

MISSION ESTABLISHED

ACTS 13:1-12 MAY 6, 2020

If you could bring Billy Graham back for one more mission where would you send him? To a dark city like Dubai or Las Vegas? Maybe to the UN or a G20 summit? Maybe to Burning Man or Comic-Con? There are a lot of places for a lot of reasons. If we give our imaginations room to run, there aren't enough pins for the map.

This is why the Church sends countless missionaries, both short-term and long-term, volunteer and ordained, to every corner of the earth. We can see in the book of Acts and through history that the *targets* of missions work have shifted and changed. Places that were once a hotbed of evangelism and revival give way to new destinations. That ongoing evolution can be seen in recent years by looking at who is sending missionaries and who is receiving them. The United States is still the number 1 exporter of missionaries, but, as of 2010, we also *receive* the most missionaries.¹

In fact, in 2013, the Center for the Study of Global Christianity started reporting on what they call the *“reverse mission...where younger churches in the Global South are [now] sending missionaries to Europe...Nearly half of the top 20 mission-sending countries in 2010 were in the Global South, including Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Mexico.”*²

Where *should* Christians be “going” with the Gospel? It's an important question. But, left to our own devices, there are innumerable answers. After all, what place *doesn't* God want to reach with His Good News? His goal is every place, every heart. And, if we were to prioritize targets, it's likely that a place like Costa Mesa wouldn't make the top ten. Or Transylvania, where there was revival in the 19th century. Or Wales in 1904.

History shows that God the Holy Spirit has a lot of very *specific* and, often very *peculiar* places in mind when it comes to the spread of the Gospel. And not only does He have specific *places* in mind, He has specific *people* in mind who He wants to use in those places.

In Acts 13 we have the beginning of what we call Paul's first missionary journey. After years of preparation and faithful service, he's going to start doing one of the things that we most associate him with: going into the Gentile world to preach the Gospel to anyone who would listen.

He is launched, not by his own impulse, but by the specific call of the Holy Spirit. As he and Barnabas and the church in Antioch respond, we see some wonderful gains on behalf of the Kingdom, but we must also recognize the submission, the struggles and the sacrifices that are part of following the Lord.

Acts 13:1 - Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen, a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

As we embark on this first great adventure with Paul and Barnabas, we are first reminded that they were connected and moored to a local church - the church at Antioch. We hear all the time the

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-missionary-massachusetts/in-200-year-tradition-most-christian-missionaries-are-american-idUSTRE81J0ZD20120221>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/03/young-missionaries/551585/>

sentiment that “the church is not a building.” And, of course that’s true. But there is a sentiment that “the Church” is only the universal aspect of belonging to Christ. Therefore, I don’t need to really connect myself, submit myself, to a local congregation, because I’m a Christian, and therefore I am ‘the Church’ no matter where I am or what I do.

The Apostles didn’t think that way. The writers of the New Testament didn’t think that way. While it’s clear that all Christians were part of a universal family, all one Body and Bride, yet it’s equally clear that local congregations of Christians, *who met together*, were a necessity. It was a given. Luke says here, “In the church at Antioch.” It was identifiable. It was a group of people who were involved with each other, regularly gathering for worship and instruction. It was a group that was *independent* from the church in Jerusalem, yet unified with them by love. When the Christians in Judea were suffering, Antioch came to the rescue. But when it was time to send out missionaries, Antioch didn’t wait for the go-ahead or a flow chart from Jerusalem.

Today, there are many Christians who, for one reason or another, don’t feel they need to be part of a local church. But, that’s like saying, “I’m an independent soldier. I’m *generally* part of the army, but I don’t belong to a platoon or a brigade. I’m my own guy and wherever I go, *I’m* the army.” There’s a term for that: It’s AWOL. And it’s an unacceptable form of service.

Now, *in* this local fellowship at Antioch, things were going great. The church was thriving. We’ve seen that they had effective evangelists, which led to great numbers of people being saved and joining in. They had incredible, apostolic teaching. They were *full* of grace and *full* of generosity. And here, in verse 1 we see that they were wonderfully diverse. There in the leadership you had older men and younger men. Men from all sorts of backgrounds and different nations. They were very well set up and doing incredible work in this important city. And they were a group of Christians who were intimately connected with one another. They were a real nickname crowd. That’s a trait carried over from Jesus’ style.

