

Launch Point **Acts 13:1-5**

Introduction

Our text in Acts 13 begins with the words

¹ Now there were in the church at Antioch . . .

To get our bearings, we need to have some idea of how the church at Antioch came into existence and why this body of believers played such a strategic role in spreading the gospel to other regions throughout the world.

Acts 11:19-26

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. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord.

Stop there just a moment and think how astonishing this is, but also how consistent what happened is with how God does things. *Hate-filled efforts to stamp out Christianity resulted in spreading it all the more.* You could even argue that the brutal murder of Stephen at the hands of those who were supposed to uphold the law energized the

first major missionary efforts of the early church. The founding the church at Antioch is directly tied to his martyrdom. And one of the first missionaries from that church, one of the most effective missionaries of all time, was there that day in support of his execution—Saul, whom we know better as the apostle Paul.

We live in a time when you hear more and more hostility expressed toward biblical Christianity. You see leaders fall and defect, major ministries cave to the lawless immorality of the times, you see more and more legislative attempts to redefine Christianity into a pagan-friendly religion and to punish those who won't yield to the spirit of the age. The broader culture is full of scoffers who belittle sincere believers loyal to the Scriptures, and more often than we would wish other professing Christians join in the ridicule.

Don't be cowed and intimidated by it all. Don't think that everything is downhill from here.

Remember that the focal point of Christianity is a cross and an empty tomb. The gates of hell will not stand up against it.

To adopt a risk-averse, self-protective, fearful spirit in the face of worldly intimidation sucks the very life out of the bold gospel advance Christ Himself commanded us to fulfill.

We need to stop the hand-wringing and complaining and get on with the mission of the forever kingdom. We can't lose.

²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord. ²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

Map: Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch, Cyrene, Tarsus

Phoenicia; Lebanon today; the ancient land of Jezebel, sea-going experts of Tyre and Sidon

Cyprus—rich, fertile island home to Barnabas

Antioch—founded by Seleucus Nicator (Victor), one of Alexander's generals and named after the general's father Antiochus. Situated on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles east of the Mediterranean.

During the first century it boasted a population of half a million, making it the third largest city in the Roman Empire, Rome being the first, and Alexandria in Egypt, the second. A melting pot of at least five different cultures: Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arab, and Persian. Even people from India and China made Antioch their home. Famous for chariot racing and the unbridled pursuit of immoral pleasure.

Because of Christ and His power to redeem and transform, Antioch became known not for wickedness for Christlikeness.

When the people in Antioch attempted to capture in a word what they saw in these new believers, they coined the word *Christians*—“Christ Ones.” At first it may have been even a title of derision, but it stuck and remains to this day, even though for many it has been gutted of its original significance.

Believers called Christians first in Antioch.

You could hardly find a healthier church anywhere or in any century. Part of that health was their heart for missionary outreach. Follow with me in Acts 13 as we learn what made this church such an effective launch point for the gospel.

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. 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.

1. Priorities of the Church (1-2a)
2. Activity of the Spirit (2b, 4)
3. Solidarity of the Mission (3)
4. Strategy of the Missionaries (4-5)

1. Priorities of the Church (1-2a)

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. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting,

The Word

"Prophets and teachers"

Ephesians 4:11-16: church life truly directed by Christ must be in response to God-appointed teachers of truth

Prophets—listen to God; speak to people
Before the Scriptures were complete—new revelation

After complete—the proclamation of previous revelation

In either case, previous revelation the test of a prophet's reliability and authenticity (Isa. 8:20)

Teachers—teaching them all things whatsoever I have commanded you (Acts 2:41-47: learning church)

Disciples are learners and followers (imitators)—not just academic students
That said, you must learn the truth before you can live the truth.

You can't practice what you don't know.

Joshua 1:8: true success impossible if the Word of God does not dominate our words, our meditations and our ways.

Life by the Book must not be merely theoretical; it has to be foundational and practical.

Witness

The early history of this church and the very make-up of the leadership team evidenced the

aggressive spread of the gospel to all kinds of people and cultures

Barnabas—from the island of Cyprus; son of consolation who helped fold Saul into the body of believers

Simeon that was called Niger (black)—Jewish name; black man
No apparent racial divide or prejudice

Lucius of Cyrene—important trade city in North Africa, possibly one of the founders of the church (11:20)

Manaen, who had been brought up with Herod Antipas the tetrarch—"children of the same age as a prince were invited to live with him, play with him, and be trained with him as companions" (Custer, 182). Manaen was one of those young friends.

