

A Sending Church – When God Chooses – Acts 13 & 14

Acts Chapter 13 marks a whole shift in the thinking of the early church. It's the beginning of what we have come to know as the missionary church. Before this, followers of Jesus had been engaged in mission, but not by choice. Persecution in Jerusalem had scattered the followers of Jesus all over the known world. Wherever they went, they talked about Jesus, and because they talked about Jesus, other people believed the gospel message and became followers of Jesus too. But all of this was fairly haphazard. God used persecution to spread the church out from Jerusalem, but it wasn't a strategy on the part of the church to deliberately send people out in mission. Not until we get to this account in Acts Chapter 13.

Now we need a little clarification here. In that part of the world there were several cities that were called Antioch. In Syria, there was a strong church established in the city of Antioch. But over in what is now southern Turkey, there was another city called Antioch in the province of Pisidia. Acts 13 tells the story of how the gospel travelled from Antioch in Syria to Pisidian Antioch. Here's how Luke describes it: ***“In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 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.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.” (Acts 13: 1-3 NIV)***

The role of leaders in sending people in to mission.

It would be easy to skip over this bit, but there is something important here. These men that are mentioned came from all over and found themselves in Antioch in Syria. Barnabas was a Jew from the island of Cyprus. Simeon was almost certainly a black man, perhaps from Africa. Lucius is a Roman name, and it's likely he was brought up in Roman culture in Cyrene in North Africa. Manaen is a Jew of Greek extraction who grew up with Herod Antipas, part of the ruling dynasty of the region. Then there is Saul, or Paul as he is later from Tarsus, and more latterly, Jerusalem. Different nationalities from all over the place. Different educational backgrounds. Different gifts. Some are prophets and some are teachers. skills. But all followers of Jesus who are united in prayer and fasting, seeking the Lord's direction for the future. Out of this time of prayer and fasting, the Holy Spirit speaks to them about deliberately taking the gospel to places where there is no church.

This is not Paul and Barnabas saying to the church “God told me”. It's the trusted leadership of the church seeking God together, and discovering that the Holy Spirit is calling their two best people to go into mission. Too often we get this all backwards. We get people who offer themselves for mission who are not the right people, but because they say that God has spoken to them, we just accept that and send them off. I was once asked to meet with the Elders of a church who had recommended a man for Pastoral training at Carey College, and the College had turned him down. He was most upset. I asked the Elders, “What leadership roles has he had in your church? In what ways has he been serving?” They couldn't think of any. So I asked them “Would you be happy to have him as your Pastor?” Their response was “Oh, no!” We wouldn't want him, but he might be OK for another church!”

Leaders at OBC, one of your roles is to be seeking the Lord about which of your best people you should be sending into mission. As you pray and fast, it's highly likely that the Holy Spirit will point you to the people who are the most valuable in the congregation. The people you think you can't afford to lose. At present as Baptists we have a shortage of good quality Pastors to lead churches. Part of the reason for that is that our churches are not sending their best people off into training for Pastoral ministry. I hear it from Carey College staff all the time. “How can we train them if you don't send them to us?” Jesus told us to pray for laborers to be sent into the harvest. But watch out when you pray like that. A lot of us that have been in mission situations in the past prayed that God would send someone, and he said to us “you go.” That's what happened to Paul and Barnabas.

“The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They traveled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because he wanted to hear the word of God. But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, “You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun.” Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.” (Acts 13: 4-12 NIV)

I don't have time today to read all of Chapter 13 and 14 of Acts. A fair bit of it is taken up with the sermons Paul preached. But I want to pick out some of the things you can expect if God digs you out of your comfortable life and sends you into some sort of mission.

1. Expect to see some amazing responses to the Gospel.

Sergius Paulus was Proconsul for the island of Cyprus. He was the governor of the island, appointed by and accountable to the Senate in Rome. Here is the top authority on the island, and he's open to the Gospel message. This is an amazing God moment that Paul and Barnabas walked right into. When you are on mission for the Lord, you have these moments where God uses you and you think "Wow, I wouldn't swap this moment for anything". To see God change the life of an influential man like Sergius Paulus was so rewarding for Barnabas and Paul. While I was in Switzerland I had the joy of seeing the European Director of a well known company that launches satellites, gradually open up to the gospel, and eventually become a follower of Jesus. He is a very bright guy, who initially said to me "Christianity is for old ladies and feeble minded people". Then he met some of the believers in our church, many of whom were PhD's from Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard and Yale, some of whom were some of the best scientists and engineers in the world. When you say yes to Gods call to mission, you get to be in the front row seats, watching God at work.

