

Rethinking Pentecostal Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa: An Ecclesiological Reflection on the Church at Antioch

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ABSTRACT

The demise of apartheid in 1994 ushered in a new democratic dispensation in South Africa and created expectations of racial reconciliation and ecclesial transformation. While many historically White-led Pentecostal churches have become increasingly multiracial in their membership, questions remain regarding the extent to which this demographic transformation has been accompanied by meaningful changes in leadership structures and ecclesial identity. In many instances, leadership within these churches continues to reflect historical racial patterns, with Black congregants constituting the majority of the membership while remaining underrepresented in senior decision-making positions. This disparity raises important ecclesiological questions concerning inclusion, representation, unity, and the theological identity of the church in a post-apartheid context. This article argues that the church at Antioch (Acts 11:19–30; 13:1–3) provides a compelling biblical model for rethinking Pentecostal identity in contemporary South Africa. As one of the earliest multicultural Christian communities, the Antioch church embodied ethnic diversity, shared leadership, missional collaboration, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Through a historical-biblical and ecclesiological analysis of the Antioch narrative, this study explores how its leadership practices and communal life can inform a renewed Pentecostal ecclesiology that transcends racial hierarchies and promotes authentic inclusion.

Keywords: Church at Antioch; Ecclesiology; Pentecostal Identity; Pentecostalism; Inclusive Leadership; Diversity; Post-Apartheid South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts is fundamentally a historical narrative that chronicles the birth, growth, and expansion of the early Christian church. In an increasingly postmodern context, where historical foundations are often questioned or relativized, the church must recognize the enduring significance of history in grounding its faith, doctrine, and identity. Luke, the author of Acts, writes not merely as a theologian but also as a careful historian, intent on providing a reliable and well-substantiated account of the origins and development of the New Testament church (Thomas 2011:7).

At the same time, Acts is more than a historical record; it is a theological narrative that demonstrates the dynamic relationship between the Holy Spirit and the life of the church. As Suggit (1992:38) observes, the work of the Spirit cannot be divorced from the structures of the church, even though the Spirit is neither confined nor limited by those structures. Throughout Acts, Luke portrays the Holy Spirit as the divine agent who shapes the church's mission, forms its leadership, and cultivates communities that embody God's redemptive purposes across cultural and ethnic boundaries. It is within this theological and historical framework that the church at Antioch emerges as one of the most significant ecclesiological models in the New Testament. As a multicultural and mission-oriented community, Antioch exemplifies a Spirit-led church that embraced ethnic diversity, shared leadership, and missional collaboration. Its witness provides a compelling biblical paradigm for rethinking Pentecostal identity in post-apartheid South Africa, where questions of ecclesial unity, diversity, and inclusive leadership continue to challenge the church.

Acts as a Radical Challenge to the Contemporary Church

The blueprint of the church presented in the Book of Acts depicts a supernatural community, empowered by the Holy Spirit and governed by divine principles rather than merely human structures (Hamon 2003:76). As Fernando (1998:40) observes, contemporary Christians who read Acts with openness and humility cannot escape its challenging implications. The life of the early church confronts many of the assumptions and practices that characterize both contemporary society and, at times, the modern church. Among these challenges are the following:

Against individualism: In a culture that prizes personal autonomy and where even the church often protects individual privacy, Acts portrays a radical community of believers who shared their possessions and held all things in common (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35).

Against self-centredness: In societies where self-interest frequently takes precedence over communal responsibility, the early Christians demonstrated extraordinary commitment to Christ and His mission by willingly sacrificing personal interests for the welfare of others.

Against relativism: In a pluralistic culture that regards truth as subjective and personal, Acts presents a church grounded in the objective truth of God's revelation in Jesus Christ—a truth proclaimed as universally valid and intended for all nations.

Against theological indifference: In an age that often rejects absolute truth and favours dialogue over persuasion, the early church boldly proclaimed Christ as Lord and reasoned persuasively with people, calling them to repentance and faith rather than merely fostering mutual religious appreciation.

Against fragmented ministry: In a context where ministry is frequently compartmentalised into specialised functions, Acts depicts leaders who combined compassionate ministry, miraculous works, sound teaching, and reasoned apologetics within a unified witness to the gospel.

Against institutional self-preservation: While many contemporary churches devote significant resources to maintaining internal programmes and structures, the church in Acts willingly released its most gifted leaders for missionary service and the advancement of God's kingdom.

