

A Partnership in Missions

Missions Month

Acts 13:1-4; 14:26-28

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This morning we come to our second sermon on missions. Like I said last week, each sermon will seek to answer a question. Last week we asked the question, “Who is the church called to go to?” And we said that the church is called specifically to go and make disciples of all people groups.

There’s an unfinished task before the church. There are around seventeen thousand people groups throughout the world. And there are still over seven thousand people groups who have essentially no access to the gospel. There’s an urgent need to go to them.

Last week, we encouraged you to educate yourself on unreached people groups. If you’d like to learn more, you can go to the Joshua Project’s website. We also asked you to pray for unreached people groups. But if we stopped at educating ourselves and praying, we’d have a hard time reaching the nations. We have to move on and actually send missionaries to the nations. And that’s what we’re going to talk about this morning. Our question this morning is who sends missionaries to the nations.

Acts 13 tells the story of Paul’s first missionary journey. It sets a pattern for other missionary journeys in our day. And it specifically teaches some important lessons on the topic of sending. I’ll be reading the first four verses of chapter 13. And the last three verses of chapter 14.

Acts 13:1-4; 14:26-28¹

¹Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²While 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.” ³Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

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

^{14:26}and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷And 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. ²⁸And they remained no little time with the disciples.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Like I said earlier, our main question to answer this morning is who sends missionaries to the nations? But as I started working on this sermon, I realized there’s another question we have to answer before we can determine who sends missionaries. We have to define what it means to be a missionary.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

WHAT IS A MISSIONARY?

It's pretty common today to say all Christians are missionaries.² But is this true? Well it depends on what you mean by missionary. It's true, all Christians are called to make disciples. And all Christians are called to bear witness to the gospel in word and deed. So, if a missionary is simply someone who makes disciples and evangelizes, then yes, all Christians are missionaries.

But traditionally, that's not the way the word missionary has been used.

Traditionally, a missionary is someone set apart and sent out to take the gospel across a cultural boundary, especially where there's limited gospel witness.³ Let me say that again. A missionary is someone set apart and sent out to take the gospel across a cultural boundary—that could include an ethnic, linguistic, and/or geographical boundary. And they're primarily sent to go to a place or people group who have very limited access to the gospel.

I'm sympathetic with the desire to call all Christians missionaries. I think it comes from a desire to correct an age-old error of creating two classes of Christians: A first-class of Christians who are in fulltime vocation ministry. And a second-class of Christians who are not. I also believe the desire to call all Christians missionaries is a desire to elevate the call for all Christians to be evangelists and disciple-makers. And I'm sympathetic to this because I think the Bible supports this conclusion.⁴

But making a *distinction* between the role of a cross-cultural missionary and the role of other Christians is not the same thing as saying some Christians are more important than others. We can maintain equality and responsibility without removing distinctions between missionaries and those who aren't missionaries.

We do the same thing with pastors and lay people. Everybody in the church is responsible to build up the body of Christ. All members of the body are valuable. But pastors and elders are set apart for a specific role of equipping the body for the work of ministry. There is equality in the body of Christ and yet a distinction of role.

But is it actually important to make a distinction between missionaries and those who are not missionaries? Are we just splitting hairs over words? Maybe. But here's the thing. Remember what we learned last week. There's an urgent need in the world for unreached people groups to hear and believe the gospel. Unreached people groups are people groups with less than 2% evangelical Christians. They have little, to no access to the gospel. So, if someone doesn't cross a cultural boundary to take the gospel to them, they will never hear the gospel.

I certainly don't want to split hairs over the language we use. But we must set apart and send out certain people to reach the unreached. And if we do away with the distinct role of cross-cultural missionaries, we may lose sight of this urgent need.

