

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

Up to the Challenge

Acts 13:1-4a

Intro: We have come to the 3rd major section of the Book of Acts. In this section, Luke describes for us, in as much detail as is necessary, the continued expansion of the Gospel into the world of the pagan Gentiles. For the remainder of the Book, Luke will focus almost exclusively on the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Paul will make several different missionary trips and will travel with different believers who will experience all the highs and lows of the ministry with him. We will notice at various times how Paul's method of delivering the Gospel will differ depending on the crowd he is preaching to, whether it be a Jewish or a Gentile crowd. It is a fascinating story of an effective missionary effort. It was a ministry that turned the world upside down; a ministry for which Paul willingly gave up his life for.

But, how did this all start? Where did it all start? It all starts right here in **ch13**, the beginning of the 3rd section. As we have seen, Jesus provides us with a loose but very accurate outline for the Book of Acts when He delivered to His disciples the pattern for fulfilling the Great Commission in **1:8**. He told them to stay in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit and then they would be His witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The first 7 chapters focus on the gospel being declared in Jerusalem, where foundations were laid for a theologically healthy church. **Ch8-12** record this same work and its results in Judea and Samaria. Finally, in **ch13**, is the expansion of the gospel into the entire Roman world, the beginning of "the missionary era."

This is considered a new area because something is going to happen in the first few verses of ch13 that had never happened in the history of the church up until then. For the first time ever, a local body of believers (Antioch church) will agree to appoint, send out and support a team of evangelist to carry the message of the Gospel to places that had never heard it before. The word missionary has to do with sending. The mission of the church is to send people by the church at the leading of the Holy Spirit into areas where Jesus Christ is not known and God is not worshiped.

This is not to say that mission work had never happened before. We've

already seen that there were others who went out from Jerusalem, and other places, who carried the message of Jesus Christ wherever they went. But, these were more like accidental missionaries – they were fleeing persecution or looking for greener pastures and they preached the Gospel as they went. **Ch13** describes something different: a concerted, organized – deliberate action was taken up by this congregation specifically to win lost people to Jesus.

What heart did this concern and effort spring from? What environment existed in the church at Antioch that produced this desire to extend their faith and themselves in such a drastic way just to see souls saved? What was the source of power behind this dangerous and costly endeavour? Our study today will look at and attempt to answer each of these important questions and then we will be better prepared to look at the ministry efforts of those that were sent.

1-4a – God has a plan to bring the message of salvation and forgiveness of sins to the world. In that plan, there are some things that can only be done by God and we must look to Him in prayer and trust Him to do those things. On the other hand, there are some things within God’s plan that only believers can do and as believers, we must discover those things, accept responsibility for them and seek God’s empowering Spirit to enable us to obediently accomplish those things. Yes, we are to do them but we are to do them by God’s direction and through His power.

Knowing this helps us to see that what God does here on earth, He often does through tools. We have already seen that prayer is a tool that God uses to see His will accomplished in the lives of His people. Witnessing is another tool. In the case of missionary work, the tool that God has chosen to use is His church; specifically – His local church. There is a sense in which all believers – all who have been born again into the family of God – are part of the “Body of Christ,” the collective body believers from the time of Jesus until the rapture. This is the church in the spiritual sense. But, in the physical world, the work of Christ has only been commissioned to and properly carried out by individual bodies of believers – the local church. There are missionary organizations and boards that exist today but these are only sending agency that help to expedite the work that the local church has been authorized to do.

It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit, working through the local church that equips and enlists believers to go out and serve the Lord in whatever capacity He has called them to. This is the tool that God has chosen to accomplish His will on earth but, clearly, this doesn't happen in every church and it certainly doesn't just happen by accident. In the church at Antioch, we have a wonderful example of an effective missionary tool readily available for God's use. The Antioch church was established, it was well taught, fully integrated, spiritually active and seeking God's direction.

established – we saw how this church was started in [ch11](#). Believers from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and preached Jesus to the Hellenists there. Later the Apostles in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch to investigate the situation there, wondering if anything spiritually good could happen in purely a Gentile area. Barnabas discovered that the church was doing quite well and stuck around to see that the trend of spiritual growth would continue. He even left for a while to find Saul in Tarsus and brought him back to teach the church biblical doctrines.

