

MBC - 1/12/2020 - Pastor Doug Thompson  
A 20/20 VISION FOR MBC  
***Pt. 1 - "Looking Upward"***

- Acts 13:1-12 <sup>1</sup>Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup>While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup>Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. <sup>4</sup>So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

***Intro: What made the church at Antioch "The best church in the Bible?"***

The title for the sermon on this passage is "***The Best Church in the Bible,***" but that's not the sermon I'm going to preach this morning! Janice and I were at the coast this last weekend and I said to her, "I'm really anxious to get back to Acts. I think our folks really want to get back to Acts!" And I still am, and we still are, but just not for a few more weeks. I want to tell you how I believe God sent me in a different direction, but also how it ties into this very passage.

The first thing that got my wheels spinning a couple weeks ago was a youtube someone sent me of Francis Chan, hip, evangelical author and former pastor, saying this to a crowd—

- "I didn't know that for the first 1,500 years of church history, everyone saw communion as the literal body and blood of Christ," Chan remarked. "And it wasn't until 500 years ago that someone popularized the thought that it's just a symbol and nothing more. I didn't know that. I thought, 'Wow, that's something to consider.'"

Well what he's talking about is the RC doctrine of transubstantiation: that the wine and bread become the literal body and blood of Jesus, and salvation comes through eating and drinking His body and blood. It also teaches that Jesus is re-sacrificed, over and over again in the Mass. "500 years ago" of course, refers to the Reformation when Protestants corrected that heresy and affirmed that the Lord's Table is *symbolic* of Christ's body and blood. It is a remembrance of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice for sin - not a repeat of it.

- Chan went on to say that "500 years ago" the center of worship changed from communion, to a guy preaching in a pulpit - which he puts down: "Some guy holed up in his office for 20 hours a week studying the Bible and then giving his own interpretation of it - and that's why there are over 30,000 denominations, when there used to just be one church - and the thing that made it one was communion."

There is so much wrong with that, I can't begin to untangle it all this morning, but I kept thinking: "So many Christians won't have a clue as to why he is wrong because they don't know God's Word enough to discern his errors!" By the way, I read at least two comments by people thanking Francis Chan for leading them into Roman Catholicism!

The reason the pulpit became front and center in the church during the Reformation was because the Word of God *is* to be central in our worship. Apart from God's Word, we don't know who He is, who we are, or how we come to know Him. And apart from His Word, we don't know what the Lord's Table really means! And the irony is, that God's Word tells us that it is

to be central, which you won't know if you give your brain and soul to the Roman Catholic Church to be your authority and interpreter of Scripture.

And by the way, there is something much worse than 30,000 denominations - and that's one church that is *wrong*. So that video really upset me - so many Christians are misled by false teachings like this because their shepherds aren't feeding them on God's Word.

2.) The second thing that got me thinking was a couple conversations I had with men who are in small, rural congregations, a lot like MBC. These men see their churches struggling with purpose, direction, motivation - because things aren't jumpin' and happenin' like big city churches. And the temptation is to try things that will attract people: maybe change up the music, shorten the sermons, maybe get the church involved in social issues or the latest fad. . . And again I thought: "No, we need to make even more sure that we are faithful to what God has called the church to be and to do. He's told us. And I'm going to tell you this morning.

3.) But I was still going to return to our study in Acts until I started studying the first 4 verses, and realized what it was that made this church at Antioch "***The Best Church in the Bible:***" They had exactly the same 4 priorities that I laid out for our church almost 6 years ago— and I'll show you that in a minute. But before we return to our series in Acts, I want us to go over these 4 priorities that made Antioch such a faithful, Christ-exalting church.

They kept looking in four directions: **Upward, Inward, Outward, and Forward.**

These are the north, south, east, and west on our compass. And we need to give constant attention and care to each of these directions to keep from losing our direction and drifting from our mission - like so many, many churches have. So let me explain these, then we're going to take them one by one over the next 3 weeks. They are on the back of your outline:

### **1.) God's people need to continually look upward.**

- **1.) Upward** - Godward. Our first priority is vertical. We seek to be a God-saturated and God-infatuated people, always striving to purify and elevate our concept of God. And we seek to worship God seriously, passionately, in spirit and truth: "*all that we are, responding to all that He is.*"

