

Acts 13:1-12, No. 28**“A Missionary Faith”****April 10, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Chapters 13 and 14 of the book of Acts relate the first extensive missionary activity conducted on behalf of the Christian gospel. We cannot say, of course, that Paul was the first Christian missionary. But he is the first of whose missionary work we have a contemporary report. Other apostles almost certainly left the holy land for parts east, west, north, or south to proclaim the good news and to form believers into churches, but we have no firsthand accounts of their labors. We have good reason to believe, for example, that the apostle Thomas went as far east as modern day India preaching and planting churches, but there is no biblical record of his work. Luke has also reported that much evangelism was being done at this time by Christians sharing their faith with friends and acquaintances, but we are given few details and told nothing about how those converts might have been organized into churches. We have also read of Peter's itinerant ministry, but he was not the missionary that Paul was to become. Peter visited already existing churches, strengthening the brethren. No doubt he was an evangelist as well, preaching to those who did not yet believe. But, so far as we know, he never did what we are about to read Paul doing, traveling through Gentile cities preaching Christ to people who had never so much as heard the name of Jesus. It is to Paul that the honor belongs as the first Christian, at least as far as we know, to make his life first a ministry to the unbelieving, to be a “church planter” among the Gentiles. No doubt he had done this kind of work already in the years that had passed since his conversion, but only at this point are we given a record of what he did, of that work for which he would be ever known as “the Apostle to the Gentiles.”

We typically divide Paul's ministry as it is reported in the book of Acts into three missionary journeys – we are about to read the beginning of the first. You will typically find these three “journeys” represented on a map in the back of your Bibles. “Journey” is a fair description so long as we remember 1) that most of his time was spent in cities conducting ministry and that travel took up a comparatively small part of his time, and 2) only on this first journey did Paul move from place to place at a relatively steady pace. In the second and third journeys most of his time was spent in long periods of ministry in two key cities: a year and half in Corinth on the second, three years in Ephesus on the third. In other words, “journey” is not perhaps the most appropriate term for what is described in Acts. In fact, even on his first journey, Paul's strategy seems to have been to remain in a place long enough to see a new Christian community established, unless, as was sometimes the case, he was forced to leave by the opposition he encountered. Upon his departure he hurried on to the next town.

In any case, Luke has reached a decisive turning point in his narrative. As the Lord Jesus had prophesied before leaving the world, the gospel had now been preached in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Now the vista opens more widely to extend the gospel's horizon to the ends of the earth.

Text Comment

- v.1 The church in Antioch had five leaders though Luke tells us tantalizingly little about them. Were they all prophets and teachers, or were some prophets and some teachers? And what would have been the practical difference in any case? Antioch was a big city and correspondingly its population and so the population of the church was cosmopolitan, ethnically and culturally diverse.
- Simeon is a Jewish name and his other name, Niger, is a Latin word meaning “black” or “dark-complexioned.” The Latin name probably means he was a black African. Some have also wondered whether this was the Simeon who had been compelled to carry the Lord’s cross to the place of his crucifixion, since that Simeon was also from Cyrene in North Africa and is also mentioned in Luke’s Gospel. Lucius of Cyrene, another African, may have been one of the founders of the Antioch church, given what Luke says in 11:20. Manaen, the Greek form of the Hebrew name Menahem was Herod Antipas’ foster brother and boyhood friend. This was not the Herod of the end of chapter 12, Herod Agrippa, but the Herod who ruled Galilee from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39, the Herod who executed John the Baptist and who interviewed the Lord Jesus the morning of his crucifixion. Luke actually shows a special interest in this Herod in his Gospel and it has been supposed that this interest may stem from his acquaintance with this Manaen who would have, it seems likely, furnished Luke with an insider’s account of Herod’s character and of events during his reign. This is, by the way, another dramatic and striking demonstration of the sovereignty of divine grace. Two boys were raised in the same home: one became an evil king, a murderer; the other a leader of the Christian church in Antioch!
- v.2 To precisely what work? Luke doesn’t say and, so far as we know, the Lord’s call was quite general. A lot was left to the good sense of the men themselves. We already learned in 9:15 that Saul or Paul’s call was to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles.
- v.3 The church seemed to recognize that something of great importance was afoot, hence the fasting and prayer. As is still today our doctrine of ordination, it is the Holy Spirit who calls and it is the church that recognizes and confirms that call. There must be both, not one or the other as has far too frequently been the case: either the church acting without any demonstrable involvement by the Holy Spirit or a man claiming a call by the Holy Spirit with no confirmation by the church.
- v.5 Here the emphasis falls upon the direction of the Holy Spirit, but, again, we are not told how that direction was given. This is the John Mark of 12:12 and 25.
- v.6 It is entirely a coincidence. Jesus was in fact a very common Hebrew name, a Jewish name, the equivalent of Joshua; so Bar-Jesus has nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth. “Bar” is Aramaic for “son of”.
- v.7 That Paulus was an intelligent man is another of the many eye-witness touches in Luke’s narrative. It was the kind of interesting detail that would be remembered by Paul many years later as he recollected these events to Luke. We might suspect that if he were so intelligent he wouldn’t have given Bar-Jesus the time of day. But if our own world today

is any indication, intelligent people can harbor superstitions of every kind and while reasonable about many things can seriously entertain utter nonsense at the same time. It was Cicero, a contemporary of Paul, who would later say that there is no idea so ridiculous that it hasn't been believed by some philosopher at one time or another.

