

February 12, 2023

“Vision - Displaying His Image”
Acts 11:19-26

FCF: The call to corporately reflect the image of God

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The Lord has made clear His desire for His people.
(anchor) We should long and labor for this.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

In church circles, we often speak of our being made in “the image of God.” That refers to two things - how we were all made to both represent and reflect our Creator in His creation. In the ancient world, kings would place statues (images) of themselves at their nation’s borders as a representation of who reigned. That’s partly what it means for us to be image bearers. It also means we are to reflect, like a mirror, something of our Creator - His character and His interests.

But the image of God is not just something we do individually. There is a corporate part to this as well. God is too great to be represented and reflected by any one of us. It takes all of us, all of humanity for all eternity - male and female, young and old, every calling and culture.

And that’s where we’re heading this morning. This is the third in our series on the new vision statement of our church. Here is the short summary sentence at the top of the statement (**READ**): “Christ Presbyterian Church exists for the glory of God and the joy of all people.”

Just below that, there is a summary paragraph, rolling out what this means (**READ**):

We are a **COVENANT FAMILY**
Being **TRANSFORMED** to the likeness of Christ
Rejoicing in and **DISPLAYING** His truth, goodness, and grace
Growing in love, service, and relationship to God and our **COMMUNITY**
For the **GLORY** of God and His kingdom, present and eternal

Each word in that section in bold is explained in detail in a paragraph below. Today, we are looking at the third line, “rejoicing in and displaying His truth, goodness, and grace” (**READ**):

We were ALL created in the image of God. No matter your age, race, income, beliefs or background, the gospel is for YOU. You are uniquely gifted by God and we welcome you. The idea of the inherent image of God in His creation informs the way in which we consume and create, the way we give and receive, the way we listen and speak. We recognize there is no corner of creation that is unknown to God and we are charged to bear and display His image to all of our spheres of influence.

From there, this particular paragraph is unpacked further so as to flesh out the intent (**READ**):

We will pursue a beautiful community by welcoming people from all backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities.
We will meet you wherever you are in life, as God has done for us.
We will work and create with diligence and excellence.
We will affirm the work of God in those around us.
We will speak truth and love.

This is our vision. How is this seen in the Scriptures? What does the Lord say to us about this?

SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 11:19-26

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Francis Schaeffer was one of the greatest Christian thinkers of the 20th century. He was a pastor, author, speaker, and something of a prophet. In a section of his book, *Two Contents, Two Realities*, he helpfully describes the church in Antioch - the one we read of in Acts 11 (**READ**):

“My favorite church in Acts and, I guess, in all of history is the church at Antioch. I love the church at Antioch. I commend to you to read again about it. It was a place where something new happened: the great, proud Jews who despised the Gentiles (there was an anti-Gentilism among the Jews, just as so often, unhappily, there has been anti-Semitism among Gentiles) came to a breakthrough. They could not be silent. They told their Gentile neighbors about the gospel, and suddenly, on the basis of the blood of Christ and the truth of the Word of God, the racial thing was solved. There were Jewish Christians and there were Gentile Christians, and they were one!

“More than that, there was a total span of the social spectrum. We are not told specifically that there were slaves in the church of Antioch, but we know there were in other places and there is no reason to think they were not in Antioch. We know by the record in Acts that there was no less a person in that church than Herod’s foster brother. The man at the very peak of the social pyramid and the man at the bottom of the pile met together in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, and they were one in a beauty of human relationships.

“And I love it for another reason. There was a man called Niger in that church, and that means black. More than likely, he was a black man. The church at Antioch on the basis of the blood of Christ encompassed the whole. There was a beauty that the Greek and Roman world did not know—and the world looked. And then there was the preaching of the gospel. In one generation the church spread from the Indus River to Spain. If we want to touch our generation, we must be no less than this.”

Ultimately, the church in Jerusalem is not meant to be our model. Our model, the one the Lord wants us to emulate, is the church in Antioch. It’s evident as you look at the details of the text. With this church, the Lord has made clear His desire for us. We should long and labor for this.