Against dependence on human methods: In contrast to modern tendencies to rely on organisational strategies, techniques, and programmes, the early church depended fundamentally on the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, prioritising prayer, holiness, and obedience.

Against the avoidance of suffering: In an era that often seeks comfort and security, the believers in Acts embraced suffering for the sake of Christ, recognising it not as an obstacle to discipleship but as an integral part of faithful Christian witness.

These characteristics demonstrate that the Book of Acts is not merely a historical account of the early church but also a prophetic and enduring challenge to every generation of believers. Its vision of a Spirit-filled, mission-oriented, and ethnically inclusive community continues to provide a compelling paradigm for ecclesial renewal. For Pentecostal churches in post-apartheid South Africa, Acts invites a re-examination of ecclesial identity, leadership, and communal life in light of the gospel's call to unity, diversity, and faithful witness.

Jonathan David (1997:81) argues that although the Book of Acts should not be treated primarily as a systematic doctrinal manual, its spiritual insights and theological patterns provide valuable models for understanding the mindset, ministry, and practices of the apostles. Through Luke's narrative, readers gain insight into the person and work of the Holy Spirit as manifested in the life, mission, and ministry of the early church. Acts portrays the Holy Spirit as the empowering presence behind the church's witness, leadership, and expansion, illustrating how Spirit-filled ministry shaped the apostolic community. As Suggit (1992:38) observes, the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be separated from the institutional structures of the church, even though the Spirit is neither confined to nor restricted by those structures. Thus, Acts presents a dynamic relationship between the Spirit and the church,

demonstrating that authentic ecclesial life emerges from both the Spirit's empowering presence and the ordered life of the believing community.

Authorship

Although the author of the Book of Acts does not explicitly identify himself, both external evidence from the early church and internal evidence from the text strongly support the conclusion that Luke was its author (Hindson & Mitchell 2010:323). Acts presents itself as the second volume of a two-part work, with the Gospel of Luke serving as the first. Within a century of its composition, the authorship of both volumes was widely attributed to Luke, the companion of the Apostle Paul (Horton 2006:313).

Hindson and Mitchell (2010:323) identify several lines of internal evidence that support Lukan authorship:

Luke as Paul's companion: The New Testament identifies Luke as one of the Apostle Paul's close companions (Col. 4:14; Phlm. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11). This relationship is further supported by the so-called "we" passages in Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–21; 27:1–28:16), where the narrative shifts from the third person to the first-person plural. These sections indicate that the author personally accompanied Paul on portions of his missionary journeys and was therefore an eyewitness to many of the events he records.

Luke as a physician: Although the vocabulary of Acts alone cannot conclusively demonstrate that its author was a physician, the language, literary style, and level of education reflected in Luke–Acts are consistent with someone possessing medical training. Luke's careful attention to detail, particularly in describing illnesses, healings, and physical conditions, accords well with his identification as "the beloved physician" in Colossians 4:14.

Since Luke is identified as "the beloved physician" in Colossians 4:14, many nineteenth-century scholars argued that the medical terminology and clinical descriptions found throughout Luke–Acts provide supporting evidence for the traditional view that the author was a physician (Burge & Hill 2012:1166). While this linguistic evidence is not conclusive on its own, it is consistent with Luke's professional background. Furthermore, the prologue to Acts (Acts 1:1) explicitly refers to an earlier account addressed to the same recipient, Theophilus, thereby establishing a direct literary connection with the Gospel of Luke and reinforcing the view that both volumes were written by the same author (Adeyemo 2006:1297).

Date

The date of the composition of the Book of Acts remains a subject of considerable scholarly debate. According to Burge and Hill (2012:1167), determining the date of authorship continues to be one of the most contested issues in Lukan scholarship. Bruce (2008:1239) argues that Luke likely intended his work to be read during a period when Christianity still had the prospect of receiving official recognition within the Roman Empire. He therefore concludes that Acts was written before AD 64, stating:

"Luke intended his work to be read in times when it seemed possible that Christianity might attain official recognition, i.e. before A.D. 64." Scholars generally propose two principal dates for the composition of Acts. The first places its authorship around AD 63, shortly after the final events recorded in the narrative. The second suggests a later date, around AD 70 or thereafter. Hindson and Mitchell (2010:324) acknowledge both possibilities but argue that the earlier date is more convincing. This earlier dating is supported by the abrupt ending of Acts with Paul's imprisonment in Rome, the absence of any reference to his martyrdom, the omission of the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and the lack of mention of Nero's persecution of Christians beginning in AD 64. Consequently, an authorship date of approximately AD 63 is generally regarded as the more plausible conclusion.

