



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Knowing Our Business

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ NOVEMBER 19, 2017

It had once been a thriving and prominent church in a residential neighborhood of Philadelphia. The sanctuary had been built before the depression, largely by several wealthy families in the congregation, and it comfortably seated over 500. But as the decades rolled on, the church declined. Several successive pastors had lost their faith at the denominational seminary and had little but social and political issues to proclaim from the pulpit. The neighborhood began to change, yet the inner core of the church had no interest in reaching the new residents. The number of young people dwindled while older members died off; fewer and fewer of the old guard wanted to make the long drive from their scattered homes in the various suburbs.

Their denomination informed them that they had no money to subsidize the church, and the weekly offering-plate income did not even cover the upkeep and utilities. When the last pastor left and no one wanted to serve as their interim, the remaining handful of members met on a Wednesday night to face the inevitable. They voted to close the church and turn its property over to their denomination to auction. The last remaining trustee went to a hardware store on Thursday morning to find a sign to put on the front door. There were no "CLOSED" signs available; the only thing he found was a sign that proclaimed "GOING OUT OF BUSINESS"—and that was what he attached to the big double doors facing the main street. A local graffiti artist came along and wrote the final devastating verdict on this dying church, scrawling underneath the printed sign the words: DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEIR BUSINESS WAS.

The story, sadly, is not unique. Churches sometimes become confused about what we're all about. We sometimes lose our way. We sometimes forget what Jesus, the Head of the Church, has called us to be. That's why we need to go back regularly to our Source—Holy Scripture—and regularly remind ourselves of what our business is.

The Story of the Church in Antioch

Let's read the account of one of the great churches of the first generation of Christianity. They didn't have any blueprint to follow. They just made it up as they went along, guided by the Holy Spirit. But the template of the Church in the city of Antioch (in the ancient Middle East) is a wonderful role model to inspire us. Beginning in Acts 11:

Meanwhile, the believers who had been scattered during the persecution after Stephen's death traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch of Syria. They preached the word of God, but only to Jews. ²⁰However, some of the believers who went to Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene began preaching to the Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. ²¹The power of the Lord was with them, and a large number of these Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

²²When the church at Jerusalem heard what had happened, they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³When he arrived and saw this evidence of God's blessing, he was filled with joy, and he encouraged the believers to stay true to the Lord. ²⁴Barnabas was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and strong in faith. And many people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵Then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul. ²⁶When he found him, he brought him back to Antioch. Both of them stayed there with the church for a full year, teaching large crowds of people. (It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.)

²⁷During this time some prophets traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸One of them named Agabus stood up in one of the meetings and predicted by the Spirit that a great famine was coming upon the entire Roman world. (This was fulfilled during the reign of Claudius.) ²⁹So the believers in Antioch decided to

send relief to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could. ³⁰This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the elders of the church in Jerusalem....

13 Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. ²One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Appoint Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.” ³So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way.

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3

Soon I will return to those “thrilling days of yesteryear,” when the church in Antioch was discovering what worked and creating the template for healthy churches in the next two millennia. We will spend a few moments noticing and discussing the things they did well. But first let me review with you the mission and purpose of this congregation.

The Mission of First Church

We at First Church believe we **do** know what our business is—and we are pouring our energies tirelessly into pursuing these ends. We believe—and it’s captured in our mission statement printed on the back of our bulletin every week—that we have a three-fold purpose. These purposes can be thought of directionally as “inward,” “upward” and “outward.”

Our **inward** focus is to be the church, the family of God, to one another as sisters and brothers in Christ. We love and support each other; we welcome each other in fellowship; we want to be there for each other in the good times and the hard times. Our **upward** focus is that we direct our efforts to helping each and every person impacted by our ministry to grow closer to God, to know Him personally, and to experience His constant presence with them. The **outward**

focus is that, impelled by God’s Spirit within us, we cannot keep the love of God to ourselves but must share it with others. We can do so personally among our friends and neighbors—as we get to know them, pray for them, invite them to come to church with us; as we provide tangible assistance to them through our partnership with Love INC to help in many practical ways; and as we support and send out men and women to go where we can’t and share the love of God around the world. These three dimensions are all equally important. We dare not neglect any one of them. And we do not pursue these three goals sequentially, one at a time. Rather, we feel it’s necessary to devote our energies to them simultaneously. That’s the only way to be a balanced, healthy church.

The Role of the Local Church in World Mission

I want to focus on that third **“outward”** dimension because this is our annual “Mission Sunday.” It is good for us to at least once a year be reminded of why and how we are to carry out this outward calling. It’s a personal passion of mind. In the 1980’s, in my very first ordained ministry, I served as the Mission Pastor for a large congregation in the Midwest. And during that time I completed my Doctor of Ministry program at a graduate school called Fuller Theological Seminary. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on the very thing that I was dealing with most immediately at that time: the role of the local church in world mission.

The questions I wrestled with were these: What part should a group of believers localized in one particular place play in the great work of God to reach a vast and lost world? How can we, with our comparatively small and limited resources, make a difference? What are the best practices that the most effective congregations are using? What I learned from my research, my visits and interviews with church leaders and missionaries, and my study of scripture has informed my pastoral ministry for the past 30 years—and it’s also part of what drives this church’s mission outreach. Here are some of the values that inspire our church as we seek to fulfill God’s calling to the world.