The things we see in Acts 11 are not novel or new. They reflect priorities and principles all through the Bible. The church in Antioch bore these things out. To illustrate that, we’re going to look at three places - the prayer of Jesus, the teaching of Paul, and the vision of John.

I. THE PRAYER OF JESUS

First, the prayer of Jesus. This is what is recorded in John 17 ([READ John 17:20-26](#)).

A) *The Backdrop*

1. Who this is

The backdrop is important. Whose prayer is this? There are many good collections of prayers for us to read and learn from. But this is the prayer of Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of God.

2. When this took place

And when does this take place? On the night before His crucifixion, hours before His betrayal and arrest. Jesus knows this was coming. Which had to bring a compression of His priorities.

B) *The Particulars*

1. What He longs for

The backdrop to the prayer. What are its particulars? What does Jesus long for? Not uniformity but the unity of the coming generations of His disciples, a unity anchored in our identity in Him. It is a visible unity, something that is observable. But it goes beyond even biblical peacemaking, beyond conflict resolution. This is the sort of unity we see in Antioch, something that transcends all barriers of class, all walls of culture, all lines of color. This is what Jesus prays and longs for.

2. Why He longs for it

Why? As important as this unity is, it is not an end in itself. It is a means towards a greater end. Twice, Jesus says it - that the world may know. That the world may know who He is and what He has come to do. This is a doxological diversity. It is a demonstration in living color of the power of the gospel and the presence of the kingdom. It is a powerful apologetic and witness.

Let me put it this way. The prayer of Jesus was being fulfilled in the wonder of Antioch.

Application:

How will the world know we are followers of Jesus? In John 13, Jesus tells us it is by our love for one another. But in John 17, in this prayer, it is a unity that cuts through all walls.

This is what Jesus desires. As His followers, we must desire this as well and pursue it purposefully and intentionally, knowing it will not happen otherwise. This is what Jesus wants.

The Lord has made clear His desire for us. We should long and labor for this.

II. THE TEACHING OF PAUL

Which brings us to the teaching of Paul, especially in the book of Ephesians. Here again, we see a reflection of what happened in Antioch, it being a realization of what Paul was to write.

A) *Paul's Ministry*

1. To the nations

Let's start with Paul's ministry. He was the Apostle to the Gentiles, going to the nations. He was among the very first to go out beyond the confines of Judaism, to cross those cultural barriers.

2. For the nations

Paul went to the nations with a ministry for the nations. A message that, in Christ, people from every nation can be reconciled to God and to one another. And he caught a lot of flack for this.

B) *Paul's Message*

1. A clarifier

Which brings us to his message. Repeatedly, especially in Ephesians, Paul spoke of "the mystery of the gospel." This refers not to something concealed but something that had been revealed. So what is it? What is this hidden thing that has now been revealed in Christ, in the gospel?

2. An explanation

(**READ Ephesians 1:9-10**) Paul speaks of a cosmic reconciliation in Christ - all things. But there is more (**READ Ephesians 3:1-6**). Here it's not just all things but all peoples. Christ has come to unify Jew and Gentile into one body. That division was the archetype, the greatest of all racial division. But now, in Christ, the division is no more. All the barriers are broken and we are one. But there's something else Paul says about this mystery. In chapter 6, as he speaks of spiritual warfare, he asks for prayer (**READ Ephesians 6:18b-20**). This is really quite striking. Why was Paul needing courage? Why was he in prison? Because he was proclaiming this mystery of the gospel - the reality of God's eternal purpose to make us one with one another. And so he had stirred up the hostility of Satan and the hatred of men, of those who did not want to hear of this unity. We need to know that there is a deep and abiding resistance to this mystery - both then and now. This mystery was an essential part of Paul's message - especially here in Ephesians.

Thinking of Antioch, both Jesus' prayer and Paul's teaching were fleshed out there.