Testimony of the power of God's grace—a wealthy, influential man from the social elite, brought up with the man who eventually murdered John the Baptist—what different tracks their lives took!

Saul—Hellenistic Jew, once chief persecutor of the church; called to be the apostle to the Gentiles—it had now been more than ten years since his conversion. With this missionary

journey the fulfillment of his call to the Gentiles would begin in earnest.

God alone makes men prophets and teachers—He draws them from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures, as He does the rank and file of the church.

A healthy church ought to evidence the same kind of broad representation among its members—because the gospel is not culture bound—it is the power of God to everyone that believes, no matter where they come from.

A church that draws just one section of the population looks more like a manmade social club than Christ's body, alive with gospel power.

It is unlikely to be a truly missionary church because it lacks the wideness of a missionary heart.

Where are your connections?
What boundaries do they cross?
What are you doing to build bridges into the lives the people you meet?

Worship

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting,

“Worshipping”—in secular Greek—civil service; in the temple, priestly service; service of worship—liturgy

Work and worship go together. Work without worship is pointless. Worship without work is pretense.

“Fasting”—common practice of the Jews (twice a week—Pharisees); never mentioned alone—prayer and fasting, worshipping and fasting (here)—earnest, single-hearted commitment that makes seeking God such a priority that even food takes a second place.

The goal of missions is to extend worship of the true God to people who don’t know Him yet. A church that isn’t devoted to sincere God-centered worship has nothing to extend. Its own members need to be converted first.

Priorities of the church—the Word, Witness, Worship—Are they yours?

What would the cadence of each day and week look like if these three priorities characterized your life?

When they do, we are far better equipped to launch gospel endeavors further.

2. Activity of the Spirit (2, 4)

² While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me

Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

⁴ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

God-entranced worship creates sensitivity to the Holy Spirit of God. If we don't take time to focus our hearts on the Lord, we are not likely to sense His leading in our lives. Don't let your work for God detach from the Person of God. Study and meditate on the Word of God to encounter the God of the Word. When you pray, talk to Him, don't just craft religious sounding phrases. Whatever service you are engaged in, set your heart toward Him, not just the nuts and bolts of the task. Listen for the Spirit. Follow His lead. It will be aligned with the written Word He gave.

But we must not fail to see that ultimately it is not our wisdom and work that drive missions, but God's. The Spirit directed this launch of missions from the church at Antioch.

“Set apart”—mark off, as with a boundary line

“For the work”—missions is no mere pleasure trip

“To which I have called them”—the call has already been made—by God alone

Think about the impact this revelation had to have had on the church family there. Two significant members from among the teaching elders of the church have been given orders from the heavenly headquarters to pack their bags and go elsewhere. And that's exactly what they're going to do with the full blessing of the whole church.

Think about what this says about the character of this church, their understanding of the times, and their submission to God. This church was born out of the efforts of risk takers. It was by no means static and sedentary. It had a culture that was responsive and active and courageous and full of life. They practiced life in the Spirit—as every believer should and must (Romans 8).

What will happen to the church if Barnabas and Paul took off to spread the gospel elsewhere? Would it fall apart? Would its progress grind to a halt? No, just the opposite.

All three of Paul's missionary journeys began from this church.

After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Antioch became the leading city of the Christian church.

Ignatius—pastor of the church; first to be thrown to the lions in the coliseum, A.D. 110

Antiochan school of theology—grammatical method, rather than spiritualizing and allegory
John Chrysostom (347-407)—100,000 members in the church; wrote the first treatise on homiletics

The church doesn't achieve safety and health by hoarding its resources, material or human, or by trying to maintain the status quo at all costs and against all risks. Our safety and health come from life, and life comes from the Spirit. Wherever the Spirit leads the church must go, or the church will die.

Mark 8:35

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

The safest place for any Christian to be is exactly where God wants him.

Romans 8—those that are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit leads us to fight sin. Walk in the Spirit and you won't fulfill the lusts of the flesh.

3. Solidarity of the Mission (3)

³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

“After fasting and praying”—priority of spiritual things even over physical needs, dependence on the Lord for direction, protection, success

Every powerful missionary advance must go forward on its knees. Not a task that man can do on his own—nothing short of divine power will do.

