

# The Church Is Sent to Encourage New Believers

**SESSION IN A SENTENCE:** God has formed the church as a community of believers who nurture and care for one another.

**BACKGROUND PASSAGE:** Acts 11:19-30

In 2007, California pastor Dan Kimball published a book titled *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations*. The book is a compilation of coffee shop interviews with older teens and twenty-somethings. The gist of the book is that many young people like Jesus, but they have strongly critical views of the church. The church, to them, is political, judgmental, oppressive, homophobic, arrogant, and full of fundamentalists.

The irony is that these same young people long for authentic relationships, a place where they can be vulnerable and ask their questions, a place to belong, that is, to experience true community. Why is that ironic? Because that is what the church of Jesus Christ is meant to be—a community of baptized believers who share a common life together, encouraging one another and helping each other look more and more like Jesus.



What might the young people in your community think about the church?

# Group Time

**Point 1:** The people of God celebrate and encourage new believers (Acts 11:19-24).

<sup>19</sup> Now those who had been scattered as a result of the persecution that started because of Stephen made their way as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. <sup>20</sup> But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news about the Lord Jesus. <sup>21</sup> The Lord's hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. <sup>22</sup> News about them reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent out Barnabas to travel as far as Antioch. <sup>23</sup> When he arrived and saw the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged all of them to remain true to the Lord with devoted hearts, <sup>24</sup> for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And large numbers of people were added to the Lord.

No one wants to experience persecution. Yet here we see that the Lord uses even persecution as a means to spread the gospel: The church gathered in Jerusalem was now scattering throughout the Gentile world because of persecution. Antioch served as a mile marker, of sorts, in terms of the gospel mission because it was there that Gentiles were first incorporated freely into the church. Just as Jesus had announced in Acts 1:8, the gospel spread from Jerusalem to the beginnings of the ends of the earth.

The apostles had a responsibility to affirm and oversee the expansion of the gospel and the church. So they sent Barnabas to Antioch. What Barnabas found was a cause for joy—new Christians, both Jew and Gentile! He then encouraged all these newborn believers so they would endure and grow in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and humanity.



What are some ways you have received encouragement from other believers to grow in the faith and remain steadfast in the face of trials?



## Voices from Church History

“But do your worst, and rack your inventions for tortures for Christians—it is all to no purpose; you do but attract the world, and make it fall the more in love with our religion; the more you mow us down, the thicker we rise; the Christian blood you spill is like the seed you sow, it springs from the earth again, and fructifies the more.”<sup>1</sup>

—Tertullian (born c. 160)

## Point 2: The people of God disciple new believers (Acts 11:25-26).

<sup>25</sup> Then he went to Tarsus to search for Saul, <sup>26</sup> and when he found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught large numbers. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch.

Discipleship requires the passing on of knowledge, but not for its own sake, and not just any knowledge will do. It's passing on and obtaining knowledge of the Scriptures for the sake of becoming more and more like Christ. When Saul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for a year teaching the church, the content of their teaching was the teaching of the apostles (see Acts 2:42), namely, all of Scripture and how it points to and is fulfilled in Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15-17).



What are some truths and teachings new believers need to be taught early in their discipleship?

We tend to think of discipleship exclusively in formal terms; we're tempted to think that it must be done by pastors or at least really spiritual Christians—just not us. But that's not the teaching of the New Testament. Jesus structured His church for every-member discipleship. The pastors and teachers equip the church for the ministry of discipleship by teaching God's Word. Then the church receives that Word and speaks it to one another in order to build each other up that we may grow in Christlikeness as well as to those outside the church so they too may believe and be called Christians.

**Discipleship:** Discipleship is a \_\_\_\_\_ that takes place both formally and informally to effect spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ as people follow Jesus. We make disciples through our words and actions, providing verbal instruction from God's \_\_\_\_\_ and non-verbal \_\_\_\_\_ through our lives.

### **Point 3: The people of God provide for the needs of other believers (Acts 11:27-30).**

<sup>27</sup> In those days some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. <sup>28</sup> One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the reign of Claudius. <sup>29</sup> Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. <sup>30</sup> They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul.

Adam's sin introduced suffering into the world (Rom. 5:12-21; 8:18-25), whether a common cold or cancer, tornadoes or tsunamis, floods or famines, diabetes or death. Nonetheless, nothing is outside the sovereignty of God, and that includes our suffering. Jesus prepared His followers to experience troubles in this world (John 16:33). Here the Holy Spirit prepared the church in Antioch through a prophet. But curiously, their preparation focused on helping others.



How should God's knowledge of and sovereignty over natural disasters affect the believer's response to them?

By sharing the news of the coming famine with the newly planted church in Antioch, the Holy Spirit prepared the disciples to respond. The church in Antioch chose to collect an offering and send it to the elders of the church in Jerusalem. Their first thought was not for their own welfare but provision for their brothers and sisters in crisis. From the very beginning of the life of the church, the Lord has provided for the needs of His people through the generosity of His people (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37).



