

**Acts 11:19-26 (1984 NIV)**  
***Antioch Power for Today***

**Introduction**

In our text today, we see how God by His Spirit was using a church in Gentile country to advance the gospel. This was the Antioch Church in the Roman province of Syria.

Oliver Cromwell was a great military leader during the English civil war in the 1600s. He eventually put down all opposition and became "Lord Protector" of England, Scotland and Ireland from 1653 to his death in 1658. The story is told that during his reign, the government ran out of silver coinage. Cromwell then sent his men to a cathedral to see if they could find any silver. They reported back to him, "The only silver we can find is in the statues of the Saints standing in the corners." Cromwell then ordered, "Good, melt down the Saints and put them into circulation!"

(<https://www.insight.org/resources/daily-devotional/individual/saints-in-circulation>)

Indeed, that was how the Antioch Church came into being. The melting heat of persecution scattered the believers out of Jerusalem, and some early converts had the dare and openness to circulate themselves in the world they were in. They were not afraid to tell others who they were in Jesus Christ. And what resulted was a church zealous and vibrant in its mission of advancing the Lord's work.

Today, we still talk about the missionary zeal and vibrancy of the Antioch Church with great admiration. How this church was willing to release the best of its material and human resources to advance the missionary cause is still an example that many churches today try to emulate.

Yes, the power of the Lord was with the Antioch Church. And we today need the same power in order to advance the Lord's work in and through us.

From the Lord's dealing with the Antioch Church, the Word of God today gives us an understanding of how the Lord would empower His church to advance His work. An important first lesson is this ...

**I. There is divine power even in the work of ordinary people (vv. 19-21).**

Let's first have a geographical orientation. Jerusalem is in the south. When the early believers were persecuted in Jerusalem, they (except the apostles in 8:1) fled northward to Phoenicia and Antioch (the capital of Syria). Some even crossed the Great Sea to the island of Cyprus on the west. And what did

these religious refugees do? Not to seek better lives in foreign lands, but to seek better opportunities to spread the gospel.

The only inhibition was that they still very much kept the message only to the Jews whom they met in those lands—i.e. to those Jews who had adopted the Greek culture and spoke the Greek language while keeping their Jewish faith. And some of these “overseas” Jews in Cyprus and Cyrene (on the northern coast of Africa) in turn went over to Antioch.

Being more international, and therefore, less ethnocentric than the Jews in Jerusalem, these “overseas” Jews began to share their newly found faith with Greeks as well. And v. 21 tells us that as a result of this overall commitment to share the gospel, “the Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord”. A church in Antioch was born.

And here’s a simple Bible quiz question: What are the names of these founding members of the Antioch Church? Answer: They were “unknowns” who nevertheless had this great commitment to share their faith. The fact that they were unnamed in the Bible suggests that they were not high-profile figures, but just ordinary believers committed to the task of advancing the gospel message.

They did not wait for Peter to come. They did not wait for Barnabas to come. They did not wait for any spiritual giant to come and start the ball rolling for them. Instead, they committed themselves to the task; they got themselves involved. And they established the Antioch Church for the “hand of the Lord was with them”. There’s divine power when ordinary people get involved, and extraordinary things can happen.

Also, more than the commitment of these believers to witness to the Gentiles was their courage to do so. You see, Antioch was morally lax; religiously diversified and culturally cosmopolitan. In other words, the people who lived there were generally “hard nuts” to crack because of the norms and values they were used to.

Also, you must remember that the Jews generally had a historical disdain for the Greeks. They viewed these non-Jewish people as unclean like dogs, fit for hell fire. Any God-fearing Jew should thus avoid any interaction with Gentiles. In fact, the traditional Hebrew-speaking Jews from Jerusalem carried with them a “class mentality”—they were first class, the Greek-speaking Jews were second class, Samaritans (half Jews) were third class, and Gentiles (the others) were no class.

Hence, when the ordinary Greek-speaking Jewish believers from Cyprus and Cyrene spoke to the Greeks about the gospel, it was not only a commitment, but also a courageous act on their part. They were actually doing something quite daring in that they were not only trying to crack some “hard nuts” by witnessing to the pagan Greeks, but also trying to break some strong Jewish

traditions by befriending these Greek people. But the Lord's hand was with them, and a predominantly Gentile church was born in Antioch.

What does all this tell us about God and people? Well, it demonstrates that God uses ordinary people to bring about conversion of sinners, and even to advance His work in significant ways.

