

ANTIOCH AS PARADIGMATIC OF THE URBAN CENTER OF MISSION

Introduction:

The book of Acts could perhaps be viewed as the story of transitions—the account of how the church developed and grew, not only in numbers, but also across geographical lines and cultural barriers. The human element must always be kept in mind as one reads this book. The people of the early church, whether we are speaking of the twelve apostles themselves, the “disciples,” the God-fearers, the Jerusalem council, the prophets and/or teachers, or any other designation or classification of Christian, all had their individual personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, their prejudices, and their particular cultural situations and worldviews. If we are going to bring life to the book of Acts we must take these things into consideration.

It is with this in mind that we look at the city of Antioch and its importance for Christian missions. We look at the development of the church at Antioch not only as a historical curiosity, but even more importantly as a story that has much to offer in modern day mission endeavor. It was not pure coincidence that brought Barnabas, Paul and others to Antioch. While we do not deny the hand of God in the events that led to Paul’s missionary journeys, there were also very human factors that God used in carrying out His work of spreading the Gospel. For a fuller understanding of how and why the church spread from the city of Antioch, a complex of personalities, cultural and religious clashes, and the historical situation need to be integrated. It is not possible at this time, some 2000 years later, to fully understand how all the factors

interrelated. We can, however, at least take into consideration what is known and what can be surmised based upon the evidence at hand.

The Importance of Antioch in the Roman Empire:

The importance of the city of Antioch of Syria in the Roman World cannot be underestimated. It was founded in 300 B.C. by Seleucus I Nicator after his victory over Antigonus. The name *Antioch* was given in honor of his father. In Acts, two cities by the name of Antioch are mentioned, Antioch of Syria and Antioch of Pisidia, although Seleucus actually founded sixteen cities which bore that name (TNBD, p. 51). Antioch of Syria was located at the head of the Orontes River, just inside the bend where it turned sharply westward from a southerly direction. This placed it approximately twenty kilometers inland, east of the Mediterranean Sea. Although nearby Seleucia served as the port, it was possible to navigate by boat from the sea to Antioch.

During the period of the primitive church it had become an important center of trade between the Mediterranean world, the Syrian hinterland, and the East. It was accessible both by land and water, being located on the best land route between Italy, Asia Minor, Persia and Palestine. Antioch was responsible for the shipping of goods from Arabia, China, India, Babylonia and Persia to Rome. It is said to have surpassed even Rome in its splendor and magnificence (Mann, p. 58). From the beginning, Antioch was inhabited by Macedonians, Greeks, and native Syrians, as well as a colony of Jews who had been granted land by Seleucus as a reward for their military services (IDB, p. 145). It flourished and became a wealthy and sophisticated meeting point for both Greek and Oriental cultures.

When Rome occupied Syria in 64 B.C., Antioch became a regional military headquarters of the new “province,” governed, not by an official or military commander of marginal capability

or given to corruption, but by a *legatus Augusti pro praetore* (Knox, page 156); a capable, faithful and trusted leader of the upper class. This provided for a degree of stability not found in places such as Palestine in general or Jerusalem in particular. Due to the importance of the city it underwent many renovations and improvements along Roman lines, which not only added to its beautification, but also served more practical purposes, such as communication and defense. In short, *the Pax Romana* was much more a reality in Antioch than in the lands to the south.

Cultural Diversity:

The importance of Antioch in the Roman world can clearly be seen. In fact, it is usually described as one of the three most important cities of that time, the others being, of course, Rome and Alexandria. The population at the time under discussion is estimated to be as high as 500,000, or even more, thereby making it quite urban, even by today's standards (Tenny, 301). The city, therefore, exhibited several of the characteristics typical of urban centers today. As already mentioned, there was a multiplicity of cultures. Many languages were spoken as traders, travelers and full-time residents interacted. Communication was possible to almost anywhere in the Roman world.

