

THE SEAMLESS PASTORATE

— A Case Study —

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Question: How does a Bible-believing Baptist church find a pastor when it needs one?

When a church's pastor moves on, moves out, or moves up, what steps does a church need to take in order to secure a suitable replacement?

Traditionally, many churches will form a "pulpit committee" comprised of spiritually mature men. This committee puts out feelers in various ways and examines potential nominees, some of whom are then given an opportunity to "candidate" for the position by visiting with and preaching to the church body. The church eventually votes to call a man, and when this is done he is installed as pastor. To avoid making unwise decisions, various safeguards are generally written into the procedures to be followed.

Of course, this is not the only way a church may go about acquiring a pastor. Sometimes the new pastor is appointed by the outgoing pastor (with or without the consent of the congregation). In other cases a man is brought up "through the ranks," developed in the church for the purpose of taking over when the current pastor retires or departs. The fact is there are a number of means that Baptist churches can employ when it becomes necessary to find themselves a pastor. From a purely pragmatic point of view, it is true to say that *any* plan is better than having no plan at all!

The proper follow-up question for Baptists is: "How did the first-century churches handle it?" How did the church at Jerusalem replace "the twelve" as they moved on or were martyred? How did pastoral leadership of the great church at Ephesus continue on into the next generation and beyond? Pastors are so vital to the enduring effectiveness of a church, for "*...it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad*" (Matthew 26:31). When faithful pastors of the apostolic era were imprisoned, exiled, or put to death, how were they replaced?

The Bible *does* have an answer! The following case study demonstrates God's plan for an enduring, "seamless" pastorate — a plan that not only enables a Baptist church to enjoy continuous Biblical leadership regardless of its circumstances, but one that will cause it to be vastly more adaptable and effective in the great work of the Lord.

This study may challenge some long-standing Baptist traditions. It is presented in all sincerity with the hope of at least provoking thought. Mark well, however, this is not a mere academic question — it happens to be an extremely relevant and practical issue for 21ST century Baptists. Why? Because there are too many one-time flourishing Baptist churches that are now *floundering* Baptist churches — in great part, it would seem, due to a breakdown in the transitioning of pastoral leadership.

THE BACKGROUND

The church at Antioch-on-the-Orontes in Syria originated out of the church at Jerusalem, coming about as a direct result of the intense Jewish persecutions leveled against the mother church rather than through any intentional evangelistic activity. It might have maintained itself as an insular Jewish congregation had it not been for the energetic preaching of some more progressive Cypriot and North African Jews.

“Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only. And some of them were men of Cyprus and Cyrene, which, when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord” — Acts 11:19-21.

The Antioch church was organized in 42 A.D. by Joses Barnabas, who was sent from and by the Jerusalem church for that purpose. His exemplary ministry in Antioch also resulted in the continuing growth of the church through the salvation and subsequent baptism of men and women.¹

“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord” — Acts 11:22-24.

No doubt realizing the city’s great potential for evangelism and the young church’s strategic potential for evangelistic outreach, Barnabas then traveled some 200 kilometers to Tarsus to fetch Saul and bring him back to Antioch. Working as a team under Barnabas’ leadership, these men enjoyed a prosperous one year ministry at Antioch, teaching the disciples “all things” that Christ had commanded and almost certainly training God-called men for the ministry (a practice they continued wherever they planted churches, *Acts 14:21-23*).

“Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” — Acts 11:22-26.

It is apparent that Barnabas and Saul were members of the church at Antioch for this year of ministry. They *assembled* with the church, they exercised a pastoral ministry (*Ephesians 4:11*), and they were subject to the directives of the church — evidenced by the church directing them to carry its gift to Jerusalem.

“And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Cæsar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judæa: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” — Acts 11:27-30.

¹ As per Acts 2:41,47; 5:14.

Following their visit to Jerusalem, the Biblical narrative moves events forward several months. The prideful Herod Agrippa I died miserably in April, 44 A.D., and shortly thereafter Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch. Accompanying them was a young John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas (*Colossians 4:10*).

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark” — Acts 12:25.

In Acts 13 the pastors of the church at Antioch are introduced by name (one of the few times this is done in the New Testament narrative). At this stage the church had been an organized assembly for over two years, and was blessed with at least five shepherds.

“Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul” — Acts 13:1.

The ethnic and social makeup of this pastorate is quite remarkable. It had money, class, and brains. Barnabas was a wealthy Cypriot Jew (*Acts 4:36,37*), Simeon was a black man, Lucius was an African from Cyrenaica, Manaen was brought up (as a foster brother) in the royal court of Herod Philip II (*Luke 3:1*), and Saul was a highly educated Pharisee. Together, they undoubtedly reflected the cosmopolitan character of a church wherein there was neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, black or white, or rich or poor.

