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# The Character of an Effective Church (Acts 13:1–13)

# 1

Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the

**devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord. Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. (13:1–13)**

There is much truth in the humorous adage that some people make things happen, others watch things happen, while still others are left wondering what happened. What is true of individuals is also true of churches. Some churches are dynamic, aggressively reaching out with the gospel to make an impact on the world. Some know God is moving in other churches and wonder why they aren't experiencing that power. Still others just barely exist, languishing while the spiritual (and maybe even physical) weeds grow. They make an impact only on their members' social lives.

Acts 11 introduced a leadership and a congregation that God used to make things happen—the Antioch church, the first beachhead of Christianity in the pagan world. That church had an impressive beginning. Acts 11:21 records that “a large number who believed turned to the Lord” under the ministry of Hellenistic Jews who fled Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom (11:19–20). The Antioch church grew dramatically under the capable leadership of Barnabas and Saul (11:26). It was in Antioch that the name *Christians* was first given to the followers of Jesus Christ (11:26). Although it was intended as a derisive term, the believers wore it as a badge of honor. Members of this largely Gentile church showed their love for their Jewish brethren by sending them famine relief (11:27–30).

But of all the factors that made the Antioch church strong, the most significant was its submission to the Holy Spirit. Both the leaders (cf. 11:24; 13:9) and the congregation (cf. 13:2, 4) of the Antioch church were Spirit-filled. They were utterly dependent on the Spirit, who energized every phase of their ministry.

What marks a Spirit-filled church? A Spirit-filled church may be defined simply as one whose members walk in obedience to the will of God. Since God reveals His will in Scripture, a Spirit-filled church must be deeply committed to the Word of God. Indeed, a comparison of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 reveals that being filled with the Spirit and letting the Word richly dwell in one's life produce the same effects. Therefore they are the two sides of the same spiritual reality.

Chapter 13 marks a turning point in Acts. The first twelve chapters have focused on the ministry of Peter; the remaining chapters focus on Paul. Until now the emphasis has been on the Jewish church in Jerusalem and Judea; chapters 13–28 describe the spread of the Gentile church throughout the Roman world. And it was from the dynamic, doctrinally sound, growing, Spirit-controlled church at Antioch that the flag of Gentile missions was unfurled. It had spiritual leaders, with a spiritual ministry, who went on a spiritual mission, faced spiritual opposition, and experienced spiritual victory.

### SPIRITUAL LEADERS

**Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. (13:1)**

Effective, strong churches inevitably have godly leaders, and the church **at Antioch** was no exception. God has always put a premium on spiritual leadership (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; cf. Hos. 4:9; Matt. 9:36). These five men were the heart of the ministry at Antioch.

Luke describes them as **prophets and teachers**, two important New Testament terms. **Prophets** played a significant role in the apostolic church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 2:20; 3:5; 4:11). Like the apostles, they were preachers of God’s Word and were responsible in the early years of the church to instruct the local congregations. Sometimes they received new revelation from God, as in Acts 11:28 and 21:10–11. Both of those incidents record that the prophets, in contrast to the apostles, received practical, not doctrinal revelation. The prophets’ function as receivers of divine revelation ended with the cessation of the temporary sign gifts. Even their office, like that of the apostles, was replaced by pastor-teachers and evangelists (cf. Eph. 4:11–12), who were the elders and overseers (1 Tim. 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5–9). (For a discussion of the cessation of the sign gifts, see John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] and *1 Corinthians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1984].)

The prophets edified the saints by preaching expositions of existent revelation (cf. 1 Thess. 5:20). Although prophets of that unique kind no longer exist, the similar gift for preaching the Word of God remains. It is given to pastors and evangelists, who proclaim what Peter called “the prophetic word” (2 Pet. 1:19) and is still vital to the spiritual health of the church (cf. Rom. 10:14–18). All the way to the return of the Lord, the “spirit of prophecy” continues to be “the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 19:10).

**Teachers** are critical in today's church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1). Theirs is the ministry of giving others a clear understanding of biblical truth. The distinctive of the ministry of teachers is its emphasis on pedagogy rather than on proclamation. That they are somewhat different from preachers seems apparent in texts that discuss both, though the same gifted man can sometimes perform both functions, as Acts 15:35 indicates.