Audience

The primary recipient of the Book of Acts is identified as Theophilus, the same individual to whom the Gospel of Luke is addressed. Williams (2004:6) observes:

"The recipient of the book, Theophilus, is the same person addressed in the first volume, the Gospel of Luke. Theophilus was probably a high Roman official, since Luke in his Gospel addresses him with the title 'most excellent', or as we should say, 'your excellency'."

The honorific "most excellent" used in Luke 1:3 has led many scholars to conclude that Theophilus occupied a position of prominence within the Roman administration. Beyond Theophilus as the immediate recipient, Luke-Acts was also intended for a broader Christian audience, particularly Gentile believers, to provide an orderly and reliable account of the origins and expansion of the Christian movement. The narrative seeks to strengthen the faith of its readers by demonstrating the continuity of God's redemptive plan, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the legitimacy of the Christian message within both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts.

Theme and Theological Message

The Book of Acts presents both a historical account of the early Christian movement and a theological interpretation of its development. As Adeyemo (2006:1297) observes, "Acts was written to provide information about what Luke considered to be the most significant events in the early days of the church. His interpretation of what was significant was influenced by his theology, and thus in reading Acts we need to focus on both historical and theological questions." Consequently, Acts should be understood not merely as a chronological record of events but as a theological narrative that demonstrates God's redemptive activity through the work of the Holy Spirit and the mission of the Church. Many scholars identify Acts 1:8 as the theological and structural centre of the book. Hindson and Mitchell (2010:324–325) argue that the major theme of Acts is encapsulated in Jesus' commission to His disciples: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8, NKJV).

This commission provides the framework for Luke's narrative, tracing the progressive expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, and ultimately to the Gentile world. Accordingly, Hindson and Mitchell (2010:324–325) suggest that Luke organized Acts around this geographical and missiological progression, highlighting the empowerment of the Church by the Holy Spirit and the fulfillment of Christ's mandate to proclaim the gospel to all nations.

Theologically, Acts emphasizes the continuity between the ministry of Jesus and the mission of the Church, demonstrating that the risen Christ continues His work through the Holy Spirit. Major themes include the empowerment of believers, the unity of the Church across ethnic and cultural boundaries, the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's covenant community, and the sovereign guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Church's missionary expansion. These themes are particularly significant for ecclesiological studies, as they present the Church as a Spirit-empowered, missionary community whose identity is rooted in faithful witness to Christ.

1. Historical Purpose

The historical significance of the Book of Acts in understanding the origins and expansion of Christianity cannot be overstated. Acts provides an authoritative account of the establishment of the early Church, the spread of the gospel, the formation of Christian congregations, and the missionary activities of the apostles. One of the distinguishing features of the Christian faith is its grounding in historical events. While the four Gospels record the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Acts serves as the historical continuation of that narrative by documenting the birth and growth of the Church over approximately three decades. Luke traces the geographical expansion of the Christian movement from Jerusalem to Rome, demonstrating the fulfillment of Christ's commission to His disciples (Acts 1:8).

2. Apologetic Purpose

Acts also serves a significant apologetic function by presenting reasoned defenses of the Christian faith before both Jewish and Gentile audiences. Throughout the narrative, Christian leaders, particularly Peter, Stephen, and Paul, proclaim and defend the gospel in response to religious opposition and legal accusations (e.g., Acts 4:8–12; 25:8–11). These speeches not only seek to vindicate the Christian message but also invite their hearers to

repentance and faith in Christ. Furthermore, Luke illustrates how the early Church engaged with Judaism, Greco-Roman philosophy, pagan religion, and Roman political authority, thereby demonstrating the credibility, legitimacy, and universal relevance of the Christian faith within the first-century world.

3. Legal Purpose

Many scholars contend that Acts also possesses a legal or forensic purpose. Since Paul was under house arrest in Rome at the conclusion of the narrative, it has been suggested that Luke composed Acts, at least in part, to provide a historical and legal defense of Paul's ministry before the Roman authorities. If Paul's case proceeded to trial before the emperor, Luke's orderly account of the life and ministry of Jesus, the emergence and expansion of the Church, and Paul's missionary activities would have served as compelling evidence of the lawful and non-subversive nature of the Christian movement. Supporters of this view note that throughout Acts Roman officials repeatedly declare Paul innocent of any offence against Roman law, thereby portraying Christianity as a legitimate movement rather than a political threat.