- (1) We want our work to be founded on **relationships**, not just sending checks to faceless organizations. We believe that the blessings are multiplied when we know our missionaries and they know us, when we can pray for them and they for us, and when we can have regular communication. When I first arrived here as your pastor nearly 14 years ago, I asked our treasurer if I could review our mission budget with him. He explained to me that, other than giving a small amount of money to a few local organizations, our mission budget was to send a \$50,000 check each year to the national denomination's office in Louisville, KY. No personal identification, no individual missionaries supported and no relationships: just dumping money into their bucket. I said to the Session in my first meeting with them that we needed to change that. A mission program like that deprived both the senders (the church) and the receivers (the missionaries) of the blessings of a relationship. Today we sponsor more than 50 different people and causes directly. We know them, and they know us. In this mutual relationship there is prayer support and there is accountability. It's so much healthier. (Our handbook of all our missionaries is available today for you to pick up and take home; and every Sunday we highlight one of those mission partners in our *First Things First* inside the bulletin.)
- (2) In addition to building a mission program on the foundation of relationships, another value we have is to follow the practice of the best work of modern pharmaceutical companies. I know that the drug companies have come under a great deal of criticism lately—for excessive profiteering, for pushing highly-addictive opioids, etc. But what the industry, at its best, has done well is to release lots of scientists to do **creative "R&D"** to look for new formulas that can heal diseases. Many of us are taking medications today that didn't exist 30 years ago, and in some cases they are saving and sustaining our lives. A pharmaceutical company doesn't know, when it begins to develop drugs and do clinical trials, which ones will be blockbuster hits and which ones won't; so they try lots of different methods.

That's what we are doing: we are trying to support a lot of different projects and missions, trusting that some of them will produce a blockbuster harvest of good for the Kingdom of God.

- (3) One more strategy our church employs: we want to have a **significant partnership relationship** with the missionaries and causes we support—both locally and globally—but we do not want to be the sole support of anyone. We choose to not give just small token donations. When we adopt a missionary or a ministry into our mission budget it will be for good amount—to provide substantial help. But we want to partner with other churches and other donors, so that no mission is completely dependent on us. We think that is a healthy thing for all—that we can be partners with other churches and Christian workers.

That's a brief peek behind the curtain of what makes the First Church mission program work. Now let's return to our roots, and revisit the exemplary church of Antioch as recorded in the Book of Acts.

The Example of the Church in Antioch

In chapter 11, verses 19-24, we find a group of believers who showed the way for us. They did not keep the Gospel to themselves. Though they could have enjoyed the first two dimensions of the life of a church (the inward and the upward) and ignored the third (the outward), the love of Christ burning in their hearts would not let them. In the first few years after Christ's resurrection the Christian church was nearly completely made up of ethnic Jews, people who had all their lives seen themselves as God's chosen people. It would have been natural for them to conclude that the New Covenant in Christ was also intended just for them. But not in Antioch. Those believers couldn't keep the good news to themselves; they had to share it even with their non-Jewish friends and neighbors. It is likely that the Antioch church also became the first multi-cultural church, because there were racial and cultural and language barriers that they had to break through. The original "church fathers" back in Jerusalem weren't quite sure what to make of this, so they sent a man they

trusted named Barnabas to check it out. And what Barnabas found was the real deal: the church was flourishing and healthy, and it was growing because the believers weren't shy about sharing their faith with their neighbors.

In chapter 11, verses 25-26, we learn that the church in Antioch was rooted in a solid understanding of the scriptures. Barnabas brought Saul to be a Bible teacher there. Saul of Tarsus was also known as Paul. He was one of the great geniuses of scripture, author of much of the New Testament, a brilliant philosopher and thinker and teacher of the Old Testament. Lest we are ever tempted to conclude that the Antioch church was simply caught up in an emotional experience of faith, we are reminded that there was a strong and solid intellectual foundation to everything they did. Sound theology and an anchoring in scripture guided and motivated them.

In verses 27-30 we discover another admirable characteristic of the Antioch church: they were generous with their material blessings. When they heard that other believers, those in Jerusalem, were about to undergo some hard times they dug deep into their wallets and gave sacrificially to help others. Antioch was a very prosperous city. It is likely that the church there contained people who had been very successful in business and the professions. It is always tempting, when we have been materially blessed, to want to hold onto it all—and even to congratulate ourselves for our wealth. But the Christians in Antioch knew that all their blessings had come from God. And out of their love and gratitude they freely and generously gave to others in need.

Finally, in chapter 13:1-3, we discover one other attribute of the Antioch church. They sent their best and brightest to do the hardest job. Though it would have, undoubtedly, been tempting for the session of that church to lock Paul and Barnabas into long-term contracts, their experience in prayer nudged them to let go, to release these two gifted men to do something greater for the Kingdom. Thus they not only gave of their wealth, they also gave some of their human resources.

What a selfless and faithful decision they made. Sending Paul and Barnabas forward, with the financial and prayer backing they needed, ultimately resulted in the spread of the gospel across the Roman world. Antioch thus became the Sending Church for the very first missionaries.

A quick recap of what made this first century church great:

- ◆ They didn't keep God's love and the message of Christ to themselves.
- ◆ They built a solid intellectual and spiritual foundation for their faith, anchored on the Bible.
- ◆ They shared generously with others out of gratitude for God's blessings to them.
- ◆ They sent forth and supported their best to be missionaries.

For the years remaining that God allows me to be one of your pastors, those principles are my template. We have a long way to go to equal our role models in the church in Antioch. But, by the grace of Christ, that's where we want to go. I pray that you'll be inspired to want to go there with us. I dedicate myself and my energies to doing everything I can to make sure that the sign "GOING OUT OF BUSINESS ... DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THEIR BUSINESS WAS" will never be hung on our door! ■