

Our Antioch Moment

Think Multiplication

Acts 11:19-30

Mark Vroegop

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians. Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius). So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Sau.” (Acts 11:19–30).

The aim of my message this week is twofold. First, I want to give you a biblical model of what happened at the church in the city of Antioch with the hope that you’ll desire for our church to look more and more like that church. Second, I want to lay out a few key directional markers for us as a church. In other words, I want you to know some of our hopes and dreams for this year.

Our new fiscal year starts in April, and we have a Congregational Meeting next Sunday night where we are seeking your approval for our annual budget. The financial plan reflects our vision of where we believe God is leading us, and I want to help you understand the big picture of where we are headed as a church.

Sometimes it can be hard to navigate a large church. I’m sure you feel that; I sure do. I think we all have a love-hate relationship with a church our size. I would guess that if you have any experience with being a member at a church, it was probably in a small church. As the church gets larger, it has to be even more thoughtful in many ways. And as our church has grown in the number of people attending, the amount of money we’re giving away, the number of churches we’ve planted, and the extent of our regional influence, we have to be more intentional.

In the fall, our staff spent four weeks talking, dreaming, and planning for 2019. Our elders reviewed our plans and provided input. This morning, I want to share our vision for next year with a few highlights. If you'd like to know more detail, we'd love for you to come to the Congregational Meeting next week.

Our Antioch Moment

I'm calling this our "Antioch Moment" because of the providential and influential role of the church in the city of Antioch in the spread of Christianity. The city is in modern-day Turkey, and it became the launching pad for the spread of the gospel, the planting of churches, and the creation of a new identity for the followers of Jesus.

The attention shifts from Jerusalem to Antioch in the book of Acts. Antioch becomes the location for the multiplication of the mission of the church. And I'd like us to see what that looked like in Acts 11.

Now, what do I mean by multiplication as it relates to the church? When Jesus met with his disciples before he ascended into heaven, he gave them the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18). After he told them about his authority as the risen Christ, he instructed them not to stay on the mountain, but to **go and make disciples of all nations**. A multiplication movement is the central mission of the church.

So, when I say multiplication, I mean *the intentional and costly spreading of the gospel for the glory of Jesus*.

For our church, we need to consider our role in that mission by asking ourselves:

- How am I growing as a disciple?
- Who am I discipling?
- How am I spreading the gospel in my neighborhood?
- How can we love our city with the good news?
- How do we reach unreached people around the world?

Multiplication is the goal; it is the definition of success. Imagine what you would think if you asked a parent about their goals for their children and they gave you this answer: "We are raising our children to help take care of us so that we can be more comfortable. We don't plan on them leaving our home." That's not the goal. It's dysfunctional. The same is true for the church.

Our aim as a church is to create a culture where multiplication flourishes. We want to create an environment where igniting a passion to follow Jesus happens in your life. And you need to figure out what your role is and where you plug into that mission. To understand our church, you need to know that we create multiplication venues for that to happen in lots of arenas. We are not convinced that there is only one way to multiply. We try not to overly script your disciple-making.

I talk a lot about the "both" of ministry. For example, we have both Small Groups and Adult Big Groups, global evangelism and urban renewal, neighborhood outreach and pastoral residency, women's ministry and next generation ministry, men's ministry and a singles ministry. We are a large church, but we are congregational in our governance, we're committed to meaningful membership, and our elders are

doing their best to shepherd people. We believe in both. You see it every Sunday. You'll see a pastoral prayer, a formal reading of Scripture, and also an 130-voice choir and contemporary worship. I teach expositionally, but we don't always walk through a book line by line.

This mindset has allowed us to move from a multi-site model to a church planting model, allowing church plants to flourish in their unique environment and context. I love seeing God make something better by uncurling my fingers in how we program it.

Now, this mindset also has challenges. Sometimes it's hard for people to know what is important. Or our staff members can feel like they are spread too thin. And so there are challenges, for sure. That's one reason our staff spent the month of August talking about our plan for next year. We wanted to have a greater sense of clarity as we moved into 2019.

With that context, let's look at three words connected to multiplication and the context in Antioch.

1. Opportunity

Our text begins with an explanation as to how the church in Antioch was established. It is interesting that Luke, the author of Acts, puts this material just after an important statement about the gospel being brought to the Gentiles in verse 18. The mission of the church started in Jerusalem with Jewish people and now it is spreading.

But it's interesting how it spread. Notice that verse 19 identifies the role persecution played. After the martyrdom of Stephen, believers fled Jerusalem and the land of Israel. The church began to move into unchartered areas—like the island of Cyprus and an area called Phoenicia, modern-day Lebanon. And it also spread to the metropolitan city of Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman empire at the time.

I want you to take note that the spreading of the gospel happened with an opportunity orchestrated by God's sovereign design even in the midst of hardship. The gospel spread through exciting moments like Pentecost (Acts 2). It spread through providential meetings (Acts 3). And it spread through suffering.