Craig Ott, a missions professor at our seminary says it well: "If we ... choose to call every Christian a missionary, then we will need to create a new term for the Christian who is specially called, gifted,

² Denny Spitters and Matthew Ellison, *When Everything Is Missions*, 67

³ See Steve Beirn and George W. Murray, *Well Sent: Reimagining the Church's Missionary-Sending Process*, 53; Andy Johnson, *Missions*, 36; and Spitters & Ellison, 68-69

⁴ See Robert L. Plummer, *Paul's Understanding of the Church's Mission: Did the Apostle Paul Expect the Early Christian Communities to Evangelize?* and P. T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul*. Both make a good case that the apostolic mission of evangelism applies to all Christians.

and commissioned for cross-cultural mission[s]. Otherwise, this unique, essential, and divinely appointed role is at risk of being lost altogether.”⁵

The language is not what’s most important. What’s most important is that we set apart and send out certain people to cross cultural boundaries with the gospel, especially where there’s limited gospel witness.

That’s the pattern we see in Acts 13. There’s an important word in Acts 13 for understanding what it means to be a missionary. It’s the word “sent.” In verse 2, we see that while the church is worshiping and fasting, the Holy Spirit said to the leaders of the church, “set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” And we know, from other parts of Acts, their work was to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, to the nations (cf. 9:15). Then in verse 3, we see that the church set them apart, “they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” Then in verse 4, we’re told they were “sent out by the Holy Spirit.”

Being sent is at the heart of what it means to be a missionary (cf. Jn. 20:21). The word missionary comes from the Latin *missio*, which means sent.

Remember what Paul said in Romans 10:14-15: “How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are *sent*. As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!’”

Missionaries don’t save people. God saves people through faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ and by his Spirit. But missionaries are critical to God’s work. How will people hear and believe the gospel if missionaries aren’t sent?

Throughout Acts, we see the driving force behind the expansion of the church is the Holy Spirit moving and the word of God increasing. It’s God who’s at work!

We see something similar in Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians 14:36, Paul reminds the church that the gospel came to them, the gospel reached them. In 1 Thessalonian 1:5, Paul says the gospel came to them in word and in power and in the Holy Spirit.

As one New Testament scholar says, “Paul almost personifies the gospel as a travelling missionary” (cf. 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Tim. 2:8-9; Col. 1:5-7).⁶ The power of the Holy Spirit and the gospel are in the foreground of the expansion of the church, so that God gets the glory. But always in the *background* we see missionaries.

So, the gospel *goes* in the power of the Spirit, and the gospel is effective to save. But the gospel only goes because missionaries are *sent*.

If we want the gospel to go to the nations. If we want the peoples to praise him. If we want the nations to be glad (Ps. 67). Then someone has to be sent. And that’s what a missionary is.

Let’s now to turn to the main question for this morning.

⁵ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennet, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 225; Quoted in Spitters & Ellison, 73

⁶ Plummer

WHO SENDS MISSIONARIES?

Who's responsible for sending missionaries to the nations? There are two actors who send in Acts 13. On the one hand, it's clear that the Holy Spirit has set Barnabas and Saul apart (v. 2). And the Holy Spirit sent them out (v. 4). And yet, the church at Antioch also sets them apart and sends them off (v. 3). The Holy Spirit calls (v. 2). But there's a sense in which the church at Antioch confirmed that call by laying hands on them (v. 3).

Both are true. There's no contradiction here. Who sends missionaries? The Holy Spirit and the local church send out missionaries.

It's important to get this clear. "Barnabas and Paul don't simply strike out on their own, apart from the prayerful confirmation of their local church leaders."⁷ There's a pattern in the New Testament of the local church partnering with the Holy Spirit in sending missionaries. The local church is responsible for sending missionaries. And missionaries are accountable to their sending church.

We see this at the end of Acts 14 where Paul and Barnabas report back to the church at Antioch what God did through them. We see Paul doing the same thing at the end of Acts 18 after his second missionary journey.

We live in a highly individualist world in North America. And many think their subjective sense of call is the final authority. If a person feels called by God, that's the end of the story. But that's not the picture in the New Testament. The call is more dynamic. It *does* involve a personal desire to go, and gifting by God. But it *also* involves a corporate confirmation and commission by the church.