4. Prescriptive Purpose

Acts serves a prescriptive purpose by providing enduring principles for the life and mission of the Church. Through its account of the early Christian community, Luke demonstrates how believers responded to persecution, leadership challenges, and the expansion of the gospel under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These principles continue to offer practical guidance for the Church's ministry and witness until Christ's return.

5. Theological Purpose

As the second volume of Luke's two-part work, Acts develops the theological themes introduced in the Gospel of Luke, particularly the universal scope of God's salvation. The narrative emphasizes the spread of the gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles, highlighting the missionary ministry of Paul and key events such as the conversion of Cornelius. Through these accounts, Luke demonstrates that the Holy Spirit directs the Church's mission and affirms that the gospel is intended for all people, regardless of ethnic or cultural background.

6. Exhortation and Encouragement

Acts also serves the purpose of exhortation and encouragement. During the second half of the first century, many Christian communities faced increasing persecution and the risk of discouragement. By recounting the successful spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome and the establishment of churches throughout the Roman Empire, Luke demonstrates that the Christian movement was sustained by God's power rather than human effort (Acts 5:35–39). His narrative encouraged believers to persevere in the face of suffering and to remain faithful in proclaiming the gospel within their communities.

New Testament Churches

The Church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; 11:22)

Acts records that "there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1).

The Church at Jerusalem occupies a foundational place in the history of the New Testament Church. Its origin was both supernatural and unique. In Acts 1, the risen Lord Jesus Christ gave His final instructions concerning the Kingdom of God after three and a half years of ministry with the Twelve Apostles. Acts 2 marks the birth of the Jerusalem church through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. On that occasion, about three thousand people were added to the original group of approximately 120 believers, and the Lord continued to add to the church daily. Acts 2:43–47 describes the life and witness of the early Jerusalem church:

"And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things in common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house

to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

This passage portrays the Jerusalem church as a Spirit-empowered community characterized by apostolic teaching, fellowship, worship, mutual care, and continual numerical growth through God's saving work.

Original Meaning

According to Fernando (1998:119), the verbal expression "they were devoting themselves to" encompasses four essential activities that characterized the life of the early church. The first is "the apostles' teaching," referring to the authoritative instruction of the apostles. The second is *koinonia*, translated as "fellowship," which denotes sharing, intimate communion, and participation in the life of the Christian community. The term is also used to describe "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:14) and believers' participation in the bread at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16). The third activity, "the breaking of bread," refers to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Finally, "the prayers" (literally, "the prayers") refers to the believers' commitment to prayer, including both participation in the established times of prayer at the Jerusalem temple (Acts 3:1; 2:46; 22:17) and their own gatherings for prayer (Acts 1:24; 4:24; 12:12).

Bridging Context

This passage provides a vivid picture of the life and ministry of the early Christian community. It highlights the wholeness of the Jerusalem church, reflected in its commitment to nurturing new believers (v. 42), engaging in worship (vv. 42, 47), proclaiming the gospel (vv. 43, 47), meeting one another's material needs (v. 45), maintaining unity among believers (v. 44), and enjoying joyful fellowship in their homes (v. 46). These characteristics portray a Spirit-filled community devoted to both spiritual growth and mutual care. In describing the Jerusalem church, David (1997:89) notes the following:

1. An Ethnic, Single-Culture Church

The Jerusalem church was initially composed primarily of Jewish believers, reflecting a largely single-cultural context. An excessive emphasis on one culture to the exclusion of others can create division, foster ethnic disharmony, and hinder the Church's witness. For the Church to fulfil its mission effectively, it must be able to cross cultural boundaries and embrace a broader, multicultural perspective while remaining faithful to the gospel.

The primary culture that should shape the Church is that of the New Testament and its biblical standards. Scriptural values and principles must take precedence over cultural traditions. As the Jerusalem church developed, its cultural and religious heritage increasingly influenced its life, and issues such as circumcision, the Law of Moses, Sabbath observance, the keeping of special days, and dietary regulations became major points of contention, at times overshadowing the central message of the gospel.