"What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever." All creatures exist for Him and for His glory. He is over all, above all. He created all things, He owns all things, and He is Lord and Master of all things. That is profound: God is *first*. People are *second*, whether saved or lost. Wow. Wouldn't the world say the opposite? "People and their happiness come first. If there is a God, He needs to stay in His place which is to serve us and our happiness." But God is first - and He needs to be first in all we do at MBC. We'll expand this in just a minute. Second—

### **2.) God's people need to continually look inward.**

And by looking inward, I *don't* mean gazing at your navel like they do up the road at Harbin Hot Springs! Look at our second objective—

- **2.) Inward** - Christ calls us to be His body on this earth and *love* one another just as He loves us. This means that we serve one another in our physical, emotional, and spiritual needs, and seek our mutual edification through the ministry of God's Word: "*Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.*" (Ephesians 4:15)

Jesus said, *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples if you have love one for another.”* That means making meals, visiting the sick, praying, counseling - all the things that this church does so well and you all do these things daily. But all of this love and care has a goal, and that is to bring every believer in our church to Christlikeness, so that when people look at this church, they see Jesus Christ. And the #1 way that happens is when we speak the truth in love to one another - this is why preaching, teaching, discipling are such a high priority in everything we do. But as important as it is that we love and build up each other, we will lose our direction and vision if we only look upward and inward—

### **3.) God’s people need to continually look outward.**

God has His people on earth to continue to do what He sent His Son to do - “seek and save the lost!” “As the Father has sent Me,” Jesus said, “So I send you.” Look at our third objective—

- **3.) Outward** - Christ’s Great Commission compels us to take the Gospel to our nearest neighbors as well as to the ends of the earth. The ultimate reason for our existence is to send and support missionaries, plant churches and train indigenous pastors who also pastor and plant sending churches.

If you’ve been tracking with us through Acts, you see this on every page - Jesus, still alive, still seeking and saving the lost, through His church. And probably not a week goes by that we don’t give some update on one of our missionaries, because that’s why we exist.

But our fourth objective is absolutely biblical and necessary—

### **4.) God’s people need to continually look forward.**

- **4.) Forward** - We are committed to looking beyond our own generation to train up the next generation to continue the mission God has called us to. Leadership training and reproduction is an ongoing, intentional priority as Paul told Timothy: *“What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* (2 Timothy 2:2)

We can be doing it all right, but unless we pass the torch to the next generation - MBC will die when we all die - to put it bluntly. I.e., We have to train up the future leaders and shepherds to carry on our vision and our ministry.

- Jesus did this! And His Disciples did this! Or we wouldn’t be here today. So we have to keep at discipleship, and training up leaders who will train up more leaders. We can’t just sit back and enjoy the ride, or one day the ride will be over, and this big brick building will turn into Lake County’s biggest Taco Bell.

I want you to pray with me that God would give us a passion to be faithful in these 4 priorities so that we don’t drift from what He has called us to be and to do. So this morning we begin with the—

## **II. Upward - Exalting God in our lives and worship.**

Let me put it like this: Our #1 commitment is to pursue a high and exalted view of God. We want to see God the way the Psalmist saw God in—

- Psalm 145:1-5 <sup>1</sup>I will extol you (*extol* means to lift high, to exalt, to make lofty), my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever. <sup>2</sup>Every day I will bless you and

praise your name forever and ever. <sup>3</sup>Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. <sup>4</sup>One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. <sup>5</sup>On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.

When you see God like this, as this massive, glorious, holy God, then you are passionate to know Him, and to make Him known. Right? You won't be able to keep it to yourself, you will cry out with David—

- Psalm 34:3 <sup>3</sup>Oh, *magnify* the LORD with me, and let us *exalt* his name together!

Words like these should flow easily and often from our lips. As God's elect, holy people, this should be the banner we fly over our church: "Oh, *magnify* the Lord with me, and let us *exalt* his name together!"

- MBC must be all about GOD: His name, His glory, His praise and honor; knowing Him, loving Him, obeying Him, serving Him, making Him known. We must be a *God-saturated* people, so that any person walking through our doors can see that we make much of our God. He should, in the words of 1Cor.14.25, "*fall on his face, worship God, and declare that God is really among us!*"

Why? Because God is the most glorious, awesome, beautiful Being in the universe, and "from *Him* and through *Him* and to *Him* are all things!" That's why!