Religious Atmosphere:

Another significant aspect to the situation at Antioch was its religious atmosphere. A spirit of religious pluralism and tolerance (with its accompanying moral laxity) had emerged. Downey describes the importance of this last characteristic in his definitive volume, *Ancient*

Antioch:

In the time of Christ, a special religious situation had grown up in Antioch which was to make the city peculiarly fertile ground when Christianity reached it. Antioch had shared, with other centers in which Hellenistic religion and philosophy had flourished, the changes characteristic of the late Hellenistic age, in which the old religious cults and philosophies were tending to become matters of individual belief, as people sought religious satisfaction for their own problems

and aspirations. In addition the city, as a meeting point of the Greek and the Oriental civilizations, filled with orientalized Greeks and hellenized Orientals of all classes and all degrees of education, had come to contain, as part of its normal daily existence, not only the old established Hellenic cults, of Zeus, Apollo, and the rest of the pantheon, by the Syrian cults of Baal and the mother-goddess—partly assimilated to Zeus and Artemis—as well as the mystery religions with their doctrines of salvation, of death and regeneration, and their promises for the after life. As one of the largest cities of the Roman Empire and one of the great commercial centers of the ancient world, with business connections in all parts of the empire, Antioch saw the coming and going of people of all sorts, bringing news of events everywhere in the Roman world. Another factor of prime importance was the presence of a large and ancient Jewish community. This community had attracted to its ceremonies and its teachings numbers of Gentiles who found in Judaism an ethical doctrine that was more satisfactory to them than the pagan teaching. Thus Antioch was peculiarly receptive to the new message (p. 120-121).

It can be seen, therefore, that the eclectic intellectual spirit, the interest in religious inquiry, and the prosperous atmosphere of the city all combined to produce an environment in which the teaching of the Gospel, when it came, could be received with openness, even by non-Jews. In this sense, Antioch was different from all other cities that might have otherwise served as a link point between the Christian message and the Roman world. For the Gospel to spread, cultural barriers had to be broken down, walls had to be removed, and communication had to take place.

Importance for Communication of the Gospel:

By far the biggest wall was that which divided the Jews and the Gentiles. Taken from a worldview perspective, the Jews had as the center of their culture their *religion*—the fact that they had been chosen by the One True God, YHWH, for a special purpose. To them that was their ultimate reality. The Greeks had as their center, *civilization and wisdom*. Knowledge and cultivation was of utmost importance to them. Obviously, *power* occupied a central place in the Roman worldview. This means that for the Jew, everything revolved around their religion—their chosenness, the supremacy of the Lord

God. For the Greek it was a matter of education. Knowledge was everything and led to the “ideal.” Certainly it is an over-characterization, but one might characterize the Roman mindset with the cliché, “might makes right.”

Now, looking at the centers of influence in the Roman world, one sees that Rome was the seat of power. Alexandria was the seat of education, libraries, etc. Jerusalem, although not being influential from a human perspective in the Roman world, was the center of God’s people. Where could these worlds meet and communicate? In Antioch more than any other city of the empire (world). Antioch, therefore, both from the logistical and cultural perspectives, was a logical starting point for mission outreach to the rest of the Roman world—the Gentiles. It was the most likely place for putting into practice on a human level the breaking down effected by Christ of the middle wall of hostility separating Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2:14-16). Once that wall was broken down, the other less significant barriers to effective communication of the Gospel to other languages and cultures could be dealt with.

The Name “Christian”:

The fact that the disciples were first called “Christian” (*Christianous*) in Antioch is significant. Luke tells us that the majority of those scattered after the persecution following Stephen’s death spoke the Word as they went to places like Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. In the former two locations they spoke only to Jews, in the latter certain men from Cyprus and Cyrene spoke also to the Greeks, “telling the good news (*euaggelizomenoi*) concerning the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20).