2. A Personality Platform-Centred Church

This type of church is built around the ministry and influence of a particular individual whose leadership style and personal charisma become the primary force holding the congregation together. The dominant personality, ministry gift, or perceived anointing of the leader attracts and sustains the participation of members, who often function primarily as followers with limited influence on the future direction of the church. In the case of the Jerusalem church, Peter initially served as the prominent leader, until James, the brother of Jesus, assumed greater leadership responsibility. As the chief elder, James provided the concluding decision at the Jerusalem Council of apostles and elders (Acts 15:13–21).

3. A Central Form of Government

In a centralized form of church government, new initiatives and differing perspectives may be discouraged or rejected. Such a structure can limit the recognition and development of members' spiritual gifts, ministry potential, and creative contributions when decision-making authority is concentrated in the hands of a few individuals.

4. It Operates on Crisis Management

Acts 6:1–6 records a crisis that emerged within the Jerusalem church: "And in those days, when the numbers of the disciples were multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration..." (Acts 6:1–6).

Jewish society had established systems for caring for needy widows; however, the social isolation experienced by those who became Christians likely limited their access to these support structures. The Grecian widows were particularly vulnerable because they were not native Judeans and often lacked nearby relatives to provide assistance. Acts demonstrates various approaches to decision-making within the church, and this passage provides an example of leadership responding to a crisis while allowing congregational participation. The apostles provided direction, while the congregation contributed to the solution by selecting seven qualified individuals to oversee the ministry. The response also demonstrates sensitivity toward the multicultural nature of the early church and the importance of addressing issues of unity promptly and wisely. Although the early church experienced challenges related to disunity, its response provides an example of effective problem-solving. However, the inability to progressively develop leadership structures and leaders became a significant weakness of the Jerusalem church. This resulted in additional challenges, as the apostles increasingly carried the burdens of the people rather than focusing on the burden of the Lord (David 1997:94). The Jerusalem church experienced numerous difficulties, requiring extensive correction through Paul's letters addressing various areas of dysfunction (Iorg 2011:5).

The Church in Samaria

According to Adeyemo (2006:1313), "Samaria had originally been the capital of the northern kingdom, established by Omri in about 880 BC (1 Kings 16:24), but the whole region was known as 'Samaria'." Samaritan religion consisted of a mixture of Judaism and pagan practices, and consequently, Jews generally regarded Samaritans as social and religious outcasts.

With reference to Acts 1:8; 8:1–25; 9:31; and 15:3, Philip the evangelist, a member of the Jerusalem church, proclaimed Christ in the city of Samaria. His ministry was accompanied by signs and wonders, deliverance from evil spirits, salvation, and water baptism. This event represented the fulfillment of Jesus' promise concerning the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem (John 4:35–38). The city responded positively to the message, and Peter and John, sent from Jerusalem, ministered to the Samaritans and witnessed the work of the Holy Spirit among them. According to Acts 8:14, the Samaritans received and responded obediently to the gospel proclaimed by Philip (Hindson & Mitchell 2010:351).

The Corinthian Church

According to Elsworth (2013:12), the Corinthian church was founded by the apostle Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18) and was located in one of the major cities of the ancient world. The church in Corinth experienced significant challenges, particularly divisions and factions among its members. Paul urged the believers to pursue unity and to be "one in Christ Jesus."

The Corinthian congregation reflected the diverse racial and social composition of the predominantly Roman culture in which it existed. However, as the church developed, these differences contributed to tension and conflict within the community. Paul's letters to the Corinthians reveal his deep concern for the unity, spiritual maturity, and proper functioning of the Church. The apostle demonstrated a particular commitment to the Corinthian church, as reflected in his opening address and appeal for unity (1 Cor. 1:1–17).

Paul, as the founder of the Corinthian church and their spiritual father, wrote to address the divisions and factions that had developed among believers. He appealed to them to pursue unity by focusing on their shared faith in Christ, through whom they had become part of the family of God and the body of Christ. Paul's desire was that they would be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10), linking unity with spiritual maturity (Ellsworth 2013:27).

The factions within the Corinthian church produced envy, conflict, and division, causing Paul great concern. He based his appeal for unity on their shared relationship with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ and their common relationship with Christ Himself. The church was divided into groups associated with different leaders, including Paul, whose ministry had been foundational in establishing the Corinthian congregation.