A church that is floundering, ignorant of biblical doctrine and spiritual truth is inadequate even for its own needs, and it is certainly not alert to the needs of others. A church that doesn't know where it has come from, why it exists, or where it is going is not going to be of much use in any missionary endeavors. The Antioch church was a church that had become very sound in Bible doctrine and spiritual truth in a very short time. It was a solid, well-rounded church.

well-taught – vs1 says that there were both prophets and teachers in this church. The prophets helped the church by laying a foundation of truth as they proclaimed the Word of God. The main purpose of any prophet is to “tell-forth” God's Word, not necessarily “fore-tell” the future, although occasionally they did announce future events ([11:28](#)). The teachers helped to ground the converts in the important doctrines of the faith. It's not enough to just believe – you must also know what you believe and why you believe it. So much that passes for theology in today's modern church is little more than bad doctrine or plain old superstition. Thankfully, there was no place for this in the Antioch church.

There another important aspect to this point. Notice that in each case – prophets / teachers – both words are plural. This means there was more

than one prophet, more than one teacher. In fact, vs1 gives us a list of 5 names but we don't even know if this list is exhaustive. There may have been plenty of others. Where did this great body of teachers come from? Was there a great Christian seminary hidden away in the mountains of Judea cranking out qualified and credentialed preachers and teachers? No. That would've been nice but that wasn't the case.

From the very beginning, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on Pentecost and 3000 souls were saved, there had been a concerted effort by the apostles to transfer the Word of God and the teachings of Jesus to the new converts. This investment produced Barnabas, who in turn was sent to Antioch and subsequently recruited Saul to come and teach. Who knows, maybe Barnabas recruited other prophets and teachers from Jerusalem. What we do know is that, upon arriving in Antioch, Barnabas sensed the spiritual need of local body of believers and established solid teaching as a priority in the mind set and normative life of this church, as it should be for all Christian churches.

integrated – The Christians in Antioch probably wouldn't have considered themselves integrated, but they were, and in a far greater sense than what we normally use the word for today. When we talk about integration we usually think in terms of race. There were believers of every shade at Antioch, but the integration was more than that. There was an integration of those from high levels of society with those from lower levels of society, the disadvantaged or slaves. There was a mingling of different ethnicities: Greeks, Romans and Jews. The church likely contained all the various grouping of people that made up the Roman Empire.

In the empire itself, these groups generally had little to do with one another. This was by design. Greeks didn't like Romans very much and for the Romans, the feeling was mutual. Of course, the Jews did not like anybody. The rich despised the poor, and the poor hated the rich. The educated people looked down on the uneducated, and so on. This was the way of the world, it wasn't just accepted – it was expected! But not in the church at Antioch! The 5 names of the teachers tell us an enormous amount of information about the social makeup of this church.

First there was Barnabas. We know him. He was a Levite; a Jewish priest. Jerusalem wasn't his hometown. He actually came from Cyprus, so he was

a Jew of the diaspora, Jews scattered in Gentile lands. This means he was a Jew who had extensive experience dealing with Greek culture. Next was Simeon, who was called Niger. “Niger” means “black.” So it’s believed he was a man of black skin. He was also a distinguished leader in this church. There was Lucius of Cyrene, likely one of the men from Cyrene who originally brought the Gospel to Antioch (11:20). He would have been one of the original founders of the church; meaning, he was a missionary. Lucius is a Latin name so he was also probably brought up in a Roman culture.

Next is Manaen. This is the Greek form of a Hebrew name, so he was probably a Hellenistic Jew. The significant thing mentioned about him is that he had been raised with Herod the Tetrarch. This would be Herod Antipas, the 3rd of the 5 Herods we discussed last week. Being brought up with Herod is an indication that Manaen was some kind of a prince—a man of high station who knew the ruling dynasty intimately. Meaning: he would be an “important person” anywhere he went but here he was associating with the other “normal” Christians in the church.

Note that Herod and Manaen went different ways. They were brought up together. But the first killed John the Baptist and was involved (briefly) in the trial of Jesus. He never gave the slightest indication of any spiritual awareness or made any response to the Gospel. Manaen, though being brought up in the same environment with Herod, became a Christian. More than that, he became a leader in the church and is numbered among its teachers. The last teacher mentioned is Saul, a former Pharisee and enemy of the church, a Jew from Tarsus who was educated in Jerusalem

This integration of leadership must have reflected the diversity of its membership. This diverse group of believers demonstrated the full unity inherent within and enjoined by the body of Christ. Because this church was established, well-taught, and integrated, it was well-equipped to go into the pagan world with the Gospel confident that it would work just as well for them as it did in their home church. Antioch was living proof that the Gospel was for everybody!