God. Not us. And that makes all the difference in how we see our church and what we do.

So how do we keep looking upward? We must passionately pursue—

#### ***A. A right view of God.***

Next to Scripture, I would say that perhaps the words I'm about to read have had more impact on my life than anything else I have ever read - they were written by A.W. Tozer in *Knowledge of the Holy*—

- "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The history of mankind will probably show that no people has ever risen above its religion, and man's spiritual history will positively demonstrate that no religion has ever been greater than its idea of God . . . for this reason the gravest question before the church is always God himself, and the most important fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like . . . were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, 'What comes into your mind when you think about God? We might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man. . . that our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us.'"

The way you and I see God, rightly or wrongly, affects everything in our lives. If your ideas about God are unbiblical and distorted then your life will be the same - guaranteed! And this is because as Tozer went on to say, "*We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God.*"

I.e., we become like what we worship. Think about that. So the way you conceive of God determines the kind of person you are. If you are thinking of God as He has revealed Himself in His Word—

- 2 Corinthians 3:18 you will be . . . transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

But you become like your conception of God even if you say there is no God, right? You will be a fool because “the fool says in his heart, there is no God.”

Ps.10 describes the theology of the wicked person: he or she thinks that God can't see what they are doing—

- Psalm 10:11 <sup>11</sup>He says in his heart, “God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.”
- Psalm 10:13 <sup>13</sup>Why has the wicked spurned God? He has said to himself, “You will not require it.”

That's why they are wicked! They have created God in their own image. They are flaky and unholy, so He must be too. That's just what Ps.50 says about the wicked and why they are that way—

- Psalm 50:21 <sup>21</sup>These things you have done, and I have been silent; *you thought that I was one like yourself*. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you.

As God's people we have to be so careful that we don't pick up our thoughts of God from the world around us—God as He is portrayed in the media, or in movies - or even by our politicians who use God for their own purposes—

And we can absorb these images and distortions into our theology without even realizing it. I remember as a baby Christian hearing the song “*Jesus is Just Alright with Me*” by the Doobie Brothers. I was so excited to hear a song about my Jesus! But he wasn't the Jesus of Scripture, the holy, eternal, Son of God who died a horrible death to make me a child of God. No, this Jesus was just “alright.” He was cool. And it was sung by a band named after a joint. Great.

Or Spirit in the Sky by Norman Greenbaum - remember that brilliant piece of theology?

Never been a sinner I never sinned  
 I got a friend in Jesus  
 So you know that when I die  
 He's gonna set me up with  
 The spirit in the sky  
 Oh set me up with the spirit in the sky  
 That's where I'm gonna go when I die  
 When I die and they lay me to rest  
 I'm gonna go to the place that's the best.

A whole generation of hippies got their theology of God from this song!

How much of our concept of God do we pick up from the world around us? Listen again to these prophetic words from Tozer—

- “Before the church goes into eclipse anywhere there must first be a corrupting of her simple basic theology. She simply gets a wrong answer to the question, ‘what is God

like?' and goes on from there. . . *The heaviest obligation lying upon the church today is to purify and elevate her concept of God until it is once more worthy of Him.*"

And the only way to do this is to make God's Word is a top priority. To worship God in truth means to worship Him as He has revealed Himself to be in His Word - period.

Worship has two-parts - revelation and response. God reveals Himself through His Word, and then we respond to that revelation through our praise and through our lives. This is why the teaching of God's Word permeates everything we do here at MBC - God's Word is to worship what wood is to a fire, what gasoline is to an engine. It is the fuel for our worship.

When you come to MBC you are going to hear dozens of Scriptures before the service is over, and it's all part of our worship—

- I remember a man who used to come to church here and he would constantly write on the back of his communication card: "more worship and less preaching!" What he meant was: more singing, because singing is worship, and preaching is . . . whatever, but it's not worship!

That's not true - God's Word fuels and feeds our worship because it reveals to us the God we worship, and it *is* worship when you listen attentively, reverently, with a heart to respond to what you hear! I would say that the sermon is the very heart of our corporate worship of God.

- The late John Stott said this; "Word and worship belong indissolubly to each other. All worship is an intelligent and loving response to the revelation of God, because it is the adoration of His Name. Therefore acceptable worship is impossible without preaching. For preaching is making known the Name of the Lord, and worship is praising the Name of the Lord made known. Far from being an alien intrusion into worship, the reading and preaching of the word are actually indispensable to it. The two cannot be divorced."

