

Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3;
14:24-15:5; 15:35

WHERE IS ANTIOCH?

Everyone knows that symbolically speaking, the two great roads of the Christian Faith are the Road to Damascus and the Road to Jericho. Nothing I say is intended to diminish the importance of these two great roads or anything they represent. They are profound, and Christianity is unimaginable without both of them. But we have not had time yet to deal much with THE RULE OF THREE. Do you also know that in Christendom, things *never* come in twos? Christianity is a religion of threes: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Body, mind, and soul. Faith, hope, and love abide, these three. On the third day He rose again. And so on. So what happened to the third road?

The Road to Damascus is about encounter between us and Jesus the Christ. It is not a relationship between equals! Conversion. Transformation. *“Behold I make all things new.”* New life, new purpose – even a new identity aware of the caring and support of almighty God.

The Road to Jericho is about compassion for another. (By the way, it is not about compassion for “others” in general. It is about compassion for another in particular.) Having received mercy ourselves – having been befriended by the Christ of God – we long to be agents of His mercy. There is much good in people, and no culture or religion anywhere is a stranger to amazing good deeds. After all, who made us? But in our tradition, Jericho is bigger than feeling sorry for somebody. Nevertheless, it is not a relationship between equals. By definition, people we encounter on the Jericho Road are needy and, in some way or another, we are trying to fill their need.

In Christendom, what is the name of the road traveled by equals? We are a religion of love. Jesus’ earthly ministry is founded and survives on the power of friendship. No other religion in the world puts as much emphasis on relationship as Christendom does. We even believe that God wants relationship with us, and in turn wants us in strong and beautiful relationships with each other that stretch unto eternity. Are there no equal relationships in love? Where is the third road?

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Something crucial is missing. And while it is not entirely missing, the category itself has been growing dim, feeble, misunderstood, and neglected before our very eyes. For the next few weeks, I hope you will take a brief tour with me on the Road to Antioch. Of course, a sight-seeing tour is not the same as really walking the road. But if we know it's there, then at least we can decide if we truly want to walk this Road to Antioch.

First we need to get oriented. With a good Bible Atlas, it's not very hard to find Antioch on the map. There is another Antioch, called Pisidian Antioch, in the heart of Asia. Paul visited it several times on his journeys, but Pisidian Antioch does not concern us here.

Some less obvious items may be interesting to some of you. Antioch is just over three hundred miles north of Jerusalem. It sits twenty miles inland from the Mediterranean Sea. The Orontes River flows north out of the Lebanon Mountains for over a hundred miles and then turns sharply west in a fertile plain separating the Lebanon Mountains from the Taurus Mountains. Antioch is near this curve in the river.

Seleucia Pieria, the port city at the mouth of the Orontes, was a satellite to the great city. We think, "How strange. Why not build the main city closer to the sea instead of having to haul everything twenty miles upriver?" But in the ancient world, it was the best way to protect a city against the warships of an enemy nation. With Seleucia Pieria as a seaport and with a good navigable river, Antioch was considered one of the great maritime cities of its day. In fact, Antioch was one of the greatest cities in the world back in the time of Jesus. It was the third largest city in the Roman Empire (Rome, Alexandria, Antioch). It is estimated that it had a population of 800,000. It was the Roman capital of Syria, was a free city, and was called "The Queen of the East." (It had been the capital of the Seleucid Empire before Roman domination.) Roman emperors often visited Antioch. Its "Groves of Daphne" were ten miles in circumference, with waterfalls, cypress trees, and beautiful gardens. There was a famous sanctuary to Apollo there. It was a huge "pleasure" area.

Antioch included an exclusive district built on an island in the middle of the Orontes River – ancient Balboa Island. Eventually, the king's palace and grounds were built there, and only royalty and royal guests were allowed on the island. Severe earthquakes destroyed the island in the sixth century A.D.

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Where is Antioch? It's easy to find on the map. You can also find it in the Bible. (Acts 11:19-21) Many followers of Jesus fled from Jerusalem and Jewish-controlled territory as the persecution of Christians mounted. Stephen had been stoned to death. King Herod beheaded James, the brother of John. He arrested Peter, who would certainly have died also if he hadn't miraculously escaped. (Does that mean God loved Peter more than Stephen and James, or less than Stephen and James? I remember asking that question back in fifth grade because of the dumb way our Sunday School teacher told us the story of Peter's escape.)

