

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Branching Out

May 28th, 2023

Acts 13:1-12

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 13:1; that’s on page 921 in your pew Bibles. Today we are going to be reading the narrative of Paul’s first missionary journey – a journey that some commentators have referred to as the most significant undertaking in the history of the church – indeed in the history of the entire world.¹ We’re just looking at the first episode in that story today, in which Paul and Barnabas begin to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the island of Cyprus. We’ll read from verse 1 through to verse 12. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While 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.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. ⁵ When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. ⁶ When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. ⁷ He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 189-190.

sought to hear the word of God. ⁸ But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. ⁹ But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him ¹⁰ and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? ¹¹ And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. ¹² Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. (Acts 13:1–12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well, as I mentioned, this is just the first episode in the first missionary journey of the Apostle Paul. Acts records THREE missionary journeys, so obviously we don't want to treat this one story as if it tells us everything we need to know about mission and Gospel outreach, but it does begin to set out something of a general pattern – and we are interested in that. We are interested in a general way as Christians and Bible readers, but we are also interested in a more narrow way today as we embark on a significant Gospel undertaking of our own. Today we are launching our satellite outreach in the community of Coldwater and so we can't help but read this story through that lens – and in the Providence of God, it would seem we are meant to. We are here in this series TODAY – and I'm sure that's not by accident.

So, let's reflect upon what we've read in terms of how the church in Antioch began to reach out beyond their local community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I think the first thing Luke means for us to see in terms of this initiative is that it was launched out from a healthy base.

Reflections Upon Paul's First Missionary Journey

1. It was launched out from a healthy base

Look again at verse 1:

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

That's a pretty impressive teaching roster, isn't it? We are most familiar with the first and last names mentioned – Barnabas of course has been one of the main characters in the Book of Acts so far, Saul – or Paul as he will soon be called, had been the first official persecutor of the church until he was dramatically converted back in Acts 9 - but in between these two giants we have some other pretty impressive characters as well. Simeon who was called Niger – is thought by many to be the Simon of Cyrene who carried the cross of Jesus Christ back in Luke 23:26. Can you imagine hearing a sermon from the man who had literally stood shoulder to shoulder with Jesus under the weight of the cross? Who had looked into his eyes, breathed his breath and tasted his sweat on that fateful day? He was an incredibly important witness in the first generation of the church – and his sons became notable leaders as well. When Mark tells the story in his Gospel he mentions his sons by name; he says:

“And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.” (Mark 15:21 ESV)

Rufus is then mentioned by name at the end of Paul's letter to the Romans – along with his mother, presumably the wife of Simon of Cyrene so the whole family appears to have played a critical role in the founding generation.

Now as for Lucius of Cyrene – we don't know much about him, he may have been the brother of Simon, but we can't say for sure.

Manaen, who is mentioned next, is described by Luke as a life-long friend of Herod – the Greek word used there can also mean “foster brother”; some say he was the half-brother of Herod, but again we can't be sure. Whatever the relationship was, it was close. Manaen was a cultural and political insider. He was lifelong friends with the man who executed John the Baptist and conspired with Pilate to crucify Jesus – so like Simon of Cyrene he was an important witness to the founding events.

As, as I said, this was a pretty stacked line up. The church in Antioch was pumped, primed and ready to overflow and by and large, I think that's how it's supposed to go. Now, obviously we are unlikely to ever have a depth of leadership like the one depicted here, but the principle would seem to be that health is to be pursued, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the mission. The goal isn't to have the healthiest, strongest, deepest church ever – the goal is to achieve a level of health that would allow you to SACRIFICE significant resources in pursuit of the Great Commission.

Which is exactly what we are attempting to do here.

This is why we have no plans to build a 1000 seat auditorium here at this site. A church of that size does generate certain economies of scale, let me tell you. There are all kinds of things you can do with a volunteer and donor base of 1000 people. Churches of that size have way better coffee, way more programs a much bigger staff and, as a result can provide a far better experience for members and adherents alike – but that's not the point, is it?

