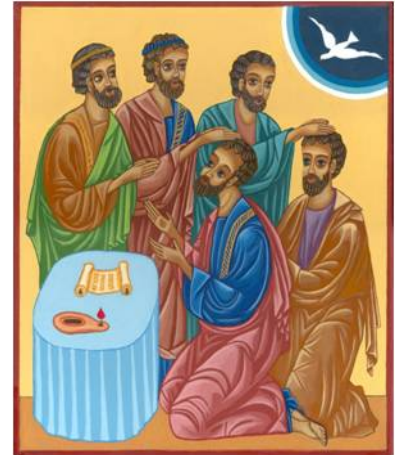


## 6. FIRST MISSIONARY TRIP (45-49 A.D.)

Acts 13:3–14:28

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that Saul began preaching immediately after his encounter with Jesus on the way to Damascus. This first missionary experience proved to be a failure. In fact, his listeners rejected his message and tried to kill him. Saul was forced to flee first to Damascus and then to Jerusalem. From there he returned to his hometown of Tarsus. It was there that Barnabas sought him out and took him back with him to Antioch to incorporate him into the fledgling Christian community. After a year of missionary “apprenticeship” in this city, Saul began his true and proper missionary activities under the guidance of the Spirit. He left Antioch in the company of Barnabas, whom the Acts describe as “a good man, filled with the Holy Spirit and with faith” (11:24). The two visited several towns in Asia Minor, proclaiming the Good News in the synagogues.



Teresa Groselj fsp,  
*The Antioch community sends  
Paul and Barnabas out on mission.*

The Jews consistently rejected the message of the two missionaries, who then turned to the Gentiles. To their surprise, they found the pagans receptive to the Word of God and to faith in Jesus. Thus they began to establish small Christian communities made up of believers of Gentile origins, without ties to the Jewish world and its religious traditions. Through the work of the Spirit, who guided Saul and Barnabas, a new situation began to emerge: Christian communities with members who came from different ethnic groups and religious backgrounds. In this way, the Spirit threw wide the doors of Christianity to universality. The connection between the Christians of Gentile origins and those of Jewish origins was their common faith in Jesus Christ, who had died and risen and was now present in his Church. This “one faith” in Christ was transformed into a public testimony through statements such as “Jesus Christ is Lord”; “He died for our sins”; “We are all children of God” and also through the quality of the converts’ lives, which sprang from a personal relationship with Jesus, alive and present through his Spirit in the baptized person and in the Church.



*Salamina, Cyprus*

When Saul and Barnabas left Antioch, they headed for Cyprus, the homeland of Barnabas. Here they met the proconsul Sergius Paulus, who listened to them with an open heart. From this time on Saul went by the name of “Paul.” This missionary trip was fraught with difficulties. In Cyprus, Paul and Barnabas had a showdown with Elymas, a magician (which is what his name means in Greek), who sought to deceive the simple and credulous local people through sorcery. He also wanted to prevent the proconsul from taking any further interest in the message proclaimed by the two missionaries. When Paul exposed Elymas as an imposter and caused him to go blind, the proconsul became a believer in Christ.

Leaving Cyprus, the two missionaries traveled to Pamphylia, Perga and Antioch in Pisidia. It was during this stage of their trip that Paul assumed leadership of the mission. According to the Acts of the Apostles, there was also a third member of the party, John Mark (Acts 12:12)—a youth who, due to fear or perhaps a difference of opinion, abandoned Paul and Barnabas in Pamphylia and returned to Jerusalem. From Pisidian Antioch, the remaining two missionaries moved on to Iconium and Lystra (Acts 14:1-17)—a dangerous and even life-threatening journey because travelers were of-

ten attacked by escaped slaves and brigands along this inland route. Some scholars think that Paul's words to the Corinthians (2 Co. 11:26) allude to this experience. In Acts 14:4-14, Luke calls Paul and Barnabas "apostles"—a title usually reserved for the twelve closest followers of Jesus. The Book of Acts testifies to the fact that, to the Church's way of thinking, all those sent out by the Spirit are apostles. In Lystra, Paul was stoned, dragged out of the town and left for dead. But he survived the ordeal and he and Barnabas left for Derbe, revisiting along the way the towns they had already evangelized. Luke sums up Paul's first missionary trip with these words:

*Having preached the good news in that town [Derbe] and made a considerable number of disciples, they went back through Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. They put fresh heart into the disciples, encouraging them to persevere in the faith, saying, "We must all experience many hardships before we enter the kingdom of God." In each of these churches they appointed elders, and with prayer and fasting they commended them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. They passed through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia. Then after proclaiming the word at Perga they went down to Attalia and from there sailed for Antioch, where they had originally been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now completed" (Acts 14:21-26).*

Verse 26 is significant because it underscores the fact that Paul's missionary trip was ecclesial: it was entrusted to him by the community of Antioch in Syria and he accomplished it together with Barnabas and (in part) John Mark. The trip ended with a return to their "home base," where Paul and Barnabas recounted all the amazing things God had done as a result of their evangelization, describing how he had opened to door of faith also to the Gentiles.

#### **FOR DEEPER REFLECTION: A Closer Look at Syrian Antioch**

Founded in 301 B.C. by Seleucus of Syria, Antioch was the third largest city of the then-known world, ranking after only Rome and Alexandria in size and consequence. Its importance was due in part to its geographical position as a link between Syria and Anatolia (a region in modern Turkey) with the Greek world. Antioch was home to a fervent cult of worshippers of Apollo (2 Mc. 4:33) and the city was so busy that it was said people could be found at home only at night!

Hellenist converts to Christianity evangelized Antioch after the death of Stephen (Acts 11:20-21) and it was here that the followers of Jesus were first called "Christians" (Acts 11:26).

The city was home to the largest Christian community outside of Jerusalem. The Antiochan Christians were primarily from Gentile backgrounds, in contrast to the Jerusalem Christians, who were almost all Jewish converts. The pluri-cultural community of Antioch was Paul's home base and reference point.