

SENT

Acts 13:1-12

The early church was given a commission by Jesus to take the Good News to all the world. What happened was that they took the message to Jerusalem. After the persecution started, they took the message to wherever they were forced to go, usually, sharing it only with other Jews. The sharing of the Gospel was on a fairly casual basis in most cases. I don't believe that this was exactly what Jesus had in mind when He gave the Great Commission to the church. I believe that He wanted the word to go out in a more deliberate and planned fashion. There is a word that we use to describe this type of planned, deliberate initiative and that word is "proactive." The early spread of the Gospel was mainly a "reactive" response to the circumstances in which they found themselves.

In the church at Antioch of Syria, things began to change. This group of Christians began to take some action. Under the leadership of Barnabas, they brought in some help to teach those who had recently become Christians. Barnabas traveled to Tarsus and brought Saul back with him. Not only did this group study the Word of God, but they also prayed and fasted. They wanted God's direction as to what they should be doing as a church so that they would be doing His will. As we look back on this situation, we might be tempted to say that the obvious answer to "what did they need to do?" was to simply carry out the Great Commission. When we don't have the benefit of hind sight, then we might have a lot of uncertainty regarding who should be deliberately going to other places, when should this effort begin, where should it start, and how should it be done. This, apparently, was the case with the leaders at Antioch.

Listen – 13:1-3

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. Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)

These five men came from a variety of backgrounds. We find in this group a Jewish man who grew up on a Roman island, two men likely from North Africa, a socially elite man who grew up in Jerusalem, and an educated Pharisee who previously sought the church's destruction. We might imagine that the kinds of questions mentioned previously were of concern to them.

Evidently, for these leaders, there were obvious ministry opportunities among the new believers to teach the diverse group of people that made up the church at Antioch. There were Jewish believers who had fled from Jerusalem during periods of intense persecution, there were also Hellenistic Jewish believers who were from other parts of the Roman Empire, and there were Gentiles who had heard and believed the gospel message.

In verse two, we read that these prophets and teachers were "ministering to the Lord" or "worshiping the Lord" (depending on which translation version you have). The Greek word that is used in the text literally means "to serve the state at one's own cost." That idea would seem to favor the concept of "carrying out prescribed duties" that had been given to them by God. We know from the Great Commission that an essential job of the apostles (and by implication of all mature believers) is to "make disciples" of those who hear and believe the good news of God's salvation in and through Christ Jesus. This would lead us to believe that in the case of the church at Antioch, that "ministering unto the Lord" would be primarily involved in discipling new believers. The process for making disciples (according to Matthew 28:19-20) is to immerse them in the character of the Triune God by teaching them what Christ had taught His disciples.

In addition to carrying out the known assigned responsibilities, they were engaged in fasting. Some commentaries suggest that their fasting was simply a carryover from what devout Jews had been doing for centuries which was to fast twice a week. Another possibility is that this fasting was a special emphasis in which these leaders were engaged as they actively sought to know God's specific will for their ongoing ministry. In the Old Testament, we see that the purpose of fasting was "that we might humble ourselves before our God and inquire of Him" (Ezra 8:21).

As they (in humility) sought to know God's will, He responded with a direct intervention by providing unmistakable direction that would be a step change in their actions to carry out the Great Commission. Most of us have heard teaching regarding the implication of the words of Christ in Matthew 28 "go into all the world and make disciples." We are told that the intent of the command to "go" is "as you go, etc." which would tell us that "in the normal course of our lives" we are to share the good news of salvation with those we happen to encounter. The step change we see that happened at Antioch is that some were called to deliberately go for the specific purpose of sharing the good news and making disciples.

The specific direction given to the leaders of the church at Antioch was to "separate" or "set apart" Barnabas and Saul to temporarily leave the group at Antioch to fulfill what God had already called them to do. Luke had previously recorded the account of Christ calling Saul to his ministry to the Gentiles; however, the fullness of what God intended to accomplish through Saul had not yet developed. We have no record of a similar call that was made to Barnabas, but apparently, the call had been made. Alexander MacLaren pointed out the importance of each person having an inward call before the church acts to commission or endorse the resulting ministry of such a call from God.

We notice that after having received a direct message from the Holy Spirit that those leaders did not act hastily but continued to seek direction from God by prayer and fasting. When we think we know exactly what God has called us to do, it is then that we may be vulnerable to following our own ideas and running ahead of God. Many times, God's revelation is to give us just enough light to see the next step rather than to see the entire road ahead of us.

The next action by the church at Antioch was to lay hands on Barnabas and Saul, before sending them out. This was not an act of ordination, but was an expression of and recognition of Christian unity of fellowship and purpose in the Holy Spirit. Barnabas and Saul then left the church at Antioch in Syria on what is commonly called the First Missionary Journey.

