

ACTS
The First Official Missionaries
Acts 13:1-3

Every faithful Christian will be missionary minded because missions are all about reaching the whole world for Jesus Christ. Christ commanded the church to carry out the Great Commission in every generation.

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matt. 28:18-20)

Missions must be given a primary place in the heart of every Christian and be a primary thrust of every local church. In Acts 13, we have the first organized effort to reach the Gentile world for Christ according to Christ's promise, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

All Christians agree that the world must be gospelized, but not all Christians agree as to how this should be accomplished. Evangelicals concur on the Great Commission but disagree over the methods for reaching the world for Christ. The whole issue has become quite clouded in the twentieth century. What place does the local church play in missions? Where do the para-church organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, Navigators, Inter-Varsity, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Greater Europe Mission, Child Evangelism Fellowship and hundreds of others fit into the biblical scheme of missions? Who has the ultimate authority over missionaries -- the local church, the denomination or the mission board? The local church versus the para-church can become a very emotional issue, and often more heat than light comes when this subject is discussed.

How do we solve these problems? We must go to the Word of God. As evangelicals, we are committed to the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. Therefore, we must go to the Bible to solve these complex problems and begin to operate a missions program on the commands and principles of the Bible. As stated many times before, it is impossible to set up an exact New Testament church or missionary program because of cultural and technological changes in two thousand years. However, the goal of every local church and individual Christian should be to operate as closely as possible to New Testament patterns. Are we ready to accept the fact that God has inspired methods as well as doctrines? If we are, then we will seek to be as Biblical as possible in our concept of missions. Hopefully, this message today will help us get some biblical convictions on missions.

SELECTION OF MISSIONARIES (Acts 13:1, 2)

Place of the Local Church (13:1)

“Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers:” -- Antioch had an established local church with at least five strong leaders who were prophets and teachers. While we are not told so, I believe these five men were also elders in that local assembly. It becomes obvious that the local church at Antioch was the basic unit from which the first organized missionary effort sprang forth. God has ordained the local church as the primary base for missions.

The church at Antioch had its seed beginnings when converted Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and began to preach the gospel of Christ, first to Jews and then to Gentiles. These original preachers were not church officials or ordained men, but laymen who had a heart for evangelism. Apparently they were in no way tied to the Christian headquarters in Jerusalem. They preached and many souls were saved. Because these Christians shared

the life of Christ, they began to meet together in informal groups, exercising their spiritual gifts. However, they were not yet an official local church. When the Apostles in the church at Jerusalem heard what was happening in Antioch, they sent Barnabas as the first official pastor of the groups (Acts 11:22). They became an official local church when elders were ordained. As the work was organized and grew numerically, there was a need for an associate pastor, so Barnabas went and sought out Saul of Tarsus (the Apostle Paul) and they ministered for one year together at Antioch. The church at Antioch grew strong and became well established. Then the Spirit of God began to prompt them about carrying the good news of Christ to the ends of the world. It must have been several years before they were able to take on any real missionary commitment. Without a strong local church home base, it is quite likely that any missions effort from that church will fail or be terribly weak.

There is no evidence that the local church at Antioch had to get permission from the local church in Jerusalem before they could get involved in an active missionary program. It seems in the case of missions that the church in Antioch operated quite independently of the church in Jerusalem. While there was a loving concern and a fellowship association with the church in Jerusalem, it seems that the church at Antioch was an indigenous church, responsible for its own program to reach the world for Christ. The first missionaries were sent out by God and the local church and these missionaries returned to Antioch to make a report of their activity in Gentile lands. "But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching with many others also the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:35). Whatever else we may say about missions, we must admit that the first organized missionary effort was local church oriented.

