (For more information about fasting see Appendix 7: Fasting.)

THE HOLY SPIRIT SPOKE While the people were worshipping and praying, God spoke to them through His Spirit. It seems they were not specifically seeking guidance about whom to send, yet this time He did not speak through a prophet. God revealed His will by placing these instructions directly into their hearts. That is one of the ways He communicates to us today. (For more information about how to listen to God today see Appendix 8: Listening to God.)

The word used for the Holy Spirit is "pneuma" (Greek) which means breath. This pictures Him as an invisible power ("Spirit"). The personal pronoun "He" is always used, never "it." All His works and attributes also show personality. He is called God (Acts 5:14) and has all the attributes which God has.

It is said there was a certain guide living in the deserts of Arabia who never lost his way. He carried with him a homing pigeon with a very fine cord attached to one of its legs. When in doubt as to which path to take, he threw the bird into the air. The pigeon quickly strained at the cord to fly in the direction of home, and thus led the guide accurately to his goal. Because of this unique practice he was known as "the dove man." So, too, the Holy Spirit, the heavenly Dove, is willing and able to direct us in the narrow way that leads to the more abundant life if, in humble self-denial, we submit to His unerring supervision.

WORKS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT The Holy Spirit is the author of the Bible, revealing and inspiring the writers. In the Old Testament He came upon and filled believers at times of special need in their lives and ministry. It is in His power that Jesus ministered and did miracles, for Jesus voluntarily laid aside His divine attributes when He came to earth (Philippians 2:7).

He is the One Who restrains sin in general (2 Thessalonians 2:7), convicts unbelievers of sin (John 16:8-9), and seals (guarantee of assurance) believers (2 Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:13; 4:30). He indwells every believer from the moment of salvation (John 7:37-39; 14:16-17; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20), produces fruit (good works) in believers (Galatians 5:2-16) and baptizes (identifies) all Christians into the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). He guides and directs believers as well as teaching and reminding them of God's Word (John 14:26). He gives spiritual gifts to each believer and through them ministers to the whole Body (1 Corinthians 12:4-13).

We are commanded to be filled (controlled) by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) by continually being in total submission to God (Galatians 5:16, 25) and not allowing any sin or disobedience in our lives (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19).

One day a Christian was looking at a big waterfall with a friend. The friend observed that this waterfall was the most neglected power source in the world! “No,” said the Christian, “the Holy Spirit is the most neglected power source in the world!” Are you trying to live the Christian life without God’s Spirit? It cannot be done. Man comes with “batteries not included.” The Holy Spirit is our energy source. Without Him we cannot function in the way we were created to function. What about you -- are you trying to run without batteries? The power is available, free, just use it!

“SET APART FOR ME” The Greek word Luke used here means “to sanctify, to single out, to set apart for a special service.” God had a special work for Barnabas and Paul and wanted them to stop their other ministry in Antioch to focus on this new calling. God calls us, He assigns us to the work He wants us to do. But we must be listening to Him, and we must be available. Even before He calls we must have an attitude of being willing to go wherever He wants and do whatever He wants.

At first it was the team of Barnabas and Paul (Saul) (Acts 11:30, 12:25, 13:2). But before very long we notice in the account in Acts that it is Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:43, 46, 50). Barnabas was willing to give up the status of recognized leader of the team as God prepared and called Paul to the position. It is a rare individual who can be like Barnabas (and John the Baptist) and can say, “I must decrease that he might increase” (John 3:30). God wants people who care more that the work is done than about who gets the credit for doing it.

A PRAYING CHURCH The leaders and people recognized God was calling these men to serve Him away from Antioch, and they obeyed God. Before acting, they spent time in prayer and fasting. They knew what God wanted, but they needed to have His guidance, wisdom, leading and power to make it successful. So the leaders and people prayed (Acts 13:3; 14:27; 15:2). They asked God to bless the work that was about to be done (Acts 14:23; Nehemiah 1:4; Luke 2:37). They also fasted to be better able to focus on prayer. (For more information in fasting see Appendix 4: Fasting.)

The early church was a praying church. They “all joined together constantly in prayer” (Acts 1:14). They were praying in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit came (Acts 3). God spoke to man through the teaching and preaching of His Word and man spoke to God through worship and prayer (Acts 2:42). God expects a church to be a praying church.

A church, no matter its size, cannot be a healthy church if prayer is not a priority. Prayer is not telling God what you want Him to do. It is coming to God with an open heart and being willing to listen to whatever He says. God expects a church to know the importance of prayer as a group and in the individual lives of each person. Leaders must set an example of this in their lives as well as when the church gathers. They must train the people to pray, both by teaching about it and also setting an example for the people. Prayer consists of the following:

1. **CONFESSION** (1 John 1:9; Psalm 66:18; 51:1). To confess means to agree with God that the issue at hand is sin (not a mistake, someone else's fault, etc.). After you confess your sin, make sure you accept God's forgiveness (Daniel 9:9,19; Psalm 130:4; 86:5; 99:8; 103:3; Amos 7:2). Only God can forgive sin (Mark 2:7; 11:25; Luke 5:24; Matthew 6:14; Colossians 3:13). God does not overlook sin, He forgives because it was paid for with the blood of Jesus on the cross (Hebrews 9:22; Ephesians 4:32; 1:7; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; Luke 24:46-47; Colossians 1:14; John 19:30).

2. **PRAISE** (Psalm 34:1-3; 48:1; Hebrews 13:15). Praise is glorifying God for Who and What He is. It is different than thanking Him for things He has done. We will be praising God for all eternity, so we should start now! God is pleased with our praise (Psalm 22:3; Hebrews 13:15). The Bible says there is power in praise (Psalm 22:3).

3. **THANKSGIVING** (Psalm 116:12; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:18). Thanksgiving is thanking God for what He has done, is doing and is going to do in your life (as well as the lives of others). We all appreciate being thanked for things we do, and so does God. Be specific in your thanksgiving. Remember, everything comes from Him and is for our good (Romans 8:28), so we should thank Him for everything!

4. **INTERCESSION** (Psalm 28:9; James 5:14-20; 1 Timothy 2:1-4; 1 Samuel 12:23). Intercession is prayer for others. Often it is good to keep a list of prayer requests so you remember to pray for them, and so you can mark down the answer, too. Then, thank God for the answer. Remember, God answers EVERY prayer. The answer is either yes (now), wait (later) or no (never).

5. **PETITION** (James 4:2; Hebrews 4:15-16; John 15:7). Petition means asking God for things for yourself. This is legitimate. We should not always pray just for ourselves, nor should we feel unworthy to ever pray for ourselves. There are some things the Bible says we should ask for: an understanding heart (1 Kings 3:7,9), fellowship with other believers (Philemon 4-6), forgiveness (Psalm 25:11,18,20), guidance (Psalm 25:4-5; 27:11), holiness (1 Thessalonians 5:23), love (Philippians 1:9-11), mercy (Psalm 6:1-6), power (Ephesians 3:16), spiritual growth (Ephesians 1:17-19) and to know and do God's will (Colossians 4:12).

6. **LISTENING** (1 Samuel 3:10; Hebrews 1:1-2; 3:15; Psalm 62:5; 46:10) Good communication is a two-way street. Pause a few minutes and listen to God talk to you. You should do that throughout your day. After all, which is more important: your passing on information to God or His passing on information to you? Be still in your mind, let Him put in thoughts, feelings, ideas, etc., that you need. Be sensitive to His leading (for more about listening to God see Appendix 8).

Prayer was a regular part of the early church (Acts 6:4) and must be for us as well. E.M. Bounds says, "What the Church needs today is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more novel methods, but men whom the Holy Spirit can use--men of prayer, men mighty in prayer." Alfred Lord Tennyson observed, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." We need to understand the top three priorities of church leaders: "Prayer is the first thing, Prayer is the second thing, and Prayer is the third thing necessary to be an effective Minister of the Gospel" (E. Stanley Jones).

A SENDING CHURCH The church leaders laid their hands on Barnabas and Paul as a way of identifying with them and committing to stand beside them (Acts 13:3). It also was authorizing Barnabas and Paul to minister in the name and with the consent of the church at Antioch.

God gives some believers to a church for them to share, to send them out with financial support so they can minister elsewhere. Established churches are to be responsible for this ministry to start new churches. The disciples in Antioch reached out to Gentiles with spiritual aid and to their Jewish brethren in Jerusalem with material aid. They not only gave, but they gave sacrificially of their own money and of the best of their leaders (Acts 13:2-3).

After Barnabas and Paul completed their journey, they returned to Antioch, reporting what had happened so the people there could rejoice and pray (Acts 14:26-28). Then the church sent them on a second missionary journey, and after that a third. God ripens the harvest but does not reap it – He expects us to do that. Paul and Barnabas were doing that.

With this, the whole book of Acts changes. No longer is the whole church in view, but the focus shifts to the expansion of the church into the Gentile world. Gentile contact with the gospel had been through Christians interacting with Gentiles in their daily lives. But now, Barnabas and Paul are going out into distinctively Gentile territories for the express purpose of seeking others with whom to share the good news. They did, however, make sure to go first to the Jewish minority in each city. This ministry would change the history of Europe and the world.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS Why did God pick Barnabas and Paul to take the gospel to others? Why were they so willing to spend the rest of their lives at this task? God had gifted them to be able to do this work, even before He called them to it. And with the Spirit working in them, through this gifting they were motivated to talk to strangers about Jesus. God gifts all believers and He expects them to use their gifts in a local church.

We have seen several spiritual gifts at work so far in Antioch. Those who had a desire and ability to reach out to strangers with the gospel were gifted in evangelism (Acts 11:19-21). Some were gifted in leadership (Acts 11:22-24; 13:1), especially those who were elders/pastors (Acts 11:30). Barnabas was gifted in discernment and encouragement (Acts 11:23). Paul was gifted in teaching (Acts 11:25-26; 13:1). A few had the temporary spiritual gift of prophecy (Acts 11:27-28) which was soon replaced by teaching/preaching and evangelism (1 Corinthians 12:10; Romans 12:6). It seems clear many Christians in Antioch were gifted in giving, helping, sharing and hospitality (Acts 11:29).

At the moment of salvation, one of the many blessings we receive are spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12). The Spirit provides these to enable Christians to be able to minister to others. Just as each person has a unique set of talents, each believer has a unique set of spiritual gifts. These are different than human talents, for talents alone are inadequate to do the work of God. These are special skills/abilities that God's Holy Spirit gives each believer to minister to others in the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:4-31).

Spiritual gifts are not given to be used for one's own benefit. They are for the purpose of ministering to others in the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12). If you are not using your gift, the Christians around you are not receiving the benefits or your gifts as they should.

Each believer has a unique combination of gifts. Just like three colors, yellow, red and blue, are blended in various combinations to form thousands of colors, so these basic gifts are blended with others to form a unique combination in each believer. No two of us are gifted exactly alike. Scripture lists various gifts: Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28; Ephesians 4:11.

Pastor: The gift of pastor is the special ability to assume a long-term personal responsibility for the spiritual welfare of a group of believers.

Teaching: The gift of teaching is the special ability to communicate information relevant to the health and ministry of the body and its members in such a way that others will learn.

Preaching: The gift of preaching is the special ability to proclaim the written Word with clarity and to apply it to a particular situation with a view to correction or edification and spiritual growth.

Leadership: The gift of leadership is the special ability to set goals in accordance with God's purpose for the future and to communicate these goals to others in such a way that they voluntarily and harmoniously work together to accomplish these goals for the glory of God.

Evangelism: The gift of evangelism is the special ability to proclaim the Good News of salvation effectively so that individuals or groups of people may respond to the claims of Christ in conversion and discipleship.

Missionary: The gift of missionary is the special ability to minister whatever other spiritual gifts they have in a second culture.

Administration: The gift of administration is the special ability to understand clearly the immediate and long-range goals of a particular unit of the body of Christ and to devise and execute plans for the accomplishment of those goals.

Knowledge: The gift of knowledge is the special ability to observe Biblical facts and make conclusions, to study and understand the Bible in a special, deep way.

Wisdom: The gift of wisdom is the special ability to know the mind of the Holy Spirit in such a way as to receive insight into how given knowledge may be applied to specific needs arising in the Body of Christ.

Service: The gift of service is the special ability to identify the unmet needs involved in a task related to God's work and to make use of available resources to meet those needs and help accomplish the desired results.

Mercy: The gift of mercy is the special ability to feel genuine empathy and compassion for individuals who suffer distressing physical, mental or emotional problems and to translate that compassion into cheerfully done deeds that reflect Christ's love and alleviate the suffering.

Helps: The gift of helps is the special ability to invest the talents they have in the life and ministry of other members of the Body so the other can increase the effectiveness of their spiritual gifts.

Giving: The gift of giving is the special ability to contribute material resources to the work of the Lord with liberality and cheerfulness.

Hospitality: The gift of hospitality is the special ability to provide an open house and a warm welcome to those in need of food and lodging.

Encouragement: The gift of encouragement is the special ability to minister words of comfort, consolation, encouragement and counsel to other members of the Body in such a way that they feel helped and healed.

Faith: The gift of faith is the special ability to exercise a supernatural capacity for believing God.

Intercession: The gift of intercession is the special ability to pray for extended periods of time on a regular basis and see frequent and specific answers to their prayers (to a degree much greater than that which is expected of the average Christian).

Discernment: The gift of discernment is the special ability to know with assurance whether certain behavior or truth purported to be of God is in reality divine, human or satanic.