- v.9 *Here is the moment of the name-change.* From this point it will be Paul – the Greco-Roman name – not Saul – the Jewish name. What is in a name?" we may ask. But sometimes a lot! He was to be the apostle to the Gentiles so it was fitting that he used and became known by his Greco-Roman name. And God vindicated that name! It has long been pointed out that for many generations now we have called our sons Paul and our dogs Nero!
- v.11 Any reader of Acts realizes immediately that what Paul said to Elymas and what he did to Elymas was very like what the Lord had said and done to Paul on the road to Damascus. So, people also have long wondered if Elymas also came to faith in Jesus as Paul had done when blinded by the hand of God. In any case Paul had a power that Elymas could only dream of.

We may wish for such demonstrations of the Spirit's power in our evangelistic work, but remember even in Acts they are comparatively rare. What is clear is that the Holy Spirit was at work opening hearts to Paul's message. The miracles that did happen tend to occur when the gospel made its way into a new territory. Still, even here it is belief in the message not amazement at the wonder that is the critical thing.

Now we have said many times already that in choosing what to record in his narrative of early Christian history, Luke has been highly selective. He decided to concentrate on Peter and Paul and to leave unmentioned the ministries of the other apostles. He concentrated on the gradual movement of the gospel westward toward Rome, not eastward, though we know the church was growing to the east as well. In fact at the time of the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., more Christians lived east of the Holy Land than lived west of it.

But what is even more significant is that in choosing what to record Luke very clearly concentrated on representative facts and events. By that I mean that in Luke's narrative we meet not only the earliest church, we meet the Christian church as it has always been and will always be. So we learn that the church had from the beginning a ministry of word and sacrament. We learn that the believers gathered for fellowship and prayer. We learn that Christians were sharing their faith with their friends and neighbors. We learn that they were generous in their care of the poor. We learn that they faced opposition and sometimes fierce persecution with courage and aplomb. We learn that they gathered into their churches people of various languages, cultures, and ethnicity. In chapters to come we will learn that they observed Sunday as the Lord's Day and that it was on Sunday that they offered their weekly corporate worship to God. All of that and more we find in Luke's early church history, *but all of that we also find to be characteristic of the life of the Christian church in the world ever since.* Christians and Christian churches have not only learned *how* the church came to be after Pentecost but have learned *what* the church is always to be. They have found their marching orders in the book of Acts. They have understood that the church that Luke has described in its early years *is the church as it ought to be.*

That may be why Luke also gives us so little detail about many things of which we would love to know more. Precisely how were prophets distinguished from teachers in Antioch? How did the Holy Spirit communicate to the church that he wanted them to set apart Paul and Barnabas? How did those five men become leaders in the Antioch church in the first place, and so on? What we learn in Acts are the principals and practices, the convictions and commitments that must always govern the life of Christ's church in the world. The rest may change from time to time and place to place. If, for example, the Christian church was not always to have prophets in her midst, there was little need to have elaborate instruction on what a prophet was, how a prophet was identified, what a prophet's responsibilities were.

Well, we have come in Acts 13 to another of these representative or paradigmatic events in Luke's narrative. We learned at the very outset of the book that the disciples of Jesus Christ were to take the gospel to the four corners of the earth. Now we learn an important lesson in *how that is to be done*. It is not, of course, the whole story, but this early narrative would prove to be a large part of the story of the conquest of the gospel over the two-thousand years from that time to this.

The church was to send missionaries to unreached peoples and places. And here we not only see that being done but are given some fabulously important and interesting lessons in *how* it is to be done.

I. The first thing we observe is that a missionary – the Christian term of art for such people as Paul and Barnabas and all who have followed in their train through the ages – is someone commissioned and sent by the Christian church.

It is highly interesting and obviously important that though Paul had already had a spectacular experience of a divine calling and Barnabas had been involved in Christian ministry in Jerusalem since the days immediately following Pentecost, we are nevertheless told with some emphasis that they were *set apart* for the work of itinerant evangelism and church planting by the leadership and the congregation of the church in Antioch. It wouldn't have surprised us at all simply to read that Paul and Barnabas decided that the church in Antioch being well-established and well-led, it was time to take the gospel elsewhere. But Luke makes a special point of telling us that the Holy Spirit interrupted their work in the great city and had the church set them apart for new work.

Why do we get verses 1-3 in chapter 13? Because a pattern is being established. The church will send her missionaries; ordinarily they will not decide for themselves to plant churches in hitherto unevangelized populations. The church will select the people for this work, will commission them, and, presumably – though this is more assumed than stated – the church will fund and in other ways support their work. Surely it is fair to conclude that when the church "sent them off," as we read it did in v. 3, it didn't fail to make provision for the expenses of their travel, food, and lodging.