It says that some of these leaders were “prophets.” What does that mean? Well, from what we can tell, in these early years before the New Testament was completed, there was a church office of prophet, like there was the office of apostle. While the *office* no longer exists, we recognize that the *gift* of prophecy continues today. So what does it mean to be a prophet in this sense? Well, they *did*, at times, tell the future. We’ve already seen that happening in Acts and we’ll see it again. These prophets also had a gift for speaking *forth* the word of God. And, we would add that they had a special gift for understanding the Old Testament, in light of Christ, the cross and the resurrection.

Acts 13:2 - ²As they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Where it says “they were worshiping the Lord,” your translation may say, “ministering to the Lord,” and that is a better sense of what was happening. The term Luke used is the one used for the Temple service in the Old Testament.³ When these believers went to church, they saw it as an opportunity for them to minister *to* the Lord.

Of course, in the church we receive help and encouragement and instruction and all sorts of benefits. But a verse like this reminds us that our gathering is not primarily for *our* benefit, but that the Lord might be glorified and worshiped and blessed by us. *He* is the object of attention. We *will* be benefitted as the Lord speaks to us and sings over us, but we’re here for Him.

³ Meyers New Testament Commentary

In this case, it seems the church at Antioch was specifically looking for the Lord's leading. They were fasting and listening for direction. Sometimes Christians argue about fasting, whether we need to do it or not. All we can say is: The Christians in the New Testament fasted. We should, individually and as a local church, explore it as a practice.

As they fasted and listened, the Spirit gave this *very specific* call. Now, how did this work? Was there an audible voice? Maybe. But it seems more likely that God spoke this message through one of the prophets listed in verse 1.

However they were led, *what* they were supposed to do was clear: Set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work for which they were called. Does that mean they *weren't* doing what God wanted them to be doing? Not at all. In fact, these guys had been really busy ministering to people and exercising their gifts. As they lived out their regular, Christian lives, that included a lot of service to the Lord. But now, God was setting before them a specific task, a specific mission, to go and accomplish.

Let's take note of the fact that Paul and Barnabas weren't just sitting around, waiting for the time when they'd be missionaries overseas. This is a sickness that sometimes plagues well-meaning Christians. They are convinced that God has placed a certain call on their lives or given them certain gifts. But, while they wait for their spiritual at bat, they refuse to do other ministry. They don't serve. They don't exercise other gifts or participate in what they think are the more menial, every day parts of Christianity. Paul didn't act that way. He knew from the day he was converted that he'd be preaching to *many*, far into the empire. But, while he waited for his launch date, what have we seen him doing? Serving. Growing. Being a part of the church. Bringing relief to those who need it.

Now, on the other side, imagine what this would've meant for the church in Antioch. They were being asked to give up two of their most beloved and gifted leaders for *years*. This would be a significant sacrifice for them. But, God was asking them to willfully give up these guys for a time. When it says "set apart" there, the idea is "*release* them. Let them go free." As always, the Lord wanted there to be a gracious unity in the church, not unilaterality.

Acts 13:3 - ³Then after they had fasted, prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them off.

They fasted and prayed again. They were people who were full of faith, but not hasty. We've seen the laying on of hands quite a few times in the book already. We've seen it in healing, of course, but also it's done to confer the Holy Spirit, to confer spiritual gifts, and to set people out to ministry. There's nothing magical about it. We don't want to make the same mistake that Simon Magus made back in chapter 8. It is simply a way that Christians can show affection for one another and show that we identify with each other and that we acknowledge what the Lord is doing in a person's life.

The believers in Antioch are an inspiring example of generosity. They did not withhold the Gospel from their neighbors. They did not withhold their resources from those in need. And they didn't withhold their Barnabas and Paul from the world at large. Can you imagine Paul, the apostle, being one of your pastors for years and then having someone say, "You wanna let this guy go?" I want Paul to minister to me! But they submitted, sacrificed and sent them off.