That should encourage you at a personal level because I've seen it play out in countless ways personally and in the lives of others. God is on the move. Sometimes, we see it through doors of a new opportunity. Sometimes it's through suffering. Regardless, there are divine opportunities.

Our strategy involves four key priorities:

- Reach our World
- Deepen our Discipleship
- Develop our Leaders
- Maximize our Resources

College Park was planted in the northside of Indianapolis in 1985. At the time, Carmel was a city with only 20,000 people. The church started with a handful of people who met at the Holiday Inn in Casino Room B. By 1986, this property was purchased. Who knew how strategic this location would be! The

church grew quickly, and in the mid-2000s ran into some leadership challenges and a hard season of suffering. When I came here in 2008, God had refined this church. The hardship produced great fruit and a readiness to see God work. Suffering produced a renewed desire to reach our world.

I recently received a picture from one of the leaders of the Mango, Togo, project—a hospital that we helped build. This was a very meaningful picture to me because I originally thought I was going to be a medical missionary, and I wanted to serve in Togo. But I sensed the Lord redirecting my steps in college to pastoral ministry. Then, after, college Sarah and I were going to serve in West Africa for two years in Ghana, the country next door to Togo. But the Lord closed that door to us. I've always had a special place in my heart for West Africa. So, when I presented this work to Nate a few years after I started at College Park, I wondered what the Lord might be doing. We've been able to establish a thriving hospital that supports church planting. And we've seen doctors and nurses from our church serve in this hospital, bringing physical and spiritual healing to many Muslims.

We are asking ourselves “Where has God placed us?” and “What has he done in us?” with a view toward reaching the world. You could think of the same question as it relates to your pain or struggle. Maybe you need to consider joining our counseling team to help other people get free. Maybe you need to help our youth ministry as a leader. We're trying to reach teenagers in our city. Our high school attendance has grown 45 percent over the last year!

We dream of reaching our world by maximizing outreach opportunities on Sundays and special events—like the 7,000 people who came to our Christmas concert. We dream that hundreds of you will go on Brookside Road Trips and Global Vision Trips so that you can be changed and motivated to reach your neighbors. And we have a goal to plant a church out of College Park every two years. Our church has planted seven churches since 1985 (New Palestine Bible Church, Sovereign Christ Fellowship, Nehemiah Bible Church, College Park Fishers, College Park Castleton, College Park Greenwood, and One Fellowship Church). We've planted four of those churches since the start of the Next Door Mission in 2015. Our Next Door Mission church plants now total over 1,100 people each week.

In verse 20, we read something very important, and it represents an important multiplication shift:

“But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20).

The shift relates to the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. That's the meaning of the word “Hellenist” in this context. They were Greek-speaking non-Jews. We'll talk more about this at the end, but I just to remind you that there are people in your neighborhood, in this city, and around the world who need to hear about Jesus.

As we consider our Antioch moment, we want to reach our world. I showed two images several years ago that highlight the difference in traffic between Sunday morning and Monday morning. God has brought us together in the city for the purpose of multiplying our outreach. We need to see the opportunity to reach our world.

2. Growth

The second theme I want you to notice is the way that God moved in this church. It was clear that God was at work among them. In verse 21, the text says as much, “and the hand of the Lord was with them. . .” It was clear that something powerful was happening in the lives of people. One of the reasons we are “praying like we mean it” is because we know that our best-laid plans will not work unless the Lord works in them.

We’ve seen that happen with our ministry in Brookside over the last ten years. What started as a Saturday Bible study has grown into a beautiful story of redemption and renewal. Every year, Dale hosts pastors from other cities looking at what God has done, and there are plans for the Brookside ministry platform to be featured in a conference in the future. Our vision of building bridges of grace that can bear the weight of truth is not only working, but it is helping other churches.

When we think about maximizing our resources, one way we want to do that next year is by finding better ways to share the story about what God has done both inside our church and outside. We see God at work all the time, and we’d like to find better ways to help you see the connection from your giving to kingdom impact in all the areas of ministry. We give away 40 percent of what we receive, and we want you to know what we do with the 40 percent and the 60 percent that makes the 40 percent possible.

We also dream of expanding our online platform and resources. Last year, we saw over a million hits from 137,000 people in 192 countries on our websites. We have dreams of having our church be a resource for church leaders as well as a resource for the neighborhoods around 96th and Towne. We have a feasibility study looking into how we can continue to grow our student and children’s ministries—the time of life when parents are most interested in the gospel. We are also looking at what God might have us do to help with the opioid crisis in our area.

Also notice that the result of this powerful movement of God’s Spirit was numerical growth: “a great number who believed turned to the Lord.” Numbers aren’t everything, and a church can get way off by talking too much about numbers. At the same time, healthy things grow. Three times in this text we find some reference to numerical growth (vv. 21, 24, 26). So, yes, we are looking to reach more people, see more baptisms, and help our church grow so that we can multiply.

I want to be clear. We are not growing just to grow. We want to grow because of what you’ll see later in this text. I’ll come back to that thought.