What do we have among us today? Is there someone in the mode of Moses or Joshua or Peter or Paul in our midst? By all means, pray for one if you like. But we do not have to wait for such a person to come or to become such a person ourselves before we can do something for the Lord.

The Word of God reassures us today that there is even divine power when ordinary people get to work because "the Lord's hand is with them". If you believe that the Lord has saved you; if you believed that the Lord has something worthwhile for you to do; then believe also that the Lord's hand will be with you. The Lord's hand symbolizes His power, and when His hand is with us, it means that His power is here to guide us, to protect us, to enable us, and to approve what we are doing for Him (Ex 9:3; Isa 59:1; Lk 1:66; Acts 4:28,30; 13:11). Yes, when ordinary people like you and me dare to do something worthwhile for the Lord, His hand is with us and His work is advanced in and through us. There is divine power even in the work of ordinary people.

These days, we read much about the power of ordinary people that protests against the rule of human authorities in different lands. From the generally peaceful ones in America to the violent ones as in the Middle East and elsewhere, such expressions of people power seem like everyday realities when we turn the pages of our papers each day.

But the power of ordinary people that we see in the Antioch believers is not the power of defiant protest, but the power of divine proclamation of the gospel.

In 1988, Hollywood released a movie called "The Last Temptation of Christ". Millions of Christians in America were outraged. They protested bitterly that the film was guilty of blasphemy, of shameless and public scorn towards the truth about Jesus Christ. By the way, this film was banned in Singapore because of religious sensitivities. It depicted Jesus as a confused and weak man who finally succumbed to the temptation of lust.

Some Christians in America wanted to raise millions of dollars in order to buy over the film so that they could burn the negatives and all the prints. Others were trying to mobilize public pressure to stop the release of the movie, and even to boycott the film's distributors at the box office. But because of the great attention, publicity and interest that had been unwittingly generated by the Christians themselves, the film was a great box-office success.

In America, where individual rights and freedom are almost sacrosanct, the protest of the Christians was snubbed by many cynical pagans who retorted, "All these Christians ever do is to tell us what we can't do, can't see, and can't believe. They just want to control everyone."

In the outrage over "The Last Temptation of Christ", only a few Christians attempted to proclaim instead of to protest. Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, was one of them. He wrote a clearly reasoned pamphlet that presented the biblical doctrine of the Person of Christ, and explained the reality of His temptation and His sinlessness.

The reason why the cries of "blasphemy!" over the movie by millions of American Christians then had sounded so weak was because they could not explain what was exactly wrong with it. The sad result was that the public interpreted their cries of "blasphemy!" as merely cries of "what we Christians do not like"

(Horton 1992:39-57)<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the most powerful thing the church can do before the unbelieving world is proclamation of the truth, rather than protest for the truth. To proclaim with our words and actions what the biblical alternative is, and not merely to protest that this is wrong and that is wrong.

There is power even in the work of ordinary Christians to advance the gospel. It does not come in the power of defiant protest, but in the power of proclamation of biblical truths with our words and actions.

Many years ago in America, a Christian man was completing some business with a lawyer. Before leaving the office, the Christian turned to the lawyer and said, "I have often wanted to ask you a question, but I have been a coward." The lawyer was surprised. "I didn't think you were afraid of anything!" he said. "What is the question?"

The client replied: "Why aren't you a Christian?"

The lawyer hung his head, "You know my weakness," he said. "Isn't there something in the Bible about drunkards having no part in the kingdom of God?"

Not to be detoured, the Christian said, "That's not what I am asking you. I want to know why you aren't a Christian."

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<sup>1</sup> Horton, Michael (ed.) 1992. *Power Religion*. Pretoria: Christian Art Pub.

“Well,” said the lawyer, “I can’t recall that anybody asked me and I am sure nobody ever told me how to become a Christian.”

Before long, the two were praying together, and God moved into that lawyer’s life. He saved him and immediately broke the power of drink that had bound him.

That lawyer was Cyrus L. Scofield, who later edited the famous Scofield Reference Bible that helped many Christians around the world in their understanding of the Bible and spiritual growth.

Someone ordinary shared the gospel truth with Scofield, without protesting against his drinking habit. The result was the conversion of a man who later contributed significantly to the biblical literacy of Christians all around the world.

(<https://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bscofield2.html>)

Do we want to win the lost to Christ? Do we want to make a difference for the Lord? Do we want to advance His work in and through us?

None of us may feel like giants of faith, but the Word of God reassures us today that we can advance His gospel and His work because He uses the ordinary to do and achieve the extraordinary. That’s the secret in the power of the Antioch believers. The Lord’s hand was with them. And that’s also a promise for us today. When we the ordinary work in faith and faithfulness, divine power goes with us.