AN ASIDE

The thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the book of Acts (coupled with *Luke 10:1-17*) give the Lord's churches the pattern for fulfilling Christ's great commandment. Among the key principles found in these passages are the following:

1. The Lord will burden a church *before* He calls men. The church at Antioch was deeply burdened for the “regions beyond” its borders. We know this because of the fasting taking place (*Acts 13:2*)! Fasting is a manifestation of the passion of a prayer (*Daniel 9:3; Mark 9:29*). In this church, prayer and fasting was underway before God ever called men to go. (This order is often reversed among Baptists today. In most instances, a man announces *his* call to a field and then spends a lot of time and energy convincing churches — including his own — of that call! This often leads to a detached relationship between evangelist and church.)
2. God's vision (direction) to a church comes through its leadership. The Holy Ghost directed the church at Antioch through its pastors (*Acts 13:2*), and then directed the team that was sent out as to where to preach (*Acts 13:4*). At a later time (*Acts 16:9,10*) we see the Spirit directing the evangelistic team of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke as to where to preach the Gospel — working through the team “leader,” Paul. That God directs His people through divinely appointed leadership is a principle found in both testaments.
3. Evangelists are to be church sent. Barnabas, Saul, and John did not go through a mission board or any external “clearinghouse” (*Acts 13:3*). They were church

sanctioned, church supported, and church sent men — exercising a faith-dependent ministry (*Luke 10:4-8*).

4. Evangelism is best done in the context of a team ministry (*Luke 10:1; Acts 13:3*). Almost without exception, the church-planting ministries mentioned in the New Testament were the work of teams of men. These evangelistic bands were comprised of two or more preachers (and often their families, *1 Corinthians 9:5*) as well as men who were being mentored along the way (*Acts 13:5c; 16:3a*).
5. Evangelists do not necessarily have to be “country-bound.” The field of service is up to the Lord (*Matthew 10:5,6*). Paul and his fellow servants exercised an international, cross-cultural, and multi-lingual ministry. What was constant was the preaching of the Gospel, the baptizing of those who believed, and the organizing of Baptist churches. The New Testament knows nothing of “home missions” and “foreign missions,” and neither does it “pigeonhole” a man to a single nation or people-group.
6. Evangelists are not expected to “stick and stay.” Their responsibility is to preach the Gospel to everyone, but the response of the hearers ultimately determines whether a church will be planted. When a city or a people rejects the Lord Jesus Christ, the evangelistic team must move on without being considered a failure (*Acts 13:46; Luke 10:10-16*).

THE ANSWER

Now to the main enquiry of this case study:

When the Lord directed His church at Antioch to send two of its pastors forth to do the work of an evangelist, what became of the church and what became of its pastoral leadership?

The church did not “fold” when Barnabas and Saul left. Though these men had exercised a ministry of great import and impact, the church did not stand or fall based on their presence or absence. This is seen in the fact that it was still thriving over two years later when the two preachers returned.

“And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles” — Acts 14:26,27.

We see the wisdom of a pastoral team ministry or a pastorate. When two men were called away, there were at least three men left to continue shepherding the flock. It was a “seamless” pastoral ministry! There was no waiting period, when the church was without a pastor. There was no searching period, when a “pulpit committee” looked for a new pastor. There was no transition period, when both the new pastor and the church got used to each other. There was no pruning period, when church members who couldn’t get used to the new pastor left ... and, there was no horror period, when the church realized they had selected the wrong man (to its hurt)!

Christ loves the church and will surely never harm or injure His sweet bride. If pastors and evangelists are His gift to His churches (*Ephesians 4:7-11*) what blessing or benefit can there be for a church to be bereft of a shepherd?

First-century pastors were generally home grown. This probably wasn't the case with the church at Antioch (at least to begin with) because most of the original members were refugees. However, as Christianity spread, church planters would come into a city or town and preach the Gospel. They baptized those who received the Lord Jesus Christ and organized them into New Testament churches. Essential to that organizing process was to set elders (pastors, bishops) in place as the shepherds, overseers, and rulers of each church. And, it was "elders," (plural). There were no Bible colleges or seminaries from whence to obtain such men. These extra-Biblical institutions hadn't been thought up yet! Intrinsic to the ministry of any evangelistic team is the training of God-called men for the work of the ministry (*Ephesians 4:12b*).

"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed" — Acts 14:23.

"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" — Titus 1:5.