Application:

This mystery was an essential part of Paul's teaching. And it was the cause of a resistance we should expect today. Why? Because Satan doesn't want any credible testimony to Jesus. But there is resistance on another front. To press here is to hit the nerve of our idols - the objects of our hope and trust, the source of our identity. Our idols rage when threatened. Our

emotions are hijacked. Conversations are ended, positions hardened. That's the way idolatry works itself out in a host of ways. That's what Paul was speaking of. We should expect this.

But the Lord has made clear His desire for His people. We should long and labor for this.

III. THE VISION OF JOHN

Which brings us to the third point, the vision of John (**READ Revelation 7:9-10**).

A) A Great Purpose

1. The source

Again, some background is worth having. What was the purpose of this vision? Its source was the risen ruling King Jesus, exalted over all powers, who was giving assurance of His return.

2. His intent

His intent was to fortify His people. They faced great pressure - to compromise to heresy or to capitulate to persecution. Rather than give up, they needed to press on with the end in sight.

B) A Vast Multitude

And what is to be on that coming day? Here is where we have this vast multitude.

1. With clear distinctions

Still with clear distinctions among us - the colors and cultures not muted but forever preserved.

2. But utterly united

All the distinctions still there but utterly united - made one by Christ to Christ and to one another. And we will all be crying out in adoration and worship as one to our one Savior with one voice.

What do we see? The church in Antioch was a foretaste of the vision of John.

Illustration:

I can recall a presbytery meeting in the Chicago area years ago. We were meeting in an old Catholic church purchased by some Presbyterians. The sanctuary had these high ornate stone walls and marble floors. The acoustics were something. And I knew that because of the time we spent singing with some Korean brothers from another presbytery. All those voices joined together in that one place, in praise of Jesus. That was a foretaste. And I got chills that evening.

Application:

Revelation 7 is where this train is going. The kingdom of God is not segregated. And we need to get ready for this. The problem comes in that some will say that this is just for the future and we should then be content with our segregated separated congregations. Can we really say that? Is that the picture we get in any way at all in Acts? Are we to settle for the status quo?

Let me put it another way. Would we do this with areas of our character, places where we need to grow in Christlikeness, where the fruit of the Spirit is less evident? Would we say, "Well, my holiness is for later. So I can be content with myself as I am." We would never say that.

Surely, what we would be saying is, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Surely we should long that we too would be called “Christians” by the people around us because they cannot help but notice the grace of God and cross-cultural unity that defies all expectations.

Friends, the Lord has made clear His desire for us. We should long and labor for this.

CONCLUSION:

Let me take you to the end of that quote from Francis Schaeffer I read earlier ([READ](#)):

In one generation the church spread from the Indus River to Spain. If we want to touch our generation, we must be no less than this.

Now let’s shift from Francis Schaeffer to J. R. R. Tolkien and *The Fellowship of the Ring*. The Ring must be taken to Mordor and destroyed. The survival of Middle Earth depends on this. It will take the strength of men and wizard and the hardiness of elf and dwarf. But Legolas, the elf, and Gimli, the dwarf, have grievances. They argue over which of their races was responsible for the waning of their old friendship. Gandalf, the wizard, steps forward and declares ([READ](#)):

I have heard both, and I will not give judgments now. But I beg you two, Legolas and Gimli, at least to be friends, and to help me. I need you both.

Indeed, they needed one another. And in time, as the story unfolds, their respect for one another grew. We see something of this dynamic in what we’ve read this morning – a larger world and its need of a smaller few to set aside their lesser differences in view of their greater mission.

What will that mean for us? How will we put feet on this? I can tell you the session is working through some suggestions along those very lines made to local churches by our General Assembly. But for now, let me just give you five words I came across this week. Five words to consider - love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage. Love, listen, lament, learn, and leverage.

This will not be easy or immediate. Substantive change never is. It will demand prayer and our continual dependence upon the Spirit. But it will be worth it. It will be well worth it.

The Lord has made clear His desire for us. We should both long and labor for this.

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