Share – 13:4-8

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 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. Acts 13:4–8 (ESV)

Seleucia was the nearest port and was about sixteen miles from Antioch. While the instructions they received from the Holy Spirit did not mention where Barnabas and Saul were to go, apparently, Barnabas determined that it would be good to start on the island of Cyprus which was a familiar area to him. Salamis, the port on the eastern area of Cyprus was about 130 miles from Seleucia. When they landed, they sought out the Jewish community in that city and started sharing their message in the synagogues. We don't know how that message was received. From Salamis they walked to the western end of Cyprus which was about one hundred miles. There

were several towns along the way and Barnabas and Saul would have had opportunities to visit synagogues in these communities. Luke's account does not specifically state that this happened, but he did indicate that they traveled through "the whole island" before arriving at Paphos. There were likely Jews in many of the town on Cyprus which means there were likely many synagogues where they could have met with Jews and perhaps Gentiles as they traveled.

At the end of verse five, Luke included a statement that "John assisted them." This was John Mark, a nephew of Barnabas, who likely had accompanied Barnabas from Jerusalem when he was sent to Antioch by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. It would be reasonable to classify John Mark as an apprentice of his uncle and was being discipled by Barnabas. One of the commentaries pointed out that John Mark was not mentioned in the instructions from the Holy Spirit to be sent out and there is no indication that he had been called to this ministry. These two differences are thought to be related to the situation where (later in this journey) John Mark left Barnabas and Paul to return to Jerusalem.

No opposition to what Barnabas and Saul were doing was mentioned by Luke until they arrived in Paphos and they were summoned by the governor of Cyprus which was a Roman province. The opposition came from a person who acted as an advisor to the governor. This advisor was Jewish and he claimed to be a prophet. The implication of this arrangement gives us some insight regarding what some people believed two thousand years ago. This Roman official believed that there was influence from the spiritual realm that impacted what was happening in the region where he was governing. He believed that he could benefit from knowing what the "powers and principalities" were planning and doing. Also, he believed that certain people could access such information which would be beneficial to him and to his realm. This is why he associated with this man named "son of Joshua" (Bar Jesus), and is likely why he summoned Barnabas and Saul when he heard about what they were teaching (the word of God) in the various synagogues on Cyprus. The governor (proconsul) was going to cover all the bases to obtain spiritual guidance. As we see, his advisor (who was also called Elymas – the magician) did not appreciate the competition that he saw coming from Barnabas and Saul and he tried to get Sergius Paulus to ignore anything Barnabas and Saul would say.

Most of us are probably thinking that we are not likely to see anything like this in our world today because we are too sophisticated or too intelligent or any number of other reasons. However, Luke described Sergius Paulus as a "man of intelligence." We might also remember that one of the most revered leaders of our nation in the past century had enlisted the services of Hollywood astrologer Carroll Righter, and later Jeane Dixon during the 1950s and 1960s. Also, during the 1980s, Joan Quigley was an astrologer best known for her astrological advice to the Reagan White House.

Rely on the Spirit – 13:9-12

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 13:9–12 (ESV)

Luke stated the context of the severe action that Paul took in response to the opposition of Elymas. Paul's action was inspired by the Holy Spirit who had provided Paul with discernment regarding the opposition they encountered. As we will see later on in the ministry of Paul, he found opposition from others Jews (the Judaizers) that came from their ignorance of the truth. In

the present case of Bar Jesus, the motivation or driving force that was inspiring him was deliberate and sinister. One of descriptors of this man was that he was a Jew who was engaged in what could be called the “black arts.” According to Merriam-Webster, black arts would be “magic that is associated with the devil or with evil spirits.” While there were some from pagan backgrounds who were involved in such practices, it was rare among Jews at that time to be involved in sorcery and with receiving messages from the unholy spirit world. This man was presenting himself to be a prophet or someone who could receive and pass along messages from the unseen or spirit world. Some have speculated that he likely used slight-of-hand tricks or some knowledge of basic chemistry to fool others into giving him some creditably.

The result of his activity was that he was doing the work of the devil, he was deceiving people, he was a hindrance to those around him who wanted to do what was right and good, and he was distorting the image of God that he claimed to represent. That’s about as close to a definition of evil as we can get. Because of the intentionally evil intent of what Bar Jesus was doing and especially since he was directly opposing what God had called Barnabas and Paul to do, Paul did not turn the other cheek and he did not go the second mile. Instead, he rebuked this false prophet in the plainest of terms in an effort to use the shock value of calling out his actions for what they were. We need to recognize with whom we are dealing in situations such as which Paul found himself. Paul, then pronounced a temporary curse upon the man – he would be blind for a period of time. This dramatic response of Paul was (first of all) likely intended for the benefit of Bar Jesus to cause him to realize how far from God he had gone and hopefully bring about repentance. Secondly, it was a reality check for the governor who had been listening to this false prophet of evil intent for some time and probably following his advice.

Whether Paul’s words had any positive benefit to the magician is unknown, but we are told that Sergius Paulus saw what happened, got the message, and believed.