Antioch had five men who were both preachers and teachers of God's Word. It was through their ministry that the church was built up in the faith.

**Barnabas** has already appeared several times in Acts. From 4:36 we learn he was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. His birth name was Joseph, but the apostles named him **Barnabas**, which means "Son of Encouragement"—an apt description of this gentle, loving man. It was Barnabas who convinced the skeptical and suspicious believers at Jerusalem that Saul's conversion was genuine (9:27). The Jerusalem fellowship sent him to investigate the rumors that Gentiles had been saved in Antioch (11:22)—a sign of the high esteem in which the Jerusalem church held him. He brought Saul from Tarsus and got him involved in the ministry in Antioch (11:25–26). Barnabas, along with Saul, carried the Antioch church's contributions for the relief of the Judean church to Jerusalem (11:30).

Little is known about **Simeon, Lucius**, and **Manaen**. Luke's note that **Simeon was called Niger** (which means "black") may suggest that he was a dark-skinned man, an African, or both. While some identify him with Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross (Mark 15:21), there is no direct evidence for that identification. **Lucius**, but not Simeon, is identified with the city of **Cyrene** in North Africa. There is nothing to link him with the Lucius whom Paul greets in Romans 16:21 and certainly no evidence to identify him (as some have argued) as Luke the physician. **Manaen** was notable, Luke records, because he **had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch** (Herod Antipas, the Herod of the gospels). *Suntrophos* (**had been brought up with**) can be translated "foster-brother." He had been reared in Herod the Great's household along with Herod Antipas. **Saul**, or Paul, needs no introduction. Through his tireless efforts the gospel spread throughout the Gentile world. These were the shepherds who led the flock to effectiveness and impact.

#### SPIRITUAL MINISTRY

**And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, (13:2a)**

The responsibility of spiritual shepherds is spiritual ministry.

Unlike many in the ministry today who are busy with shallow activities and programs, the leaders at Antioch understood their spiritual mandate clearly. They patterned themselves after the apostles, who, according to Acts 6:4, devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Those are ever the priorities for the man of God.

**Ministering** is from *leitourgeō*, a word that originally meant “to discharge a public office.” It was “used of the Attic orators who served the state at their own cost” (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker’s reprint of the 1930 edition], 3:177). The leaders of the Antioch church faithfully discharged the office God called them to and fulfilled their ministry (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5).

In Scripture, however, *leitourgeō* means more than public service; it describes priestly service. In the Septuagint it described the priests who ministered in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:41). Serving in a leadership role in the church must be viewed as an act of worship to God. Such service consists of offering spiritual sacrifices to Him (cf. Heb. 13:15–16), including prayer, oversight of the flock, studying, and preaching and teaching the Word.

Their **ministering** was not to the congregation but to **the Lord**. It is crucial to understand that God is the audience for all spiritual ministry (cf. Acts 20:19–20). Those whose goal is ministering to people will be tempted to compromise to achieve that end. Making the Lord the object of ministry obviates the need for compromise.

Like the Macedonian believers, those in ministry must give themselves first to the Lord and only then to other believers (cf. 2 Cor. 8:5). They are to “be diligent to present [themselves] approved to God,” not to men (2 Tim. 2:15). The man of God, like every believer, does his “work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,” because “it is the Lord Christ whom [he serves]” (Col. 3:23–24).

The Bible frequently connects **fasting** with times of vigilant, passionate prayer (cf. Neh. 1:4; Ps. 35:13; Dan. 9:3; Matt. 17:21; Luke 2:37; 5:33; Acts 14:23). Believers may become so concerned with spiritual issues that they lose the desire to eat, or they set aside food to concentrate on intense intercession. Those who know little of fasting perhaps know little about such concern. Scripture nowhere commands believers to fast, but Jesus assumed His followers would do so (Matt. 6:17; Luke 5:33–35). In sharp contrast to the showy, hypocritical fasting of the Pharisees, believers’ fasting is for God’s eyes only (Matt. 6:16–18). (For a further discussion of fasting, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 399ff.)