“Laid their hands on them”—

Not their ordination—already ministers of the gospel

Laying their hands on them showed the church’s support of them and solidarity with them as they headed out

This missionary enterprise rises neither from maverick individualism nor from iron-handed institutionalism.

Visible emblem of the church’s recognition that the Spirit had called these men and would empower them to fulfill their mission

It is the Lord’s church and the Lord’s appointed mission.

The Spirit’s gifts and the Spirit’s call are at the Spirit’s discretion.

A healthy church body is sensitive to the Spirit and submissive to His leading.

“Sent them away”—let them go, released them

According to verse 4, the Spirit sent them out—the church only released them to carry out what the Spirit of God was sending them to do. Their departure did not sever their vital connection to the church. The result of their

missionary efforts were newly established churches across Asia, complete with elders appointed in each church (Acts 14:23), so that gospel progress could continue. When they returned they reported to the church in Antioch what the Lord had done through them.

Acts 14:26-28

²⁶ And from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Developing ongoing healthy solidarity with our missionaries is a major goal for these next ten years.

4. Strategy of the Missionaries (4-5)

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.

Word-focused—proclaimed the word of God
2 Timothy 4:2 Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke,

and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.

In the synagogues

Find those with some acquaintance with the Scriptures—notably the predictions regarding the Messiah

This was ever their method—Jew first, then Gentile, because the Jews already had some familiarity with God’s Word and expectation regarding the promised Messiah

When you are witnessing it is always helpful to know what exposure to the Scriptures the person you’re talking to has had. Start there.

That said, there are many who’ve not had such exposure but whose hearts are nonetheless open to the gospel. It is universal in its appeal. It is for all ethnicities. Every created being. There are always multiple connection points just by virtue of being fellow humans made in God’s image and suffering the curse of sin.

Mentoring

They had John Mark to assist them. He was a young man from apparently a wealthy family. Like the family that hosted the last supper on the night of Christ’s betrayal. He has both a Jewish and a Greek name. He will end up bailing out on this first missionary journey—

perhaps more rigorous than he bargained for, or maybe just immature, or both.

On the second missionary journey Paul and Barnabas could not agree on whether to give him another chance. Mark ended up going with Barnabas, and Paul took Silas instead, and then added young Timothy to the team early on. But later Mark becomes a close associate of Peter. That connection led to his writing the Gospel of Mark, which is essentially Peter's gospel. And even Paul in his Roman imprisonment mentions Mark as valuable to the ministry.

No failure has to be permanent. God Himself ratified the usefulness of this young man when He chose him to write one of the four Gospels.

What I want us to see is the team approach to the missionary endeavor, and that the team included a man still in his developmental years—an intern, if you will. Learning includes failing. But keeping on nonetheless. What better way to further missions in the next generation than to bring them along with you. We learn best what we can observe and live alongside of those who are doing the work. Multiplication is key.

One other person we might overlook who joined Paul on that second journey. Luke

himself. Some sources say he was from Antioch too. What is clear as you read Luke's Gospel and his account in Acts, is that he had a missionary heart as wide as the world that rivaled Paul's heart for gospel advance. He was a physician of souls not just of bodies. God used Luke to pen this priceless record of the first 33 years of church history. Where would God's people have been over the centuries without it. Luke's gospel efforts are still bearing fruit and will to the shores of eternity.

2 Timothy 2:2

And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.

What role has God given you to advance the gospel in your generation and the generations to come?

Your efforts may seem of great cost and of small consequence, but there's no measuring the fruitfulness of whatever you do in keeping with the Spirit's lead.

Conclusion

1. Priorities of the Church (1-2a)
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Song: I Will Go

Discussion Questions

1. How does knowing the thriving church in Antioch resulted in part from the persecution that broke out after Stephen's martyrdom affect your outlook on the possibilities of powerful gospel advance today despite hostility toward Christianity?
2. Does a 3rd Great Awakening seem possible to you? Why or why not?
3. What connections do you have that cross cultural or ethnic boundaries, and what are ways you have found build bridges with people?
4. What are ways you make the Word, witness, and worship priorities in everyday life—or could do so?
5. What was a time you've sensed the Holy Spirit leading you, and how did you respond?
6. What are some ways we can express and maintain solidarity with gospel partners whom God has called to take the gospel elsewhere?
7. What are some ways you can be engaged in mentoring others to live for Christ and to share His gospel?
8. What encouragements and warnings do you draw from the fact that John Mark, Timothy, and Luke all served for a time alongside Paul in his missionary journeys?