

Authentic Christianity

Acts 11:19-30 on April 11, 2021
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Please read Acts 11:19-30 before going further in this transcript.

Back in my college days I went through a skateboarding phase. Occasionally, we would skate over to the Rosedale Mall. I think it's called the Rosedale Center now. From time to time, we'd run into other skaters and start talking about who could do which tricks, and this would sometimes lead to a game of P.O.S.E.R. Spelled "P.O.S.E.R.," POSER was sort of like a game of HORSE, only instead of shooting hoops on the basketball court, you'd do tricks on your skateboard. The idea was to land a trick on your skateboard, and if the other person couldn't land it, then they were given a letter. First "P," then "O," all the way to POSER. As in, if you lost, YOU were the BIGGEST POSER out here! You were just ACTING all like you were some kind of a "real" skater. Well, truth be told, when it came to skateboarding, I was pretty much a POSER. Sure I could land a few tricks, and I was good at traveling long distances on my board, but I couldn't do many of the cooler tricks. In fact, I couldn't even "ollie" (that's where you kick the board up in the air and jump over picnic tables and cool stuff like that).

Here's the point of this illustration: there are plenty of people in our world today, who wear Christian jewelry or can maybe quote a few Bible verses out of context. They may even go to church once and a while, but if you were to really dig down deep, and challenge them on their faith a little bit, their POSER Christianity would NOT hold up under scrutiny. Now let me assure you, the goal of this sermon isn't to judge who is an "Authentic Christian" and who is not.¹ But, we are going to consider how we can define "Authentic Christianity." More specifically, we're going to let the church in Antioch, from Acts 11, teach us a few things about "Authentic Christianity."

Please turn or click in your Bible to Acts 11:19. Acts 11 flashes back to Acts 8. Acts 11:19-20 begins, "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus."

Take a look at our **MAP** on the back page of this transcript. Today's passage lists several places. Jerusalem: helps us get our bearings a little (ORANGE arrow). It's down in the bottom center of our map, on the south edge. Phoenicia: is a region north of Jerusalem (BLUE arrow). It stretches "along the NE coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Modern-day Lebanon). Cyprus: is an island on the Mediterranean, way over to the west (BLUE arrow). Cyprus was Barnabas' hometown. Antioch: is on the NE corner of

¹ Consider Jesus' warning about this in Matthew 13:24-30, "The Parable of Weeds."

our map, ~15 mi. inland from the Mediterranean, on the north end of Syria (BLUE arrow).² At this time in history, it was the 3rd largest city in the Roman Empire, with a multi-ethnic population as high as half a million people!^{3 4 5} Cyrene: is over in North Africa, not even on our map. Some of us may remember that a man from Cyrene, named Simon, was forced to help Jesus carry His cross for part of the way to Calvary.⁶ Interestingly, Acts 11:20 tells us that Simon was not the last man from Cyrene, to help carry the cross of Jesus. These other men didn't literally carry the cross, but they did carry the message of the cross to Antioch. And it wasn't because they were forced to; they wanted to. Tarsus: is on the north end of our map, right in the center (GREEN arrow). This was Saul's hometown.^{7 8}

Acts 11 flashes us back to Acts 8, when the church was scattered by the persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom.^{9 10} In fact, it flashes us back even further, back to Jesus' prophetic words in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." By God's design, the scattered church continues to make its intended impact. One of the first things that the Antioch Church teaches us about Authentic Christianity is that...

Authentic Christians...

1) Believe/Share the Good News about Jesus. Acts 11:21 tells us, "The Lord's hand was with THEM, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." Not all that long ago, they themselves had put their own faith in Jesus, and it changed them forever. They were no longer living for themselves; they were now living for God. They were out sharing the Good News about Jesus with others. Verse 21 says, "The Lord's hand was with THEM." Who is this "them" in verse 21, that the Lord was with? John Stott calls "them" "unnamed evangelists."¹¹ Acts 8:4 reminds us, "Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." Just so we're clear, these

² Not only is the gospel spreading north, but it is spreading to non-Jews. These Greeks are NOT "Greek-speaking Jews, but Gentiles." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1847 footnotes on Acts 11:20.

³ *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2241 footnote on Acts 11:19.

⁴ "Antioch reflected a marriage of oriental and Hellenistic life with Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, Egyptians, and Indians making up the population. The church with its practice and doctrine represented a distinctly countercultural way of life... Antioch was a cosmopolitan city full of gods, where Judaism functioned as an exception in clinging to the one true God."

Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 411.

⁵ From this Antioch Church, Paul launched his first 3 missionary journeys. See Acts 13:1-4; 15:40; and 18:23. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1847 footnotes on Acts 11:19.

⁶ See Luke 23:36.

⁷ It's also where Saul's fellow believers sent him, back in Acts 9:30, about 7-8 years earlier. (*NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2241 footnote on Acts 11:25.) This is when the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem were trying to kill him.

⁸ Tarsus wasn't too far from Antioch, ~100 NW as the crow flies. Or perhaps we should say, "as the ship sails," since they are both fairly close to the Mediterranean Sea.

⁹ By this time in history, that particular time of persecution is now mostly resolved, due to the spiritual transformation of Saul. In fact, last we were told, back in Acts 9:31, it's now a relatively peaceful time in the life of the church; a time for being strengthened in their faith.

¹⁰ This section is kind of a flashback to the scattering of believers that happened due to the persecution in Acts 8:1. *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2241 footnote on Acts 11:19-30.

¹¹ Or "anonymous missionaries." John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, pp. 200-201.

“unnamed evangelists” were NOT apostles.¹² You see, Authentic Christians believe, and they are transformed by that belief, forever changed. They not only BELIEVE, they also SHARE the Good News wherever they go. NOT just the Apostles, but EVERY believer.

You see, the key to sharing the Good News with others, isn't about being an apostle or a well-known evangelist or a pastor; the key is the Lord's hand at work through His people. Any belief or lasting change in another person's life, is entirely in the Lord's hands, not ours. Certainly, we have a role to play in sharing the Good News but nothing miraculous happens apart from God.¹³

The Jerusalem Church's choice to send Barnabas in v. 22, was a GREAT choice for many reasons.¹⁴ One reason Barnabas was a great choice is that, if you're looking for encouragement, Barnabas is your guy! After all, his real name was actually Joseph, but everyone called him Barnabas for a reason. Some of us probably remember why... Acts 4:36 taught us that “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”).” Another reason Barnabas was a great choice, is that he had something in common with some of these evangelists who'd gone to Antioch. Barnabas was from Cyprus just like some of them. He shared their broader understanding of life and faith outside of Jerusalem.¹⁵

Acts 11:23-24 goes on, “When [Barnabas] arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was GLAD and ENCOURAGED them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.” Doesn't it make you SO glad when you see God's grace at work in another person's life. Not glad because we can chalk up another decision for Christ, or so that we can boast about the attendance numbers, but GLAD FOR GOD'S GRACE AT WORK! Now, verse 24 does mention that “a great NUMBER of people were brought to the Lord.” It mentions this to point out a growing need in the Antioch Church: Barnabas realizes that he needs to set up an intentional discipleship strategy to build them up in their newfound faith.^{16 17}

¹² Acts 8:1 says, “all EXCEPT the apostles were scattered.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 1990, p. 201.

¹³ See John 15:1-5.

¹⁴ In Acts 11:22, “The sending of Barnabas was apparently in keeping with the Jerusalem church's policy of sending leaders to check on new ministries that came to their attention.” (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1848 footnotes on Acts 11:22) We find a similar thing back in Acts 8:14, when the Jerusalem church sent Peter/John to Samaria to check in on Philip's evangelistic work and offer him their encouragement and support.

¹⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, Rev.*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1988, p. 226.

¹⁶ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 415.

¹⁷ Even as we reflect back on our baptisms last Sunday, can you imagine the number of baptisms that were happening in the Antioch Church!? We should praise the Lord for each and every time we can baptize a believer in Jesus Christ!

Authentic Christians...

2) Learn/Teach God's Truth Acts 11:25-26 says, "Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul¹⁸, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a WHOLE year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people...." In verse 24 great numbers are BROUGHT to the Lord; and in verse 26 great numbers are TAUGHT about the Lord. The discipleship need is SO great in Antioch, that Barnabas goes and gets Saul from Tarsus, to help him teach all of these new believers. Let's note 2 things here:

1. First of all, Barnabas isn't concerned about protecting his turf, or who gets the credit. He humbly invited Saul to join him in this team effort, of working together to build up these disciples.¹⁹
2. The second thing worth noting, is that Saul spends a LOT of his time teaching believers and building them up in their faith.