Exorcism: The gift of exorcism is the special ability to understand Satan's workings and know how to stop the work of demons in people's lives.

While the gifts of Prophecy, Speaking in Tongues, Interpreting Tongues and Healing were part of the early church, they are no longer gifts God gives to us today. They were temporary gifts to help the church get started, but were no longer needed when the church matured and the New Testament was written. For more information on this see my books "Spiritual Warfare" and "Spiritual Growth and Discipleship."

HOW TO DISCOVER YOUR GIFTS First, get to work helping and serving others in any way you can. You will not be able to do everything, neither will you be good at everything you try. There will be some areas of service which others recognize as being something you do well, and they will ask you to minister in those ways. Those ways of ministering to others which you do well and enjoy are the ways God has gifted you. It will be a combination of the gifts listed above. It is a different combination for everyone.

When you find areas where you are able to serve with good results, learn more about them and look for more opportunities to perform these functions. Learn from others you find who seem to be well experienced in the same areas of service you are in. Dedicate these abilities to God and make them available for His use. You will continue to improve throughout your whole life as you serve Jesus and others in the family of God.

MY LIFE AND MINISTRY The church I pastored for 35 years had about 50 people when I began there. Thirty-five years later, the church was still 50 people, but not the same 50, for many had come and then moved on to other churches. People in the USA often move from one location to another. The average American moves 11 times in his life. People leave churches for other reasons as well. Oftentimes, people would come to our church to learn and grow, then later God would move them to another church to serve and use their gifts in that location. It wasn't easy for me pastoring a small church when most people judge the success of a pastor or church by the number of people who attend. I had to remember that it was what God thought that mattered, not what others thought. I learned that success is being in the center of God's will for me and my church. If I was obediently serving Him, then the size of the church was up to Him, not me. There can be great peace in that knowledge.

Remember, it is Jesus' church and HE will build it. We are to faithfully do what God expects of a church, and the rest is up to Him. He said, "I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it" (Matthew 16:18). The promises in this verse are very important and very true. For two thousand years His church has existed no matter what Satan has done to destroy it. It will continue in our day and long after as well.

As I said in chapter 1, evangelism was not a spiritual gift I possessed. Very few of the people in my church did, either. That does not mean we were excused from the responsibility of sharing the gospel with others, which we did. It means God's main working through us was in other areas, though. The people in my church were gifted in helping others, showing hospitality, helping those in need and loving people who were struggling. My gifts were in the area of teaching and preaching the Bible. I am also gifted in discipling and helping others grow, and in counseling people. The church I pastored was a small church that acted like a family. People who were having many kinds of problems in life would come. They would be loved, accepted and taught how God wants them to live. Many lives were changed by the Body of Christ working together when each person used their individual gifts.

APPLICATION TODAY God expects healthy churches to be characterized by worship and prayer. These must be real and authentic, not just something scheduled into a program. A group of believers who are totally committed to God and sacrificially serving Him will naturally want to pray and praise Him. It will come from within. Communicating with God and praising Him naturally flow from a heart devoted to Him. If your church is not characterized by these, then something is missing.

A church serving God will also be one in which the members use their spiritual gifts to serve others in the Body. There will be opportunities to develop and use the various gifts God has given them. This will include sending some to take the gospel to others. A godly church is a sending church. Just as each Christian is different, so each church is different. Mine was a teaching, discipling church. Not all churches have the same gifts or the same role in God's plan. Some are good at evangelism and church planting. Others are better at teaching the Bible, or worship, or helping the poor or sending missionaries. Each church is different. Some doctors focus on bringing babies into the world. Others are better at helping children grow to be healthy adults. Still other doctors spend their time training other doctors. The church I pastored was like a teaching hospital. People needing special care and training came, and much time and love was spent helping them. Through this they learned how to minister in this way and when they left our church they were prepared to use their gifts in other churches.

BEING THE CHURCH GOD WANTS YOU TO BE We can see from the church at Antioch six traits of a healthy, godly church: 1) faithfully share the gospel, 2) reflect God's grace, 3) teach and disciple believers, 4) help others in need, 5) have godly leaders and 6) worship and pray. The health of a church cannot be determined by its size, no matter how large. Growth does not indicate a healthy church. Growth is not one of the things God expects of churches. For the most part it will happen,

but that is not always true. Some churches do not increase in size despite being healthy and doing what God expects. I think that is one of the reasons the size of each church is not mentioned in the Bible; we might use that to evaluate the church. That is not God's way, it should not be ours.

THE REST OF THE STORY ABOUT THE CHURCH IN ANTIOCH The Church of Antioch went on to make a powerful impact for Christ. Within three centuries half of the city's population professed to be Christians, among who were many well-known godly Christian men. One of the best known, even today, is Ignatius (AD 35-108). He pastored the church of Antioch for 40 years and is reputed to have said, "It is right therefore, that we not just be called Christians, but that we actually be Christians." For his boldness to be a genuine Christian, he was executed and eaten by lions in the Colosseum at Rome. Another well known leader in Antioch was John Chrysostom (AD 349-407). He memorized the entire Bible and became a mighty Bible teacher and preacher, bringing many souls to salvation in Christ.

The Church of Antioch also remained a strong base of Christianity for centuries. It was the location for at least ten ecclesiastical councils, hosting church leaders from various parts of the Roman Empire between 252 and 380 AD. It became a base for sending the first missionaries to Gentile nations and for planting new churches all over Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece. It also supported and helped the struggling new churches in the East, including India, for many centuries.

CHURCH AT ANTIOCH TODAY Visitors to modern-day Antakya (Antioch) in Turkey will find little evidence of the thriving Christian community that developed there in Paul's day. St Peter's Cave Church is in a cave believed to be the meeting place where Peter taught the early Christian believers on one of his visits to Antioch (see Galatians 2:11). Re-built by the Crusaders after the city became the capital of the principality of Antioch in 1098 AD, it was abandoned when the Crusaders left, but was repaired by Capuchin monks in the 19th century. Little else remains from Paul's day, apart from an impressive collection of Roman mosaics and artifacts housed in the local Hatay (Antakya) Archaeological Museum.

CONCLUSION

I hope you better understand what God expects of churches today, and that you point your life and ministry in the direction God wants. To be a healthy church means being a church that is like the church in Antioch. Is your church like that? Are you living in that same way yourself? It is my hope and prayer you are.

END OF BOOK REFLECTION QUESTIONS

To help you get more out of this book, think about the following questions and how you would answer them. You can write down your answers if you want, or just meditate on them. The answers don't get turned in; they are for your benefit.

Name some new things you learned about what God expects of churches from this study?

How does your church compare to the church in Antioch?

In what areas does your church struggle most? Why?

What can be done to improve those areas?

Can you think of a church that reminds you of the church at Antioch?

How can you know when God is speaking to you?

APPENDIX 1: A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CHURCH IN INDIA

The first Jews that came to India were in Solomon's ships that went to Cochin (now Kerala on the southwest coast of India) almost 600 years before Jesus was born. Some stayed to gather the riches of India which were shipped to Solomon's court. About 100 years later, when the northern kingdom of Israel went into captivity, other Jews moved to Mizoram and Manipur. Gradually they left Judaism and seem to have become headhunters and animists like those around them.

When Jerusalem fell to the Romans in 70 AD the Jews were scattered everywhere; some came to India as traders, settling in the Punjab. Thomas, a disciple of Jesus, came to the Punjab to bring the gospel to these Jews. Jesus had instructed His followers to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the world, and that included India. Later, Thomas again traveled to India, this time to south India, Kerala, to minister to the Jews living there. He made a third trip to India, returning to Kerala and traveling across to the east coast where he started churches in the Malabar region south of Chennai. He ordained leaders for the churches there, went to Burma, then returned to India. He was martyred in Mylapore on December 21, 72 AD. The churches he had started continued, but struggled to remain alive.

For the next 1,500 years, the church in Antioch oversaw the churches in India, providing leadership, resources and sometimes Christians to join and help them. It seems many Christians moved from Syria to Malabar and Mylapore between 400 and 900 AD to help the church. There were a few Indian converts, but not very many. The local Indians persecuted the church and any who joined. Then, when the Muslims (Moguls) moved into the area in the 16th century, the persecution intensified to the point that the Punjab area church was wiped out by the Muslims.

By 1400 AD, only the church in Malabar remained active. Though small, weak and composed of mainly traders who were stationed there, it stayed alive. The churches started by Thomas in Kerala were all but gone, so some believers from the Malabar church moved there to reestablish the church and keep Thomas' work alive in India.

In the 1500's, Roman Catholic priests came to the west coast of India at Malabar with Portuguese traders and established churches for traders stationed there. Low caste Indians came to the church for protection against their enemies. Most of the Christians who were already in that area switched to the Roman Catholic Church because they were allowed to keep their Hindu practices and beliefs and still be part of the church. The evangelical churches started by Thomas and Christians from Antioch had said the Indians must leave Hinduism behind to be a Christian. Many did not want to do that. For several hundred years, Catholicism controlled the church, yet there were very few Christians and churches continuing to follow the truth of the Bible.

Then in the 1700's, other European countries started sending missionaries with their traders. The Protestant Reformation had taken place in Europe, and now many Protestants, who stayed faithful to God's Word, came to India. Protestant churches slowly developed in these trading stations, mainly attended by Europeans who came to India for business and also some Indian employees who worked for them.

William Carey started missionary work when he came to Calcutta in 1793. He translated the Bible into 40 languages and printed books and Bibles. Small churches were established in that area. Meanwhile, the Thomas churches in the south were taken over by Anglicans from England because they had become the largest group in the church. There were a few Indians who attended the churches, but it is hard to know if they came for money and protection, or for the gospel. Very, very few of the church leaders were from India, most came from Europe. As a result, there was not an Indian church in India, but a European Church which did things in European ways which were foreign to the Indian Christians. Gradually, the truth of the gospel took hold and grew.

Large church growth happened in Andhra Pradesh during a famine from 1876 to 1878. Churches in the USA and England sent food for the starving people. Those who came to the churches were mostly from the poor castes. No one knows if they came just for the food, or if the love and sacrifice of those who provided the food brought them to the love of Jesus. The upper castes, not wanting to associate with the lower castes, rejected Christianity. As these new churches in India grew, they needed leaders. Some came from among the Indian Christians, but most came from the USA or Europe. Missionaries started schools, medical work, orphanages, leprosy work, Bible translations and much more. They tried to make the Indian church self-supporting, to operate without foreign money, but that was not always successful. Today, many Indian ministries still depend on foreign money to operate.

India needs strong, healthy, growing churches that meet the spiritual as well as physical needs of the people. All groups and castes in India need to be reached, from the richest to the poorest. India needs strong, self-sufficient churches that provide their own leadership and resources. The gospel must be relevant to the culture in India. What works in the USA or Europe will not work in India. God will lead the Indian church to become the church He wants it to be in India – an Indian church. India needs churches like God expects, like the church in Antioch. My prayer is that this book would help you be able to lead your church in that direction.

APPENDIX 2: SALVATION

Everyone needs salvation, which comes only through Jesus (John 14:6) by grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).

THE NEED OF SALVATION *For ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God ...* (Romans 3:23). Because God is holy and perfect, He cannot allow sin in His presence. Still, He wants man to have fellowship with Him -- that is why He created man. To cleanse mankind of sins, He came to earth Himself as our substitute to experience God's wrath against sin, to be crucified, to take onto Himself the guilt for the sins of the world. He experienced what we would experience in all eternity in hell, condensed and poured out on Him. Because He was man, He could be our replacement. Because He was sinless, He did not have sin of His own to pay for and could pay for ours. Because He was God, He could experience hell for all of us at once; He had a greater capacity to suffer. There is nothing we can do to add to salvation, it is all by God.

THE PROVISION OF SALVATION God provided it all, all we do is freely accept His provision. Ephesians 2:8-9 says: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.*

John 19:30 says: *When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.* The word "*it is finished*" in the Greek means: "paid in full," which was written on bills of receipt. Jesus was not killed for our sin, He suffered and paid for all of it, then, when the payment was fulfilled and His life's work completed, He voluntarily died for there was no longer any reason to suffer. HE paid it all!

THE RECEPTION OF SALVATION Salvation is received by faith. Romans 3:28 says: *For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.* John 3:16 also says: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* The artist who painted "Jesus at the Door" is said to have purposely left off the knob from the door, for the door represents the human heart, and on that door, the bolt is on the inside. Jesus stands and knocks. But he will not come in unless we open the door.

THE REJECTION OF SALVATION Jesus is the only way to God, there is NO other way of salvation (John 14:6). Rejection of His gift of salvation means eternal condemnation in hell. *"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."* (John 3:36).

THE TENSES OF SALVATION At the moment of salvation all past sin and its penalty is removed (2 Timothy 1:9; Acts 16:31). No matter what, it will never be held against us, for its penalty has been paid (Romans 8:1). Sin committed after salvation has also been paid for on the cross, but must be confessed (admitted to - 1 John 1:9). Then it is removed. Unconfessed sin does not endanger our salvation, but hinders our closeness and fellowship with God. Sin between a husband and wife does not end the marriage, but does keep the partners from being able to be close to and enjoy each other.

While salvation removes the penalty of all sin, it does not remove its power (Philippians 2:12-13; Romans 8:13). A Christian still has a sin nature and the capacity to sin just as much as an unbeliever. Lot is a good example of that (Genesis 13:12, 19:29-38; 2 Peter 2:7). While we CAN sin, we don't HAVE to sin! Sin's power is just as strong, but now instead of being powerless to resist, we have a greater Power, the Holy Spirit, and don't HAVE to sin any more. We are free from the power of sin, but not yet from the presence of sin.