As the number of believers among the Greeks grew in Antioch, Jerusalem’s interest was peaked and they decided to investigate. Although they had had the amazing

experience with Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18), they were wary of the multitudes of converts from among the Gentiles in Antioch. No doubt, the notion that one should be circumcised and put himself under the Law of Moses in order to become a Christian was still prevalent, although they would have accepted some ambiguities. The fact of the new Jewish sect (Christian) that was coming into existence, allowing for membership by both Jews and Gentiles without the strict obedience to the Law, aroused at least the curiosity, if not the suspicion, of the Jerusalem elders. Antioch morality was already low. It is easy to see how the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would conclude that without the Law the Christian church there would soon degenerate all the more (Knox, p. 157). Therefore, the church of Antioch must always be understood in connection with its relationship and conflict with Jerusalem.

The choice of Barnabas as emissary to Antioch was logical. He was a proven Christian who sold his possessions for the good of the church, he was of Jewish background, he had a diplomatic personality, as is evidenced by the name given him by the apostles (Son of Encouragement), and he also had previous experience with people of other cultures, since he himself was from the island of Cyprus (Acts 4:36-37).

Upon arrival at Antioch, however, instead of insisting on circumcision for admittance into the Christian Church, Barnabas rejoiced to see the grace of God, and, true to his name, encouraged the new Christians to continue with the Lord (Acts 11:23). He soon saw the need for another teacher to help instruct the people, and went to Tarsus for Saul. Finally there was a place where Saul's zeal and enthusiasm for the Gospel could be put to good use. Due to the atmosphere of religious tolerance at Antioch, Paul's boldness would not cause nearly the disturbance that it had caused in Jerusalem (Acts 9:29-30). At

this point it is mentioned that “the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

Scholars are divided as to the origin of the designation “Christian” assigned to the Antioch believers. Its essential meaning is clear, however: The personal property of one called “Christ.” Elias J. Bickerman writes:

Greek terms, formed with the Latin suffix *-ianus*, exactly as the Latin words of the same derivation, express the idea that men or things referred to belong to the person to whose name the suffix is added. In Greek as in Latin the suffix *-ianus* is a substitute for the possessive genitive (p. 118).

The believers never employ the term Christian as a self-designation in the New Testament, however. They chose to call themselves “brethren” (Acts 11:1, 14:2, 15:1,3); the “disciples” (Acts 6:1, 9:1, 11:26, 13:52, 18:27); “saints” (Acts 9:13, 32, 41, 26:10); the “faithful” (Acts 10:45, 16:1,15); “followers of the way” (Acts 22:4, 24:14). The term *Christian* is used only two times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28, I Peter 4:16), in both cases in a way which seems to indicate that it held negative connotations in its normal usage.

Yet, in spite of its perhaps original negative meaning, it must have actually been seen as a quite appropriate description of *who* they were. Fully half the population of the Roman world at this time were slaves, so the concept of slavery, of being owned by another, was not unheard of. The imagery of this label must have impacted the Antioch believers in several ways. First, they were, in fact, purchased by Christ. Christ, who paid a tremendous price for them, had purchased them from one owner, namely Satan. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (I Peter 1:18,19). Second, believers are indeed owned by Christ. Being the property of

another in the Roman Empire was not the most enviable position, to be sure; however, the concept was crystal clear and quite ordinary. But to be the property of Jesus Christ was something altogether different. Slaves normally had no rights, but being the possession of Christ meant being a son of God, with rights of inheritance (John 8:35; 15:15, Romans 8:15ff.) Third, the disciples clearly understood what it meant to be a servant (*doulos*) of Christ. Being Christ's servant also had a cost. This the disciples understood. Indeed some had already paid with their blood. Servanthood implied suffering, which the Christians were exhorted to not only endure, but in which they were to rejoice (John 15:18-21, Matthew 5:11-12).

Another comment concerning the name *Christian* bears mention. How fitting that in a place of such cultural diversity, in a location where the cultural barriers were being broken down both within the Christian church as well as without, the name *Christian* would first be used to describe the followers of Jesus. It is a name that is Hebrew in conception, Greek in form, and Latin in termination, which in and of itself mirrors the unity that is possible only in Christ Himself.