Some Christians stayed in Jerusalem, of course. They were the most Jewish – the most conservative – of the Christians. They loved Jesus, but they hadn't departed from their Jewish way of life at all. They were able to fit in with their surrounding culture and all Jewish practices, just as before. Their leader was James – not John's brother, who we just mentioned was beheaded – but James the brother of Jesus Himself. This James was never a disciple, never a follower, never a true convert during Jesus' life. But Jerusalem understandably had enormous reputation, and being a blood brother of Jesus had given James enormous reputation as well. So James was head of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, and wouldn't that form and set the pattern of Christian Life and thought for the future?

How interesting! The Jerusalem church was logically the center and headquarters of Christianity. It was where all the big stuff happened. It was the City of David, so why not the city of David's greater son – the Messiah? People tended to assume so, even back then.

And who lived in Jerusalem? Christians nobody could tell were Christians, for the most part. They melted into their surroundings, doing what they had always done, just as they had always done it. They did not spread the news very far; it would bring persecution down upon them. They not only refrained from telling Gentiles about Jesus, they did everything in their power to stop others from doing so. And when they couldn't stop them, they insisted that at least all Gentile converts must become Jews, totally: get circumcised; get kosher; obey all the rules of Jewish custom and tradition, along with swearing to obey Torah. It was only natural; in their position in Jerusalem, the more that Christians were associated with anything non-Jewish, the more precarious their own lives became. Does this remind you of anybody you know? Melting into the society and culture around us is a

pretty sensible thing to do ... unless we believe in something different, and strongly so.

Meanwhile, the people who believed in Jesus – who intended to *live* like they believed in Him and couldn't shut up about it – had to flee. They had to pick up and find someplace else to live. They headed for Jewish relatives and friends – that is, Jewish communities – but *outside* of Israel. Jewish communities that lived in the midst of pagan surroundings were not as stringent as Jerusalem. The Book of Acts tells us that they went to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. The largest collection ended up in Antioch, because Antioch was the largest city in the region.

Doubtless, Antioch didn't even notice their coming. It was busy being one of the greatest Roman cities in the world – busy with its commerce, pleasures, celebrations, and governmental affairs. But into Antioch came refugees from the persecution of a tiny sect in Jerusalem, three hundred miles away. They settled mostly in the Jewish quarter. They had only what they could carry with them. They had to find work, food, and a place to live. But something burned within them that ... well, you know the rhetoric. Does it remind you of anybody you know? Anybody in your house?

Then something happened that nobody planned. They were Jewish, but Jesus had changed them. Nobody knew what that meant yet or where it would lead, except it had made them homeless. They talked to Jewish neighbors there in Antioch, and to each other. Until – and it seems so innocent – some of them (natives of Cyprus and Cyrene) began talking to Gentiles also. They were Jews but they were used to Gentile neighbors. Nobody had ever said they shouldn't talk to folk they ran into. Only, the response was surprising. Some of the Gentiles were powerfully drawn to what they heard, and they wanted to be part of it. Suddenly there were Gentiles hanging around, coming to the meetings, excited about what they were learning. Some of them even began to pray, and to turn their wills and their lives over to Jesus and His Kingdom. They also discovered the presence of the Holy Spirit, and started to walk the WAY, just like real people.

Now the fat was in the fire! Nobody planned it. (Well, no human did.) Nobody designed it ahead of time. But there it was. Either these Gentiles must be accepted into the church or they must be driven away. If accepted, they must be accepted on the authority of Jesus' love, or converted to Judaism along with their devotion to Jesus. *These* were

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the great issues of the first-century church. This was the real drama. Roman persecution, when it came, was no fun, but these were the real issues. Would the Jerusalem church, under the leadership of James, decide these issues? Who else could?

Where is Antioch? Antioch is where followers of Jesus first became known as Christians. Antioch is where the Christian church began to wrestle with its real identity, and shape, and purpose, and truth. Antioch is where Christianity began to perceive itself as something new and different from Judaism; something in its own right; something with a mission it could not forsake, yet far bigger than it could handle.

Antioch is where the church became a faith community. Antioch is where the first offering was taken to help others in trouble. Antioch is where the Christian missionary movement was born. Antioch is where Christians first practiced ordination: laying their hands on chosen leaders who would go act for them, and the church promising its support and granting them whatever authority it possessed. (To lay hands on someone says, “You are my hands and you go where I cannot go, but my hands back you up and their labor will support you.”) Antioch is where Christians learned to pray and fast together; to argue together; to decide together; to trust that the Holy Spirit would guide and instruct them as a church – that is, as a group, as a faith family. Antioch is where Christians became accountable to each other for the manner and intention by which they walked the WAY.