In the future, when we are in heaven, we will be free from the very presence of sin and our sin nature will be gone (Romans 13:11; Titus 2:12-13). That is guaranteed to every one who accepts God's free gift of salvation.

THE SECURITY OF SALVATION Salvation cannot be lost or returned. Once a person is born into God's family, he cannot be 'unborn' out of it. He is part of that family no matter what. Our keeping our salvation does not depend on our 'hanging on' but on God's faithfulness (2 Timothy) and protection (Matthew 12:20; Ps 37:24), steadfastness (John 10:28-29; Romans 8:37-39) and forgiveness (Romans 4:6-8).

APPENDIX 3: THE CHURCH

The emperor Diocletian set up a stone pillar on which was inscribed these words: For Having Exterminated The Name Christian From the Earth. If he could see that monument today, how embarrassed he would be! Another Roman leader made a coffin, symbolizing his intention "to bury the Galilean" by killing His followers. He soon learned that he could not "put the Master in it". He finally surrendered his heart to the Savior, realizing that the corporate body of Christ and its living Head, the Lord Jesus, cannot be destroyed by the onslaught of mortal men.

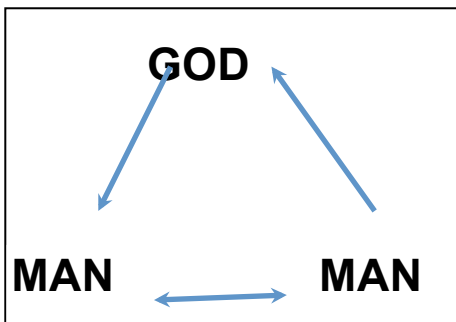
The history of the church has been represented by the Waldensians in a picture of an anvil with many worn-out hammers lying all around it. Beneath this scene are the words: One Anvil -- Many Hammers. Organized religion may fail; but the living organism composed of all born-again believers will stand forever. God is calling out of this world a people for His name who will dwell with Him throughout eternity. It is called the 'church.' Nothing, not even all the powers of hell, will be able to destroy this church (Matthew 16:18).

THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH The Greek word translated 'church' (ekklesia) means "a called out group." It was used of a local assembly, or gathering, of people. It is the Bride of Christ. Basically, the church is everyone from every country, of every age and background, who has become a born-again believer of Christ from the time of the Resurrection to the Rapture. Those who accept Jesus before or after that time are part of redeemed Israel, not the Body of Christ. The church truly has a special position in God's plan and program. He is the Head, we are the Body. He is the Groom, we are the Bride. We are a distinct people of God, not part of Israel and not replacing Israel in God's

plan. The church is not a building, denomination, or local group of people, but is the collective of all those saved during the Church Age.

THE LOCAL CHURCH Still, the Bible does talk about the local church (“assembling, gathering”) as well as the universal church. Local churches all are part of the universal church. While there seem to be many more factions and divisions among the church than is necessary, one can understand that a variety of local church groups is necessary to meet all the individual needs, backgrounds and commitments people bring with them.

Someone has said the church is a hospital for sinners, not a display case for saints. The church is not an ark for the saving of just a select few or a ferryboat to take effortless passengers to the shores of heaven. It is not an eternal life insurance company, neither is it a social set which welcomes certain people and excludes all others. Rather, the church is a lifeboat for the rescue of sin-wrecked and perishing souls. It is a family in which love and service are expected from each person to each person. It is the representative, the ‘body,’ of Jesus Christ on earth, reflecting His spirit and controlled by His will. The purpose of the local church is two-fold: to go out into all the world, and to share the plan of salvation with all in it. It is to take the good news of Jesus to a lost and dying world. It is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.



The church also exists to meet the needs of its members. Any Body needs to meet the needs of its parts for each part to function in a healthy manner. This requires balance between teaching (God communicating to man), worship (man communicating to God) and fellowship (man communicating to man). They must all be present. Teaching and learning God’s Word (hearing from God) must come first, though (Acts 2:42).

Following the analogy of the human body, each person in the church is endowed at the moment of salvation with particular gifts to be used for the encouraging, helping, and building up of others in the Body (1 Corinthians 12, 14). Jesus Christ, after ascending into heaven, sent the Holy Spirit who gives the wisdom, power, strength, gifts, guidance, direction and grace needed to function for God. This is how the church is to function, by allowing the Holy Spirit to work through us to meet each other’s needs so that we are well equipped to do the work God gives us as the church in the world.

The Bible does not give any strict commands about church government. There were spiritual leaders (elder/pastor/bishop) and physical leaders (deacon) who divided the responsibility. As to more than that, whether one bishop ruled many churches, or each person in the local church had an equal say, or if it was a mix of the two, we do not know. History records all types of church governments. That is not a Biblical absolute. Meeting spiritual and then physical needs is required, though.

‘CHRISTIAN’ CHURCH TODAY The Christian church today is divided into three main groups: Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant. This is the main breakdown of the Christian church. Among Protestants it is broken down even further. Divisions are on the basis of theological belief (Calvin vs Arminian; liberal vs conservative, etc.), historical and cultural beginnings (denominations like Lutheran, Presbyterian, Anabaptist, etc.) or geographical locations (by country, language spoken, etc.). Still, each one who has accepted Jesus as Savior, if in one of these groups or not, is part of God’s real church, His Body and Bride, that will rule and reign with Him for ever and ever.

APPENDIX 4: BARNABAS, A SHORT SUMMARY

Barnabas, also called Joseph, was a Levite and a relative (perhaps cousin or uncle – Colossians 4:10) of Mark (Acts 4:36). His home town was Cyprus, and it seems he came from a wealthy family (Acts 4:36). He may have been educated with Paul on Cyprus. Both were well educated. All Jewish boys, even wealthy ones, learned a craft, so Barnabas would have also.

It is not known when he became a follower of Jesus, but it was some time during Jesus' ministry. He was one of those who followed Jesus when He was on earth, perhaps one of the 70 (Luke 10:1). He may have been the one to suggest Jesus use Mark's home for the Last Supper.

Barnabas was the kind of person who was able to encourage others. His given name was Joseph, but he was nicknamed "Barnabas" because it means "son of encouragement," a character trait he was known for (Acts 4:36). People trusted him; he could bring comfort and peace to those around him. He was willing to sacrifice what he had to help support the poor Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 4:37; 1 Corinthians 9:6). Barnabas came to know and trust Paul, who had been known only as the one who persecuted the church and put to death many believers. So, after Paul's conversion, Barnabas was willing to introduce him to the Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26-31).

The leaders of the church in Jerusalem chose Barnabas as the one to go to Antioch to check what was happening in the church there (Acts 11:23-24). He then went to Tarsus and found Paul (no easy job it seems) and brought him to Antioch to help teach the many new Gentile and Jewish believers there (Acts 11:23). When the church in Antioch heard about the coming famine, Barnabas and Paul were the ones to take the money to Jerusalem.

God sent Barnabas and Paul from Antioch on the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). Barnabas had been training and mentoring Paul in the faith, but while they were traveling, Paul's natural gifts for leadership caused Barnabas to step back and let Paul take over the leadership. Being able to lead or follow is a rare but very important ability, and Barnabas was able to do either.

After the first journey starting churches, they returned to Antioch, then went to Jerusalem when the issue of Gentile salvation was discussed (Acts 15:1-21; Galatians 2:1-10). God made it clear that Gentiles could become Christians without having to become Jews first. Paul wanted to go back to the churches he had started to check on them and help them grow. Because Mark had deserted them at the start of the first journey, Paul did not want to take him along on the second. Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. They had a sharp disagreement and parted ways (Acts 15:36-41). Paul continued on his journeys, and Luke's account in Acts follows him. Barnabas took Mark, and they went on their own travels in Cyprus sharing the gospel and starting churches. Later, Paul did find Mark useful to himself and the ministry (2 Timothy 4:11).

It seems most of Barnabas' ministry was in Cyprus. History tells us he did minister in Rome after Paul had done so. Some even feel Barnabas is the author of Hebrews, but no one knows for sure. Tradition tells us that he was killed by Jews on Cyprus.

APPENDIX 5: LAW & GRACE

One day a man was selling a warehouse property. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and strewn trash all over the place. As he showed a prospective buyer the property, he took pains to say that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. The buyer said, "Forget about the repairs. When I buy this place, I'm going to build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site."

That is God's message to us! Compared with the renovation God has in mind, our efforts to improve our own lives are as trivial as sweeping a warehouse slated for the wrecking ball. When we become God's, the old life is over. He makes all things new. All He wants is the site and the permission to build. There are still some trying to "reform," but God offers "redemption." All we have to do is give Him the "property" and He will do the necessary "building."

SALVATION IS BY GRACE, NOT LAW The Bible makes it clear that we are under grace, not a set of laws to earn our salvation. *John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Romans 6:14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. Romans 6:15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*

Salvation is all by God. *Ephesians 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.* A young fellow came forward in a Gospel meeting, earnestly asking, "What can I do to be saved?" Knowing the man thought he had to accomplish something by his own efforts to gain redemption, the Christian worker responded to the anxious inquirer, "You're too late!" "Oh, don't say that," exclaimed the distressed seeker, "I really want salvation; I'd do anything or go anywhere to obtain it." "I'm sorry," replied the other, "you're too late for that. Your salvation was completed many hundreds of years ago at Calvary. It's finished work! All you have to do is simply receive Christ. Then the blessed gift He offers will become yours through His merits." Realizing his great debt was paid, the young man found peace by looking to the Savior and resting his all upon the grace of God.

Jesus completely finished the work of salvation on the cross. There is nothing to be added. *John 19:30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. Hebrews 1:3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

Salvation is received by faith *Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* After hearing the gospel explained, people often say, "You mean there is nothing I can do to deserve it? That is too easy." It seems natural for people to object to the idea that God's unmerited favor can be given so freely to unworthy sinners. Many find it difficult to trust a God who offers salvation as a free gift.

LIVING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS BY FAITH, NOT LAW Unfortunately, too often those who come to Jesus for salvation by grace then try to live the Christian life by law. They put themselves under some form of legalism. They are motivated by fear, guilt, pride, etc. and feel they have to do (or not do) something to earn or deserve something from God. This is a very wrong motive for serving God and living for Him. We live the Christian life the same way we entered the Christian life - by grace. *Galatians 3:1-3 You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?*

There once was a man whose wife died, and so he hired a housekeeper to help with the home and the children. Each morning he would leave a list of what he wanted her to do: wash clothes, shop for food, iron, etc. She would do what was on the list, and at the end of the week get her paycheck. After awhile they became friends and eventually fell in love and married. When they returned home after the honeymoon, the woman found she was doing the same work she had done before: clean, shop, iron, etc. However, now there was no list and there was no paycheck. She was doing the same thing but for a higher motive: love.

That is how God wants us to serve and obey Him, out of love. He does not want us living for Him out of fear of rejection. He does not want us living for Him out of guilt, or trying to earn or deserve His blessing. He freely loves us and wants us to respond to that grace by loving Him back. *1 John 4:19 We love because he first loved us.* That is not too much to ask. We want our children to follow our wishes, not out of fear or guilt or trying to earn our approval, but because they love and trust us and want to do so. The same is true of our heavenly Father.

Salvation is by grace. Christian living is by grace. It is our pride that steps in and says we must add or do something. Our pride keeps us from accepting something freely given (it's free to us, but salvation is anything but free -- the cross shows the tremendous price that was paid for it). It is all by grace. Grace is truly amazing. Amazing grace!

Like the saying goes: "Try it, you'll like it!"

APPENDIX 6: PAUL'S LIFE BEFORE ANTIOCH

Paul was one of those people who does everything 100%, whether he was opposing or supporting the church. He never did anything halfway.

ANCESTRY "Paul" was his Latin (Roman) name and "Saul" his Jewish name, which was used at home. His great-grandfather, from the tribe Benjamin, left Giscala in Galilee to move to Tarsus.

HOME TOWN Tarsus was a prosperous, self-governing city-state of ½ million people. It was a leading center of finances and education. It was a very worldly city for a Jew to grow up in.

PARENTS Paul's father was a wealthy Pharisee. He made tents from the long black wool of local sheep. He was also a burgess of Tarsus and a Roman citizen, which was a proud privilege for anyone. Not much is known about Paul's mother. Perhaps she was sickly, maybe having died when his sister was born. Somehow his sister ended up in Jerusalem, perhaps being raised by relatives there after her mother died.

EDUCATION Paul was mainly home educated. In the synagogue, he was taught Hebrew. By age 13, he would have mastered Jewish history, poetry and writings of the prophets. He had an excellent mind and marvelous memory.

LANGUAGE Paul, as most everyone in his day, was multilingual. He knew Greek from infancy, it was the main language of the day. Aramaic was the common language Jews used in their homes. Hebrew was the scholarly language boys learned to study the Bible. He also had a good working knowledge of Latin.

CAREER Tent making was a humble occupation, but the Jews believed that all boys should learn a craft and know what it is to work. Tents were common, used by caravans, nomads and armies. Paul would have spent many hours weaving cloth, pushing the shuttle back and forth. This would have left his mind free to think. His mind probably focused on God and Jewish beliefs.

FAITH While he lived in Tarsus, he did not feel at home there. Baal worship, immorality, and persecution of those who worshipped God would have turned his heart to the land of his ancestors.

