

ANTIOCH TYPE CHURCHES MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

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The First Time I Met David Mohan there were a number of things that impressed me deeply. He was the pastor of what we would call a mega-church, but any similarity in his thinking to mega-church in the mind of the westerner stopped with size. He viewed the Church in general, and the task of the church he led in particular differently than I had been led to believe from my own American experience. I have documented in other places how limited our theology of Church and practice of Church is in America. Without wanting to, we have slipped into a come and see approach to Christianity. Besides the nominalism that this is begetting in our time, we are left with few really biblical measurements of “success” beyond, “How many? How much? And, are they reasonably happy?”

This is engrained so deeply into our thinking that we are nearly oblivious to how self-centered we have become. We bemoan the growing self-centeredness of our culture in general and even Christians in particular. But, we fail to recognize that our idea of church is just as self-centered! Examples abound, but one will suffice. Just today as I drove the streets of the city I live in, I saw a billboard with this message. “First cares about Children” First is a large church in the city. The words caught my attention and immediately led me to wonder several things.

Are they saying that the other churches in the city (over 800 of them!) don’t care about the children? Or, are they saying that they care more about children than the other churches? Or, is the message, we care more about children than others, therefore attend our church? Whatever the intention of the message, it is reflective of how American churches have come to view themselves. The catchy phrases, new member drives, return to church weekends, even the yellow pages ads, all add up to one apparent conviction with several very ugly and unbiblical conclusions: the local church is a place you go to, not as the Bible clearly teaches, a people called to follow Jesus into relationship with God, and placed by Him in every possible walk of life. The conclusions are obvious.

One, churches are in competition with each other. Two, some are better than others, especially in their own minds! Three, the bigger you are, the more you must be doing things right. In spite of the fact that your church may be full of people who not only don’t look like Christ, they in fact don’t want to look like Christ. Four, doing things right is apparently more important than doing the right things. Five, it does not matter how irrelevant we become to the world around us, as long as people come to our church, we are satisfied.

David, and leaders like him all over the world stand in stark contrast to our self-centeredness. Try to talk about the size of their churches, and you find out about their city instead. They know how many people attend their churches, but they are more concerned with how many are not yet reconciled to God. Try to talk about their size, and they will turn your attention to their nation. They are men and women who understand just how important churches are to bring the Gospel to their world and completing the task that Jesus gave us. Try to talk about their church and they will instead talk about how many new churches have been planted, or even about the other churches in their city and nation.

As I read my New Testament and especially the book of Acts, I am struck with how similar David and leaders like him all over the world are to churches in the first century. They realize that they are not more important than any other church, for the task of the Gospel will take all of Christ's people to complete. They are like unto key churches in the New Testament times. They are like unto the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth or Rome. Their size is not recorded in the New Testament. Their famous preachers are not listed in the New Testament. What is recorded is their strategic significance in reaching valleys, regions and cities all around them. They were I believe, special gifts from God to the whole body of Christ in a geographical region that committed themselves to unconditionally release all of their resources into the full evangelization of that region.

Even the ministry of Paul and the teams of people who worked with him throughout the western world of that day can be seen to encompass this same way of thinking. FF Bruce comments in his commentary on the book of Acts that the life and ministry of Paul seemed to reflect the strategic eye of the Holy Spirit moving across the world of the Roman Empire and moving Paul and the team that worked with him to the right place at the right moment. The goal seemed to be churches planted in strategic places, which would in turn naturally touch the many other geographies around and between them. In *The Pauline Circle*, Bruce goes on to help us understand how God the Spirit used Paul to do this. In fact, he was never alone in the process. Bruce documents that Paul had at least 25 other people working with him in this task. In this way, though Paul and a portion of the team was short term in any one place, no church was every abandoned. One can easily imagine how such a large number of roving team members, none of them in any one place at any one time apparently, could make such a dramatic impact on their world in such a relatively short period of time.

Are there principles that we see in Scripture that would indicate what an Antioch type church might look like in the 21st century? I think that there are! First, an Antioch church is one that understands who it is and why it exists. These churches inherently understand that if we are to reach the world around us, and even the one distant from us, then we must be able to move a majority of the people who call themselves followers of Jesus. For, whatever God is going to do in the world, both Scripture and history abundantly declare, He has designed to do through all of Christ's people.

With the words of Paul in Ephesians 2:10 to 3:11, and especially verses 10 and 11 of chapter three, these churches understand that the church is not first and foremost a place or program. But, it is a people called out of the world to follow Jesus into relationship with God. Because of this

new orientation, they are people who are being changed into Christ's image, and are used by God in all of their relationships to declare His message. God does this through them in several ways. One, he uses what they are becoming to incarnate the message of the empty grave in the unique relationships of His people to each other and to those outside of the body. This is the uniqueness of the fruit of the Spirit lived in them. Each of these fruit are inter-personal characteristics that are seen in interpersonal relationships between believers and even in their relationship to the world around them. Two, the Spirit uses the gifts that He has given to each of Christ's people to work through all of them unique ministries. These ministries are not just, nor even primarily, in the support of the program of a local congregation. But, they are anywhere and everywhere Christ's people go every day.

Second, an Antioch church is one that understands what God wants it to do. Some would see this as a search. But, these churches instinctively understand their relationship to the world around them and their accountability before the Lord of the Harvest for it. I have dubbed this circle accountability. Circle accountability is asking God the Holy Spirit to give us a specific geographical area around us where we can empower and release all of our resources until every man, woman and child in that circle has had a repeated opportunity to hear, understand and accept or reject Christ as their offering for reconciliation to God. Those who come to faith are then integrated into a local congregation where they begin to grow in their relationship to God and are themselves empowered to participate in the ministry of the purpose of the Church.