Even though we may tend to think of Saul as a traveling evangelist, who never stays in one place for very long, that's not an accurate understanding of his ministry. In other words, Saul viewed teaching believers as equally important to evangelizing the lost. Evangelism/Teaching went hand-in-hand. To put it more directly, every local church needs a Win/Build/Equip strategy for ministry: **Win** the lost, **Build** up believers, **Equip** those believers for ministry to others. Again, it's NOT about the NUMBERS of new believers, or even about the NUMBERS who were being taught God's Truth, it's about the intentional strategy to progressively build up the faith of each and every Christian. In v. 23, Barnabas encouraged them to build the kind of faith that would "remain true to the Lord with all their hearts."

Being an Authentic Christian means being a learner. In fact, "DISCIPLE"²⁰ means "LEARNER." Matthew 28:19-20 describes our Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This is why it's SO CRITICAL for each and everyone one of us at E-Free Bemidji, to jump into a Life Group or a Bible study, into Family Worship Night or Youth Group, into something more than just one hour on Sunday morning. SOME of us as TEACHERS, and ALL of us as fellow LEARNERS. By the way, we're planning 2 new Formation Groups for this summer: 1) Christianity Explored. 2) The Bible's Big Story: Intro to Biblical Theology.²¹

¹⁸ Verse 25 says Barnabas went to Tarsus IN PERSON. Apparently, either because it was so urgent, or because he wanted to make the appeal to Saul himself.

¹⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 419.

²⁰ Μαθητεύω = "① to be a pupil, with implication of being an adherent of the teacher... ② to cause one to be a pupil, teach." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 609). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

²¹ Can you imagine having Barnabas/Saul lead one of our Spiritual Formation Groups for a whole year!? Well, even though we can't schedule Saul/Barnabas for this coming fall, we are very much looking forward to some amazing adult spiritual formation classes!

Acts 11:26 tells us something else about these disciples, "...The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." The DISCIPLES were actually called by many different names in Acts: "Brothers & Sisters" (1:16); "Believers" (4:32); "The church" (8:1); "The Lord's people" (9:32); "The Nazarene Sect" (24:5); and "Followers of the Way" (24:14). But the name "Christian" is the one that has stuck around for some 2,000 years now.^{22 23 24} Sadly, in our culture today, the word "Christian" has been watered down quite a bit. It seems like almost anyone can claim that he/she is a Christian and get away with it. In some ways, the title "Christian" has become a broad, rather vague descriptor. It's become unclear what or who we actually mean by the name "Christian" because there are SO MANY POSERS out there.

It shouldn't surprise us that some people mock the name "Christian" today. But it should greatly concern us WHY they are mocking Christians. It would be one thing if they were mocking us because they were mocking Jesus. After all, Jesus Himself warned us that we would be persecuted for His Name's sake. Much of the mocking that Christians hear today in America, is about lacking a clear witness. It's about failing to demonstrate what devotion to Christ is really about. This doesn't mean any of us are perfect. One of the main reasons that we're being mocked as Christians, is that too many people who call themselves "Christians," have discredited and devalued the precious name of Christ. This devaluing is the result of not walking the walk; of living lives that fall FAR short, of what is rightly expected from identification with the name of Christ.

But, this didn't seem to be a problem in Antioch. The fact is, calling someone a "Christian" in Antioch, may have actually been intended as an insult. But it wasn't because the Antioch Christians weren't walking the walk, but much the opposite. There's actually good evidence, that in the Antioch Church, calling someone a "Christian" was a derogatory way of belittling someone for being devoted to Christ.^{25 26} In the church at Antioch, the Christians there were mostly known for one particular thing: their AUTHENTIC connection to Christ.²⁷ What an incredible thing to be known for!²⁸ And... what an incredible RESPONSIBILITY – to represent not just the name "Christian," but to represent the name "Christ," upon which the title "Christian" is built!

²² During the time of Acts 11, "The name [Christian] suggests that people are beginning to view them as members of a group distinct from Judaism." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2241 footnote on Acts 11:26.

²³ Surprisingly, the term "Christian" is only used in 2 other places in the NT: Acts 26:28 and 1 Peter 4:16. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1848 footnotes on Acts 11:26.

²⁴ Christian means "belonging to Christ" or "followers of Christ." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2241 footnote on Acts 11:26.

²⁵ "The probably intransitive passive expression 'be called' suggests that the name was given to believers by others. It may well have been derisive...." Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, p. 415.

