

LEADERS OF THE ANTIOCH CHURCH (Acts 13:1–3)

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Antioch was a unique city—pluralistic religiously, ethnically and culturally. It would compare favorably to a San Francisco or a New York both for its demographic diversity and its "modern" advances, which included, for example, street lights and running water. Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire and the launching pad for Paul's first missionary journey. Antioch usurped Jerusalem as the center of Christian mission for the second half of the book of Acts.

But the significance of Antioch to the Christian Church was not primarily because of its location or population but because of its leadership. In this city, God raised up five men who would literally change the course of human history. The purpose of this essay is to examine three essential ingredients of the character of these leaders: They were Sociologically Diverse, Spirit Led and Missions Oriented. If we can recapture these three characteristics in today's church leaders, we too can reroute our own culture.

I. Sociological Diversity

Acts 13:1 lists five individuals who were leaders of the church at Antioch:

NAME:	ORIGIN:	ETHNICITY:
Barnabas	Cyprus	Hellenistic Jew
Simeon (Niger)	—	Black
Lucius	Cyrene	African
Manaen	Palestinian	Greek/Herodian
Saul	Tarsus/Jerusalem	Hebraic Jew

This is an impressive list for at least two reasons. First, God had truly made "two peoples into one" (Eph 2:14). He united these people at several levels: (a) Those from different financial strata—assuming that Manaen, having been raised in Herod's household,¹ was a wealthy aristocrat. (b) Those from different religious backgrounds—Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews as well as Greeks (cf. 11:19–20). (c) Those from different nationalities—African, Syrian, Cyprus, Palestinian. And (d) those of differing skin color—assuming that Niger, meaning black, was a description of Simeon.

¹The word *synthropos*, literally means "suckled by the same nurse." It seems to indicate that Manaen was a comrade and peer of Herod rather than a servant to him.

Second, this list is impressive because it indicates the mobility of this church. Because their leaders represented such a broad array of people, the church could move evangelistically into any sector of this pluralistic city with a coherent voice for Christ. Simeon could speak to the blacks; Saul could debate in the synagogues; Manaen could deal with the wealthy politicians; Lucius could minister to the immigrants. Furthermore, because of the diversity represented in the leadership, this church would be more likely to avert the kind of racial division that impacted the young church of Jerusalem (Acts 6:1).

In a time of rising racial tensions, the church today would be wise to raise up leaders from a variety of socio-economic strata to evangelize and represent the diversity of people we find in our cities. If we fail in this, we may consign the next generation of Christians to churches that are myopic and schismatic, albeit homogenous and complacent.

II. Spirit Leading

We notice from 13:1 that these five men were gifted by the Holy Spirit in the area of prophecy and teaching. It is grammatically possible to view Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius as prophets and Manaen and Saul as teachers. But more likely all five displayed both gifts. For instance, Barnabas was certainly a gifted teacher (cf. 11:26). Furthermore prophecy was not primarily for predicting future events (e.g. Agabus 11:28; 21:10–11), but for speaking out authoritatively a message from God. This was especially crucial prior to the writing of NT books. In light of this, it is easy to see how prophecy and teaching would go hand in hand.

In addition to their corporate gift of prophet-teachers, each individual was uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit. At least we know that to be true of Barnabas and Saul whose personalities and abilities were complementary but quite distinct (cf. 15:37–39). Barnabas was an encourager (4:36; 9:27; 11:22, 25; 15:37), and gifted with benevolence (4:37), while Saul was a skilled orator, debater, and writer.

Not only were these men gifted by the Holy Spirit, they also opened their lives to the Spirit through the spiritual disciplines of worship, fasting, and prayer (cf. Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23). It was in this context of actively pursuing God that the Holy Spirit spoke to these men. Like the Apostles of Jerusalem, their primary duties as church leaders were the ministry of the word and prayer (6:2–4).

Should it be any different today? Our preachers and elders must adopt the priorities of the early church leaders. Both in Jerusalem and Antioch their primary tasks involved the Word and prayer. Social programs and administrative decisions are important and perhaps necessary. But too often the expediency of the urgent prevails over the most important priorities of our leaders. Not only must our leaders be Spirit-gifted men with unwavering priority, but they must continually open their lives up to the leading of the Holy Spirit through the disciplines. This frightens us for two inappropriate reasons. First, we are afraid of being labeled Pentecostal if we talk about or seek the Spirit's guidance. But if anything is clear from the book of Acts, it is this: The progress of the Church is in the hands of the Holy Spirit. We will do little of eternal significance if not led by Him. Second, we fear the cost of the disciplines. Worship, prayer, fasting, and Bible study are terribly time-consuming and painful. But as they say, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen." Leadership is not for the half-hearted, nor is it for the purpose of stroking egos. It requires discipline and hard work.

III. Missions Orientation

The church of Antioch was the result of some brave missionaries who dared to cross cultural lines (11:19–20). And the church never forgot their debt to God and to the people who first evangelized them. That is why their mission's program took the shape that it did. First, Saul and Barnabas were not sent to distant lands and foreign languages. Rather, they went to Barnabas' home land of Cyprus, returning the gospel to the people who first brought it to Antioch. They recognized a debt to the people of Cyprus. But because they were willing to meet the needs they saw around them, their concentric circles of influence continued to expand until Paul knocks on Rome's door by the end of the book. Furthermore, when the great debate exploded in Acts 15 over circumcision, the leaders of Antioch did not presume authority over the church of Jerusalem. Even though Antioch had effectually become the center of Gentile missions, they submitted themselves to the decision of the Elders and Apostles in Jerusalem.

Second, when they sent out an evangelistic team, they did not recruit a couple of idealistic misfits who were a bit slow but quite eager. They went after the best, sacrificing their own leadership to accomplish this task. These two were veterans who had both been on church planting ventures before (11:22–26; 15:40–41). And even when Paul and Barnabas split up, they both recruited helpers that they considered "prize fighters" for the gospel. Case in point: On Paul's second missionary journey he acquired: (1) Silas—a Jewish prophet from Jerusalem. (2) Timothy—a bright young man with a glowing reputation that had compassed 40 miles by foot; as a half-breed he could speak to a significant "people group." (3) Luke—a Greek physician, historian, and linguist. And (4) in Corinth he met up with Priscilla and Aquila—a successful "blue-collar" couple from Rome. But no matter how far Paul traveled, he continued to return to his "home" church at Antioch to report the ever expanding work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 14:26–28; 18:23).

Church leaders who are in tune with the Holy Spirit, will be aware of at least two things in terms of Missions: Spiritual responsibility (Rom 15:27) and Global opportunity. For Spiritual leaders the primary question is not, "What will it cost?" but "What will it take?" We have more Christians per capita than we have ever had in the history of the church. We have better training institutions, more money and more technology than we've ever had. We have the Bible in over 1,400 languages, and Christianity, scattered all over the globe, is now the largest of all world religions. We can say, without hesitation, that we have far more advantages and opportunities than did the church of Antioch to spread the Gospel. The only factor which could tip the scales is leadership. Do we have leaders who are Sociologically Diverse, Spirit Led, and Missions Oriented? The answer to this question is not found at the end of your pointed finger. It is found in the mirror as you honestly answer this question: Am I the person that God wants me to be in the global conquest for His Kingdom?