HOME LIFE Paul's home seemed to have been a haven of piety with obedience to God emphasized. Perhaps there was a stern overemphasis on external conformity.

GROWING UP Paul went through Bar Mitzvah at age 13, which is probably when he took his first trip to Jerusalem. He would have gone with his father and other men who were making the trip for various spiritual and/or business reasons. This was not only a special time religiously, but Paul got to see his sister. Sometime later, Paul returned for training and study with the famous Rabbi Gamaliel.

Jesus had spent time with him when He went to the temple for His Bar Mitzvah several years earlier. Paul's training would have been long and hard. He would have to master not only the Hebrew Scriptures, but also Jewish interpretations and commentaries on them: the Mishna, Gemerra and the Targum. He quickly outstripped his contemporaries with his intellectual giftedness. He had a very logical mind, and excellent memory, fertile imagination and analytical reasoning. Because he always expected much of himself and others, he didn't seem to have many close friends. Many others in training were only concerned about external conformity (hypocrisy) and impressing others. Paul was always concerned about doing the right thing for the right reason. Outside he seemed to attain perfection, but inside he struggled with pride, lust and materialism.

RETURN TO TARSUS In his early 30's, Paul returned to Tarsus and became a leader in the synagogue there, teaching the Scriptures while supporting himself by making tents. Perhaps it was in tent making that he met Barnabas.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE Paul seems to have been athletic, strong and in good physical condition. Tradition says he was under 5 foot, broad shouldered, with closely knit eyebrows and a thick beard. He had a long, crooked nose. He became prematurely gray and then bald. From his conversion experience he had eye troubles. Friends said he was ugly, enemies preferred the term 'repulsive.' His great impact on the world did not come from his physical appearance.

MARRIAGE While much in Paul's life is unknown, from information in his writings, knowledge of Jewish history, and traditions, we can piece together some things about him. It seems he was married at one time and probably had a son. Perhaps both died in an epidemic which was so common in those days. How that must have broken his heart and depressed him! It may have been that, along with the events of April 14, 33 AD, that caused him to return to Jerusalem. On that day it got dark everywhere at 12 noon. At 3 PM an earthquake shook the world and the light again shone. These things were obviously supernatural. When word from Jerusalem about the strange events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth came, Paul was intrigued. Being a strict Jew, Paul would have wanted to do anything he could to stamp out this new heresy. Perhaps all the hurt and pain, the depression and emptiness came out in anger and hate to those who saw this Jesus as the Messiah. Paul ended up in Jerusalem opposing this new movement with everything he had.

PAUL THE PERSECUTOR Throwing himself into this new venture would help him escape the memories of his lost family, as well as give him a new challenge, something to fill the empty void inside. It was a reason to keep going. He lived and worked on the street of the tentmakers in Jerusalem, but spent as much time as he could with the religious rulers. He became a leading Pharisee in Jerusalem. Men that he had admired and respected, such as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Stephen, now became his hated enemies. Paul was one of the youngest Sanhedrin members, and thus one of the most influential men in Israel. His whole future was before him.

SPIRITUAL YEARNINGS Yet, obviously Paul was empty, searching for real meaning and purpose in life. The harder he worked at being a perfect Jew, the more he felt empty. Eventually he stopped striving after that elusive peace that evaded him. He felt crushed under the burden of the law and tradition, but knew of no other way to seek God. All these frustrations and fears he took out on those he saw as the enemies of Judaism. When they claimed to have the answers and the peace he was looking for, he overreacted all the more against them, making it a personal battle against them.

ONLY JESUS SATISFIES Paul had everything the world could offer, everything one could want. He had a well-to-do, important, supportive and loving family. He had the finest education one could have in both Judaism (Hebrew) and secular (Greek) knowledge. He had a successful career as a tentmaker and also as a rabbi. He was in the Sanhedrin (the top 70 men in Israel worldwide with the power to govern in all areas of Jewish life). He was on the rise, for he was still quite young. He was

near perfect in his religion, exhibiting outward sinlessness. He seemed to have it all. But he was empty and searching inside. He missed the one thing that alone can satisfy – Jesus.

He had heard plenty about Jesus being the answer to his needs. His good friend Stephen told him often. At least, they had been good friends from the same synagogue when Paul had been in Jerusalem before to study. Stephen was as mellow as Paul was abrasive. Stephen had the peace and the answers that Paul sought. Paul could not counter Stephen's arguments proving Jesus as the Messiah. Paul grasped the full implication of it all, what it would mean to him personally, and to Judaism as a whole, if Jesus of Nazareth really had been the promised Messiah. It would take away the one thing Paul built his life on – Jewish law and practices. Finally, since he could not silence Stephen's words any other way, he used his authority as a member of the Sanhedrin to have Stephen stoned to death.

FULL-BLOWN PERSECUTION The matter was not settled for Paul, though. In fact things got worse. He attacked Christianity like a mad man. His choleric temperament, his zeal for the things of God, the pain from the loss of his wife and son, the emptiness he felt spiritually, and the jealousy he experienced toward Christians who seemed to have everything he sought, all drove him fanatically. He would burst into homes and synagogues. He imprisoned or killed old men and women as well as children. Others were beaten and crippled. During all this, though, Paul was coming in deeper and deeper contact with the gospel. As he infiltrated their services and heard their defense at their 'trials,' he learned more and more about this Jesus. He heard from those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus' miracles and who had memorized whole speeches Jesus had given. He saw that the great pain he inflicted on them did not take away their joy. Nothing did. They had something he lacked, and he hated them all the more because of it.

CHRISTIANITY SPREADS Finally the Christians in Jerusalem were driven out of town or so deeply underground that they couldn't be easily found. Jerusalem seemed safe from this new cult, but instead of putting it out, Paul discovered he had just spread it around. Like kicking a fire apart to put it out, only to realize that each spark caught on and started a new fire where it landed, Paul realized that those who left Jerusalem were taking their message elsewhere. Not content to purify only Jerusalem, Paul wanted the belief totally eradicated everywhere. He knew that if he did not stop it, soon it would spread beyond his ability to destroy it. It was already getting a strong footing in Damascus to the north. He feared that if this "Way," as the new belief was called, were allowed to take root and grow, there was no telling where it would spread and what damage it would do!

ON TO DAMASCUS Damascus had a large Jewish population, which made it ripe for the spread of this new message. Paul got the official papers he needed, gathered Jewish soldiers (Levites) and other officials, and set out to move his headquarters to Damascus. There he would end, once and for all, this blasphemy. Damascus was a 4-day donkey trip to the north, 150 miles away. They traveled through Galilee, past the Golan Heights, then by Mt Hermon. These brought to mind the adventures of God with His people at these places. Why could Paul not experience this victory and satisfaction in God that his ancestors seemed to find? He was filled with guilt, emptiness, and no peace. He even had doubts about the eventual success of his mission, although he kept shoving them to the back of his mind every time they surfaced. He was grieved by the pain his persecution was causing so many people, but he justified it as necessary to rid Judaism of its enemies. Still, there was something about these Christians ...

CONVERSION! Suddenly a light greater than the sun, the Shekinah Glory itself, shown on Paul and the whole group he was traveling with. They all fell down before it. All heard a sound, but only Paul heard the words: "Why are you persecuting Me?" They were spoken by a Man about Paul's own age, and instantly Paul knew Who it was, even though he had never seen the Man before. To confirm his suspicions Paul asked, "Who are you?" The answer was what he expected, "I am Jesus." In a second that seemed like an eternity, Paul knew that Jesus loved those whom he was persecuting,

and He loved Paul. Immediately Paul broke in surrender. All his old theological arguments melted away. It no longer mattered what his Jewish contemporaries would think or what future in Judaism he was giving up. Stephen was right, Paul was wrong – it was that simple. Accepting that brought what Paul had been seeking his whole life, for instantly sweet peace flooded over his soul. He surrendered his life 100% to the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, the Jewish Messiah, God Himself come to earth as man. Paul had a new Master Whom he served with unswerving dedication the rest of his life.

THE FIRST FEW DAYS OF NEW LIFE Paul was blind for the next 3 days. In fact, his eyesight was affected for the rest of his life. It was a constant reminder of when God broke him, as Jacob's limp reminded him of a similar event in his life. Those three days were spent without food or water, for he had no desire to eat. He was so focused, so overwhelmed with the newness of this, it was all he could think about. Proud, independent, self-sufficient Paul had to be led by the hand into Damascus and cared for by others. He was no conquering hero, but a conquered prodigal. He had plenty of time to think. Stephen was a time bomb that detonated in his mind. He recalled point after point that Stephen made, word for word, and each one hit home like a sharp sword. How could he have been so blind? How could he have missed it? It was so clear, so very clear to him now. Guilt and remorse washed over him in waves, followed by grace and peace. The words of Stephen would stay with him forever. They would become the framework, the basic structure for the words Paul himself would speak. Now Paul would be speaking Stephen's words. It was as if Stephen still lived – certainly his message lived on.

Then God sent a man named Ananias to Paul. That was quite an act of faith for Ananias, who had been praying Paul would not come, and if he did, would not find him! Through Ananias, Paul received his sight and publicly showed his new faith by adult baptism (immersion). Paul spent the next few days in Damascus and at once preached in the synagogues that Jesus was the Messiah. What a time that must have been! Some probably thought, though, that he was using this as a trick to sneak into the church and find out who was a Christian so he could have them killed. Because of this uproar, he was not able to stay in Damascus long, though.

BASIC TRAINING Paul spent the next two years in the Arabian desert, from the summer of 35 to the summer of 37 AD. He fled partly to protect his life, but also to learn more about his new faith. He learned to depend on God during these years. God taught him spiritual truths and how to apply the information he already knew about the Old Testament to Christianity. He learned more, perhaps meeting with Jesus directly for instruction. He had time to think, reflect, digest and integrate this new world view into his life. He witnessed to and taught others he happened upon, learning to share his new faith. He had time to grow spiritually. Something similar happened to Moses in the same desert. God used this time for Paul to grow spiritually.

APPRENTICESHIP From the summer to the fall of 37 AD, Paul spent time in Damascus for awhile, then in Jerusalem, and finally in Tarsus. He started applying his new knowledge in practical situations, gaining experience teaching and preaching about Jesus. Jerusalem was especially hard on Paul, for his conversion account was not believed by the Jews, who did not trust him. Only his old friend Barnabas stood by him and encouraged the others to accept him as a brother in the faith. With the persecution now over and Paul helping spread the word, a period of peace and growth came to the church.

It seems Paul went home to Tarsus during this time, too. I wonder - how did his father and others there respond to this change in Paul's life? He must have really desired to see them put their faith in Jesus, but we do not know if any did or not. It seems he was scourged 5 times by the synagogue leaders, so he was not any quicker to quit than they were to believe. Some say this is what undermined his health and caused him to be bowlegged the rest of his life. A complete break from family and Judaism occurred here and now.

BEGINNING MINISTRY Then Paul went to Syria and Cilicia from the fall of 37 to spring of 43 AD – 5 ½ years. He ministered, but he learned as well. He traveled on his own as God was preparing him for the upcoming missionary journeys he would lead. He preached, planted and strengthened churches, and learned patience through suffering. He may have even experienced death and come back to life during this time (2 Corinthians 12:1-10).

There was a complete, total change in his life and heart. Now he had the satisfaction and peace which had eluded him for so long. His life totally turned around. Outwardly, he went from the top to the bottom (a leader in Judaism to a disciple of Jesus). Inwardly, though, things went from the bottom (turmoil and guilt) to the top (peace and satisfaction).

Eventually, Paul ended up in Antioch where a very strong Christian church had begun, and where believers were first called ‘Christians.’ Paul became a leader in the church there – not one of the top men, but a leader in training. God was preparing him for the upcoming missionary outreach to Gentiles which Paul would soon spearhead.

APPENDIX 7: FASTING

Did you know that there is more in the Bible about fasting than repentance and confession? Jesus taught more about fasting than He did about baptism or the observance of the Lord’s Supper. He fasted, as did Moses, David, Elijah, Esther, Daniel, Paul and many others.

Fasting is expected by Christ. In Matthew 6:16 He says, "When you fast..." not "if you fast," implying that it is something He expects us to do. Similarly, in Matthew 9:15, Jesus told the disciples of John that it was not necessary to fast while the bridegroom was with them. Rather, the time to fast was when he was no longer around. Obviously, Jesus was referring to Himself as the bridegroom, and the historical record shows that when He ascended to the Father, the church embraced the discipline of fasting (See Acts 13:2; 14:23).

As we begin, it is important to define what we are talking about. Fasting usually makes us think of going without food, but fasting is a voluntary abstinence from any legitimate pursuit for spiritual reasons. Notice it must be voluntary, not induced by health constraints. It must be from a legitimate pursuit, not something sinful or out of bounds for a Christian anyway. And it must be given up for spiritual reasons, not dietary or medical reasons. For example, fasting from shopping (except grocery shopping) for a time can help focus our spiritual lives and teach self control. Fasting from the media (TV, cable, radio, magazines, newspapers, etc.) can give us more time to use for spiritual pursuits like Bible study and prayer.

So what is the purpose of fasting? Let us start by looking at what fasting is NOT. It is not a means to draw attention to ourselves (Matthew 6:16-18). Neither is it a way to earn approval from God. God is not impressed by what we do, but why we do it (Isaiah 58:3-4).