But if the Holy Spirit and the local church send missionaries, then what should we make of missions agencies that play such a prominent role in sending missionaries today? Are missions agencies biblical?

I believe that missions agencies are biblical and used by God to advance the mission to the nations, so long as they understand their role.

The picture in Acts 13 is only part of the picture. Sure, the church at Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas out, but as we read the rest of Acts and other parts of the New Testament, we see there were other churches involved in Paul's missionary journeys. Paul asked the church at Colossae to pray for him to have an open door for the gospel (Col. 4:3). The Philippian church gave money to his missionary journeys (Phil. 4:15). We see something similar in 3 John. John writes a letter to an elder named Gaius (v. 1). Apparently, John's local church had sent out missionaries, but Gaius' church was also involved in supporting those missionaries (v. 6).⁸

There's a biblical pattern for partnership in missions beyond the partnership between a missionary and a sending church. So, to the degree that missions agencies come alongside the local church to facilitate the gospel going to the nations, I think that's very biblical and highly practical.

There are hardly any local churches who have all the resources needed to fully support the missionaries they send out. And it's not just a lack of financial resources. Most local churches don't know all they need to know. They don't know how to get access to certain people groups or how to

⁷ Beirn

⁸ Johnson, 37-40

effectively reach them. There are issues with visas, and language, and cultural training. And most churches don't have the expertise to provide these needed resources.

So, for centuries churches have established partnerships with other churches and with missions agencies to be more effective in reaching the nations.

Our own denomination was started in part because of a missionary impulse. There were local churches who wanted to send out missionaries, but didn't have all the resources they needed. So, they formed an association of churches based on shared theological convictions and a shared effort to reach the nations.

So, I hope it's clear that partnerships with agencies are biblical and practical. But with all this said, I still want to offer some modest caution to the local church, to missionaries, and to missions agencies.

The first caution is to the local church. I believe the Bible is clear enough that we are responsible to send missionaries. And so, we can't abdicate this responsibility to missions agencies. We can and should partner with missions agencies, but we have to retain responsibility for sending missionaries.

Maybe one reason so many missionaries find that their primary allegiance is to their agency is because some local churches have abdicated their responsibility *to* the agencies, not because missionaries are just individualistic or don't value the local church. Maybe churches haven't taken their role as a sending church seriously enough. Maybe missionaries aren't finding the support they need from their sending church.

I think First Free has done a good job in supporting its missionaries. But we certainly have room to grow. So next week we'll talk more about what it looks like to send missionaries out well.

The next caution I want to offer is to missionaries and missions agencies. If the church can't abdicate their responsibility, then missionaries and missions agencies can't avoid accountability to the local church.

I believe the basic pattern in the Bible is that each missionary needs a sending church to whom they're responsible. That doesn't mean they won't also look for support with other churches. They should. And that doesn't mean they have no accountability to their agency. They do. But they should have a primary sending church.

So, if you're sensing a call to missions, may I encourage you as a first step to talk with the leaders of the church. Lucas and I just spoke with someone recently considering a call to missions and we're planning to meet with someone else in the next couple of weeks. I'm humbled and encouraged to see people starting with the leaders of their church.

We don't need to get territorial in any of this. Remember this is primarily God's work. But if Christ has given the Great Commission to the local church, then the church needs to own their responsibility. And missionaries should maintain accountability to the local church.

The church is the bride of Christ. And the true church is manifest in local churches, as we learned in Colossians 3. As Andy Johnson says, "Agencies are good if they realize they are bridesmaids, not the

bride. If they realize they are the stagehands, and not the star. An agency is a *parachurch* ministry. And a parachurch ministry, by definition, comes alongside the local church, they don't supplant it."⁹

Christ has given a clear mission to the church. We're called to go to the nations and make disciples. But God's Word not only gives us a mission. It gives us means for executing that mission. And those means involve the church setting apart and sending out people to take the gospel across cultural boundaries, especially where there is little gospel witness. Let's be faithful to the mission and the means.

⁹ Johnson, 27