



+ We focused in on the church at Antioch (Acts 11 and 13) in our Sunday morning sermon at Magdalen Road Church.

At the start of Acts the risen Lord Jesus gives the agenda for the whole of the book. The gospel *will* ring out from Jerusalem to Judea and all Samaria and then to the ends of the Earth. After the stoning of Peter in Acts chapter 7 the believers disperse and take the message of Jesus with them. As they arrive in Antioch in Syria (Acts 11) so the gospel is spoken into this urbanised environment. This is an important chapter because here the gospel has reached the stepping stone “to the ends of the Earth”.

Antioch was a diverse city. The third largest city in the world of the time with at least 18 different ethnicities all living within the same centre. Riots were not uncommon in Roman cities largely because of this ethnic diversity. It’s interesting that Jesus’s followers are first named “Christians” in Antioch - have you ever wondered why this is? It comes after Paul and Barnabas have been teaching, the church has grasped that the message of Jesus is for everyone, and this is the fruit of that. Them being called Christians is presumably because they were not easily classified. In a diverse urban centre with lots of segregation and minimal mixing, here are a group of people where all the usual boundaries have been broken down.

You can imagine others living in Antioch looking at the church and asking “what should we call them?” - and so they invent a new label for them.

As we reach chapter 13 and get a glimpse of this new church, two things in particular are of possible relevance to us as we consider how to develop fruitful urban churches.

Firstly

+ this is a church with a global leadership (v1).

Luke does not *need* to tell us who the church leaders are, but seems to carefully highlight the extraordinary diversity of this leadership team. For a start we have **Paul** and **Barnabas** whom we know a little more about - they were both Jews but brought up in a Greek context outside Palestine and so familiar with a variety of cultures. They were both bilingual and both well travelled. Next we have **Manaen** who was brought up in the household of Herod Antipas - probably some kind of stepbrother. He

would’ve experienced a privilege upbringing with economic and educational opportunities... and yet was living in a house that was presumably very ‘anti the gospel’. For example it was Herod who beheaded John the Baptist (after John spoke out against him divorcing his own wife and subsequently marrying his brother’s wife). It was also this Herod who sent Jesus back to Pilate at his trial for his Crucifixion. All in all, Manaen might have been a surprising leader of the Antioch Church. Next is **Lucius** of Cyrene - A North African believer from what we would call now Libya - possibly one of the early arrivals in Antioch who initially preached the gospel as he fled the persecution. Finally we encounter **Simeon** called Niger - Luke’s description of him helps us understand that he was likely a black African.

What is Luke’s agenda in outlining the deliberate diversity of the Antioch leadership? Is it simply to highlight the different groups represented in the church? Or is it a more strategic decision in forming a global leadership team to shepherd a global church and to reach a global city? Does **this** strategic decision help us as we consider churches in urban centres?

+ this is a church with a global vision (v2-3)

As well as being a diverse, global leadership team - strikingly Antioch has a global vision too. In v2-3 we see God calling the church to set apart Paul and Barnabas, and to send them out into the world. It is from Antioch (Rather than Jerusalem) that the gospel will spread into new territory. Perhaps this is because in sharing the gospel in their city, they would have already done the work of contextualisation and considered how to cross different cultures and worldviews with the message of Jesus. It was part and parcel of the ministry upon which their church had been founded.

It is a church with a diverse global leadership team, seeking to reach a global city, with a heart for the globe. Perhaps the church at Antioch has much to teach us about our context today?

Here are some questions for your groups, as always feel free to adapt as appropriate:

Our world is currently about 54% urban, it is estimated that by 2050 it will be 66%. What broad challenges do you think that will face for local churches? How will we have to do things differently?

What differences and similarities does Antioch have with our urban centres today do you think? Is Oxford divided? Give evidence... (discuss) [25 marks]

Why do you think the church in Antioch had such a diverse leadership team? What would be the pros and cons of this?

Do you think our Church is diverse? How about our leadership team?

How much do you think Luke’s example in Antioch is descriptive or prescriptive?