## SPIRITUAL MISSION

**the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. And when they reached Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews; and they also had John as their helper. (13:2b-5)**

Spiritual men with effective spiritual ministry will see God extend their spiritual mission. God chooses for further ministry those already actively serving Him. He is not likely to take idle Christians down from the shelf, dust them off, and entrust them with important work. Saul and Barnabas were deeply involved in ministering to the Lord when their call to further service came. God chose experienced, proven men for the vitally important mission to the Gentiles.

The truth that all ministry is to be done for the Lord is here reinforced by the Spirit's command to **set apart** Barnabas and Saul **for** Himself. They were His men, to use as He would and send wherever He desired.

Another principle that flows out of this text is that God sovereignly calls men to the ministry. The church did not choose Saul and Barnabas. Indeed, they would probably have been the last two chosen, since they were the best the church had. Nor did Saul and Barnabas volunteer. Instead, the Spirit sovereignly **called them** to full-time missionary service.

A final principle to be gleaned from this text is the importance of waiting for God's timing. The Antioch church did not concoct schemes or map out strategies to reach the Gentile world. Instead, it concentrated on carrying out the ministries God had already entrusted to it. An important feature in discerning God's will for the future is to do His will in the present.

How **the Holy Spirit** communicated to the church is not revealed. Presumably He spoke through one of the prophets. However the message was communicated, the church's response was instant obedience. There was no grumbling or resentment; the Holy Spirit demanded the church's best, and Antioch joyously provided Saul and Barnabas.

After **they had fasted and prayed**, no doubt for the success of Saul and Barnabas's ministry, the leaders **laid their hands on them**. The laying on of hands neither granted Saul and Barnabas the Holy Spirit nor ordained them to ministry. Both had already received the Spirit



(Acts 9:17; 11:24) and had been serving in the ministry for many years. The laying on of hands simply signified identification, confirmation, and unity in their upcoming mission (cf. Num. 8:10; 27:18–23).

Having prayed for Saul and Barnabas and having publicly identified with them, the Antioch church **sent them away**. A better translation of *apoluō* (**sent them away**) might be “they let them go,” or “they released them.” It is clear from verse 1 that the Spirit, not the church, sent out the two missionaries. Since He had already sent them, all the church could do was cut the cord and let them go. That truth is repeated in verse 4, where Luke relates that the missionaries were **sent out by the Holy Spirit**.

Leaving Antioch to begin the mission, **they went down to Seleucia**. Located some sixteen miles away, near the mouth of the Orontes River, **Seleucia** served as the port of Antioch. Whether the missionaries took the road to Seleucia or traveled by boat down the Orontes is not stated. Once in Seleucia, they took passage on a ship and **sailed to Cyprus**.

**Cyprus** is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily and Sardinia. It is about 60 miles off the Syrian coast and would have been visible from Seleucia on a clear day. The main part of the island is 90 to 100 miles long and up to 60 miles wide. In New Testament times its two major cities were Salamis, the chief port and commercial center, and Paphos, the capital.

Saul and Barnabas no doubt chose to begin their missionary outreach on Cyprus for several reasons. According to Acts 4:36, it was Barnabas’s home and thus familiar territory. Also, it was close to Antioch, probably two days’ journey at most. Further, Cyprus had a large Jewish population. All those reasons made it an ideal starting point for outreach to the Gentile world.

Arriving at the main port city, **Salamis, they began to proclaim the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews**. To preach the gospel first to the Jews was Paul’s custom throughout his missionary journeys. Cyprus had a Jewish settlement large enough to support several synagogues in Salamis. As they traveled from synagogue to synagogue, Saul and Barnabas **had John Mark as their helper**. He was a native of Jerusalem (Acts 12:12) and was Barnabas’s cousin (Col. 4:10). When Saul and Barnabas returned to Antioch from Jerusalem after delivering relief aid, John Mark came with them (Acts 12:25). He had undoubtedly left Antioch along with Saul and Barnabas. Although he was soon to desert them and return to Jerusalem, for now he was a member of the team, helping Saul and Barnabas carry out their spiritual mission.