The reputation of the church at Antioch made its way to Jerusalem (v. 22). Barnabas, a major leader in the church, was sent. He was encouraged not only with the numeric growth, but he was also blessed by the grace of God in the life of the church. He exhorted them to “remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose” (v. 23).

We see here the need to keep growing in depth. In order for a church to multiply itself, there must be something to multiply. Our four directional markers are: Reach our World, Maximize our Resources,

Deepen our Discipleship, and Develop our Leaders. In order to be a multiplying church, we have to be sure that we have ways for people to grow in grace together. That's why we are working hard to help people move from being a first-time visitor to belonging as a member. We hosted our largest DISCOVER event last Sunday. We've had over 400 people attend DISCOVER and 300 complete the membership process. And we are looking for new ways to connect even more people into discipleship relationships, Small Groups, and Adult Big Groups. What's more, we're committed to using our parish model with our elders to allow our elders to not only govern well but to also shepherd the flock. Our goal is to help people "remain faithful with steadfast purpose."

However, notice what Barnabas does in verse 25. When he saw what was happening in Antioch, he went and found Saul or Paul. They served together in Antioch for a year. Barnabas connected Saul to the work that God was doing. But they wouldn't be there long.

If you look ahead at Acts 13, you'll see that after a year of ministry the Lord called Saul and Barnabas to plant churches throughout the Roman Empire. This led to Paul's first, second, and third missionary journeys with Antioch being the base of operations. Antioch became a powerful sending church.

In order for this to happen at Antioch, Saul and Barnabas must have raised up new leaders. And the church must have been willing to release them for the further work of planting churches. When we think about Developing our Leaders, we feel the urgency to do this because of the opportunity before us.

We are working on a plan to help volunteers and leaders flourish as they serve. We are working on redeveloping our deacon ministry to help our elders shepherd more effectively. And behind-the-scenes, we want to be sure that our staff and elders are spiritually healthy.

One of our leading ways of developing leaders is through our residency program. I'm thrilled with what God is doing as we bring in future leaders in pastoral ministry, worship, and interns to deploy them—sometimes to one of our church plants, sometimes to other churches.

Let me give you two examples. Luke Humphrey and Dan Weller were both residents a few years ago. Luke raised most of his support through College Park and is part of a church planting movement in the UAE. Dan Weller is the pastor of Chapelwood Baptist Church on the Westside. Both of these men are doing great work, and they had a great impact on our staff.

Here's another one. At our annual Elder Dinner, we honored three elders. One of them was Eric Edgell, who served as the chair of the search team that called me as Lead Pastor. Eric then served as the chairman of our HR Committee and then as the Chairman of Elders for over five years. Well, he's now helping with One Fellowship Church. The phone conversation where he told me about his desire to help T.C. plant the church was filled with grateful tears. We've done a lot of life together, and we are still dear friends. After the Civil Rights Visions Trip, Eric felt called by the Lord to help plant this new church. And part of our mission is to deploy people—even our best people.

So, our aim is to grow, but not just numerically; our goal is to grow the kingdom by multiplying. We want to reach our world, deepen our discipleship, develop our leaders, and maximize our resources.

And we want to do this in such a way that the world takes notice.

3. Community

The final characteristic here relates to how the church treated one another. Our Antioch moment requires a level community that is shaped by the gospel. Notice that verse 26 tells us that the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

You need to know that when the city of Antioch was built, it was divided in half, keeping different people groups or ethnicities apart. Over time, and as the city expanded, it was divided into 18 different tribes. Antioch was ethnically segregated. But this church was different. It included Greeks and Jews together. In fact, the church in Antioch was the place where Paul confronted Peter in Galatians 2 when he rearranged the tables for Jewish leaders from Jerusalem communicating that racial divisions were more important than the gospel itself. This church was a place where gospel-identity said something powerful.

In fact, the people of Antioch didn't know what to call these disciples. They weren't Jewish. They weren't Greek. And what do human beings do when they encounter people from different ethnicities gathering? They make up a name. William Barclay suggests it may have been a term of derision.¹

If that's right, then the term Christian refers to a group of people whose love for one another confounds the world. And oh, how I pray that would be true for us. I pray that we would be a people who blow the minds of people in our community such that they don't even have a category for who are!

But notice they also expressed that love through how they handled their possessions. According to verse 29-30, the church in Antioch wanted to be involved in the spread of God's grace to the church in Jerusalem. They used their financial resources to multiply the gospel. We'll look more at this next week.

Your Antioch Moment?

I hope you can see the special grace that was upon the church in Antioch. And I hope you see why this is a compelling model for us to consider. We have a plan to Reach our World, Deepen our Discipleship, Develop our Leaders, and Maximize our Resources. And we need one another to accomplish this vision.

Rather than seeing this as merely a vision for our church, I exhort to consider your personal Antioch moment? What opportunities are in front of you? Where do you sense the Lord leading? What areas of growth are needed in your life in 2019? What can you do to develop a robust gospel-centered culture of grace in our church? I want you to join us in this thrilling moment in our church's life. I want you to help us multiply the gospel.

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¹ William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), 105.

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