So our upward look means purifying and elevating our concept of God through God's Word, but it also means—

### ***B. A right view of His church.***

As God's people, our very identity and our supreme occupation is all about the worship of God. Look with me at a passage that should change forever the way you see your relationship to the church—

- Ephesians 2:19-22 <sup>19</sup>So then you [this is a plural you] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup>in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup>In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

What is this church? Members of God's household - His family - which is amazing, and "*A holy temple in the Lord. . . a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*" Christ's church is the place where the living God dwells! Paul said in

- 2 Corinthians 6:16 *We are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”*

That’s stunning. **God** - dwells in us, walks among us, He is our God and we are His people? The word for temple here is *naos* which referred to the holy of holies, where the shekinah glory of God dwelt. That’s us. Do you get that? *The holy of holies, is fulfilled in MBC.* Look with me at

- 1 Peter 2:5 <sup>5</sup>you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We are the temple and we are the holy priesthood, and what is our holy occupation? *“to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”* I.e., to worship our living God, together, as His people! We are called to do on earth what the holy angels are always doing in heaven: giving unceasing praise to God!

So all of this means that the way we see God should affect the way we see ourselves as His church - if we see ourselves the way God sees us! Do you see how this gives us a passionate purpose? And a reason to be a committed, faithful part of this church? Look at what Peter says just a few verses later - this is who we are and what we are called to do—

- 1 Peter 2:9 <sup>9</sup>But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, *that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

What an amazing identity and purpose we have as Middletown Bible Church! To be the dwelling place of God on this earth? God mercifully saved us out of our misery to be His God-saturated, Christ-captivated people. To offer up His thanks and His praise as a royal priesthood?

- And then you hear people say, “Oh, I’m a Christian, but I don’t go to church.”

How should we respond? *With evangelism.* Seriously.

If we have a high view of God, then we will have a high view of His church - low view of God = low view of church: doesn’t that explain a lot of what we see today?

### ***C. A right view of worship.***

When we get who God is, and who we are as His people, then corporate worship will be a top priority for our lives, for our families. Years ago John MacArthur wrote a book entitled, “Worship, the Ultimate Priority,” because everything God is doing in us and with us here on earth is preparation for eternal worship in heaven. God sent His Son to earth to seek and save a people to be His worshipers. What did Jesus say in—

- John 4:23 <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.

Are you a Christian this morning? *This is why.*

And when we see worship according to God's Word - we will see it as *an end in itself*.

I.e., it needs no other justification. It doesn't need to serve any other purpose, but simply to praise Him and ascribe to God the honor and majesty of His Person. Just to please Him and Him alone, with no other self-serving motive—

- You remember the story of Mary of Bethany taking that very expensive perfume and anointing Jesus' feet and wiping them with her hair. Lavish, extravagant worship. How did the disciples see it? Wasteful - Judas spoke for all of them when he said, "Why wasn't this ointment sold and the money given to the poor?" But Jesus commended Mary. "You've always got poor people, you don't always have Me!"

What was Jesus saying? Well first of all, He was accepting worship, which means He was claiming again to be God. And He was saying, "God comes before people, and worship should have no other motive than the honor and pleasure of God alone! Yes, we benefit - we are blessed! - but that's not *why* we worship. It's not *for* us, it's not *about* us, we worship for God and God alone! He is the object and His pleasure and His glory is our passion. Not our pleasure. Certainly not our own honor.

- Let me put it like this: if we are worshiping God for His glory and His pleasure alone, it should appear as a total waste of time to unbelievers. If we're doing it right. I.e., they will complain: "This isn't accomplishing anything! You should be out helping poor people, doing good things -!" That's just what Judas said! But oh, beloved, worship of God, lavish, extravagant, even expensive worship is an end in itself. Our God is worthy of such worship.

This has so many implications. I hope it explains the way we try to do things around here—

- We are picky about things like sound and lighting - because when we proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light, we want it to be seen and heard, clearly and with the 'excellence' of which He is worthy. Amen?

Even the way we all keep up these facilities God has so blessed us with - we want people to drive by here and say - "They must think very highly of their God!"