²⁶ Whether the name "Christian" was adopted by believers as a way of describing themselves, or whether it was invented by their "enemies as a term of reproach, [Christian] is an apt title for those 'belonging to Christ.'" *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1848 footnotes on Acts 11:26.

²⁷ Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson, *Acts: A Visual Guide*, Christian Focus Publications Ltd., Scotland, 2018, "The Hand of the Lord was with Them" sermon on Acts 11:19-30.

²⁸ In Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus shares the Parable of the Weeds; some of us know it as the Parable of the Wheat/Tares. Jesus warns His followers not to be too eager to rush to judgment, on who is an authentic follower, and who is not. God will sort out the final truth in the end. Even so, there is a place for Brothers and Sisters in Christ to hold one another

Acts 11 wraps up by reminding us of another sign of authenticity.

Authentic Christians...

3) Care for one another as Brothers/Sisters. Acts 11:29-30 says, “The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.” In verse 28, the prophet Agabus predicted that a severe famine was coming. The Antioch Christians took him at his word and the local church responds with benevolent generosity.²⁹ Authentic Christians practice generous stewardship of their personal funds on behalf of their fellow Bros/Sis in Christ. This offering was not imposed on them, they decided on their own to give. At E-Free Bemidji, even 2,000 years after the Antioch Church, this Benevolence Fund practice still continues! If you or someone you know in our church family needs some help, please don’t hesitate to contact one of our elders. (Their pictures are posted right on the bulletin board in the foyer.) This pattern of caring for one another continues all throughout the book of Acts and the entire New Testament, right up into present-day Christianity.³⁰ This is why none of us needs to feel bashful or hesitant about receiving help from our fellow Christians when we need it. God has explicitly designed the local church, to care for one another.

Well, this brief, 3-point sermon on “Authentic Christianity” is by no means fully comprehensive. We haven’t said anything this morning about worship, or prayer, or any number of other things that would help us describe an Authentic Christian. We’ve really only had time for a partial description, but this is a pretty good start.³¹

Back in January, at our church’s Annual Celebration & Vision Meeting, we talked about...2 specific focuses for E-Free in 2021. One focus is to...

1) Continue improving how we care for one another.

a. We’re trying to improve our care for one another by strongly encouraging **CHURCH MEMBERSHIP**. Church Membership is a definitive step toward at least 3 things: greater commitment to one another as Bros/Sis in Christ, greater participation in the God-intended local church, and greater safety from sin and accountability in our Christian walk.³²

So what’s holding you back from becoming an official member of this Church Family?

accountable, and to call one another to a higher standard. For example: > Matthew 18 lays out a simple but clear plan for how to lovingly confront one another if there’s a sin that’s come between us. > And Galatians 6 urges us to gently restore a brother or sister in Christ who is caught in sin.

> But 1 Corinthians 5 tells us flat out, not to associate with someone who claims to be a Christian, but is living in open, unconfessed sin. You see, that’s why learning God’s Truth is SO important; it’s not only important that we rightly define “Authentic Christianity,” but also that we live out authentic Christian lives. God expects our faith to be authentic and we shouldn’t make a mockery of the death/burial/resurrection of Jesus Christ, that we just celebrated on Easter weekend. So, if you have something in your life, that is bringing your Christian reputation into question, make it right today.

²⁹ Their response shows a high level of respect and regard for the prophetic foresight demonstrated here.

³⁰ It’s worth noting that this theme of benevolence comes up again and again as one of the signs of Authentic Christianity. Acts 2:42 told us, “They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.” Acts 4:33-34 says, “...God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them....”

³¹ If you’re part of a Life Group, you’ll have the opportunity to talk about this some more, and to try and come up with a more thorough definition of “Authentic Christianity.”

³² Pastor Fred Martin “Why Should I Join a Church” pamphlet used by permission, Christ Fellowship 2003.

b. We are also improving how we care for one another by encouraging involvement in a LIFE GROUP. Life Groups are our sermon-based small groups that meet all throughout the week. The Life Group motto is “learning together & loving one another.” There’s a link right on the front page of our website: www.efcbemidji.org/lifegroups