Antioch was also an active church. The Holy Spirit didn’t need to come into that church and fan the flames of revival under frozen bottoms sitting on cold pews. No, this church was already on fire for the Lord. In fact, it was while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting that the call to service

from the Holy Spirit came. This appears to have been the normal activity of this church. The first job of any servant of God is to minister to the Lord. In the OT, priests did this in the tabernacle or the temple. Under the new covenant, we are called to do the service of a priest by offering our own bodies as living sacrifices ([Rom 12:1](#)). Ministering to the Lord involves doing what pleases and honors Him – worship, praise, prayer, obedience, faithful service. This is what the Antioch believers were busy doing.

They were also a seeking church. we know this because they were fasting. Biblical fasting means to do without food for a time so that, being in a spiritual frame of mind and giving yourself over to spiritual things, you can properly seek God’s direction for a new phase of life. We know that’s what they were doing but why were they doing it? What were they seeking God for? Maybe they were seeking what role they should play in world missions. They knew the Great Commission. The early preachers would have shared it with them. Paul had been told he would be a missionary to the Gentiles. Years had gone by. Maybe Paul had been talking about it, wondering if it was time to get on with it. The church might have shared his thinking: “Maybe it’s time for us to do something about it too; to be useful.”

Whatever the reasoning, it’s clear that they didn’t want to make this decision on their own, to presumptuously take it upon themselves to fulfill this missionary function. So, they waited on the Lord and sought His direction. It was while they were doing this in a prayer meeting that the Holy Spirit spoke and said, “Separate to Me Barnabas and Saul.” If we assume that they fasted and prayed about the need of the world for Jesus, we can see how God answered their prayer – by using them! That’s often how God works; by sending those who have it on their hearts to pray for a need.

3 observations before we close: 1) Notice what the Holy Spirit called them to do: “separate to Me...” Before Barnabas and Saul could do anything significant for God in this new missionary venture, they first had to be separated to Him. That’s not to say that they weren’t already dedicated and faithful servants of God but it’s quite possible for dedicated, faithful servants to become comfortable in their service and miss out on whatever new things God wants to do through them. If you desire to be separated to God for the purpose of seeing His will accomplished in your life and through your life, you must first be willing to separate yourself from some other things – even some good things. You can’t really say “yes” to God’s call on your life until

you can say “no” to those things that will keep you from that call.

2) for the work – God had a specific work He had appointed for Barnabas and Saul to do. Now, God’s call on Paul’s life had already been stated (9:15-16). This was not some touchy-fuzzy, fell good call; this was a serious call to a serious ministry. This was a work that would involve a lot of toil and sweat; sacrifice and a fair share of physical pain and humiliation and that doesn’t even cover the problems he would have within the churches he would establish. Even knowing all this, Paul still felt the need to constantly press into god’s presence and seek His direction for every next move he was to make. The truth is, that’s a revelation every believer should be engaged in discovering, daily.

What work have we been called to? Eph 2:10 explains it quite clearly – good works. I realize that’s a very generic term but the truth is that God has preordained very specific “good works” that each believer was created and saved to accomplish. You might not feel very significant in the kingdom of God by this verse says you are wrong. You are His workmanship – His poiema: a beautiful poem, a work of art. God doesn’t just save us from the wrath we rightly deserve; He saves us to make something beautiful of us, something useful.

God’s love is a transforming love. It’s strong enough to meet us right where we are at, no matter how wretched our condition may be. But, when we receive this love, it never fails to bring us to where we should be in the eyes of God. The love of God that saves my soul will also change my life. The beautiful thing that God is making of us will be active in doing good works, not in order to gain salvation, but as evidence of salvation. These good works serve as valid evidence that the one who does them is walking as one of God’s children.

3) sent...by the...Spirit. Were they sent by the church or by the Holy Spirit? Both! True, it was the church who fasted and prayed, it was the church who laid hands on them (a formal commissioning) but the Holy Spirit was the driving force behind it all. Again, the Holy Spirit is not a power for us to use. He is a Person, the 3rd Person of the Trinity. So instead than thinking of Him as being a power we’re somehow to seize and use, think of Him as a person whose job it is to use us. Acts gives us this contrast. In Acts 8 we have Simon wanting to get and use the Holy Spirit, but in Acts 13 we have the

Holy Spirit getting hold of and using Barnabas and Paul.

But, the Holy Spirit didn't call the missionaries and send them out, He also went with them. If the Holy Spirit didn't go with us, we wouldn't dare do any Christian work. We'd be too scared to even attempt it. Where the gospel hasn't been heard life is dark and opposition to it is strong. How could we dare tackle such work unless the Spirit is with us and working in us to bless the message? But, if we know God is with us, we can boldly go anywhere He leads. 😊