What are some results that come from the church caring for brothers and sisters in Christ?



# Daily Study

## Day 1: Read Acts 11:19-24

Jesus promised that the world would hate us because it hated Him (John 15:18-20). Paul told Timothy that “all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The early Christians in Jerusalem experienced this kind of suffering firsthand. After Stephen’s martyrdom, most of the Christians left Jerusalem to escape the increased pressures against them (see Acts 8:1; 11:19).

When we remember that the Lord Jesus is in control over all things and recognize that this includes persecution, we realize that the Lord is at work even through our suffering. That’s precisely what we see in Acts 11:19-24. Persecution became a means by which Jesus continued to build His church, as those who were being scattered took the gospel beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. How do we know that Jesus remained sovereign over the persecution to bring about the growth of the church? Verse 21 tells us as much: “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord.”

 Read John 15:18-20 and 2 Timothy 3:12. How will these passages inform your thinking about God, about His church, and about yourself?



### Voices from Church History

“There is no cross so great, so grisly, so horrible that very little good is brought with it for Christendom. For in the cross and persecution of Christians, faith increases, the gospel is in full force, the hearts of Christians are kindled and prepared to suffer for Christ’s sake whatever they must. The more Christians are persecuted and slaughtered, the more Christians are born.”<sup>3</sup>

—Johann Spangenberg  
(1484–1550)

## Day 2: Read Acts 11:25-26

In God's providence, the martyrdom of Stephen led to the birth of the church in Antioch. This church became a crucial outpost for the Gentile mission as Saul's (or Paul's) home base. News about these new believers in Antioch reached Jerusalem. The apostles, in turn, sent Barnabas to encourage them, and Barnabas then set out to find Saul in order to bring him to Antioch. Barnabas and Saul met with these new believers for a whole year, teaching large numbers of them the truth about Jesus and His gospel (see also Acts 20:17-24).

This is what discipleship is all about: following Jesus so that you and others can become more like Him. That's what Barnabas and Saul did. The two of them remained with the believers in Antioch for a year, encouraging them to follow Jesus and teaching them God's Word so that they would look like their Lord.



Who has discipled and encouraged you to follow Jesus? How can you encourage others to follow Jesus in a similar fashion?

## Day 3: Read Acts 11:27-30

King Jesus is Lord even over famines. We see this in how Jesus prepared His church for the upcoming famine by revealing to Agabus, by the Spirit, what would happen and where it would happen. Luke confirms that it did happen during the reign of Claudius (v. 28).

The Lord who is sovereign over the famine is also able to care for His people in the midst of their need. He can care for the needs of His people in supernatural ways, but most often, the Lord cares for His people through ordinary means. And one of the ordinary means by which the Lord cares for His people is through the generosity of His people.

In this instance, each believer in Antioch gave "according to his ability" (v. 29). They gave out of what the Lord had given them. Large gifts and small gifts, the quantities were different, but the impact for each gift was the same. God used all of it. Through their generous giving, the Lord met the needs of the Christians in Jerusalem.



How does the way you spend your money reveal what you love?

## Day 4: Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-9

Just like it would today, collecting an offering required organization and planning. In a previous letter, Paul, also known as Saul in Acts 11, had already presented the Corinthians with the opportunity to collect the offering (1 Cor. 16:1-4). Here Paul reminded them of that fact and encouraged them to follow through on their commitment by appealing to their initial eagerness to take part in the offering (2 Cor. 9:2).

Unlike the Christians in Achaia and Macedonia, the Corinthian Christians seem to have been people of means, at least several of them. Thus, Paul urged them to give out of their wealth. He encouraged them to give generously because the one who “sows sparingly will also reap sparingly” (v. 6). In the end, however, each was to give as they had decided and with joy.



How does understanding your wealth compared to the wealth of most people in the world encourage you to be generous?

## Day 5: Read 2 Corinthians 9:10-15

We should reject the teaching and principles of the so-called prosperity gospel—the ideas that by faith we can become wealthy, healthy, and prosperous in whatever we claim. Still, when you read 2 Corinthians 9:10-15, there are some pretty blatant promises. The God who provides seed for the farmer and bread to eat will also provide and multiply your seed. The clear implication is that if you're generous, you don't have to worry about what you've “lost.” What the Lord multiplies, however, is not primarily our money but “the harvest of [our] righteousness” (v. 10).

What is the nature of this increase? Well, it's not necessarily monetary wealth; it's the kind of wealth that produces not more material wealth but thanksgiving to God (v. 11). In other words, the joy of generosity is that it both supplies the needs of the saints and glorifies God (vv. 12-13).



In what ways does your life line up with the principles for giving as described in 2 Corinthians 9:6-15?