**And when they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they found a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet whose name was Bar-Jesus, who was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. . . . Now Paul and his companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. (13:6–8, 13)**

When God's people seek to advance His purposes, satanic opposition is unavoidable. The missionary team had by now traversed **the whole island** from Salamis in the northeast corner **as far as Paphos** on the southwest coast. Besides being the seat of the Roman government, **Paphos** was

a great center for the worship of Aphrodite [Venus]. . . . The greatest festival in Cyprus in honor of Aphrodite was the Aphrodisia, held for three days each spring. It was attended by great crowds not only from all parts of Cyprus but also from surrounding countries. (Charles F Pfeiffer and Howard F Vos, *The Wycliffe Historical Geography of Bible Lands* [Chicago: Moody, 1967], 305–6)

It was a city rife with immorality: "Extensive religious prostitution accompanied [Aphrodite's] rites at Paphos" (Pfeiffer and Vos, 306).

Here, in the capital, **they found a certain magician**. As happened when Peter and John brought the gospel to Samaria, Saul and Barnabas were confronted by a **magician**. *Magos* (**magician**) does not necessarily have an evil connotation. It is used, for example, in Matthew 2:1 to describe the wise men who visited the infant Jesus and His family. The term originally referred to the hereditary priestly tribe within the Median nation. They were well-versed in astronomy and astrology, agriculture, mathematics, and history. They were involved in various occult practices and were famous for their ability to interpret dreams (cf. Dan. 2:1ff.). Such was their political power and influence that no Persian ruler came to power without their approval. (For further information, see *Matthew 1–7*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary [Chicago: Moody, 1985], 26–28.) Later, however, the term **magician** was used to describe all sorts of practitioners of magic and dabblers in the occult. **Bar-Jesus**, being **Jewish**, obviously was not one of the Medo-Persian magi. Like Simon (Acts 8:9–11), he was a deceiver who put his knowledge to evil

use.

Bar-Jesus was not only a magician; Luke further describes him as a **false prophet**. His name, ironically, means “son of salvation”—a strange name indeed for a deceiving false prophet. It was no accident that this man had attached himself to the Roman **proconsul**. The kingdom of darkness is eager to influence those who rule. Much of the evil in this world can be traced ultimately to such baleful influence by “the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12; cf. Dan. 10:13–11:1).

The Roman governor of Cyprus was **Sergius Paulus**, whom Luke describes as **a man of intelligence**. The accuracy of Luke’s account is verified by an inscription found at Soloi, on the north coast of Cyprus. That inscription dates itself “in the proconsulship of Paulus” (Sir William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], 74).

As an intelligent Roman, the governor no doubt had a keen interest in new philosophies and religious beliefs. That he had in his entourage a Jewish teacher (albeit a renegade one) showed he had some interest in Judaism. Saul and Barnabas appeared to him to be two more Jewish teachers from whom he could learn more about the Jewish faith. Further, his duties as governor prompted him to investigate this new teaching that was sweeping Cyprus. Accordingly, he **summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God**.

Alarmed at the prospect of Sergius Paulus’s conversion, and his own subsequent loss of status, **Elymas the magician (for thus his name is translated) was opposing them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith**. He was doing the bidding of his evil master, Satan. Like many Jewish people at this time, Bar-Jesus also had a Greek name, **Elymas**, by which he was known at the court of Sergius Paulus. Luke’s parenthetical note that **thus his name is translated** does not mean **Elymas** translates Bar-Jesus. Instead, **Elymas** was apparently the Greek transliteration of an Arabic word for “magician” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], 462).

It is well to remember the lesson of these verses. Leading someone to Christ is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it a matter of making a successful sales pitch. Rather, it involves all-out war against the forces of hell. Saul and Barnabas battled Bar-Jesus for the soul of Sergius Paulus.