Acts 13:4 - ⁴So being sent out by the Holy Spirit...

Let's notice this, it's very important. They were not sent by the design of the church or some strategic initiative or some demographic research. They were sent by the Holy Spirit. The whole world was in need of the Gospel, how could they know where to go? Some commentators suggest that they decided (on their own) to go to Cyprus since that's where Barnabas was from. But that makes no sense. The Holy Spirit had a specific itinerary in mind. *He's* the one that sent them.

Acts 13:4b-6a - they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵Arriving in Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. They also had John as their assistant. ⁶When they had traveled the whole island as far as Paphos...

The island of Cyprus is about 130 miles long. As far as square mileage, it's about twice the size of Kings County. It was a deeply pagan place, like most of the world at the time. It also had a large Jewish population, indicated by the presence of multiple synagogues.

Why did Barnabas and Paul make it a habit of going first to the synagogues? Paul was, after all, called to the *Gentiles*, right? He was, but not at the *expense* of Jews. Jesus had told him he'd speak to Gentiles, kings *and* Israelites. Paul preached to everyone. And these two men were, of course, Jews themselves. They had an undying love for their countrymen. Going to the synagogues was a natural and reliable way to *start* a preaching ministry in a given city. Because, as tradition would have it, visitors like Paul would be invited to *share a message* to the assembled group. They were able to quickly make connections and proclaim Jesus Christ. And, word would travel fast. We know that's true from what we've already seen in the book, but in a moment we'll see that, by the time they get to the capital on the other side of the island, the governor already knows all about their trip.

Luke gives us a piece of information that will become very important later on: John Mark came along as their assistant. This was no cushy job. He wasn't dead weight. In fact, the term used means, "under-oarsman." Think *Ben Hur*, but without the beatings! But John would've been helping with menial work. Or making travel arrangements. Perhaps he was involved in the ministry side, too, but there was a lot of hard work to be done.

Church work, missions work, requires a lot of effort. We're so thankful that Calvary Hanford has always been a church full of hard workers, who are willing to do what needs doing.

It says there at the beginning of verse 6: They traveled *the whole island!* We're not sure how long it took, but what a great testimony to be able to say that they were able to cover the whole area. It reminds me of those maps that Verizon and T-Mobile use to show everywhere their network can reach. I pray that the Lord would, by *His* sovereign will, increase our coverage of ministry.

There, in Paphos, we pick back up:

Acts 13:6b - they came across a sorcerer, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus.

This guy had a lot going on. The name he went by was "Son of the Savior." He was involved in occult practices. He had Jewish heritage. And he had made his way into the capital building, where he wielded influence over the governor.

God had defeated one of Satan's servants in the last passage, but the battle continues. There will always be additional opposition to the Lord's work as long as we're on this earth.

Acts 13:7 - ⁷He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God.

The governor of the island was thirsty for spiritual things. And we're told he was a thoughtful, intelligent man. Unfortunately, being *smart* doesn't guarantee that a person won't be taken advantage of by the devil. As an aside, one of the great privileges we have as Americans is to *vote* for our leaders. When those opportunities come around, let's remember that intelligence or worldly success isn't enough. An *intelligent* man is susceptible to the Bar-Jesuses that the Devil sends their way. We want leaders who are people of wisdom and integrity. People like Daniel and Nehemiah.

Acts 13:8 - ⁸But Elymas the sorcerer (that is the meaning of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.

Matthew Henry wrote: "Satan is in a special manner busy with great men and men in power, to keep them from being religious, for their example will influence many."⁴ A capital building is a perfect place for our enemy to attack. Look at our situation today. With all the freedoms we're meant to have in this nation, suddenly a very few have almost limitless power. Imagine, during the time we find ourselves in, how different things would be if our leaders were Spirit-filled, Bible believing Christians!

Now, whenever I picture this interaction between Paul and Bar-Jesus, I always think of it as a quick thing. Like that scene in *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* when Gandalf drives out Wormtongue, who was poisoning the mind of King Théoden. It's a pretty quick showdown.