The point is to be healthy enough to GIVE AWAY WELL FED, WELL TRAINED MEMBERS AND LEADERS so that the mission can continue to grow. By God's grace, we've been trying to do here at Cornerstone. If you've been here for a while you know that back in 2011 we had a conversation about managing growth. We were bumping up against all the growth barriers in this place – parking, CM space, sanctuary space. We could have expanded the physical plant, but instead we made the decision to send 75 of our very best people down to the southward to start a new work, which by the grace of God quickly grew to a 150 people and is now knocking on the door of 200 people.

That's the miracle of overflow church – what you give away GROWS faster OUT THERE than it could ever do in here!

That's what we're trying to do again in Coldwater!!

That's what it means to be an overflow church!! We want to get healthy, we want to train people up – NOT so as to maximize our experience in here, but rather so as to position ourselves to participate in this process out there.

That's the pattern we're seeing in this story. We have a healthy church giving away health for the sake of the wider mission of Christ.

The second thing we see is that this story is that this entire endeavour was initiated by the Holy Spirit in a time of worship.

2. It was initiated by the Holy Spirit in a time of worship

Look at verse 2:

While 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.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

Now, of course, we want to know HOW exactly the Holy Spirit “said” ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul’ – did he say that through one of the prophets, did he cause all the elders to have a strong impression, or did he speak in an audible way – we have no idea – what we know is that the idea for this plan did not arise organically from within the congregation – and why would it? As I said, these people were living the Vida Loca – they had FIVE fantastic preachers and teachers in their church. They were RESOURCE RICH – they were SUPER WELL FED, so we are not surprised that it never occurred to them to break up the dream team and send two of their best preachers out to plant other churches. This idea had to be implanted in them by the Holy Spirit of God and it came while they were worshipping and fasting.

Fasting, by the way, is treated in the New Testament as a prayer and worship intensifier. The word is used three times in Acts² and each time it is paired with something else, so we get worshipping and fasting here in verse 2 then we get:

“fasting and praying” (Acts 13:3 ESV)

And:

“prayer and fasting” (Acts 14:23 ESV)

Fasting is a thing you do to enter more intensely into something else, so it was during a time of intense worship that the church felt led by the Holy Spirit to break up the dream team and to send out Barnabas and Saul.

There is so much we could say about that.

Sometimes in churches WORSHIP and MISSION are pitted against each other. The people who are into MISSION look down on the people who are into worship – as if that is somehow selfish, but here’s the thing, in this story it is WORSHIP that gives birth to mission! Why? Because if you aren’t FIRED UP about God then how are you ever going to make the sacrifices that are necessary for mission? You have to SEE GOD in order to STARVE yourself in pursuit of the glory of God among the nations. The one thing leads to the other. John Piper said famously:

“Mission exists because worship doesn’t.”³

Meaning that we do MISSION to EXTEND WORSHIP and that is certainly true – but here we see that MISSION exists because WORSHIP DID. This mission was birthed by the Holy Spirit in

² Four if you count the reference in Acts 27:9 to the Jewish fast associated with the Day of Atonement.

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/missions-exists-because-worship-doesnt-a-bethlehem-legacy-inherited-and-bequeathed>

a time of INTENSE CORPORATE WORSHIP and as a church about to feel the PAIN and COST of mission again, we will need to remember that.

The third thing I want you to see here is that this particular mission began in the territory of a near neighbour.

3. It began in the territory of a near neighbour

The island of Cyprus was just under 100 km off the shore of Seleucia, the main port in Syria; apparently, you could SEE it from the mainland on a clear day. So they were not trying to take the Gospel to the other side of the world – where they might not speak the language and where they would be unfamiliar with the local customs and culture – they were taking the Gospel NEXT DOOR.

It was a place they knew, it was a place where they had connections; remember, Barnabas was actually a native of Cyprus – we were told that in Acts 4:36; and it was a place that had already had some Gospel preaching. We were told that in Acts 11:19:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. (Acts 11:19 ESV)

So this was NOT completely FOREIGN territory. It was one barrier over – and there is wisdom in taking that approach. Cultural boundaries are hard to cross and with each additional boundary you have to cross your access and effectiveness is further delayed. This is why, for example, we are investing in the work of Paul Masih in India. He is training up Gospel workers in northern India who will be able to press out from there into some of the most unreached nations on planet earth. Nations that are culturally NEAR to them but that are WORLDS AWAY from you and I. The Gospel workers he is training up will be taking the message of Jesus Christ to near neighbours – just as we are attempting to do here as we press out into Coldwater.