A second lesson from the Antioch Church is this ...

## **II. There is divine power in the work of encouragement (vv. 22-26).**

News of what is happening in Antioch had reached the ears of those in the Church at Jerusalem (HQ of New Testament Christianity). By now, after what had happened in Samaria because of the ministry of Philip (he started a thriving church among the Samaritans), and the conversion of people like Paul and Cornelius, the Church at Jerusalem was more prepared to accept such events as the Lord’s grace working in the lives of people.

Still, what happened at Antioch needed investigation. But this time, the Jerusalem Church did not send any apostle to the scene. Instead, they sent Barnabas who was noted for his gift of encouragement and objectivity (in 9:26-27, Barnabas had defended Paul when the disciples in Jerusalem had doubted the latter’s conversion experience). And being a Greek-speaking Jew from Cyprus himself, Barnabas literally spoke the language of those in Antioch.

So, Barnabas came and when he “saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts” (v. 23). He saw the Lord’s grace in the changed lives of those in

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Antioch ... and he rejoiced. He was sent to investigate, but that's different from seeking out things to find fault with.

Barnabas was true to his name as the "Son of Encouragement". The Word of God describes him as "good, full of the Holy Spirit and faith"; he strengthened the good work he saw in Antioch to the point that "a great number of people were brought to the Lord" (v. 24).

Indeed, there's divine power in the work of encouragement. Barnabas saw and stayed to be a part of what the Lord was doing in and through the people. And in his example, we learn one important mark of an encourager—i.e. the openness to enlist others to work together without fear or favour.

With so many being brought to the Lord, Barnabas knew that it would be too taxing for him to work alone. With so many new converts in Antioch, the greatest need was teaching/grounding in the Word of God. The sad thing in Christian conversion is that many are saved, but many are also not fed well to become strong so that they can live for the Lord.

Barnabas saw this need and whom did he seek? Saul of Tarsus who was perhaps the best he could approach for the job. But Saul was more than 100 miles away and with no email or telephone, how did Barnabas contact him? He "went to Tarsus to look for Saul" (v. 25). That's how keen Barnabas was to get Saul on board.

And you know something—Saul was likely a more gifted teacher than Barnabas, and that means Barnabas was putting his own leadership and prominence on the line when he invited Saul to join him. But Barnabas was willing to let others use their gifts to further the work of the Lord, even if it meant they could do certain things better than him. That's the mark of an encourager. Barnabas cared more for the Lord's work, for the interest of the bigger body than for his own prominence. That's the mark of an encourager. Barnabas didn't try to suppress the abilities of others, but provided opportunities for them to advance the Lord's work. That's the mark of an encourager.

What does all this mean to us? Well, it reminds us to encourage others to serve together with us, especially with their gifts. Some of you here may have the desire, the zeal and the gifts to serve. And to the church I say, "Encourage and give them opportunities to serve." Some of you may be young and lacking in experience. But we still need to encourage you to serve. What you need is not denial, but mature ones to be your guides and mentors.

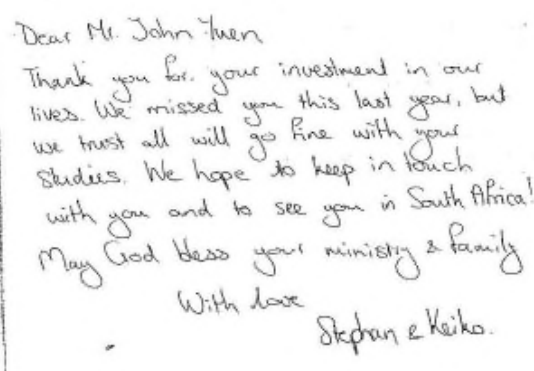
My point is that we must not be quick in picking on the mistakes of those who serve, but be encouraging to them in constructive ways. Criticism often breeds wilful rebels. Encouragement breeds willing recruits for the Lord's work.

Barnabas was an encourager, and specifically, he encouraged others "to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (v. 23). Literally, he encouraged

people “to cleave to the Lord”. Spiritual pilgrimages are not always filled with mountain-top experiences. There are many journeys into deep and dark valleys. Hence, we need encouragement “to remain true to the Lord”. We need others to put courage into us so that we can continue “to cleave to the Lord” during those difficult times.