But that might not be how it happened here. In Paphos today you can visit with they call St. Paul's Column. It's a tradition and is extra-biblical, so we can't be sure, but the story goes that Bar-Jesus used his influence to cause Paul to be tortured - scourged - while tied to this column. Paul, who won great territory for Christ's Kingdom, who pioneered work into places no one else had ever gone, the great victor of the faith, nevertheless also suffered great injuries and made great sacrifices in his service to Jesus Christ.

Acts 13:9-10 - ⁹But Saul—also called Paul—filled with the Holy Spirit, stared straight at Elymas ¹⁰and said, "You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery, you son of the devil and enemy of all that is right. Won't you ever stop perverting the straight paths of the Lord?"

One of the terrific themes in Acts is that, if we're in the will of God, you and I do not need to be intimidated by anyone. Not Herod. Not Elymas. Not angry silversmiths. Not Sadducees or soldiers. Paul could be *sure* of the power of God because he was walking in obedience to the will of God.

Paul spoke incredibly sternly, but lives were hanging in the balance. This guy was engaging in a campaign of opposition, in the hopes that Sergius Paulus *would not* get saved! Paul rightfully calls him out. He says, "You act like you're the son of the savior, but you're a son of the Devil!"

Acts 13:11 - ¹¹Now, look, the Lord's hand is against you. You are going to be blind, and will not see the sun for a time." Immediately a mist and darkness fell on him, and he went around seeking someone to lead him by the hand.

⁴ Matthew Henry *Concise Commentary*

In wrath, God remembers mercy. Bar-Jesus wasn't struck dead, though he deserved it. He wasn't even made permanently blind. Rather, this physical judgment would be temporary, as it had been for Paul, himself. We hope that Bar-Jesus would see the darkness he was living in and turn to faith in Christ, as Saul of Tarsus had done. We don't know if he did, but we *do* know that God has *this* kind of mercy, even for people like this.

Acts 13:12 - ¹²Then, when he saw what happened, the proconsul believed, because he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

The message had power. The Gospel always has power, in every place. There's nowhere the Gospel *doesn't* work. But, one of the reasons that their message was so powerful was because they were in the will of God and in the place He had asked them to go. Eventually we're going to get to Acts 19 where there are some guys, well meaning, wanting to do God's work, and they take it on themselves to go cast out some demons. But it goes very badly for them. They hadn't been set apart for that work. They were operating under their own initiative.

So, how do we apply this? Do we wait to do spiritual things until we get a nearly audible message from the Holy Spirit? No. That's not what Paul did. He busied himself with spiritual service. He even made plans to go certain places like Asia and Rome and Spain. *But* he and the other Christians in this book were very sensitive to the *leading* of the Holy Spirit. They wanted to be specifically directed and took it seriously. When they got an idea, they prayed about it and looked into it, but, if the Lord said "No," which He often did, they didn't force the issue. In the mean time they lived out their faith as fully as they could in the place where they found themselves, until the Lord presented them with some new task, some new opportunity, be it long or short term.

We began with the question of where we would send Billy Graham for one last mission. The truth is, we're living out that question, but with *ourselves* as the Billy Graham in the equation! You and I are under the same commission, given the same Spirit, part of the same universal Body. And before us is a huge world that none of us could hope to cover on our own. So, am I supposed to go to Costa Mesa like Chuck Smith or Africa like David Livingstone? Am I supposed to stay in Antioch like Lucius or leave for a time like Paul? Does God want me to be a Barnabas or a John Mark? These are questions we can't answer but the Spirit can. He has peculiar missions set apart for us and He invites us to discover them as we operate within a local church, living the regular Christian life, ministering to the Lord.

Dana Robert, author of the book *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became A World Religion*, assessed today's mentality when it comes to missions. She says, "The current situation is almost a total free-for-all."⁵

Acts reminds us that God has a specific plan for His Church universal, for our church local and for each of our lives individual. We are free to line up with Him or go our own way. We know the better choice to make.

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-missionary-massachusetts/in-200-year-tradition-most-christian-missionaries-are-american-idUSTRE81J0ZD20120221>