This, of course, raises the whole question of para-church organizations. What about evangelistic organizations such as the Billy Graham Association, or mission boards such as Wycliffe Bible Translators, or campus organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, or Bible colleges, or seminaries, or publishing houses? Only a very narrow minded person would fail to recognize that God has greatly used these para-church organizations, and in some ways more effectively than the organized church. If we say that God has only ordained the local church as the means to accomplish His work on earth, then we must say that all para-church organizations are not legitimate and not of God. If, on the other hand, we see no place for the organized local church and believe in a laissez faire type of Christianity with no emphasis upon central control, then we have virtually wiped out the teaching of the New Testament on the primacy of the local church. Perhaps there is an answer, but it is painful for both the local church and the para-church and will mean adjustments in both camps. The church at Antioch was founded by lay preachers. These Christians were gathering together and sharing the life of Christ before there was ever any official organization in a local church. These lay evangelists were doing the work of a para-church organization. Later, Barnabas was sent to Antioch to ordain elders and officially establish the church. It seems that the biblical position is that God has ordained the local church as the primary means, or base, for all Christian activity, but para-church organizations can function as evangelistic arms of the local church. However, para-church movements must never function as a local church, must seek ultimately to establish local churches, and must ultimately filter their converts into local churches with teaching and ruling elders. There is a place for para-church organizations in the evangelization of the world, but converts should be taught and trained in the importance of the local church and encouraged to unite with a local church. Whenever a para-church organization sees a local church doing the job as well as they, the para-church organization should move on to some other field of labor for Christ. At no time should a local church support para-church organizations which are anti-local church in action or attitude. If the local church must support missionaries going into a para-church situation, then they should only support those missionaries who will place a strong emphasis on the local church.

“. . . Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.” -- From the Greek text, we see that the first three of these men had the spiritual gift of prophecy and the last two the gift of teacher. Barnabas was a wealthy businessman who gave up his business and became a preacher and leader in the church. Simeon was a black man, for “Niger” means “swarthy complexion” or “black.” Lucius may have been one of the original founders of the church at Antioch and later became a faithful co-laborer with the Apostle Paul. Manaen was a foster brother of Herod the Great, being of royalty, who was converted to Christ. Finally, there was Saul, a converted Pharisee. In this group we have a collection of people from all walks of life, fellowshipping in the same local church and leading that local church. It is truly amazing how God takes the most unlikely people, saves them, and then makes them leaders in the local church.

Priority of the Missionary Call (13:2)

“And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, . . .” -- The missionary call came to Barnabas and Paul while they were ministering and fasting. The word “ministering” here denotes a performance of official duties of any kind and was used in the Old Testament to express the priestly functions. These five men were probably doing more than just praying although prayer was part of their life styles as Christian leaders. The fact that they were serving and then received the missionary call has great significance. While these men were performing their spiritual gifts, busy serving Christ in Antioch, the Spirit of God spoke to them. They were being faithful in exercising their gifts where they were and were in a constant attitude of prayer. Then the Holy Spirit spoke to them. We know it is easier to steer a ship or car when it is moving so the Holy Spirit can more readily communicate with those who are moving for God.

This teaches us that a missionary must be a faithful witness at home before he goes to a foreign field to preach. If he is a failure at home, he will be a failure on the field.

These men were developing their spiritual gifts. They did not sit around and wait for a bolt of lightening to hit them from heaven. They did not hole up in a cave in order for God to speak to them. They were carrying out their ministries faithfully as unto the Lord and God spoke to them.

They undoubtedly were concerned about their place in the Great Commission and taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. This local church at Antioch had a vision for world missions and was praying about their part in the Great Commission. The local church in Jerusalem, however, was not really a missionary minded church. They were so bogged down in legalism and tradition that they were not as effective as they could have been for Christ. They did not have the same vision as the church in Antioch. Antioch Christians had a vision and they ministered, fasted and prayed about what they could do to reach the world for Christ.

Notice also they were “ministering to the Lord.” Any man in full-time Christian service must learn to do his work unto the Lord and not unto men. Men pleasers will have their ministries shipwrecked.

“. . . the Holy Spirit said, . . .” -- We do not know for sure how the Holy Spirit spoke to these five men. Perhaps He spoke through one of the prophets. Perhaps He just gave a sense of peace to all who were there. However the Holy Spirit spoke to these five men, there was unanimous agreement. They all had the mind of the Spirit on this matter. When they all agreed, they knew it was the will of God. In light of this verse, I have often wondered if there should be total, unanimous agreement on the board of elders in a local church before any extensions of ministry are undertaken.

Notice very carefully, it was not the Apostles, elders, deacons or congregation who gave Paul and Barnabas instructions to go on the missionary journey, but God the Holy Spirit. He spoke subjectively to the minds and hearts of Barnabas and Paul that they were to go and the other three leaders had this same conviction.