I reflect on my ministry with students as a theological educator. I admit that there were times when I was disappointed with the attitude of both students and colleagues. Sometimes, I got discouraged and asked myself, “Why on earth am I doing this? Isn’t there something better to do?”

There was a couple who were once my students. The man is a white South African and the woman is Japanese. Just before they left Singapore, they wrote me a little card:



Dear Mr. John Yuen  
 Thank you for your investment in our  
 lives. We missed you this last year, but  
 we trust all will go fine with your  
 studies. We hope to keep in touch  
 with you and to see you in South Africa!  
 May God bless your ministry & family  
 With love  
 Stephan & Keiko.

This may be just a little note, but it goes a long way in encouraging me even until today whenever I read it again, especially the first sentence—“Thank you for your investment in our lives.” It reminds me that my past ministry in theological education was not a season when I was wasting my life and time away. Rather, the Lord’s hand was with me as I invested myself in preparing men and women for the Lord’s work.

Indeed, a little encouragement can go a long way in helping people keep or regain their spiritual focus and bearing. Yes, we all need to be encouraged from time to time in order “to remain true to the Lord”. And the Word today is exhorting us not to wait to be encouraged, but to be a Barnabas—i.e. to go and be an encourager to someone.

Before my wife and I were married, we had a friend whose younger daughter was diagnosed with a blood disorder. This friend and her husband were shattered by the news. The days that followed proved to be very painful and traumatic for both the parents and the sick child. All attempts to treat the child were going nowhere. It was then evident that she would die soon.

My wife (then my fiancée) and I, together with other Christian friends, took turns to visit this couple and sick child in the hospital and to pray for them. The couple was not Christians then. This couple was at the same time shunned by some of their own family members and relatives. Why? Because their misfortune was looked upon as a kind of bad luck, and these people were afraid to be cursed by it if they came too close to the couple.

Even after the child eventually died, some of the family members and relatives still refused to come to the couple and comfort them. Such was the deep sense of rejection experienced by the couple.

When my wife and I sped up preparation for our wedding day, we sent this couple an invitation card. The lady called up my wife and said: "My husband and I would really love to attend your wedding service and dinner. But are you sure you want us to come? Even some of our family members and relatives are still avoiding us. Are you sure you want to invite us?"

My wife replied, "Yes, we would really like both of you to come."

And with a voice choked with gratitude and emotion, she said, "Thank you for accepting us."

They came on our wedding day. And this gesture further provided my wife and me (and other Christian friends) more opportunities to reach out to them with the gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ. Not long later, this couple became Christians. The Lord also blessed them with a baby boy. But the greatest joy shared by my wife and me (and other Christian friends) was to see this whole family get baptized in church one Sunday morning.

I have learned a lesson in encouragement as a result—i.e. to encourage someone is to respond to that person's need or pain with a touch of God's love so that he/she can be reassured that God is indeed real.

But it is ironic that very often, Christians find it easier to love and encourage the lost outside the church than to love and encourage one another in the church. Thus, we need God to help us show more love and encouragement to one another in church. This is because to love and encourage the lost outside the church, but not to do likewise to one another in church is really an irony.

But if we truly love and encourage one another in church both in words and actions, then I believe it will be easier for us to speak the truth to one another in love. Why? Because we know that when we speak the truth (even if it is



some hard words), the intention is to build up and care for one another, not to tear down one another.

Verse 26 pays a wonderful tribute to the work of Barnabas and Saul in encouraging and strengthening the Antioch believers. These believers were “called Christians first in Antioch”. Literally, they were given the name “Little Christ” by the unbelievers in Antioch.

Is this a derogatory term? No. But it certainly testifies to the faithfulness of these disciples in connecting their words and works with the name of Christ in a less-than-friendly environment. They were trying to be like Christ.

Indeed, we are Christians first before anything else.

- If you see yourself as Christian first, how will that change the way you work?
- If you see yourself as Christian first, how will that change the way you behave before your peers?
- If you see yourself as Christian first, how will that change the way you treat your family members?
- If you see yourself as Christian first, how will that change the way you relate with other people, both Christians and non-Christians?

Let’s encourage one another to see ourselves as “Christian first” before anything else in our different situations. And there is divine power in such encouragement because the Lord’s work can and will be advanced in our various situations.

## Conclusion

Let me close with the Lord’s words to His disciples in John 13:34-35 – “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

By His death, the Lord encouraged us with His perfect love in spite of our sins. Today, He is exhorting us to do likewise to one another.

*So let’s seek the Lord to help us encourage people with a measure of His perfect love as we respond to their needs and weaknesses.*

Amen!