The biggest dangers to be avoided at all costs in fasting are legalism and pride. Instead, fasting is to be seen as something that “hoists the sails of the soul in the hopes of experiencing the gracious wind of God’s Spirit.” Receiving a spiritual blessing is not guaranteed, but fasting often puts us in position to experience this as God moves.

One important reason to fast is to draw closer to God. Fasting enables the believer to feast on God. You “eat the Lord” – craving, desiring him, wanting him, receiving him, enjoying him. God is the most desirable being in the whole universe. Every time your stomach growls with hunger, you are reminded how hungry you are for God. Every time food-thoughts attack your mind, you are reminded of God-thoughts: “I am hungry, but I am hungrier for You, God!” “I love the taste of food; but Your love tastes better.” “I prefer You, Lord, over anything.”

Fasting has often been used by God's people when a special urgency was sensed about the concerns they were lifting to the Father. This was Ezra's motivation as he was about to lead a group of exiles back to Jerusalem. The result was that God heard and granted his requests and brought success to his mission (Ezra 8:21-23). Of course, this is not to say that if we fast God is required to do as we ask. Fasting is not and never has been a way of pressuring God into giving us something. It is a way of giving ourselves fully to God so that we can say with confidence: "Thy will be done."

For some, fasting can be a way to express to God their depth of feeling. You may remember from the book of Esther that when Haman convinced King Xerxes to permit him to eliminate the Jews, this was the response of God's people to the news (See Esther 3:8-11; 4:3). They even went so far as to cover themselves with sackcloth and ashes, a sign of great sorrow.

At other times, fasting is a way to demonstrate just how serious we are about repenting of our sin. This is what the Jews sometimes did when they repented and turned back to God (see 1 Samuel 7:3-6). Nineveh, too, fasted to show repentance for sin (Jonah 3:5-10). So did Paul after seeing Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

Still another reason for fasting can be to enhance worship. The prophetess Anna never left the temple (See Luke 2:37) but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. The church at Antioch saw a unique relationship between the two as well (See Acts 13:2).

There's nothing magical about fasting. It is simply one way of telling God that your priority at that moment is to be alone with Him.

People in the Bible fasted to help them find guidance and direction from God. Paul did that after his salvation experience (Acts 9). Later in his ministry, Paul (and Barnabas) did not dare to appoint elders without praying and fasting over the matter (Acts 14:23). Nehemiah fasted to receive God's direction and wisdom about the situation in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 1). The early church fasted before sending out missionaries (Acts 13:1-3; 14:23).

Also, we can fast to help receive deliverance in times of crisis. Jehosaphat proclaimed a fast when the Moabites and Ammonites attacked (2 Chronicles 20). The USA declared a time of prayer and fasting before declaring Independence from England. During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln proclaimed times of prayer and fasting.

So what benefits do come from fasting? For one thing, fasting increases our sense of humility and dependence on God. It accomplishes this by showing us just how little strength we actually possess and how much we need the Lord (Philippians 4:13). It helps us be broken in His presence so He can fill and use us for His glory.

In a practical way, fasting increases the amount of time we spend in prayer. Instead of eating or being involved in whatever activity we are turning from, we have extra time to devote to prayer and Bible study. Try combining prayer and Bible study by praying through Bible passages as you read them. Make a list of others you can pray for. God's Spirit will put names in your mind and prompt you as to how to pray for them.

Fasting also serves as a reminder to us of our need to put Christ first in everything. Additionally, it is a good exercise in self-discipline. It strengthens us to be able to refrain from other things, such as sinful temptations, as we learn to control our appetites and lusts. Food is our greatest legitimate need after breathing, so learning to deny that drive helps us have victory over other drives which are sinful. This is especially true of learning to gain victory over lust for food, immorality or things. Even as athletes train their bodies for physical contests, fasting trains our spirits for spiritual battles.

Fasting can help in situations where we face a sin that constantly ensnares us. If we are willing to pay the price of fasting and prayer, we can know deliverance from that sin, and the joy that follows! A decision to fast in such a situation demonstrates to God that we are truly serious about our repentance, that we sincerely long for new life in that area, and that we are willing to pay any price to have victory over the sin.

Then how long should we fast? A fast can last for a portion of a day or it can last for weeks. That is really up to you and how you believe the Lord is leading in the matter. My advice is that you do not jump into a prolonged fast from food, but gradually increase the duration, allowing your body to adjust to a lack of nourishment. You can begin with a partial fast. For example, for 3 weeks Daniel fasted by eating no meat or drinking any wine (Daniel 10:3). He also refrained from the comfort of applying lotion to his body.

Or you can fast for a certain period of a day, like sunrise to sunset. Remember, though, when you fast in this way, do not eat more than you normally would when you do eat. Do not try to make up for food missed.

The best way to learn the spiritual benefits of fasting, as well as how to fast, is to fast. Is there something God wants to do in your life that you have yet to see happen? Perhaps fasting is the missing element.

APPENDIX 8: LISTENING TO GOD

Have you ever had anyone open a conversation with you by saying, “God told me to tell you ...”. Whenever I heard that, I immediately became skeptical. I guess I was a bit jealous; it seemed to me that God had never told me anything. So I made an in-depth study about how God speaks to us, because I really wanted Him to speak to me as well. I have always desired deeper intimacy with God, so hearing Him talk to me was very important. As it turns out, He had been speaking to me a lot more than I realized. The problem was that I usually did not recognize His voice. That may be the case with you as well. If so, the purpose of this article is to help you recognize and understand God’s voice, for He really does speak to us today.

Which is more important: what you have to say to God, or what God has to say to you? Which do you focus on more, talking to God or listening to God? We know He already knows what we are going to say before we say it, but we cannot know what He wants to say to us unless we listen to Him.

GOD WANTS TO SPEAK TO US I am convinced He wants to speak to us, and that He does so often. He wants us to listen to Him. Psalm 81:13 “If my people would but listen to me...” Jeremiah 33:3 ‘Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.’ Psalm 50:3 Our God comes and will not be silent. 1 Samuel 3:1-10 God spoke to Samuel as a boy.

God wants to fellowship with us, to communicate with us. He created us to have a personal relationship with Him. Not only does God desire to communicate with man, but man desires to communicate with God. Psalm 83:1 O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.

We know communication from God is possible for He is God. If He can hear us speak to Him, He can certainly speak to us as well. Not only is it possible, it is probable for He made us to relate to Him. Even more, it is necessary for it is the only way man can know God. Man desires to speak to

God just as God desires to speak to man. The Bible is full of examples of this in the past. When we see how common this was in Bible times, we will realize how common it still is today.

GOD SPOKE TO PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE In the Old Testament God walked and talked with Adam in Eden. He spoke to Cain, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Job. He spoke to Moses at the burning bush, in Egypt, in the desert and at Mt Sinai. We read that God spoke from the cloud as well as from the Ark. He even spoke through a donkey to Balaam. It is recorded that God spoke to Samuel, David, Nathan, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, Jonah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah and other prophets. Kings like Ahaz, Manasseh and Jehu heard from Him as well.

God spoke often to Jesus. He spoke to the leaders of the early church. Philip was told to go to the eunuch, Paul heard Him on the road to Damascus, Peter was told to go to Cornelius, Ananias to Paul and Paul to Macedonia. These and many other examples are listed on your handout if you want to look up any of them.

Thus we see that God did indeed speak in the past often and to many different people. Therefore it is only natural He would do the same thing today. *Jeremiah 33:3 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know.'*

HOW DOES GOD "TALK" TO US? When we communicate with each other we use verbal words, body language, or written words. God uses various means to communicate with us, too. Sometimes He uses the beauty and greatness of nature to get man's attention and show him there is a great Power at work in the universe.

Often God speaks through other people, especially mature believers who know us, to give good guidance and advice. He puts the wisdom in their minds and the desire to pass it on to us. We must recognize this as one of the ways God speaks His will to us today.

In addition, there are circumstances and experiences which God uses to reveal His plan and will to us. Often we are not sensitive enough to hear God as He speaks in these ways. Paul saw God speak through circumstances both when He opened a way or closed a way for Paul to go in ministry (Acts 16:7; 1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Usually when we think about talking with God we think about **prayer**, and rightly so. Prayer, as we all know, includes listening as well as talking. Communication implies listening as well as talking – giving out information and taking in information.

When you pray, first pray to listen; pray you will be open to and able to listen. Then listen to pray; ask God how you should pray about certain things and listen for His guidance. It is while listening that we suddenly become aware of a flash of revelation, an insight in the form of a picture, an inner inaudible prompting, a thought that comes to mind, a word or phrase of Scripture, a growing conviction or awareness of what needs to be done, or an increasing consciousness of what God desires you to do.

Jesus is a prime example of this. Since He set aside those attributes that would have made His earthly life easier, such as His omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence (Philippians 2:7), He needed wisdom and revelation, guidance and direction from God through the Holy Spirit, the same as we receive it. He prayed for long periods of time because that was when He connected with God. Surely He did not spend all that time talking, but must have been also listening. A good example of this is found in His choosing the twelve to follow Him. He spent the previous night in prayer, obviously asking for and receiving guidance about whom to choose (Luke 6:12-19).

God uses **His Word** to speak to us (2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 4:12). Sometimes a familiar scripture just jumps off the page; a promise in Scripture speaks to a present situation; understanding

of a certain passage, story or verse comes alive to us in a new way; or the hearing of His spoken Word goes deep into our soul and ministers to a need.

Ok, so God speaks to us through nature, others, circumstances, prayer and the written Word. Often, the way He speaks through them is by the Holy Spirit living in us, communicating what He wants to say. Therefore, we must make sure we add the **Holy Spirit** to our list of how God communicates to us today.

Since personal, face-to-face communication with God will not happen until we are living in heaven, God now reveals His guidance and direction to us through His Holy Spirit within us. It is His Spirit that speaks His message to our hearts (John 16:6-13). Just as Jesus spoke God's message to the disciples when He was with them, so the Spirit also spoke to them when Jesus was gone. The Spirit is Jesus' replacement, so we need to listen to Him as we would if Jesus Himself were sitting here talking to us!

When we listen to Him, the Holy Spirit shows us how to pray (Romans 8:26-27). It is the Holy Spirit who delivers our message, our thoughts and feelings, to God the Father. It is also He who delivers God's message to us. When we say that we 'hear' God's voice, it is really the Spirit within Who is speaking to us.

The final way God still speaks is through our **conscience** (Romans 9:1). Our conscience is not a perfect instrument, for it is programmed much like a computer, but as you grow as a Christian, God sensitizes your conscience so it lines up with the Bible. When I am given too much change by a clerk, when I try to avoid an opportunity to speak out for Jesus, when I am tempted to do something I know I shouldn't – then God's Spirit warns me by pricking my conscience.

So God continues to speak to us today through nature, others, circumstances, prayer, the written Word, the Holy Spirit and our conscience. We need to become more aware that God is indeed speaking to us. We need to be able to recognize and 'read' Him as easily as we do a mate or good friend. We need to spend more time listening.

WHAT DOES GOD'S VOICE SOUND LIKE? It is very important to recognize God's voice when He speaks to you. Let us look at what God's voice sounds like, and then we will talk about some of the things He says. The first clue we have to what God's voice sounds like is in 1 Kings 19 where we see it is a still, small voice – **a gentle whisper**. God spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice (2 Kings 19:11-13). He was not in the wind, fire or earthquake. Sometimes we think God speaks in a supernatural, highly emotional, deeply moving way. Maybe sometimes, but usually it is a still, small voice. That is the voice we need to learn to listen for and recognize.

I remember several years ago I was marrying a couple that I had known for a long time and that had been coming to church and Bible studies for quite some time. They had some major 'issues' it seemed they had worked through, but the day before the wedding the groom did something that was part of his old pattern. I clearly heard God's voice in my spirit telling me not to marry them, so I didn't. The bride and both families really put a lot of pressure on me to go ahead with the wedding, but I knew that God had spoken.

Remember, this is not a verbal voice, a sensation or an emotional experience. In fact, it can be very easy to overlook His voice or just think it's a thought of our own. It can be a thought that won't go away, an impression that won't leave, a burden that demands action, or a new idea that has the stamp of God upon it.

We need to learn to hear God's still voice as He speaks to us. I can think back on times He told me to talk to someone about Him, and I didn't. Those still haunt me. Better memories are the times when God put it on my heart to speak to someone, and I obeyed.

We need to learn to recognize God's still, quiet voice speaking to us. When we learn to listen for it, we recognize that He speaks **rich and enlightened thoughts** to our spirits. God can put a new idea directly and immediately into our mind. He can give us a new perspective in which to view something. He can put new desires into our hearts. He can stimulate certain memories stored within our mind just when they are most needed. Often God's still, small voice takes the form of thoughts that are our thoughts, though they are not from us.

When God speaks in your heart, it does not matter where your mind has been going; He blocks and overrides all circuits. You are captivated by His voice speaking to you. He commands your undivided attention. There is absolute certainty in what He says. What He says is right. His word has perfect balance and proportion. Everything He shows us fits together seamlessly. The word He gives us is complete. Everything He says complements everything He has been showing us.

When I study, when I prepare sermons and lessons, I try to be very aware of the rich and enlightening thoughts that God sends me by means of His Spirit. When I counsel I always try to be sensitive to His leading and direction. When we are involved in spiritual warfare, it is essential to be in tune to hear what thoughts God gives me. God speaks to you in the same way. You need to learn to take time to recognize His voice (John 2:22; 14:26).

Spend time quietly listening to God. Have a paper and pencil with you to start writing down some of the things that come to mind. It may be a reminder of something to do or an idea about how to solve a problem. It could be just a sense of peace and wellbeing. But first, you must listen.