- I'm not saying that God-exalting worship requires a lot of money - I've worshiped with believers shivering from the cold in Romania, because the Communist govt. turned off all the power; in Uganda where the floor of the church was dirt and the roof was sheet metal held up by sticks. And I've preached in the Philippines with chickens walking down the aisle and a dog sleeping under the communion table! But in all those places, those believers sought to worship God *with the best they had to offer Him, because He is worthy of "all that we are, responding to all that He is!"*

Is that the way you worship here on Sunday mornings? Do you come to get, or to give? You've come to appear before the King! Have you prepared your heart and mind to offer Him thanks and praise? Do you sing to Him and about Him with all you've got? And when He speaks in His Word do you drink it in as the very word of God? Beloved, He is worthy!

### III. How the church at Antioch fleshed out these 4 priorities—

So now I want you turn back with me to Acts 13. I want to show you what made the church at Antioch the Best Church in the Bible: they had these 4 priorities—

#### 1.) They looked upward. They were a God-centered church.



- <sup>2</sup>While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” <sup>3</sup>Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. <sup>4</sup>So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit (stop)

They were continually worshiping God, along with fasting - going without food for the purpose of being undistracted in their prayers. Christians are known for eating just about every time they get together, but when they go without eating, that’s the real deal, right? You do that because you are serious about God. These believers were seeking God’s will and guidance for their church - they were passionate about that. And *while* they were on their knees, the Holy Spirit spoke (I believe through one of their prophets) and answered their prayers. How did they respond? More prayer and fasting! **This was a God-centered church.**

And they were so in synch with God that Luke could say that it was actually the Holy Spirit who sent out Saul and Barnabas. Beloved, I want MBC to be that kind of church - completely dependent upon our heavenly Father so that we be completely confident that we are in His will. That’s the only reason our brother in India can keep going out to reach Hindus for Christ - He’s close to the fire!

## 2.) They looked inward - they fed their flock on God’s Word.

They put a premium on teaching the Word of God - Luke even tells us the names of those who taught the flock. Back in ch.11, we read that Barnabas left Antioch to go search for Saul - he travelled 100 miles to Tarsus to bring him back and this is what Luke says—

- Acts 11:26 *For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people.* (They disciplined them in the faith with solid teaching from the Scriptures, and it’s interesting that this is right where Luke inserts this comment:) And in Antioch the disciples were first called *Christians.*”

The church in Antioch knew God’s Word that’s why they were a healthy loving, caring, generous church - they sent an offering to the needy saints in Judea. And beloved, MBC will only be a healthy, loving, caring, generous church if we stay strong in God’s Word - oh, pray that we will! Pray that *you* will! Third—

## 3.) They looked outward - they were missions-minded church.

They were the first sending church in the New Testament - they launched Paul on his first missionary journey which began the final phase of what Jesus said in Acts 1:8 that His disciples would be His witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” It began in Antioch! They knew Jesus’ Great Commission - they got the memo. And I absolutely believe that this is what they were praying and fasting about when the Holy Spirit came to them: “Oh Lord, How will You use us, and where will You use us? Oh Lord, we know that you want us to go to the world with the Gospel, show us who You would send!”

And He did - He sent their very best, didn’t He? Barnabas and Saul. When you look at it, they willingly sent *40 percent of their core leadership team!* That is commitment to missions.

And the thought struck me: they were doing exactly what Jesus told the church to do in—

- Matthew 9:37-38 <sup>37</sup>Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; <sup>38</sup>therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

They prayed, and God sent! Amazing how that works! And you know, we prayed, here at MBC, for many years that God would send someone out from our church, and this last year, God answered our prayers - and what-do-you-know - He answered with a girl! (Ashlee).

Antioch was God-centered, Word saturated, missions-minded, and finally—

#### **4.) They looked forward - they raised up leaders.**

Luke tells us their names - and this didn't happen by accident, they were intentional about discipleship and spiritual reproduction - history tells us that the church at Antioch remained one of the 5 major churches in the world for 1,000 years.

- We saw at our 40<sup>th</sup> celebration how God has kept MBC going for 40 years, but it's only because He keeps raising people to take over for those who move on (or move up!). Please pray that God would continue to raise up leaders so we can keep passing the baton. And you pray that you can spiritually reproduce yourself in others to take your place when you move on.

And if you are planning on moving on, you can't, until you do! I want MBC to be a church like Antioch - next Sunday we will see what it means to keep looking inward.