

CHAPTER 6: FIRST MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 13–15 — “If We Go Global Like They Did ...”

WHAT THEY FACED

The barrier-breaking breakthrough with Gentiles created a new question: How do you systematically reach the unreached world? The church at Antioch emerged as a launch pad—a diverse community ready to send missionaries into uncharted territory. There was no roadmap for cross-cultural church planting, and the cultural complexity was real: How much should Gentiles adopt Jewish customs? Opposition waited in every direction, from both Jewish and pagan communities. Leadership questions pressed in as well: Who leads? Who sends? Who decides policy?

Could they develop a reproducible strategy for global missions that would work in any culture? As Maxwell writes, “Vision without a strategy remains an illusion” (The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, p. 45).

WHAT THEY DID: THE STRATEGIC MISSIONS BLUEPRINT

PHASE 1: DIVINE SENDING (Acts 13:1–3)

The leadership team at Antioch included Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch), and Saul (v. 1). Their diversity was itself a statement of the gospel’s reach—Barnabas, a Jewish Levite from Cyprus; Simeon called Niger, likely African (Niger means “black”); Lucius from Cyrene in North Africa; Manaen, connected to political power; and Saul, a former Pharisee and Roman citizen. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke clearly: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (v. 2). So, after further fasting and prayer, the church laid hands on them and sent them off (v. 3).

Notice the order and principles at work. Worship preceded work; the call came in the context of worship. Prayer confirmed direction; fasting and prayer preceded sending. The team validated the calling; there was corporate confirmation of an individual call. And authority transferred through the laying on of hands, signaling official authorization. As Maxwell’s Law of Process reminds us, “Leadership develops daily, not in a day” (The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, p. 23).

PHASE 2: THE REPRODUCIBLE METHOD (Acts 13:4–14:28)

Their first stop was Cyprus (13:4–12). Strategically, they began with Barnabas's homeland—familiar territory first. Opposition arose quickly. Bar-Jesus, a sorcerer, tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. Paul confronted him: “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right!” (v. 10), and the sorcerer was struck blind. The result was powerful: “When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord” (v. 12). From there, a leadership shift becomes evident: “From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia” (v. 13). It is now “Paul and his companions,” not “Barnabas and Saul.”

In Pisidian Antioch (13:13–52), they entered the synagogue on the Sabbath and sat down (v. 14). Paul's method was consistent and wise. He started with Scripture, using the Old Testament as a foundation. He connected the promises to Christ: “What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus” (vv. 32–33). And he called for decision: “Through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you” (v. 38). The audience response moved through a familiar arc—initial interest as many Jews and devout converts followed Paul and Barnabas (v. 43), swelling crowds until almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord (v. 44), and rising religious opposition as jealousy took root (v. 45). This led to a pivotal decision: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (vv. 46–47). The Gentiles received the message with joy, honored the word, and those appointed to eternal life believed, as the word spread through the whole region (vv. 48–49). Persecution was organized against the missionaries, and they were expelled, but they shook the dust from their feet and went to Iconium. The disciples, nevertheless, were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit (vv. 50–52).

The same pattern unfolded in Iconium and Lystra (14:1–20). They began in the synagogue, met a mixed response, and ministered with signs and wonders as the Lord confirmed the message of His grace (14:3). Opposition intensified, with plots to stone them. In Lystra, Paul healed a man lame from birth, and the crowd cried, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” They called Barnabas Zeus and Paul Hermes. Paul's response was humble and clear: “Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God” (v. 15). Soon after, opponents from Antioch and Iconium turned the

crowd, and Paul was stoned and dragged outside the city, thought to be dead. But when the disciples gathered around him, he rose and went back into the city (vv. 19–20). As Maxwell observes, “The measure of a leader is not what he does in moments of comfort and convenience, but what he does in times of challenge and controversy” (The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader, p. 67).

PHASE 3: CHURCH ESTABLISHMENT (Acts 14:21–28)

On the return journey, their strategy was intentional. They made disciples—“They preached the gospel in that city and won a large number of disciples.” They strengthened churches—returning to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch to strengthen the disciples. They appointed leaders—elders in every church. And they committed these leaders and churches to the Lord with prayer and fasting (vv. 21–23). The model was reproducible: evangelize by preaching the gospel, establish by planting churches, equip by appointing local leaders, encourage by returning to strengthen, and entrust by committing the work to God’s care. Finally, they sailed back to Antioch, gathered the church, and reported “all that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (vv. 24–28).