The first step in becoming a missionary or any full-time worker is an inner conviction from God that He has called you to this work. In the missionary call, the initiation is with the Holy Spirit. The local church must never send people arbitrarily to the mission field who think it would be nice to serve Christ in another country. No, there must be an inner conviction that one has been called to this task. A person can not just volunteer his services to the mission field. No, there must be Holy Spirit conviction that one is divinely called. There must always be that subjective confidence that one has been called. If you have this call, you know it. If you don't have it, pray for it. If you don't get it, don't worry about it and serve the Lord faithfully wherever you are.

The call to full-time Christian service which includes the missionary call is realized through a study of the Bible, through trusting in God to open and close doors, through the inward persuasion of the Holy Spirit, and through a commitment of the life to do whatever God calls to do. God has given us the command to go and each one of us should pray and ask God to send us. When we do, He will give us peace one way or the other.

My own call to the ministry has a definite subjective side to it. I am called to the ministry and this inner conviction

has never left me (although in times of discouragement I think about quitting but I could never do it). I often thought about being a minister before I was converted to Christ which indicates that God may have been working in me about the ministry before He saved me (although at that time I was living like any pagan American.) After trusting Christ as my personal Lord and Savior, God began to give me an insatiable hunger for the Scriptures. He also gave me an inner conviction that He wanted me in the ministry. There was no bolt of lightning or great emotional experience, but there was a growing conviction that I could not shake. Whenever I thought about doing anything else, this subjective feeling of service to Christ nagged at me. Finally, I dedicated myself to full-time Christian service by myself in a time of prayer. God has proven to me hundreds of times that this is His will for my life.

I felt my first obligation. as a called minister was to commit myself to some kind of missionary work. Right after I finished my Master's degree at Dallas Theological Seminary, I had all the papers signed to go with the Campus Crusade for Christ. Through a particular circumstance, I had a definite conviction I was not to go with this organization. I tore up the application and decided to go on for my Doctor's degree.

Five years later, after my graduation from my doctorate program, I still sensed my obligation ,to the mission field. I applied to FEBIAS (Far Eastern Bible Institute and Seminary) hoping to become a teacher in the seminary which was in the Philippines. My family and I were ready to go, but God closed the door, for the mission board would not accept me. They thought I was too radical and would rock the boat at the seminary.

God has called me to full-time ministry, but not to the foreign mission field. He called me to be a pastor-teacher and has sent me to Grace Church. I am satisfied with His calling and will do all I can to further the cause of foreign missions, for my heart is there even though my field of calling is America.

“... Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” -- Barnabas and Paul were set apart by the Holy Spirit to do a special work for God. They were to be the first official missionaries to the Gentile nations. God not only sovereignly chose the men He wanted to be His missionaries but He chose the work they were to do. If God touches anyone to be a missionary, He always provides the place of service. For instance, when Adoniram Judson started to go to India, God directed his steps to Burma. When the father of modern missions, William Carey, planned to go to the South Seas, the Holy Spirit directed him to India. God always gets the right people in the right places because He has a work He wants to do in this world. Every person whom God calls to the mission field gets to the mission field and they are effective. Those who drop out were never called to be missionaries and were duped by some emotional response to commit to missionary work.

Notice that Barnabas and Saul were “set apart unto Me.” They were no different than the other three or any Christian, but they were called and equipped to a special kind of service. Ministers and missionaries in one sense are different than the ordinary Christian because they have been set apart to full-time Christian work.

When the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Paul, He called the very best of the five to be His missionaries. The obvious conclusion is that the Holy Spirit calls the best not the spiritual drop-outs to the mission field. Quite often people think that if a person can not cut it as a Christian in our American society that person can be sent to the mission field where he will be effective. Nonsense! God calls and sends the very best to do missionary work! It always takes special people to do a special work for Christ.

The church at Antioch lost two-fifths of its leadership to missions but they were really gaining. They were reproducing through Barnabas and Paul in the winning of souls and in the propagation of their philosophy of missions in new established local churches.

God called two of the five to go and called three of the five to stay home. Both groups knew they were in the will of the Lord. Those who stayed were just as precious to the Lord as those who went out. God calls some of His people into missionary work and He calls others to stay home and pray and give to missions that the gospel may go forward.

Have we prayed and honestly asked God for His will? Are we ready to go if God calls us? Are you convinced that if God calls you, this will be the most exciting life for you?