Cultural Diversity in the Antioch Church: (Acts 13:1-3)

The cultural diversity in the Antioch church is immediately apparent in the opening words of Acts chapter 13: "Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul" (13:1). The names of these leaders represent several ethnic and social backgrounds. They also suggest different geographical and language areas. Thus the leadership of the church reflected the cultural diversity of the church. As to the difference, if there was any,

between a “prophet” and “teacher,” we can only speculate. Some may have served mainly as prophets, others mainly as teachers; others may have had responsibility in both areas. The order of the names of the prophets and teachers proves no special ranking or hierarchy of importance, nor is the specific title attached to them of the utmost consequence. Rather, the significant point is the names of these men, and what those names tell us about them.

The first to be mentioned is Barnabas, whom we have already discussed as being a Levite from Cyprus. Next there was Simeon (interestingly a Hebrew name), who was called “the black,” (Niger), quite possibly a black African. Perhaps he was the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in Luke 23:26, whose sons, Rufus and Alexander, were known to the Christian community (Mark 15:21). Then Lucius of Cyrene is mentioned, who was most certainly from North Africa. Manaen, the fourth of the Antioch leaders mentioned here, has the distinction of having been a childhood companion of Herod the tetrarch (Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, Stott, p. 216). The fifth church leader was, of course, Saul of Tarsus, a Jew, but born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). The leadership of Antioch, therefore, was a microcosm of the diversity of cultures, languages, and origins of church.

Unity of Spirit in the Antioch Church:

As diverse as this congregation and leadership was in its cultural makeup, there was a remarkable unity of spirit that welded them all together. This is quite astounding considering the kinds of people represented; for example, Palestinian Jews and Greek speaking Gentiles, who were usually antagonistic toward each other. Instead of desiring to keep Barnabas and Saul to themselves, they obeyed the word of the Holy Spirit and sent them on what is called “Paul’s first missionary journey.”

Many credit this harmony and unity of spirit to the general social milieu in evidence at Antioch. We have already demonstrated the ways in which the cultural diversity of that city and its position of prominence in the Roman Empire worked together to facilitate the spread of the Gospel among the Gentiles. Antioch was a meeting place for many nationalities, a place where barriers between Jew and Gentile were not nearly as prominent as in Jerusalem or some of the other important cities occupied by a large Jewish settlement. It should be no surprise that the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles should first take place in Antioch. At the same time, let us not get the idea that Paul and Barnabas were preaching a “hellenized” Gospel, which they contextualized and adapted to this situation. We must conclude that they were teaching the Gospel in its truth and purity.

However, there is a much more significant and profound factor that needs to be recognized and considered; namely, the Gospel was the power that ultimately enabled them to erase in their practice the artificial ranking of persons and places. If we are to believe that Christ came into the world “when the fullness of time had come” (*ta pleroma tou chronou*), we can also deduce that this included the timing with regards to the openness to change that would be a part of cities like Antioch, as well as the Roman Empire in general. The important point, however, is that the two Biblical presuppositions necessary for orthodox theology in general, and sound missiology in particular, were recognized by a group of people who were ready to see them in all their implications. The presuppositions were certainly recognized by all Christians, however they were more readily applied in practice at Antioch. First, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Paul wrote these words while discussing the very same issue of

which the book of Acts treats; that is, the position of the Jews as God's chosen people in relation to the Gentiles. He points out that while the Jews had been chosen by God to be entrusted with the covenant, in the final analysis, "there is no difference" (Romans 3:22). Both Jews and Gentiles, in and of themselves, do not measure up to God's standards. "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin." The second essential presupposition is that all are justified freely by God's grace, apart from the Law. God was the One who had initiated and applies salvation. The right relationship with God could be established only on the basis of the redemption won by Christ. This means, again, that in truth, there is no difference:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Romans 3:28-30).