Third, an Antioch church is one that knows what this vision will look like when God has done it. In this, I am not referring so much to the actual number of people in their circle of accountability who are coming to faith. But, to how we know that God, and not just human ingenuity, has accomplished the task. There are at least five non-negotiables in this regard. By non-negotiable, I mean that even if the circle is apparently measurably reached, but other value factors are not in place and increasing in the people of Christ, we wonder, who did the work, God or us?

These non-negotiables can be divided into two broad categories. The "be" categories as I call them, refer to who we are becoming. One, are all of Christ's people growing in their intimacy with God. This is the first call of Scripture. So, to find people practicing any forms of Christianity without this first premise is unacceptable. Two, are they telling their grace testimony into all of the places and people God gives them opportunity. Three are they using their grace gifts in the whole of their lives. And, four is the body interpersonally living the resurrection and the fruit of the Spirit.

The "do" category refers to what we are doing. Can the local congregation measurably demonstrate that it is making an impact on the world around it? We have become more concerned about what is inside the church building than we are with those who are still outside the church and without an incarnated demonstration of the Gospel. This too is unacceptable. Antioch churches not only understand this mandate, but also can show that they are making a significant impact on their world.

Upon these principles, what do these Antioch churches do that makes them so effective in completing the mandate of Jesus to disciple the world? First, they view their circle of

accountability as their reason to exist. They of course are concerned about what goes on in the program of their congregation. But, if that program is not making in-roads into the people around them who do not yet know of the reconciliation offered to them in Jesus, then, they are not satisfied.

Second, they do research into the circle. It is not always that formal research is done. But, one way or another, these people understand the world that surrounds them. Because they are so motivated to see the Gospel penetrate it through their own actions, they are consistently asking questions about the circle. I am always amazed to find how good a job these leaders have done in exegeting their circle. They will know what the ethnic and sociological composite looks like and they will have a good idea of the kinds of activities that will be necessary to reach them.

This then leads to the third fact about the activities of these kinds of churches. They will develop diverse means of reaching all of the people in the circle. Since they are focused upon bringing people to faith in Jesus, not luring them into a church, they know that there will be different means necessary for differing kinds of peoples. Most of the people won will be won through the impact of the lives of the believers in the congregation. Each and every member will be inspired to make their whole life count for the message of the Gospel in all of the relationships that God gives them. Their families will be calling cards to the transformation that God brings to those who are in relationship to him. All they do will demonstrate that the grave is empty and it can be most evidently seen through the incarnation of Jesus in His people and their relationships to each other and those outside of the faith. But, they will use the gifts found in the people of the congregation to build strategies that penetrate people who are outside the pale of relationships to Christians.

With this orchestration by the Spirit, empowered and released by the leadership of the congregation, of the non-formal witness of the people's lives and grace testimonies, and the mobilization of the Spirit gifts, comes the commitment to guarantee that every man, woman and child in their circle has the repeated opportunity to be reconciled to God. This is the fourth distinctive of Antioch churches; they act upon their spiritual convictions by developing a complete program to see their circle reached. They release all of the grace testimonies into the circle. They release all of the grace gifts into strategies to access pockets of people in the circle. They plant new churches in the circle. They bless other churches in the circle and actively work to see them equally effective in reaching people in the circle. If it is not illegal, immoral, unethical, or against the Bible, they try it! And, they do all of this with a specific time frame in mind. The time frame does not claim what can only belong to God: redeeming people! But, they are willing to be responsible for what they can control: assuring that people have a repeated opportunity.

Finally, these churches develop a comprehensive plan to orchestrate the whole process. One, they develop multi-faceted programs to assure themselves that their people are growing in the non-negotiable values they have embraced as a leadership. Two, they develop a multi-faceted program to take the Gospel to everyone in the circle. Three, they develop a multi-faceted program to plant multiples of new churches, inside their circle and beyond it. Four, they develop a multi-faceted program to send the Gospel to other places around the world.

The languages may be different and the cultures dramatically diverse, but, Antioch churches I have seen around the world all look the same in the most important ways. They win many people to Christ. They plant many new churches. They grow their people in faith that makes a difference in tangible and transformational ways. These Antioch type churches literally hold their hands out and allow the Spirit of God to take what He needs from them to grow the Kingdom of God. They have discovered the words of Jesus Himself that, it is more blessed to give than it is to receive!

About the Author

Dwight Smith and his wife Patti originate from California. They served as missionaries in Colombia before returning to California, where they were involved in the planting of Cornerstone Bible Church, San Jose. During this period Dwight was also involved in the founding of DAWN (Discipling A Whole Nation) ministries.

In the mid-1980s, Dwight became President of United World Mission, a long-established mission agency. While at UWM, he reformed the agency and set up its International Training Center. Through Dwight's leadership, UWM joined forces with over 60 US mission agencies and local churches to form the Alliance for Saturation Church Planting, a strategic network formed to take advantage of the opportunities for evangelism created by the break-up of the former Soviet Union in 1989.

Dwight Smith was elected to the position of President of Saturation Church Planting International in January 1996. The accumulation of such international experience, coupled with clear vision and ongoing commitment, make Dwight an inspirational leader. Dwight and Patti have four grown children and two granddaughters. Dwight has a DMiss at Biola University, California.

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