The second group aligned themselves with Apollos, an eloquent and gifted Jewish Christian teacher from Alexandria, Egypt (Acts 18:24). Some scholars suggest that this group emphasized wisdom and special knowledge, which contributed to pride and conflict within the church. Another group identified with Cephas (Peter), possibly because of his connection with Jewish Christianity and his status as one of the original apostles. A further group claimed exclusive loyalty to Christ, emphasizing a special relationship with Him (1 Cor. 1:12). These divisions reveal how personal preferences regarding leaders, teachings, and practices can disrupt church unity. Paul therefore rebuked the Corinthians for focusing on human leaders rather than the gospel that united them in Christ (1 Cor. 1:10–17). Believers are called to maintain a spirit of humility, unity, and selfless service, with the shared purpose of honouring Christ and advancing His mission (Ellsworth 2013:30–31).

The churches discussed above represent only a small selection of New Testament communities. These congregations were diverse groups of believers who faced significant challenges as they sought to establish communal life in Christ. Much of the New Testament record highlights their struggles, including doctrinal disagreements, tensions in worship, and interpersonal conflicts. As Iorg (2011:7) observes, the early churches experienced numerous discouraging and challenging problems that tested the commitment of both leaders and members.

The Church at Antioch

Acts 11:19–21 states that believers scattered because of the persecution following Stephen's death travelled to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, initially preaching the gospel only to Jews. However, some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began proclaiming the Lord Jesus to the Greeks in Antioch. As a result, "the hand of the Lord was with them," and many believed and turned to the Lord.

The *Africa Bible Commentary* (2006:1321) notes that the early believers initially limited their witness to Jewish communities, even when they had entered Gentile regions. This limitation was challenged by believers from Cyprus and Cyrene who preached Christ to the Greeks in Antioch. The Lord affirmed their mission, and many Gentiles responded in faith, demonstrating that the gospel was intended for all people and not restricted to one ethnic group. Wagner (2008:223) identifies the three regions mentioned in Acts 11:19–21. Phoenicia was a coastal province north of Galilee, including major cities such as Ptolemais, Tyre, and Sidon. Cyprus was a large Mediterranean island with significant cities such as Salamis and Paphos, and it later became a missionary-sending region. Antioch, the capital of Syria, was one of the largest and most strategic cities in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria.

Conner (1982:53) observes that the Antioch church was not founded by apostles but by unnamed believers who later received apostolic ministry and teaching. Unlike Jewish believers who were familiar with Scripture, Gentile converts required instruction in both biblical truth and Christian living. From Antioch, Paul's three missionary journeys resulted in the establishment of Gentile churches. The movement in Acts reflects a transition from Peter's ministry in Jerusalem (Acts 1–12) to Paul's ministry among the Gentiles (Acts 13–28).

Antioch was a multicultural and cosmopolitan city, consisting of Greeks, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, Arabs, Persians, and Italians (Iorg 2011:15). This diverse context shaped the identity of the Antioch church as a community that reflected God's inclusive mission. While the Jerusalem church initially limited its witness primarily to Jews, the believers at Antioch extended the gospel to Gentiles. Bruce (2008:1264) notes that the growth of the Antioch church was not the result of a planned strategy but occurred as believers proclaimed Christ to those they encountered.

David (1999:101) argues that believers who were scattered from Jerusalem due to persecution initiated a new movement of church planting. Both David (1999:101) and Iorg (2011:7) suggest that Antioch, rather than Jerusalem, provides a model for the New Testament church because it demonstrated a healthy, balanced, and

effective expression of church life. David further outlines principles from the Antioch church model that may offer valuable insights for the Pentecostal Church in the post-unification era.

1. A Multiracial and Multicultural Church

The Antioch church embraced both Jews and Gentiles without compromising the message of Christ. It provided a model of inclusion where different nations, cultures, and backgrounds could participate in the life of the Church. By overcoming cultural and racial barriers, Antioch demonstrated the universal nature of the gospel and created space for diverse communities to worship and serve together.

2. A Plurality of Leadership

The Antioch church was characterized by a diverse leadership team with different backgrounds, experiences, and spiritual gifts (Acts 13:1). Leaders such as Barnabas, Saul, and Manaen brought varied forms of training and influence, yet they served together in unity. They shared not only ministry responsibilities but also authority and decision-making.

3. Operational Autonomy

The churches established through the missionary efforts of Antioch developed their own identity and operational capacity while remaining connected to their founding church. Although Antioch served as a sending base, each congregation grew into a distinct and functioning community.