Take another case study. Where did all the elders and evangelists associated with the church at Ephesus come from? They had to have been home grown — trained in that schoolhouse by Paul for over two years (*Acts 19:9; 20:18-35*). By the time the apostle and his team left Ephesus, all Asia had been evangelized (*Acts 19:10*) and a group of faithful shepherds set over the mother church (*Acts 20:17*).

When a church has a plurality of pastors, as did the church at Antioch, it is blessed with great flexibility. Two pastors could leave to do the work of an evangelist, as did Barnabas and Saul, without harming the body.

Notice what happened after they returned from their first evangelistic journey:

First of all, they returned and rehearsed (*Acts 14:27*), but then they remained for a "long time" with the church. (So much for the traditional one-year furlough!) Not only that, but during this time they returned to their *pastoral* ministry. (So much for a man having to accept an "either/or" job description of pastor or evangelist!)

"And there they abode long time with the disciples" — Acts 14:27.

"Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also" — Acts 15:35.

There was a two-and-a-half year span between the end of Paul's first evangelistic journey and the beginning of his second. During that time, both Paul and Barnabas remained busy in the Lord's work — as pastors! Both men traveled to Jerusalem, along with Titus and others, to confront the Judaism error head on. (Once again, notice it was the *church* at Antioch that determined which of their men should go and it was the *church* that provided for them to make the long journey, *Acts 15:2,3*.)

The same pattern can be seen occurring in the time between Paul's second and third evangelistic journeys.

"And when he had landed at Cæsarea, and gone up, and saluted the church, he went down to Antioch. And after he had spent some time there, he departed..." — Acts 18:22,23.

Like the electrons in an alternating current, the God-called preachers associated with the church at Antioch moved seamlessly back and forth in the various aspects of the work of the Lord. Because the church was blessed with a pastorate rather than a pastor, it became the great evangelistic church of the apostolic era. It never lost power!

Of course, this divine arrangement will never work when one electron decides it is far too important to be so flexible. And it will not work well if a church has only one electron in place, especially if that electron brooks no partner. None of the pastors of the Antioch church carried such an attitude. When the Holy Ghost said to that church, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them," we do not hear the brethren complaining to the Lord that these men were too "key" to be let go; nor do we hear Barnabas or Saul protesting that they were too important to be sent away. Instead, one can almost hear the unified delight over the fact that God had graciously heard and answered their fervent prayers and was going to use the church to do His work.

And later, when the two weary and worn preachers returned to their church, they were received back as pastors and teachers. No one considered them to be second class "missionaries," and no one lauded them as "heroes." God's work is God's work whether it be planting or pastoring, and God's men are God's men whether they be evangelists or pastors and teachers.

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase" — I Corinthians 3:5-7.

Would not the work of the Lord be better served if 21ST century Baptist churches and preachers recognized the following in regards to the Lord's work?

- That traditions (yes, "Baptist traditions") are ultimately ruinous unless they are upheld by New Testament precept or principle — *II Thessalonians 2:15*.
- That the development of a scriptural pastorate through the training of God-called men by means of hands-on mentoring must be a high priority — *II Timothy 2:2*.
- That the Lord's provision of a scriptural pastorate is to enable a church to seamlessly attend to its God-given responsibilities — both to the flock and to the field?

Would not the work of the Lord be better served if 21ST century Baptist churches and preachers actually *practiced* what they recognize to be scriptural?

How much precious time and money is wasted when churches fail to make scriptural provision for the inevitable changes that come within their leadership? How often do once "great"

churches that were built around a single pastor fall into obscurity or (worse still) apostasy when he goes?

The question was asked: “How does a Bible-believing Baptist church find a pastor when it needs one?” The answer seems to be: “It doesn’t have to *find* one — he’s already there!” As long as Christ continues calling men into the ministry and so long as they are being scripturally trained by their pastors and/or evangelists, a church will “seamlessly” maintain its ability and flexibility to be steadfast, unmovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord!

Right?

If the thesis and conclusions of this study make sense, all that remains is to implement them. Though many Baptist churches may not have, the good news is they *can*!

Obviously changes like this will not happen overnight. For one thing, God-called, qualified, pastors are in short supply — and it takes time to train and mentor them along the lines of // *Timothy 3:10,11a*. Furthermore, traditions are not easily erased. It just may be that a church will have to do things the old way when it comes to finding a pastor ... but, it doesn’t have to stay that way!

Why not at the least set a new course? Regardless of how long it may take, the end result is wonderful. How about it? Imagine, a perennial group of scriptural preachers in every Baptist church, doing the work of the ministry — whether feeding the flock at home or cloning the church elsewhere.

Why not, indeed!

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