Now there are exceptions to this general rule – but there is wisdom in recognizing and affirming this as a general rule. The fourth thing I want you to see here is that this missionary endeavour initially targeted people associated with the Jewish synagogue.

4. It initially targeted people associated with the Jewish synagogue

Look again at verse 5:

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. (Acts 13:5 ESV)

We're going to see this pattern repeated again and again and again over the course of the Book of Acts. When Paul arrived in a city he would always begin by preaching to the Jews and the Gentile *phoboumenoi* or "God-fearers" in the synagogue. Usually, after a while, he would get kicked out and he would take his new converts with him to form the basis of a new work – sometimes right next door to the synagogue, as was the case in Corinth. Now, there were all kinds of reasons why Paul adopted this approach – some of them theological and not directly applicable to our outreach and mission today, but interestingly, Luke mentions none of those reasons, which serves, intentionally or not, to put the focus on the pragmatic BENEFITS of this approach.

And there were pragmatic benefits.

These people, who had grown up in the Jewish synagogues, knew the Old Testament, they knew the stories, they had some background and as such, when they were converted, they could immediately be turned into co-labourers. And so, whatever else is going on here, I think it is fair to say that there is FAITH and EFFICIENCY in sowing our seed where some kind of foundation has already been laid.

We don't always have to start from scratch, in fact often the course of wisdom involves building upon whatever is already there – however imperfect that may be and we can do that here in Canada. There are still hundreds of thousands of people like me, for example, who went to

Beavers and Boy Scouts at the local United Church when they were children. Now, was that a perfect program? Not at all. Did they teach the whole Gospel there? No, they did not. But some useful seeds were sown.

Do you remember the old Beaver pledge? Beavers in Canada, in my day were taught to say:

"I promise to love God and to help take care of the world".

That's not bad.

Wolf Cubs, which was the next age bracket up were taught to say:

"I promise to do my best, to do my duty to God and the Queen, to keep the law of the Wolf Cub Pack and to do a good turn to somebody every day".⁴

Now – is that the Gospel? No – but it is SOMETHING – it is a seed of something and sometimes with a little water and a little sunshine that SEED will AWAKEN and GROW into something REAL and we would be foolish not to take advantage of that. I think we make a mistake, sometimes in this country, in targeting the LEAST religious people in a community first. They did it exactly the opposite way in the New Testament.

The fifth thing I want you to see here is that this missionary initiative provided an important context for leadership development.

5. It provided a context for leadership development

We'll be brief here but I do think that this detail is worth noticing. Look at the second half of verse 5; Luke says somewhat offhandedly:

“And they had John to assist them.” (Acts 13:5 ESV)

Apparently they had recruited John Mark from his home in Jerusalem back at the end of chapter 12 – I referred to this last Sunday. Acts 12:25 says:

⁴ <https://scoutsvictoria.com.au/media/1993/fs260035-canada.pdf>

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. (Acts 12:25 ESV)

John Mark was a well-educated young man who eventually served as the personal secretary to the Apostle Peter. The church father Papias says that it was John Mark who compiled Peter's memories into what we call The Gospel of Mark, so he became a person of enormous significance in the second generation of the church – but as you probably know, he did not exactly cover himself in glory on this first missionary journey. In Acts 13:13 it says:

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13 ESV)

This created a sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas when it came time to plan their second missionary journey – Barnabas wanted to give John Mark another chance, but Paul felt that the trip was too important to risk it by bringing along someone who had already demonstrated a lack of grit and resilience. They decided to agree to disagree and they instead planned TWO trips instead of one – Barnabas taking John Mark and going one way with Paul taking a young man named Silas and going the other way – we'll get to that story in a couple of weeks.

For now, all I want you to see is that a CHURCH ON THE MOVE is a church that provides opportunities for younger leaders. AT REST a church tends to platform and prioritize A-list leaders – that's how this story began. But once the church begins to MOVE and MULTIPLY, it has no other OPTION but to train and develop leaders.