God speaks to us today through His Holy Spirit. We can hear His voice. It is not a sound, it is a voice; not something you hear with your ears, but in your mind. Once you learn to recognize and respond to this voice, you will recognize it often - that gentle whisper. God speaks rich and enlightening thoughts to our spirit by His Spirit. Often this still, small voice speaks rich and enlightening thoughts by causing a **burning within the heart**.

The disciples who talked with Jesus on the road to Emmaus that first Resurrection Sunday experienced this. Luke 24:32 says, "They asked each other, 'were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?'" Psalm 39:1-3 talks about this as well. "My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned."

Do you ever find yourself moved by something you sense in your spirit? Perhaps it happens during a song or sermon, when listening to a testimony, or when you are out in nature? This stirring is God speaking to our hearts through His Holy Spirit, putting His fire within us to highlight something of importance.

So we see that this still, small voice speaks rich and enlightening thoughts by causing a burning within our hearts. How He speaks is by a gentle, quiet whisper. Where He speaks is to our thoughts and to our hearts. He touches our rational mental capacity (enlightened thoughts) as well as our emotional feelings (burning hearts).

WHAT DOES GOD'S VOICE SAY? What can we expect to hear from God? What sort of things does He communicate to those who are listening? To Ezekiel, God complained that "these people have ears to hear but they never hear, eyes to see but they never see" (12:2). Jesus repeated this complaint several times as well (Mark 8:18; Matthew 13:13).

For most of us, the first time we heard God speak to us He was **convicting** us of sin, making us aware of our sin, showing us our need of salvation. That was God speaking to us, or we would not have become aware of our sin. Jesus said, "When the Holy Spirit comes, He will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me" (John 16:7-11). I Thessalonians 1:4-5 says the gospel comes to us with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.

Usually the first time we hear Him speak, it is convicting us of our sin and need of Him. He continues to warn us about sin and point out sins we have committed. He also communicates information and guidance when we need that. At other times, He may speak encouragement and peace to us. When He has a special service of ministry to do, He gives us direction and ability to do that. Then, too, there are times He reveals Himself to us so we will respond in worship.

God speaks to us to show us the sin in our life. He does this before salvation so we will see our need of Him. He also does this in the lives of those who have freely received His gift of salvation so that they can confess and repent of their sins. Problems arise when we follow the tendency to only heed what we want to hear. A doctor can give us good advice about diet changes or needed exercise, but we can very easily decide to ignore his counsel for changes we do not want to make.

I've learned to recognize God's Spirit when He convicts me of sin. He warns me ahead of time through my conscience. He also censures me after I have sinned. While we may not want to hear these things from Him, we can thank Him for faithfully bringing sin to our attention. Think what might happen if He did not!

A second type of content God speaks to us is **information and guidance**. Jesus said, "But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13).

The Bible abounds with examples of this. Paul said the Holy Spirit warned him of what was to come when he went to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-23). He reminded the church in Corinth that they had the "mind of Christ" (2:16). Joseph heard of Pharaoh's dreams, and God told Him the contents and their meaning. Daniel heard Nebuchadnezzar's dream, and God gave him the interpretation. Jacob (Genesis 46:2) and Samuel (2 Samuel 23:2) both said God spoke His guidance to them. Simeon was moved by the Spirit to find Jesus with His parents in the temple (Luke 2:25-28). Several times the Bible tells us that God guided Him by directing His spirit (Mark 2:8; John 13:21). God spoke to Ananias and told him to go to blind Paul (Acts 9:11-15).

Twenty three years ago, I was between churches and seeking where God would have me minister. A church in western Pennsylvania invited us to come speak and apply, so we did. We were not sure if God wanted us to go there or not, but they went ahead with their procedure and voted on us. The vote was 100% - unanimous. I remember agonizing over the decision, awaiting their final call telling us if we were coming or not. When the phone rang I still was uncertain, but as I talked I knew God was telling me to turn it down. I really wanted to get back to pastoring. I had never heard of Main Street Baptist Church in Doylestown. Six months later, God led us there, and the church vote was 51% in our favor. Denominational leaders urged us to turn down what was then a hot-bed of conflict and strife, but I knew God was leading us to stay with this one. Listening to God and allowing for His guidance and direction are so very important.

It's not just the big things, but little things He leads us with as well. Many times I have not been able to find my keys or something else I misplaced. After frantically looking everywhere, I finally stop and pray, then soon after that their location pops right into my mind!

So when we talk about the content of what God speaks, we find He speaks conviction, information and guidance, and also encouragement.

God does not only speak information to us; quite often He speaks **words of encouragement**, peace, comfort and strength (John 14:27; Philippians 4:6-7). God has given me encouragement and peace about our church. Despite the small number of people and financial difficulties, I know He wanted me to persevere there.

So God speaks conviction, information and encouragement to us. He also **tells us how to carry on the responsibilities and ministries He has given us**. His voice calls people into ministry

(I Timothy 1:12; 2:6-7) and then tells those whom He has called what to say. Moses is an example of this (Exodus 4:10-12). Surely, you have noticed times when you were talking to someone about spiritual things and suddenly found yourself explaining something in a way you had never thought of before that moment.

When I teach and preach, I depend on God to give me the right words to say. That is why I always pray before I start, asking Him to give me His words to speak and that everyone would hear Him, not me. I need to listen to Him, and you need to be hearing from Him as you hear me.

The final form His communication may take is that of **revelation of Himself**. Often it will just seem to 'hit' us how wonderful, powerful or majestic God is. This is His revealing Himself to us by His Holy Spirit so we can rejoice, respond in praise and worship.

Sometimes we can be so overwhelmed with God's love in our soul that we find ourselves enraptured in an immense feeling of being loved deeply, of God telling us how much He loves us. Our natural response is to worship, to love Him back.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE? Now that we have covered the topic of God speaking to us, we need to turn to our side – man listening to God. Since God does speak to me, what can I do to hear God's voice? Hearing God's voice is more than just reading a couple of Bible verses each morning.

The first requirement to hearing God's voice is **salvation**. While our sin still separates us from God we are not only spiritually blind, we are also spiritually deaf. Since it is God's Spirit within us that communicates God's messages to us, we have no 'receiver' or 'transmitter' until we have God's Spirit.

However, just because we have accepted Jesus as Savior and have the Holy Spirit inside does not mean we are always attuned to Him. Sin, rebellion, disobedience, self-centeredness, laziness, these and many other things can quench His Spirit. We do not lose the Holy Spirit when we sin, but we do cut off the communication with God that comes through Him. So we need to be **disciples** who follow Him and live for Him in order to regularly hear from Him.

When we have accepted Jesus as Savior and have Him first in life, with no unconfessed sin, we will hear from God. God supernaturally opens our spiritual eyes so we can 'see' His truth. He also opens our spiritual ears so we can 'hear' His voice. Ezekiel 12:2 warns, "Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear?" So important is this verse that it is quoted seven times in the Gospels and another seven times in the Book of Revelation. So, before we can listen to God we must have His Spirit within, and there can be nothing blocking our listening to Him. We must make that free will choice to listen to Him.

WHAT KEEPS ME FROM HEARING GOD'S VOICE? Lots of things can break the connection between us and God. One of the most common things is **distractions** that turn us from His voice.

Luke 10:34 says that Martha was too busy to hear Jesus because she was distracted by meal preparations. If we do not make time to spend with God, talking to Him and listening to His voice, we will not hear Him. He will not shout over other things and force us listen. He waits until we are ready to quietly listen to Him, however long that may take.

Sometimes, when I am too busy during the day and neglect my relationship with God, I find myself waking up during the night for no reason and just lying there. I have learned to use that time to pray and reconnect with God. It is His way of calling me aside to be with Him. Nancy does the same when I neglect spending quality time with her, not by waking me up during the night, but she does let me know I have been neglecting our relationship. Is God trying to tell you right now that you've been neglecting Him? Listen to what He says!

Martin Luther said, "I have so much to do today that I shall never get through it with less than three hours' prayer." Charles Spurgeon said, "I always feel that there is something wrong if I go without prayer for even half an hour in the day." Even when times are busy, we must learn to listen.

A second interference that can block us from hearing God's voice is **disappointment**. The Psalmist cries, "O my God, I cry out day by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent" (Psalm 22:2). When our prayers do not appear to be answered according to our wishes, we sometimes stop praying and drift from God. When we feel hurt by someone, we withdraw from them.

Daniel had to pray for three weeks before he received God's answer (Daniel 10:12-14). We may have to pray for three years, or thirty years. It is very likely that Jonah's family was killed by the Assyrians, so when God sent him to bring them a message that would spare them from judgment, Jonah did not want to listen to God.

I remember when, as a new Christian, I prayed for something very important to me. I believed God wanted me to ask Him for it, and that if I prayed and believed, God would grant my request. He did not, and I was confused and devastated. I had a decision to make: withdraw from God because I was disappointed in His will, or trust Him anyway.

The final danger to examine concerning the ways our hearing God can be blocked is **disbelief**. Four times the Bible says, "Today, if you will hear his voice...." (Hebrews 3:7, 15; 4:7; Psalm 95:7). It is up to us to decide to believe we will hear Him. Do you believe He can speak to you, to you yourself, and not just to others? If not, confess your unbelief and ask for forgiveness.

WHAT DOES GOD DO TO GET OUR ATTENTION WHEN WE AREN'T LISTENING? God is faithful. He wants us to listen to Him. He even goes out of His way to get our attention when we are not listening. My computer gives an alert when it is disconnected and cannot receive signals. God sends warning notices to a disconnected spirit as well.

This message may come in the form of an **unsettled spirit**. When God wanted to get a message to King Ahasuerus, He kept the King from sleeping (Esther 6:1). If you feel restlessness in your spirit, an unsettled feeling, like something is wrong or missing, take that as God's warning that He wants your attention. Listen to what He has to say.

Another form this message can take is an **unsolicited word from another person**. This could be an admonition or a correction. God sent Nathan to David with such a message after David sinned with Bathsheba and then did not confess his sin (2 Samuel 12:1). The unsolicited word could even take the form of compliments and words of appreciation or approval which can get our eyes off ourselves and onto God.

The third type of warning message from God is **unusual circumstances, both good and bad**. Paul alerted the Corinthians to the fact that, because of unconfessed sin, many of them were sick and some had died (1 Corinthians 12:29-30). Illness, accidents, bankruptcies, failures, divorce, disappointments – all these and other means may be used to get someone's attention to bring him back to God. This is not to say that all negative circumstances are God's way of getting our attention, but it is certainly something to consider.

God not only uses negative things to get our attention, but also positive. Sometimes God sends **blessing** to get us to listen to Him again (Romans 2:4).

So, we see that God gets our attention by giving us a restless spirit, an unsolicited word from another person, unusual circumstances, both good and bad, and also by **unanswered prayer**. Sometimes, when it seems the heavens are closed and God is not hearing us, God simply wants us to concentrate our efforts more toward connecting with Him. While this certainly is not the only

reason for what we call ‘unanswered’ prayer, sometimes God does use it to make us more desperate to hear from Him so we will examine our lives for sin and listen all the closer to Him.

THE COST WE MUST PAY TO HEAR GOD’S VOICE What must we make sure we are doing to hear God’s voice? **Hearing means commitment to obey.** We must listen before we can obey, but we will not be able to really listen until we commit to obey. “Listen” refers to more than hearing sound. When a parent says to their child, “Did you hear me?” they are not wondering if their voice was loud enough. They are pointing out the importance of doing what was said.

We must make a commitment to obey God before He speaks, not wait until we hear from Him and then consider what He says along with our other options. He does not speak His will to us just so we can think about it. He wants to see evidence of an obedient heart before we even know what He will say(Hebrews 3:7-8). Hearing means commitment to obey, and often when we do so, there is a price to pay.

Hearing means commitment to pay. God often calls us to do things that do not fit our agenda, our schedule or our idea of what should be done. Hosea committed himself to obey God, and God told him to marry an adulterous wife (Hosea 1:1-3). Jeremiah was cruelly persecuted. Isaiah was commanded to go around naked and barefoot for three years (20:3-5). Hearing God means commitment to obey, no matter what the price we must pay.

Always be on the alert for anything God may be doing to get you to better listen to Him. Is He giving you an unsettled spirit, an unsolicited word from another person, unusual circumstances (both bad and good), or unanswered prayer? Do you notice any of these in your life right now? Is God trying to get your attention so you will listen?

Make sure you are willing to obey what He says, even before He tells you. Some things may be pleasing and easy, but others may be difficult to do and understand. Often there is a price to pay. Are you willing to pay the price to hear from God? Will you commit to obey Him no matter what He says?

BENEFITS OF LISTENING TO GOD When we listen to Him, He shows us the **path to travel**. He provides guidance, leading, directions and instruction we need (Isaiah 30:21). You can see this in the lives of Moses, Abraham, Joseph, Daniel, David and many others.

Another benefit of listening is a **peace within**. That peace comes from an intimate relationship with Him. Knowing we are in God’s will and that He will lead us gives us peace (John 14:27). When you listen with an obedient heart toward the One you love above all else, He will give you a deep assurance and abiding sense of rest; you will not be swayed by pressures, and confusion cannot enter your mind.

A **positive attitude** comes from listening to God as well. This is an all-encompassing attitude that God is in charge and in control (Luke 2:19; 1:45).