Antioch is where it happened: the fellowship of believers, the community of faith, the body of Christ. The Christian movement that swept the world did not come out of Jerusalem, though its faith was born there. It came out of Antioch. Antioch was the true center of the apostolic church. Jerusalem and Antioch fought each other over who had the truth – over who were the rightful leaders of Jesus’ church. Sometimes the battles were cordial, sometimes nasty. Well, you know what church life is like. Anyway, Antioch won, or we wouldn’t be here. The Road to Antioch is the road to the church, to the body of believers, to the fellowship of the Christian Way.

Do you feel it? It cannot be *only* our personal relationship with God in Christ Jesus. That’s what the Damascus Road is about. It cannot be *only* neighbor love – good deeds, righteousness, our own caring. That’s what the Jericho Road is about. Something essential is missing. Even Damascus and Jericho put together can still seem like an individual

operation: my faith, my good deeds, my spiritual journey, my perspective, my struggles and victories and defeats and all the rest. That is *not* Christianity! Vital parts of the Path, yes – but not Christianity. American religiosity, perhaps – but not Christianity.

Antioch is the road to community. Nobody walks the Christian Road alone, not even alone with Jesus. It is a contradiction of basic truth. Christianity *is* a church – a fellowship, the body of Christ, a body of believers. Nobody can love alone, and nobody can follow the Lord of Love in a vacuum. To be Christian is to be part of a body, part of a faith family, part of a fellowship.

For many people in our time, Christianity (and church membership) has become such a vague and jumbled hodgepodge that they no longer realize it is the most exciting and important possibility in all of life. It no longer calls most people to do anything specific, to take any steps, to make any progress in their faith.

At *this* church, we keep trying to remember: To be a Christian, we must do some things. We must turn our lives over to Jesus Christ. We must pray and read the Bible every day. We must tithe. We must be carriers of the Message – find and nurture our six. We must each have a spiritual mentor. We must seek our vocatio. We must receive, claim, and give forgiveness. If we do not do these things, we do not want the Christian Life. If we do not do these things, we cannot experience the Christian Life. The Christian Life is made up of – and made out of doing – such things.

Each of these steps or stages has many dimensions. Every single one of you who has tried any of them has found incredible surprise and delight awaiting you, and no doubt some pain and challenge. And we haven't finished with any of these familiar stages yet; we haven't become expert in even half of them. But it is time to add another factor: we need to walk the Road to Antioch together, and on purpose.

One of the requirements for the spiritual life is a faith community, a fellowship of believers. We each need to be part of a body of faith-friends – larger than our immediate families, smaller than the village or town in which we live. Loyalty, devotion, caring, and concern for this faith community rank next to the immediate family. This body – *ecclesia*, people, church – is like a laboratory where you try out and practice Christian principles before taking them into the world beyond.

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Church is supposed to take time, energy, discipline, devotion. It is not for spectators. If nobody in your church annoys you, disagrees with you, or stretches your capacity to love, then your church is too small. It is not helping you to grow. If you are not engaged in some project or purpose with your church – beyond your own personal needs or desires – then it has not turned into a church yet, at least not for you.

I am not even trying to preach or teach any of this yet. Just trying to get the definition clear. Already it's enough for one day. So let me turn back to the Scripture readings for a moment, just so you will remember that none of this is my notion or design. It comes under the category of "obscure things of utmost importance."

The Apostle Paul is a member of the church at Antioch. He is not a freelance preacher or missionary, as many suppose. He does not go out on his own authority. He does not rely on his own prayers alone. He operates out of a fellowship. He is ordained – chosen and sent out – by his church, as representative of his church.

On every journey Paul takes, except when he is under arrest and cannot help it, he starts from Antioch and returns to Antioch, where he makes a full report and receives further assignment. Between journeys, we find him living, teaching, and preaching at Antioch. Antioch is his home, his headquarters, his home church.

Paul checks everything with his Lord, and is empowered by his Lord. But Paul also checks everything with his church, and is empowered by his church.

Christianity is not a "Lone Ranger" religion. If we want to be part of it, we must live in, and out from, a church. The Road to Antioch is the road to Christian community. It has fallen into disrepair in our time. I am hoping it is time for us to take, again, the Road to Antioch.