2. Expect to see spiritual opposition close up.

You are going to be in the front row of spiritual warfare too. Not only are you going to see the power of God at work, but you are going to face Satan's power. He will do everything he can to destroy the work of God in you and through you. Some people gladly received the good news about Jesus when Paul and Barnabas preached. But from others they faced fierce opposition. Paul had to look Elymas the sorcerer right in the eye and confront the evil he was doing. If you are preaching the gospel, you are going to stir up some fierce opposition. And if you read through these chapters of Acts, much of the opposition came from the religious people. They had opposition from Elymas. They got kicked out of Pisidian Antioch. In Iconium the Jewish and Gentile leaders plotted to stone them. In Lystra, after a crippled man was healed, the Lycaonians started to worship them as gods. If ever there was a demonic way of getting them off track that was it. They had Jews follow them from Antioch and Iconium, deliberately sabotaging their ministry, stirring up the people against them. They rallied the crowd against them, dragging Paul outside the city and stoning him until they thought he was dead. Mission and ministry is not for woosy people. It's not for the immature or the well meaning. It's tough. That's why we need to send our very best people into mission.

3. Expect hardship.

About four years ago Lyn and I were at a Pastors conference in southern Turkey in a city called Antalya. In Paul's day it was called Attalia. It's mentioned in Acts 14: 25 and 26 as the place they sailed from at

the end of this missionary journey. Just along from Attalia was the town of Perga. I had no appreciation of the meaning of these next verses until I had been there.

“From Paphos, Paul and his companions sailed to Perga in Pamphylia, where John left them to return to Jerusalem. From Perga they went on to Pisidian Antioch” (Acts 13: 13- 14 NIV)

The speaker at our conference organized a day trip for us to travel from Antalya to Pisidian Antioch. The trip took us three hours, through stinking hot, barren, scrubby country. We went in an air-conditioned bus. Paul had to walk on a Roman road called the via Sebaste.

(2 Photos)

It's about a 250 kilometer walk and a 3600 foot climb into the mountains from Perga to Pisidian Antioch. It was wild and dangerous country. Why go to Pisidian Antioch? Because Serguis Paulus, the governor of Cyprus, had family there, and Paul and Barnabas wanted to take the gospel to them. The remains of the synagogue where Paul preached are still there. Even in those days, it was a very isolated place. But that's what the call of God is about. To go to the hard places to reach people who might never hear about Jesus.

People, we need to honor those from our church who we have sent out on mission. Those that are in dangerous places serving Christ. Julie Lincoln in Nepal. The Pham family in Vietnam. Mike and Glenda Stainton in Cambodia. People like the Holts who were in Thailand. The Paines in Ethiopia. The Tuckers in Papua New Guinea. The Clines serving on mercy ships. The Cochrans in Bangladesh. These people, and many more like them, have endured hardship for the sake of the gospel. Saying yes to a call of God is not easy. (Ex missionaries and Pastoral staff, and existing Pastoral staff to stand.)

4. Expect to have to repackage the gospel message.

When Paul preached to the Jews in the synagogue he was talking to people who had a good understanding of the God of Israel. But he also shared the gospel with people who were used to sacrificing animals to Zeus and Hermes. Greek culture was so different from the Jews, and he had to find ways to relate gospel truth to them in a way they could understand. I remember a missionary friend in Papua New Guinea telling me that he had to repackage the story of the prodigal son, for in that culture, a man's pigs are valued more highly than his wife. So when the prodigal son goes to live with the pigs, they thought that was wonderful, which sort of defeats the point of the story. We can no longer count on people having a God framework in our culture. The gospel message doesn't change but the way we communicate must change so that those who hear will understand.

5. Expect God to use you.

At the end of Chapter 14 there are some delightful verses of scripture that sum up this first missionary journey.

***“They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. After going through Pisidia, they came into Pamphylia, and when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. From Attalia they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been committed to the grace of God for the work they had now completed. On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. And they stayed there a long time with the disciples”.* (Acts 14: 21-28 NIV)**

When Paul and Barnabas went back to the church that sent them, they reported all that God had done through them. I'm sure that was exciting for the church, but the biggest beneficiaries of mission are the people who go. Not the people who stay at home, but the people who go. Paul and Barnabas had seen high powered people come to Christ. Satanic opposition confronted. They had seen crippled men walk. Jews and Gentiles choosing to follow Jesus. Churches established. Leaders appointed. Believers taught

and strengthened. What is not to like about all that? When you say yes to a call of God to mission, it's as though he is inviting you to a front row seat to enable you to watch his activity close up.

So where are the new generation of Paul and Barnabas's who will follow in their footsteps? Who are the next people from OBC who will hear the call of the Lord into mission beyond New Zealand, and ministry within it? God has not stopped calling people to mission. Is he calling you?