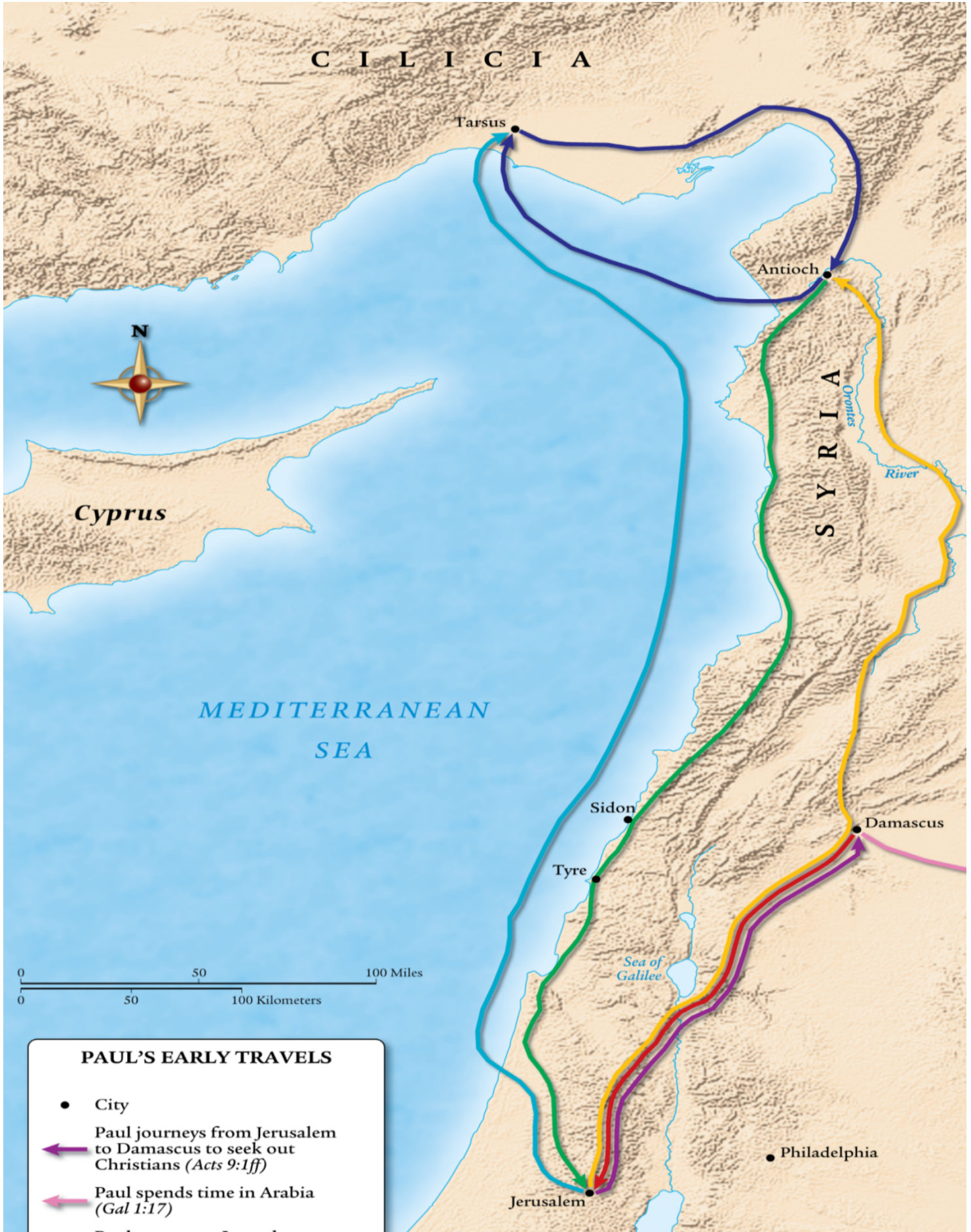
c. We are also caring for one another through our new Servant Team ministry, which we’ve mentioned on a couple of different Sundays now.

Another focus is to...

2) Continue “becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus together.”

This comes right out of the Great Commission, which we just talked about. ***We need to continue making disciples*** through all of the various ministries of our church. As a church, learning/teaching God’s Truth needs to be kept front and center. We do this from the pulpit, as well as in every classroom, and every ministry connected to our church; whether it’s INSIDE these walls or OUTSIDE of them.

Wherever we are, whatever we’re doing as Christians, let’s represent Christ well! Let’s give a watching world a CLEAR picture of Authentic Christianity!



C I L I C I A

Tarsus

Antioch

N

Cyprus

MEDITERRANEAN SEA

S Y R I A

Orontes River

Sidon

Damascus

Tyre

Sea of Galilee

Philadelphia

Jerusalem

0 50 100 Miles
0 50 100 Kilometers