Also **personal intimacy** comes when we learn to hear God better. When we share ourselves with God and He with us, there comes a deep sense of connection(Psalm 32:8-9).

Of course, we should not leave out the fact that when we listen to God we feel **purification**. We feel clean inside when we confess the sins He has brought to our attention; we feel a companionship and closeness to Him, that we are wholesome and accepted.

Listening develops in us a **passion to obey** God. God works from the inside out and refreshes us. He gives us an earnestness to get up and get moving to do what He wants. He increases our zeal and enthusiasm.

Finally, listening to God **promotes listening to others**. When God spoke to the boy Samuel, the more experienced Eli taught the boy how to recognize and respond to God's voice (1 Samuel 3:8-9).

With wonderful benefits like these, how could anyone not want to spend time listening to God? What better use of time is there than communicating with the Creator of the Universe, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords?

COUNTERFEIT VOICES WE HEAR There are actually three counterfeit 'voices' that can confuse or mislead us. The first is the **voice of the flesh**. As Paul says in Romans 8:5-8, the flesh is, in essence, the part of us that tends to sin. It is in opposition to the Spirit in us and leads us to disobedience of God (James 1:13-14). The desires of the flesh can be strong, especially if they have been given free rein in the past. By knowing what God's Word says and by listening to the convicting voice of the Spirit within, we can learn to recognize this voice for the self-centered temptation it is.

A second 'voice' is the **voice of the world**. The world system, with its values and goals, can have a strong appeal to our sin nature (flesh). John warns us not to love the system around us, that it is not based on love of God and His Word (1 John 2:15-17). Its 'voice' comes to us through what we see, hear and read in our daily lives. It can come through others, the media, or our own envy of those who seem better off than we are. Inputs from the world around us can be very persuasive, affecting how we think and therefore behave. They can sound very appealing, so we need to carefully study God's will as revealed in the Bible and be sensitive to the Spirit's promptings and warnings. When the voice of the world lines up with the voice of the flesh, the temptation can be very strong.

The most dangerous voice, however, because it is most subtle, is the **voice of Satan**. Ananias obviously listened to Satan's voice instead of God's when saying he was donating all he received for the sale of his land when it was, in fact, only part of the amount (Acts 5:3). Satan does communicate with man. He did so with Jesus, tempting Him after Jesus was forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 4). Paul says Satan sows deception in the hearts of people (2 Corinthians 11:3).

To confuse or deceive us, Satan often counterfeits God and pretends to be God speaking to us. The results are deadly if we listen to the wrong voice. As with a friend or loved one, we must take time to listen. As we learn to identify God's voice and commit to responding to what He says, we will find we hear from Him quite often. Our relationship with Him will grow, and we'll be much better servants of His. Sometimes, however, knowing which voice we are hearing can be difficult.

Judas heard Satan's voice and betrayed Jesus (Matthew 26:14-16). Peter heard Satan's voice and did not believe the voice of Jesus (Mark 8:31-33). A leper was healed by Jesus and was told not to tell anyone who healed him, but he heard Satan's voice and disobeyed (Mark 1:40-45).

Jesus says that everything Satan says is a lie, for that is his nature (John 8:44). The Bible gives no details about just how Satan does this, but we do know he can put thoughts into a person's mind (Mark 8:33). In addition, Satan can take thoughts out of a mind (Matthew 13:19).

As with Adam and Eve, Satan's communication with man is always deceitful and destructive. He can suggest how we may meet a legitimate need on our own, without waiting for God's provision; put thoughts of guilt and failure into our minds; provide excuses to justify a sinful course we are taking. His aim is always to undermine God's goodness and the Bible's authority.

Satan is willing to speak as much as a man is willing to listen. He uses various forms of the occult to communicate with man, such as tarot cards, Ouija boards, séances, and other means. He can and will speak directly to a person much as the Holy Spirit does (1 Peter 5:8). This is very dangerous.

While we know Satan is limited to one place at a time, we must recognize that he does his work through demons. It is highly unlikely that Satan will ever speak to us directly, but assigning certain demons to harass and impact us can still bring the results he desires. Thus, when we say that 'Satan speaks to us,' we are really recognizing that all demonic forces work together for Satan.

David's thought to take a census of the people was demon-inspired (1 Chronicles 21:1ff; 2 Samuel 24:1). So was Saul's jealousy and anger at David (1 Samuel 16:14-23). Ananias and Sapphira's greed was demon stimulated as well (Acts 5:3). King Saul went to a medium to connect with a supernatural power when God did not speak to him (1 Samuel 28:4-7). For this reason John warns, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Therefore it is essential to make sure you can tell Satan's voice from God's voice. Let's look at how to do that.

HOW CAN I TELL THE VOICE IS GOD'S OR SATAN'S?

The first way we can tell the difference between God's voice and Satan's voice is that **God convicts while Satan condemns**. When God speaks to us about sin, we feel guilty and sinful, but still loved. When it is Satan condemning us, we only feel rejected and hopeless.

Jesus forgives and restores, as with the woman taken in adultery. Jesus stood her up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:10-11). By contrast, Satan accuses and focuses on our guilt. That is why he is called the 'accuser of our brothers' (Revelation 12:10).

God will expose the sin and focus on it, but only for the purpose of our confessing and repenting of it. He offers hope of restoration. He does not emphasize our guilt, failure and unworthiness in that area or as a person in general, but Satan does.

When Jesus convicts, we know specifically what He is talking about and what to do about it. When Satan accuses, we just have a nagging sense of unspecified guilt and failure which discourages and defeats us. Or Satan may point to past sins which have been confessed and forgiven, then try to get us to feel miserable about them, ignoring the fact that God has forgotten them.

A second way of telling the difference is to remember that **God clarifies but Satan confuses**. God desires to clearly show us sin in its true, deadly light. He removes for us the deceptions of 'pleasure' which Satan has used to justify the sin. Satan tries to perplex us with worldly logic and explanations by feeding us excuses, justifications, thoughts of how it is another's fault, and general confusion over it (James 3:15). When God speaks, there is a sense that everything is under control (1 Corinthians 14:32). Satan's purpose is to ensnare and take captive (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

God's voice brings peace (Philippians 4:7), but Satan's voice brings uncertainty, for what he tells us conflicts with what the Spirit is also telling us. Thus, we feel perplexed. If the voice you are hearing brings a nagging, gnawing feeling of frustration in your spirit, it is not from God. God brings a deep calmness in your spirit.

There's another way to tell the difference: **God confirms while Satan contradicts**. When God's voice speaks to us, we know it lines up with the Bible and the advice to us from godly believers. It passes Paul's test of making sure everything is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and admirable (Philippians 4:8-9). However, when Satan speaks, his words do not agree with the Bible or advice of mature Christians. When a desire is so strong that we ignore the warnings in our spirit, we are headed toward sin.

Further, **God chooses while Satan captures**. God's voice brings us freedom, there are no strings attached. "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Following Satan's voice brings bondage, we are trapped and taken prisoner (2 Timothy 2:26).

Satan says, "Do your own thing, do what you want to do." God says, "Consider the effects of your behavior on others. Live a selfless, self-giving life." Satan says, "Live for the moment." God says, "Live with an eye on eternity." Satan says "Do not concern yourself with what others say." God says, "Receive godly counsel." Satan says, "You are as mature as you ever need to be. You are grown up." God says, "Continue to grow and mature, to become more and more like Jesus." In all these instances Satan's advice, while appealing to our flesh, leads to bondage and defeat. God's will, instead, brings freedom and life.

In addition, **God constrains but Satan constricts**. God draws us by His love and gives us a desire to want to live for Him. "For Christ's love compels us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). Moving from sin to following God is like taking a shower when we are really dirty because we know how good we will feel afterwards. Satan's communication does not bring that. It constricts, limits, makes us feel dirtier and ineffective. We feel discouraged and hopeless. Satan is like the salesman trying to force us to make a decision we are not quite sure of, telling us if we miss this opportunity to buy now, it will be too late. God respects our free will; He does not force us. He gives us time to think the alternatives through. When we feel forced, pushed or in a hurry, we can know Satan is speaking, not God. God is never in a hurry!

The way to tell Satan's voice from God's voice is to run what you hear through the following test:

1 - **Is it consistent with the word of God?** Does this solution fit the principles that are in the Bible? Does it violate anything in the Bible? Would Jesus do it?

2 - **Is it a wise decision?** In your own heart and mind is it the type of solution that Jesus Christ himself would agree with? Would Jesus implement this solution himself?

3 - **Are you confident in asking God to enable you to achieve this solution?** Can you look upon this solution as one that God would send into your life?

4 - **Do you feel that it is a God given solution?** Deep within your heart, do you feel or sense that this solution is the will of God?

5 - **Does this solution fit a child of God?** From all that you know about God, does this solution or this answer fit a person that truly loves, believes, and trusts God?

6 - **Does the solution fit God's overall plan for your life?** Does this solution fit in with God's guidance and direction of your life?

7 - **Does this solution honor God?** Does it bring glory and praise to Almighty God?

Have you been able to recognize any of these traits of Satan's voice in communication you have been hearing? Make sure you are not following anything that does not come from God!

Are you now better able to discern God's voice from Satan's voice? If you really want to hear from God only and not be deceived, He will make sure you have the discernment you need. Just ask Him.

APPENDIX 9: LESSONS FROM THE CHURCHES IN REVELATION 2-3

The seven churches in Revelation 2-3 were actual churches that had been started 40 or 50 years ago by Paul or his followers. All of them are still outwardly functioning as a church and doing

what God wants, but many are just doing it out of habit or to impress others. God demands their service is motivated by love and devotion to Jesus. This is a good reminder for us today as well.

THE CHURCH AT EPHEBUS – Doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

The church at Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7) is known as the church that left its first love – Jesus. Ephesus was a leading seaport and the capital and largest city of the Roman province of Asia. It was a very modern city that followed all the most recent ideas and philosophies, no matter how evil or sinful they were. The temple to the goddess Diana was there. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Paul started the church in Ephesus about 45 years before Revelation was written. He used it as his base of operations for at least 3 years (Acts 18:19-21; 19; 1 Corinthians 16:8). Timothy labored there as well (1 Timothy 1:3) and so did the Apostle John. Tradition says John lived there with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Four of the books in the New Testament were written to the Christians in Ephesus: Ephesians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Revelation). Perhaps John's Gospel and his three epistles were written to them as well.

Jesus is described as the One who holds all the pastors and churches in His hand. He has sovereign protection and divine authority over all of us (Revelation 2:1).

The church is commended for being a committed church of hard working people (Revelation 2:2). They persevere despite persecution and keep serving (Revelation 2:2). They cannot tolerate sin or false teaching (Revelation 2:2-3, 6).

However, Jesus says they have forsaken their first love (Revelation 2:4). They stand for the truth, persevere despite difficulties and serve God, but they have lost the fervency, the depth and the purity of their love for Jesus. They had it in the beginning, but it faded in time. They did all the right things, but for the wrong reason. God doesn't look to see how busy and active we are in His service, He looks to see how strong our love and devotion is to Jesus.

That can happen to us, too. We go through the motions doing everything a pastor or church should do, but we aren't motivated by love and commitment to Jesus Christ Himself. Does your mind wander when you read the Bible or pray? Do you say and do the right things but know Jesus isn't in first place in your heart? God isn't impressed by what we do, He looks at the reason we do it (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). When Jesus looks at your heart, does He see love for Himself as the strongest controlling factor in your life? Do you do what you do out of a love for Jesus and no other reason? It's very important you do.

Jesus called on the church at Ephesus to listen to His warning and to repent and make Him number one in their hearts again. Tradition tells us they did repent and change. The church there was strong and provided great church leaders for the next 300 years. Eventually Islam took over the area and destroyed all the churches and Christians. The city of Ephesus was deserted 600 years ago and the site is now empty.

A HEALTHY CHURCH faithfully serves Jesus because of love for Him and for no other reason. Pride, greed, fear of rejection, trying to impress God or others, wanting to earn approval from God or others – all these are wrong reasons to follow. Love of Jesus because of what He did for us can be the only reason behind what we do for Him.

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA - Faithful in persecution.

The church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11) was both rich and poor. Smyrna was also a seaport on the Aegean Sea about 40 miles north of Ephesus. It was a large, wealthy city with a population of about 100,000. It was destroyed several times by invading armies or earthquakes but was always rebuilt by its inhabitants. The goddess Cybele was worshipped there. She was seen as the

personification of the yearly rejuvenation of nature in spring ("mother nature"). The city still exists today with a population of about 200,000.

Polycarp, who lived from 70 AD to 155 AD, was part of the church in Smyrna when this was written (95 AD). He was a disciple of the Apostle John and a friend of Ignatius. He taught Pothinus and Irenaeus, other influential early church leaders. He had a deep devotion for Christ.

Jesus describes Himself as the one who knows what is happening and can accurately judge. He knows what it is like to face death as they do and He reminds them of life after death for all believers (Revelation 2:8).

Jesus commends them for their faithfulness despite intense persecution. When Polycarp was 86 he was arrested but urged by Roman officials to turn from Christ and be set free. He said, "86 years I have served Him and He never did me any injury. How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" The official said, "I have respect for your age. Simply say, 'Away with the atheists (referring to the Christians who denied all the Roman false gods) and be set free.'" Polycarp solemnly said "Away with the atheists" - pointing to the pagan crowd. He was burned at the stake in AD 155.