Not only, however, was there a complete atonement effected between God and man in Christ Jesus. Paul goes even farther and points out now that the "middle wall of division" mentioned above, which separated Jew and Gentile had been destroyed along with the wall which separated God and man (Ephesians 2:14ff.).

This concept, admittedly having been elaborated in writing by Paul at a much later time than that which is under discussion concerning the Antioch church, was already understood by the church, yet not so easily assimilated. The friction between Jerusalem and Antioch would continue for some time. Paul, by the time of Acts 13, had already had to painfully defend the freedom and unity found in the Gospel against the "hypocrisy" of Peter, and yes, even Barnabas (Galatians 2:13). When the Judaizers from Jerusalem

continued to visit the areas of Paul's missionary activity and insist that Christians must become Jews also (Galatians 1:7, 2:4, Act 15:1), it finally became necessary for Paul, Barbabas and others to return to Jerusalem a second time to come to an agreement over the issue. It seems to have been decisively settled at the so-called meeting of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:2-35). Circumcision would certainly not be required *of the Gentiles* for membership in the Christian church; however, to safeguard against causing too much offense to weaker brethren, certain other lesser requirements were imposed.

The settlement of this controversy had other ramifications as well. It also helped to settle the issue of authority in individual congregations. Paul and Barnabas' reason for going to Jerusalem in Acts 15 was not only to resolve this particular issue, but also to resolve the question of the real seat of authority for the church. As Meeks and Wilken wrote: "What Paul was resisting, in his confrontation with Peter, was the attempt of Jerusalem to extend its authority to Antioch" (p. 17). This is in no way to deny the authority of the Apostles, who were the highest human authority. It does show, however, that ultimately the highest authority had to be the Gospel, the teaching of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to Galatia: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed" (Galatians 1:8). Then, for emphasis, Paul repeats this statement in the very next verse: "As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed" (1:9). The gospel of Christ, understood in its wide sense, had to be the final authority. Though Jerusalem was the mother church of Antioch, she should not overextend her control in a way that tended to subvert the message of the Gospel. By the same token, the two churches cannot be seen independently from one

another. They were in constant fellowship with each other. That they felt mutual concern for each other is born out by the fact that Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22), and Antioch sent disaster relief to Jerusalem (Acts 11:28ff.)

Conclusion:

As was stated at the beginning, an understanding of Acts and the Antioch church requires a certain understanding of all the cultural, historical, social and religious influences. We must understand Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James and the others as human beings who had their own strengths, weaknesses and cultural background. For some reason, people like Paul, Barnabas, and indeed the Antioch Christians in general, were able to integrate the full implications of the gospel more quickly than many in the Jerusalem church. The cultural situation at Antioch ideally suited it for becoming the springboard of outreach to the Gentiles. After all, the Gospel went forth from Jerusalem mainly due to persecutions, which drove the disciples outward, away from their enclave (Acts 8:1-4). On the other hand, the first missionaries to regions beyond were commissioned and sent officially by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:2-4).

Soon the Christian church would become almost totally Gentile in makeup, and the question of the Jerusalem church was settled. However, its implications for cross-cultural communication of the Gospel remain today. There is still no room for ethnocentrism in the Gospel. There is still no difference, for all have sinned. And Christ still died for all. Paul's theology and practice is still applicable today in the modern day Antiochs, in those places where cultures, languages, religious milieus are all coming together. The Gospel must be presented in a way that does not require one to become a

German, an American, or any other nationality to be a Christian. We must break down in practice the walls that Christ has already broken down for us in reality.

In this way, the city of Antioch is paradigmatic as we think of the extension of the kingdom in the twenty-first century. The cities, with their plurality of cultures, ethnicities, languages, as places where new immigrants are willing to hear and consider new ideas, as centers of communication, travel and commerce, as settings where peoples from around the world rub shoulders, as places where the gospel can be heard and received and embraced, and, in turn, from which it can be communicated around the world, continue to provide opportunities for the proclamation of the gospel and the breaking down of walls of separation, between God and man, and between man and man.

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