But such external attacks are not Satan’s only strategy. Even more deadly over the centuries have been his attacks on the church from within. It is hardly surprising, then, that he sought to derail the mission to the Gentiles with internal pressure as well. That pressure came in John Mark’s desertion. Having completed their work on Cyprus, **Paul and his**

**companions put out to sea from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. Perga** was a major city in the Roman province of **Pamphylia**, in Asia Minor.

What specifically was the reason **John left them and returned to Jerusalem** is not clear. Some have suggested that he was afraid to travel in the dangerous mountains of Pamphylia, a region infested with bands of robbers (cf. 2 Cor. 11:26). Others think he resented Paul's taking the ascendancy over his cousin, Barnabas; others that he disapproved of Paul's emphasis on preaching the gospel to the Gentiles; and still others that he feared persecution. Whatever the reason, Paul did not consider it valid (Acts 15:38). And, tragically, although John Mark's desertion did not stop the mission to the Gentiles, it did split the successful team of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:36–40). Internal dissension, division, and disunity continue to disrupt works of God that have stood fast against the storms of external opposition.

#### SPIRITUAL VICTORY

**But Saul, who was also known as Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, “You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.” And immediately a mist and a darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking those who would lead him by the hand. Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.** (13:9–12)

The battle for the soul of Sergius Paulus now reached its climax. **Saul**, who, Luke notes, **was also known** by his Roman name **Paul**, had had enough of the magician's interference. Being **filled with the Holy Spirit**, Paul **fixed his gaze upon** that false prophet. As with all those who dabble in the occult and demonic doctrine, Bar-Jesus was **full of all deceit and fraud**. *Dolos* (**deceit**) is the Greek word for “a snare.” Like a cleverly disguised snare, Bar-Jesus was not what he appeared to be to his unsuspecting victims. *Radiourgias* (**fraud**) appears only here in the New Testament. It meant originally, “ease or facility in doing; hence readiness in turning the hand to anything, bad or good; and so recklessness, unscrupulousness, wickedness” (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 1:516). Far from being a “son of salvation,” Bar-Jesus was accused by Paul as being in reality a **son of the devil**. Bar-Jesus fancied himself a righteous

prophet, but Paul denounced him as the **enemy of all righteousness**. He constantly twisted and perverted God's truth, leading to Paul's withering question, "**will you not cease to make crooked the straight ways of the Lord?**"

Bar-Jesus was not to escape with a mere tongue lashing, however. As he had made others spiritually blind, he was now to suffer physical blindness. Paul informed him, "**the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time.**" That Bar-Jesus' blindness was to be temporary was an indication of God's mercy. One can only hope that he recovered from his spiritual blindness as well.

The missionaries' spiritual victory was not only negative, as seen in the defeat of Bar-Jesus, but also positive. Satan's emissary had been defeated and silenced; and now Paul and Barnabas were about to win the battle for Sergius Paulus's soul: **Then the proconsul believed when he saw what had happened, being amazed at the teaching of the Lord.** As so often is related in Acts, God used a miracle to confirm the authenticity of His messengers and the truth of His Word. Significantly, it was **the teaching of the Lord**, not the stunning miracle he had just witnessed, that prompted **the proconsul** to believe. He was **amazed at the teaching of the Lord**, not at the miracle.

There is no reason to doubt the genuineness of Sergius Paulus's belief. That he became a true Christian is suggested by some extrabiblical sources. The great nineteenth-century archaeologist Sir William Ramsay "argued from other literary sources that Sergia Paulla, the proconsul's daughter, was a Christian, as was her son Gaius Caristianus Fronto, the first citizen of Pisidian Antioch to enter the Roman senate" (Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981], 9:421; cf. E. M. Blaiklock, *The Archaeology of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977], 107; J. A. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 392). But apart from such external evidence, Luke's account is clear. The conversion of Sergius Paulus "has been the main point of the whole Cyprus narrative" (John B. Polhill, *The New American Commentary: Acts* [Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 295). As his erstwhile counselor was plunged into physical darkness, the proconsul emerged from spiritual darkness into the gospel's glorious light.

The church at Antioch stands for all time as an example of an effective church. The successful mission to evangelize the Gentile world that it initiated was a turning point in history. The true church of Jesus Christ on earth today is the spiritual legacy of that outreach.