We've experienced the same thing HERE in our own expansion efforts. Those of you who have been here for a while will remember that Pastor Levi began as the Worship Intern down at RCC. We needed to build out our worship capacity when we began planting there so Pastor Jody invited Levi to come on as an intern – but as you will recall, we gave him a chance to preach, and the rest, as they say is history. Humanly speaking, it was the NECESSITY associated with

EXPANSION that gave Pastor Levi the opportunity to discover and use his gifts – and that’s important for us to see. As we contemplate this new venture in Coldwater all we can see now at the beginning of the process is what it will COST us in terms of leadership. We will LOSE several key volunteers in CM. We will LOSE several key volunteers in worship. We will LOSE a significant portion of Pastor Matt’s time and attention as an Associate Pastor here – all of that is TRUE – but that isn’t the whole story is it? Because, no doubt, once again, in the mystery of Providence, as we step out in faith NEW LEADERS will emerge and develop before our very eyes, thanks be to God!

The sixth thing we ought to notice here is that this first missionary venture had to press through significant spiritual opposition.

6. It had to press through significant spiritual opposition

Not everyone celebrated their arrival on the island of Cyprus. There was a Jewish false prophet there named Bar-Jesus – also known as Elymas the Magician. Now the word “magician” and “Jewish” don’t often go together in the Bible; there are all kinds of passages mandating that anyone involved in sorcery or divination or fortune telling is to be DRIVEN OUT – which perhaps explains why Elymas was living in Cyprus. NT scholar David G. Peterson says here:

“This man was an apostate Jew, who had succumbed to the attractions of heathenism, using his power and influence as *an attendant of the proconsul*.”⁵

Elymas had put himself forward as an expert on matters of religion, and he had managed to worm his way into the inner circles of the proconsul’s court. If you are a Tolkien fan, then Elymus is like Grima Wormtongue in the court of King Theodin of Rohan – and the Apostle Paul is like Gandolf who breaks the spell of this wicked conjuror so that the King – or the proconsul in this case – can recover his wits and breath again the free air of men.

⁵David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 379.

That's the idea here – and the point is that the Gospel will always be opposed by whisperers and so-called experts. Our culture is AWASH right now in the testimony of Christian apostates – men like Bart Ehrman and Abraham Piper – who grew up in the inner circle of evangelicalism - who have now rejected the faith and who use the internet and social media platforms like TikTok to teach other, younger believers to do the same.

In every time and in every culture those who would proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ have had to press through deception and opposition of this sort.

But it can be done – as it WAS DONE in this story here. Elymas is unmasked, and the proconsul Sergius Paulus, is enabled to believe. Which leads us to our final observation this morning, we see this first missionary venture relying upon the essential attractiveness of the Christian Gospel.

7. It relied upon the essential attractiveness of the Christian Gospel

You have to piece two verses together to get this point. Look first at verse 7. It talks about the Proconsul, Sergius Paulus:

“a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.” (Acts 13:7 ESV)

According to Luke Sergius Paulus SOUGHT TO HEAR the Word of God. He had heard ABOUT IT – but now he wanted to hear it directly for himself. Now look at verse 12. Once Elymas was out of the way:

“Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.” (Acts 13:12 ESV)

We tend to focus on the spicy bits in the middle about how the Apostle Paul neutralized the threat posed by Elymas, but the SUBSTANCE of the matter is that Sergius Paulus was ATTRACTED TO and ASTONISHED BY the Word of God – how easy it is to forget that! We so often

EMPHASIZE and FOREGROUND other things!! We foreground THE MUSIC or the KIDS PROGRAMS or the FELLOWSHIP – all of which are GREAT but none of which made much of an impression upon Sergius Paulus. He came for the teaching. He came for the Word of God.

Can I tell you something?

This approach to outreach and mission will never not work – in fact I expect it to work EVEN BETTER in the years and decades ahead. The more this culture CRATERS – the more our chickens come home to ROOST – the more attractive and ASTONISHING this Word of God will be to our friends and neighbours. As everything around us crumbles – this Word of God will APPEAR SOLID to them. As everything around us goes crazy, this Word of God will SOUND WISE to them. As everything around us turns to ASH - this Word of God will TASTE GOOD to them.

So preach it!

Press through the noise and opposition and preach it. Preach it here, preach it there – preach it everywhere. Because the grass withers, the flowers fades, but the Word of the Lord will stand forever – thanks be to God! Let's pray together.