4. It Developed Local Ministries

Acts 11:25–26 records that Barnabas brought Saul to Antioch, where they taught the church for a year, and the disciples were first called Christians. During this period, the church developed its ministry capacity through strong teaching, pastoral leadership, and spiritual growth. The church also responded to prophetic guidance and provided assistance during the famine (Acts 11:28–29).

5. It Had a Leadership Structure That Grew

The Antioch church demonstrated a willingness to release leaders and resources for the fulfilment of God's mission (Acts 11:29–30). Unlike a restrictive leadership model, Antioch developed leaders who were empowered and released for broader ministry beyond the local congregation.

6. It Developed a Vision for World Evangelism

The persecution experienced by believers in Jerusalem contributed to the development of a broader missionary vision in Antioch. Recognizing the limitations that the Jerusalem church faced regarding Gentile ministry, Paul and the Antioch church sought to advance the gospel among the nations (Acts 11:25; Gal. 2:7–10; Acts 14:26–28).

CONCLUSION

Having examined the Scriptures, this paper concludes by reflecting on the post-apartheid context of South Africa. While many churches have achieved functional unity through shared worship and structures, genuine unity requires a deeper transformation of heart, mind, and relationships. Leaders who demonstrate unity can encourage unity among members, reflecting God's order amid ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and gender diversity.

White Pentecostal megachurches need to develop a clear theology of ethnicity, particularly regarding leadership. Mono-ethnic leadership structures can limit the Church's growth and witness, while diverse leadership can strengthen and extend its ministry. As Fernando (1998:185) notes, there are five key biblical requirements for maintaining unity, which are particularly relevant within the post-apartheid context:

Individuals must crucify themselves.

Paul's teaching on unity in Philippians 2:1–11 presents Christ's humility and self-sacrifice as the model for believers. Maintaining unity requires forgiveness, compassion, and a willingness to set aside personal interests for the greater good (Eph. 4:32).

Leaders must prioritize the preservation of unity.

Leaders have a responsibility to protect unity by avoiding favoritism, division, and alignment with factions. They must uphold biblical standards of unity, even when doing so is challenging.

Believers, especially leaders, should cultivate open fellowship and accountability.

Beyond organizational accountability, the Church requires spiritual accountability through meaningful fellowship. Unity in Christ is strengthened through shared prayer, worship, and commitment to God's Word, which leads believers toward maturity and unity in faith (Phil. 2:1; Eph. 4:3, 13).

Striving for agreement in decision-making.

Acts 15 provides an example of resolving theological disagreement through collective discernment. When questions arose regarding circumcision and Gentile believers, Paul and Barnabas engaged with the Jerusalem Council, where different perspectives were considered. Under James' leadership, the council reached a decision that promoted unity and agreement (Acts 15:25–28).

Hamon (2003:67) emphasizes that the Church is not a human institution but a spiritual community that operates through the power of the Holy Spirit. Its authority does not come from status, wealth, or influence, but from Christ's leadership and the Spirit's work. A biblical church order must therefore recognize Christ as the supreme Head of the Church and preserve the unity of all believers (Saucy 1972:119).

The unity of the body of Christ is a unity expressed through diversity. Although there is one body, its members have different functions and gifts (1 Cor. 12). This diversity extends beyond spiritual gifts to include cultural differences, with each individual and culture contributing to the life of the Church. John Fuder (1997:1), reflecting on Jesus' ministry, argues that Jesus' words explained His works, while His works demonstrated the truth of His words. Words without works lack credibility, and works without words lack clarity. This principle remains relevant for the Pentecostals in the post-apartheid era: the Church must make the Word visible (John 1:14) and the image of Christ audible (Col. 1:15). Van Niekerk (1982:35) emphasizes that Jesus' ministry is fundamentally human, relevant, and transformative, as it values human relationships, restores dignity, and renews people within God's Kingdom. Therefore, unity should not be understood as uniformity or as requiring agreement on every social, political, or economic issue. Adeyemo (2006:1297) identifies inclusiveness as a major theme in Acts, demonstrating that the community of believers transcends racial, regional, and social barriers. The Church is therefore called to embrace all people without division based on race, culture, or class.

The paper therefore contends that Pentecostal identity in post-apartheid South Africa requires more than multiracial congregational participation; it demands an ecclesiology in which leadership, mission, and fellowship genuinely reflect the unity and diversity of the body of Christ. By bringing the Antioch paradigm into dialogue with the South African Pentecostal context, this study contributes to contemporary discussions on ecclesial renewal, reconciliation, and inclusive leadership within Pentecostalism.

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