Early Christians were accused of many things: cannibalism (because partaking of Jesus' body in the Lord's Supper), lust and immorality (because they greeted each other with a holy kiss), atheism (because they rejected other gods) and political disloyalty (because they would not say Caesar was god). We today are accused of many things by unbelievers around us as well. Like then, we must stay faithful.

Because they were Christians their possessions were taken and they were poor (Revelation 2:9). But Jesus reminds them that they are spiritually very rich, and that is what matters more than earthly riches. That is important for us to remember today as well.

The believers in Smyrna had been Jews before turning to Jesus. The Jews who didn't believe persecuted them (Revelation 2:9). Rejection and criticism that comes from friends and family can be very painful. Jesus faced the same thing, and as we follow Him we will not be exempt.

Jesus encouraged them to stay faithful because one day the persecution would end (Revelation 2:10). It lasted from 54 AD to 284 AD. They are told to not give in to fear (Revelation 2:10; 1:17-18; 2 Timothy 1:7). The worst persecution can bring is death, and death holds no fear to those who believe in Jesus. There is a special reward, a crown, for those who stay faithful (Revelation 2:10). The cross comes first, then the crown. It was that way with Jesus and will be that way with us as well.

There is no condemnation for this church; nothing stated that they needed to change. In times of suffering and persecution we draw much closer to Jesus and live for Him. We don't like painful times, but it is during them that we become more like Jesus. Jesus promises that those who put their faith in Him will never face separation from God but will be united with Him for all eternity (Revelation 2:11).

A HEALTHY CHURCH faithfully serves Jesus even when being persecuted. No one likes to suffer, but God does use it for our growth and His glory. He stayed faithful when dying for us, we must stay faithful in living for Him.

CHURCH AT PERGAMUM - Tolerating sin in the church.

The church in Pergamum (Revelation 2:12-17) is described as being the church next door to Satan's throne. The city was about 55 miles north of Smyrna and a few miles inland. It was a center for many pagan religious cults. Emperor worship was very strong in Pergamum. It had a university with a large library and was known as a leading producer of parchment. It still exists today as "Bergama" and has a Christian church in it.

Jesus describes Himself as the One who is able to judge, to discern and to clearly divide (Revelation 2:12). He knows of their sin and hates it.

He acknowledges they live in a city dominated by Satanic activity through the worship of Asklepios (the god of medicine worshipped as a serpent) and Zeus. He knows they have stayed true, even to death. Antipas was a pastor or leader who was martyred for his faith (Revelation 2:13).

Despite this, there were some real problems in the church. A few in the church had sin in their lives and the church was allowing it (Revelation 2:14-15). A few in sin in a church can ruin a church's power and remove God's blessing on the whole church. The sin is similar to Balak's sin. Balak brought sexual immorality among the Israelites, and evidently some in this church were doing the same thing there. We must keep all sexual sin out of our churches today. When a person repents and is forgiven we must restore them and show grace as Jesus shows us, but if they haven't repented we must confront and point out the sin. That is true for pastors and leaders as well as church members.

There were some followers of Nicolas there as well (Revelation 2:15). They advocated indulging the flesh in any sin they wanted to commit. They felt they were more spiritual than others because they were 'free' to do anything their body wanted to do. They said sin committed by the body didn't affect the spirit, so why not sin? At Ephesus they hated this teaching (Revelation 2:6), here some practiced it and the others let them (Revelation 2:15).

While only a few committed these sins, everyone was called to repentance for allowing it to continue in the church (Revelation 2:16). Jesus warns that if the church doesn't deal with these sins then He Himself will bring judgment against those sinning and those who allow it.

Jesus also reassured those who are faithful to Him and stood against these sins that they will be blessed and rewarded in this life and the next (Revelation 2:17).

A HEALTHY CHURCH does not tolerate sin. They lovingly but firmly remove anyone who continues in unrepentant sin. Too often today we don't want to offend anyone so we allow open sin to continue. The pastor and whole church is then guilty of allowing it and will lose His blessing because of it. It can be hard to challenge those who allow sin in their lives but we must do it for their sake and for the churches sake (Matthew 18:15-17). This pertains not only to immorality but to gossip, anger, judging others, pride and selfishness.

CHURCH AT THYATIRA – An influential woman allowed to bring in sin.

The church at Thyatira (Revelation 2:18-29) is known as the church that allowed Jezebel to mislead them. Like the other cities in Revelation 2-3, Thyatira is located in eastern Asia Minor. It bordered on Mysia on the north and Lydia on the south. It was a trading town that was famous for it dies for clothing. There was a large guild of dyers in the city.

Lydia is from Thyatira, so it has been suggested that she started the church when she returned home from Philippi (Acts 16:14-15), but no one knows for sure.

Jesus revealed Himself as God who judge sin. He sees all sin, hates it and will judge it (Revelation 2:18). He did find good in the church (Revelation 2:19). They were actively producing good works, they loved God and each other, patiently persevered in faith, they served out of love and they stayed faithful even in hard times. These characteristics were growing stronger among them (Revelation 2:19).

However there is a sin among them that overshadows all the good. One sin in a church can, and does do that! They allowed a woman member to be involved in immorality and idolatry and did not stop her. They didn't approve, but they didn't stop her from bringing this into the church and as a result many were being misled by her (Revelation 2:20). She was called 'Jezebel' because she acted

like the evil wife of King Ahab who was also very immoral and idolatrous. Evidently she was a very influential woman of high position, perhaps even the wife of a church leader or pastor, so no one wanted to oppose her.

She claimed special revelation from God as a prophetess, but the power really came from Satan. She compromised with her culture to be accepted as one of them (eating meats sacrificed to idols) (Revelation 2:20).

God promises He will discipline her with death (Revelation 2:21-22; 1 Corinthians 11:29-30; 1 John 5:16; Acts 5), the same as the Old Testament Jezebel (2 Kings 9:30-37). Those who didn't oppose her will also be disciplined (Revelation 2:22-23; Hebrews 12:4-12), some even with death. Many of these are probably true believers but ones who went astray and believed her lies. They won't lose their salvation, but they will forfeit reward and blessing because of their unfaithfulness. Those who tried to stand against her in the church won't be disciplined and are encouraged to stay faithful (Revelation 12:24-25) because they will be rewarded in heaven (Revelation 2:26-28).

It is important to realize that when Satan attacks a church from without with persecution the church just grows stronger (as at Smyrna). But when Satan plants someone with false teachings inside the church, he often succeeds in distracting the whole church and bringing them under God's discipline.

A HEALTHY CHURCH does not allow one person, no matter how influential, to mislead others and bring sin into the church. That person, along with those who do not oppose them, will be severely disciplined by God. Sometimes we fear confronting strong, influential people when they turn from the truth. They can cause a lot of trouble and often have a strong following. But compromising and letting them and their sin flourish brings us under God's discipline as well. Sin and sinners must be confronted and removed in a loving but firm way.

CHURCH AT SARDIS – Spiritually dead and going through the motions.

The church at Sardis (Revelation 3:1-6) was dead and didn't even know it! Sardis is located 50 miles inland (east) from Smyrna. It was a connecting link between Asia and the east and became rich through trade, textiles and locally mined gold. The temple of Artemis was located there. The church was probably started soon after Paul's second missionary journey.

Jesus identifies Himself as the One who has authority over all pastors and churches (Revelation 3:1). As such they are accountable to Him. He finds this church dead (Revelation 3:1-2). The Christians at Sardis served God. They gathered for worship and prayer, and they contributed their money. In fact, they seemed so active and good that they had a great reputation among other churches as being a great church. However, Jesus says they are dead. They are busy and active but dead inside, like the church at Ephesus (Matthew 23:27). They are proud of their past reputation and coasting on it. We can't tell from the outside if a church is healthy and serving God out of love for Him, or if they are just going through the motions. Only Jesus knows that! So don't try judging other churches. Only Jesus knows their hearts.

The Christians in Sardis were commanded to wake up and repent or they will be judged (Revelation 3:2-3). There were some true believers still there who wanted to grow and live for Jesus (Revelation 3:4). The whole church must have a desire to know Jesus better and grow closer to Him, not just outwardly do the things that impress others. The church must teach the Word of God so the people learn it and practice it in life. The Christians needed to remember what they already knew and put it into practice. They needed to humble themselves and stop going through the motions of playing church but to really serve Jesus out of love and devotion to Him alone.

Jesus closes with encouragement to the few believers who still faithfully served Him out of love and devotion (Revelation 3:5-6). God promises to bless them in this life and reward them in heaven. The same is true for us today.

A HEALTHY CHURCH keeps Jesus at the center of their worship and service. They do all they do out of love, devotion and appreciation for Him. They don't just act like a Christian on the outside to impress others, but out of their heart in thankfulness to all Jesus has done for them.

CHURCH AT PHILADELPHIA – Faithful to use opportunities to minister.

The church at Philadelphia is known as the church of brotherly love (Revelation 3:7-13). This letter is the most positive and encouraging of all of the letters to churches. The church had life and gave life to others.

Philadelphia lay about 30 miles southwest of Sardis. It was named by Attalus II (159-138 BC) who had special love and devotion for his brother Eumenes II. The city stood in a wine producing area and worshipped the pagan god Dionysus, the god of wine. All travel and commerce to central Asia Minor passed through this city. Philadelphia remained a free Christian city even after the Muslims controlled all the areas around them. It remains today under the name Alasehir.

Jesus describes Himself as the One who is holy and true in character and conduct. All He says and does is truthful. He is the One who will fulfill all the promises given to David. He alone makes a church what it is. Satan tries to close doors, but when Jesus opens a door nothing can close it (Revelation 3:7). That is what has happened at Philadelphia. This strategic location gave them many opportunities to share salvation with others. We must be alert to the open doors, the opportunities God gives us to serve Him and others (1 Peter 3:15).

This church seems to be small in numbers and resources ("little strength"). Perhaps the opposition from others caused them to turn to God for help and keep them from the errors other church committed. It is His power, not ours, that changes lives (2 Corinthians 12:9-11). Despite the difficulties they faced, they faithfully studied and obeyed God's Word. They persevered. They remained faithful and did not turn from Him (Revelation 3:8). They weren't perfect, but no failure was great enough to be mentioned.

God promised them that the Jews who have been persecuting them would one day recognize their error and admit their guilt (Revelation 3:9). He assures them they are safe from coming judgment (Revelation 3:10), just as we will be removed by the rapture before the judgment of the Tribulation.

Jesus assures them that when He comes, it will be sudden (Revelation 3:11). They are promised they will enjoy eternity with Jesus in heaven (Revelation 3:12-13).

A HEALTHY CHURCH does not have to be a large church. It does have to be a church that faithfully serves Jesus and puts Him first in all they think and do. God expects us to do our best with the open door opportunities He gives us. He doesn't compare churches with each other and neither should we. All we do must be with Him in mind and for His approval and not for any other reason.

THE CHURCH AT LAODICEA – Lukewarm faith makes Jesus sick.

The church at Laodicea had the terrible reputation as the church that made Jesus sick (Revelation 3:14-22). Laodicea was a very wealthy city, located where 3 main highways came together. This brought in a lot of wealth. It was also well known for its banking industry, manufacturing black wool and a medical school that produced eye ointment. About 30 years before this letter, the town was destroyed by an earthquake but they quickly rebuilt. They had so much money they even refused Rome's offer to help. The church here was started by Paul, who also wrote a letter to them (Colossians 4:16).

Jesus described Himself as trustworthy and true in His evaluation of the church (Revelation 3:14). He is the sovereign ruler over all. He has nothing good to say about the church at Laodicea, only criticism. He says they are neither hot nor cold, just lukewarm (Revelation 3:15). This was a reference to the water that had to be brought to Laodicea by aqueducts and was lukewarm when it got to them. Other cities nearby had sources of fresh water that was either cool or hot, but not Laodicea.

We like our drinks hot or cold. Lukewarm is often unappetizing. Jesus uses this to describe their spiritual state. They weren't on fire for Him, nor were they coldly rejecting Him. They were in the middle. They outwardly looked like they were a church that followed Jesus, but their hearts weren't in it. They acted like Christians out of habit, not out of love and commitment. Jesus says He hates Christians like this and will vomit them out (Revelation 3:16). They think they are doing fine, but are not (Revelation 3:17). There is no persecution there to cause them to turn to Jesus. Life is easy and riches abound, so they live like others around them while claiming to be Christians. They think they are rich but they are really poor (Revelation 3:17). They are hypocrites, and God hates hypocrisy (1 John 4:20; Luke 6:46; Mark 7:6; Matthew 23:27-28; 6:16-18; Luke 20:46-47).

Jesus commands them to repent and live for Him no matter the persecution or difficulties that come (Revelation 3:18). He warns them that if they don't repent He will discipline them (Revelation 3:19). They won't lose their salvation, but He will allow things to happen to show them their need of Him. He says He is at the door waiting for them to open and let Him have His rightful place as head of their church (Revelation 3:20).

To those who do follow and faithfully serve Him He promises they will rule with Him forever (Revelation 3:21). He encourages them to listen to what He says and act on it (Revelation 3:22).

A HEALTHY CHURCH does not compromise with the world or allow their love for Jesus to grow cold. It's easy, after one is a Christian for some time, to let our devotion to Jesus cool off but to keep on doing all the things Christians do. Jesus doesn't look at what we do, He looks at our heart to see why we do it (1 Samuel 16:7). What does He see when He looks at your heart? Is your church filled with the love of Jesus so that it overflows into all you do?

What lessons can you learn from these churches? Which is your church most like? If Jesus would write a letter to your church, what would He say about it? What would He praise? What would He condemn?