PHASE 4: THE GENTILE CONTROVERSY (Acts 15:1–35)

A crisis arose in Antioch when some taught, “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (v. 1). This was not a small matter. It touched the very heart of the gospel and the future of the movement. Would Christianity remain a Jewish sect or become a global faith?

At the Jerusalem Council, Peter reminded the assembly that God had already shown His will by giving the Holy Spirit to Gentiles, just as He had to Jews. “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (vv. 7–11). Paul and Barnabas recounted the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through their ministry (v. 12). Then James, leading the church in Jerusalem, rendered judgment: “We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood” (vv. 19–20). An official letter was sent, affirming that Gentiles did not need circumcision, but should abstain from practices that would unnecessarily offend Jewish believers (vv. 22–29). The result was joy and encouragement as the believers received the decision and were strengthened (vv. 30–35). As Maxwell’s Law of Navigation says, “Anyone

can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course” (The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership, p. 17). The Jerusalem Council charted the course for global Christianity.

WHAT THEY GOT: THE GLOBAL CHURCH BLUEPRINT

From these labors emerged a strategic, reproducible methodology. The pattern was systematic—begin in the synagogue, then turn to the Gentiles, plant a church, appoint leaders, and move on, trusting God with ongoing growth. The message remained the same, while methods flexed to fit culture. Indigenous leadership was the default, with local believers leading from day one. Ongoing support came through return visits that strengthened and encouraged.

Theologically, the church clarified essential truths. Salvation is by grace through faith alone—not faith plus works. Gentiles did not need to become Jews to become Christians. Unity was defined by gospel essentials, while cultural diversity was honored. The vision expanded toward every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Organizationally, sending churches commissioned missionaries. Ministry was done in teams, not solo. Accountability was practiced through reports back to sending churches. Leadership development was immediate, with a clear focus on raising up local leaders.

The measurable results were undeniable. Geographically, the gospel advanced through Cyprus and Galatia, and foundations were laid across Asia Minor. The strategy was proven and ready for replication. Leadership multiplied—Paul emerged as a primary missionary, elders were appointed locally, and team members like Silas and Timothy were recruited. Church planting became the consistent outcome—every stop resulted in new congregations. Culturally, Gentile inclusion was affirmed by official policy. Jewish–Gentile unity was modeled through practical solutions. A global identity crystallized around the name “Christian,” born in the diversity of Antioch. Missional DNA took root: every church became a sending church.

MAXWELL’S LEADERSHIP LAWS IN ACTION

They lived the Law of Legacy by building systems that would outlast them. They demonstrated the Law of Explosive Growth by multiplying leaders for exponential expansion. They exemplified the Law of Navigation as the Jerusalem Council guided the church through its most crucial decision. And

they embraced the Law of Sacrifice as Paul endured stoning and relentless opposition for the sake of the mission.

MODERN APPLICATION: THE GLOBAL MISSIONS MODEL

Before you go, embrace strategic sending. Worship and fast, seeking God's direction through spiritual disciplines. Confirm calling through corporate validation, not merely personal conviction. Build diverse teams that bring multiple perspectives and cultural strengths. Establish clear lines of accountability and communication with the sending church.

Follow Paul's method for church planting. In your entry strategy, start with existing connections and natural cultural bridges. Seek out receptive people—those already leaning toward truth. Demonstrate authenticity so your character speaks before your message. Expect opposition and plan for resistance from established systems. In your gospel presentation, use familiar foundations, connect everything to Christ, call for a clear decision, and form community immediately by integrating new believers into fellowship. For church establishment, develop leaders quickly without waiting for “perfect” candidates. Create systems that can function without you. Address cultural issues wisely where traditions conflict with faith. And plan your exit from day one, working yourself out of a job.

When cultural controversies arise, use the Jerusalem Council model. Listen to all sides. Look for where the Holy Spirit is already working. Focus on essentials, separating the core of the gospel from cultural preferences. Create practical solutions that address real concerns without compromising truth. Communicate clearly so all are strengthened. As Maxwell notes, “Great leaders ask great questions” (Good Leaders Ask Great Questions, p. 23). Ask: What is essential to the gospel and what is cultural preference? How do we maintain unity while allowing diversity? What barriers have we created that God never intended? How can we honor multiple cultures while serving Christ together?