John G. Paton, the great missionary to the New Hebrides, had a subjective calling to the ministry of missions. A synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Scotland was looking for a missionary to join the Rev. John Inglis in New Hebrides. They took a poll of the synod in the hope that the votes of the members would reveal one who should go. When the votes were counted, it was seen that the action was inconclusive. And as the vote tabulation came in, a cloud of sadness appeared to fall over all the synod. Then the Lord began to speak to John Paton in his inner conscience, "Since none better qualified can be gotten, rise and offer yourself." Paton says there was an overpowering impulse to answer aloud, "Here am I, send me." He went on to say, "I was dreadfully afraid . . . and yet I felt a growing assurance that this was the call of God to His servant and . . . the voice within me sounded like the voice of God."

PREPARATION OF MISSIONARIES (Acts 13:3)

Petition (13:3a)

"Then when they had fasted and prayed . . ." -- After the Holy Spirit had called Barnabas and Paul to missionary work, then the local church at Antioch really got down to prayer. They were not approving God's will. They were simply cooperating in God's call. They were praying for God's blessing on these missionaries. They believed in prayer for missionaries. They not only prayed, they fasted. This was a praying church. The leaders prayed and the people prayed. There can never be an effective missionary church unless there is a praying church. The church must pray for God to speak to the congregation about missions, trusting God to pick out and touch some for missionary work. A church is not really missionary minded unless people are being called by God into full-time Christian work. A missionary church prays for the missionaries on the field. Whatever else a missionary church may be, it is first and foremost a praying church which pleads with God for the salvation of souls and the raising of laborers for the reaching of the lost masses in this world. "And seeing the multitudes He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and downcast like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest'" (Matt. 9:36-38).

These Antiochian Christians also fasted when they prayed. Fasting is biblical and it is done in the Bible when there is a deep spiritual concern. Fasting is done so one can forego the normal demands of life in order to concentrate for a time on finding what God wants, and to pray that what He wants will be accomplished. Apparently God recognizes a fasting and praying Christian or local church, and it pleases God when we deny our bodies everything for a few hours except our precious thoughts of Jesus Christ and His will for us and others.

In this section of Scripture, we are not told that Barnabas and Paul went to six months of missionary training before they left on their missionary journey. Both of these men had been faithful in the ministry for over ten years and were successful. They were proven veterans and needed no training. They needed only the power of the Holy Spirit to anoint their ministries. We see that the Holy Spirit took trained men, seasoned veterans, and called them to the mission field. He did not take a couple of young rookies with no training. What was their preparation for this missionary journey? Prayer, prayer and more prayer! They knew that if God went before them, nothing could stop them, but if God did not bless them, all their efforts would amount to nothing.

Identification (13b)

This laying on of hands had no magical powers, but it was merely an expression of the Antiochian Christians with these two men as they started the work of world evangelism. While the leaders (elders) of the local church probably did the actual laying on of hands, this act was representative of the whole body of believers at Antioch. The whole church was involved. They acted as one, identifying themselves with the work of Barnabas and Paul. This was their way of approving the work of these missionaries and indicating that they would be with them in prayer and financial support when necessary. The church sent them out with the unity and harmony of the whole church behind them. These two missionaries knew that the local church was with them and behind them in this new venture of organized missionary work to the ends of the earth. This must have given Barnabas and Paul a great feeling of warmth, love and security, for surely they must have had fears about this new venture.

CONCLUSION

Saved

For those who are already Christians, I want to ask you several questions. Have you honestly asked God to call you into full-time Christian work and for Him to make it clear to you that this is God's will for your life? He must call you, but are you asking Him to do so? If God gives you a subjective inner conviction that He is calling you, are you ready to do His will at any cost? Anyone who is called to go into full-time Christian work will be expected to deny himself. If God does bring this inner conviction to full time service, are you willing to let go and trust Christ alone to lead you?

Unsaved

For you who are not Christians, why do you suppose missionaries go to other countries and brave all kinds of hardships? They go to tell others about Jesus Christ. They are convinced and commissioned by God to declare the message of Jesus Christ who died for sinners and rose from the dead. They declare Christ alone as the only way to get sins forgiven, receive eternal life and gain entrance into heaven. Missionaries are convinced that all men are in need of Christ. They are convinced that the destinies of men are hanging in the balance. They are dealing with life and death issues. My friend, are you in need of Christ? Christ can come into your life and wipe away your past sins and grant you eternal life which leads to a more abundant earthly life. Turn to Christ, bow before Him as your Lord and flee to Him as your Savior. Trusting Christ is being born again, receiving the new life and being made a new creature. Trust Christ and come alive to God.