And so it would be throughout the ages to come. Missionaries would be *commissioned gospel workers* and their commission would come from the church, individual churches or later either denominations or groups of churches acting in concert.

Now, to be sure, there are many ways of becoming a Christian. One can become a Christian through the faithful witness and example of a Christian friend or acquaintance. One can become a Christian reading the Bible or listening to Christian radio or watching Christian television. One can become a Christian listening to a preacher in a Christian church. And, of course, vast multitudes have become Christians through the spiritual nurture, instruction, and example of their Christian home. But, by and large – there are exceptions of course – if you are a person who belongs to a non-Christian community, if you have little or no contact with Christians, if there are no Christian churches in your town or city, to become a Christian *you need a missionary*, someone sent for the explicit purpose of making Christ known to those who do not know him.

And here we learn that it is the church's responsibility to be sending such people to such places. We may take this for granted, but only because since Acts 13 it has everywhere and always been the practice of the church to commission and to send missionaries to unreached people. Indeed, it is not too much to say that a very large part of the story of the Christian church in the world since the days of the apostles has been the story of the missionaries the church has sent to the four corners of the earth.

To be sure, the world is a different place today than it was two-centuries ago. Africa now has an immense Christian church, growing larger by the day. The last statistic we heard was that 14,000 people are added to the church in Africa every single day. It does not need missionaries from other parts of the world to bring the gospel to the peoples of Africa. But that is true only because two hundred years ago and for a century and a half thereafter the church commissioned thousands of missionaries to take the gospel to Africans who had never heard the good news of Jesus Christ and eternal life. The fruit of their work through long years is the great spiritual harvest among Africans today. Early on Africa needed missionaries. Now African churches, like all Christian churches before them, are sending their own missionaries to people yet to be reached.

II. The second thing we observe is that missionaries invariably operate with a plan, a strategy by which to meet and evangelize the unsaved and form them into churches.

The church sent them off and they left Antioch, one thing is very clear: they didn't walk thirteen miles to the port of Seleucia, flip a coin, and in that way choose a boat and a destination. We are not told at this point precisely what plans they had, both short term and long term, but that they had a plan is clear and becomes still clearer as we proceed.

They went first to Cyprus, the island tucked into that near corner of the Mediterranean Sea. Why Cyprus? Well it was an obvious choice since Barnabas was himself a Cypriot, as we learned way back in Acts 4:36. They started in familiar territory. They got their feet wet in a place Barnabas was thoroughly familiar with. From there, as we will read next time, they would travel into the

hinterland of Asia Minor, into what was the Roman province of Galatia. And from there, over time, they would make their way westward toward Rome, the capital of the world.

This was all territory with which Paul would have been familiar, growing up as he had not far away in Tarsus in the nearby province of Cilicia. What is more Paul and Barnabas, though Jews, were Greek speakers. Indeed, virtually all educated people of that world spoke Greek. Even the Romans preferred Greek to Latin, as the language of cultured people. When Julius Caesar was stabbed in the Senate, if he said anything at all to express his sense of personal betrayal, it was not, “Et tu, Brute?” as Shakespeare had it, Latin for “And you as well Brutus?” He would have said something like “kai su, teknon?” Greek for, “Even you, my son?” Thus it was that everywhere they went they could communicate easily without having to learn the local language. I myself wonder if this is why we do not have a firsthand report of missionary work to the East. It was all in foreign languages and had to be done more slowly and carefully. The conversations they had with Sergius Paulus and with Bar-Jesus were almost certainly held in Greek.

What is more, upon entering a town or city they went first to the Jewish synagogues, as we read in v. 5. This would be Paul’s strategy throughout his missionary career and, so far as we know, for largely pragmatic reasons. [Peterson, 379] The Jews would welcome him because he was a Jew, they would understand his message because his technique was to demonstrate from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah, and, by this time, many of them would have heard something of Jesus themselves. They began, in other words, with the low-hanging fruit. Once there was a fledgling community of Christian believers, the Gentiles could be evangelized, added to the number, and a church built up. It is not as clear in these opening verses of chapter 13, but Paul was always interested in leaving a functioning church behind him when he moved on. And he had a plan as to how best to do that. Jewish Christians would know all about elders, would be used to weekly services, would be familiar with the teaching of the Bible and so on. Once they understood how Jesus fit into the biblical narrative, the infant church could survive after the apostles had moved on.

Interestingly, Paul and Barnabas took along an assistant, John Mark, Barnabas’ nephew. This is interesting for several reasons. First, he is not mentioned as having been set apart by the church in Antioch for missionary work. So far as we can tell, it was Paul and Barnabas’ decision to add the younger man to their party. Second, we aren’t told precisely what it was that John Mark did. But clearly Paul and Barnabas were thinking ahead about what their work would entail and how it would be done and thought another man would be useful. It is the sort of things missionaries have done ever since: lay plans to make the most effective use of their opportunities, chose the right people to accompany them, and so on. We take this for granted nowadays, but when we meet missionaries we expect to hear something of their plan; how they intend to evangelize or to plant churches or contribute to existing gospel work in some other way. Already at the very beginning we learn that Missionaries are planners, strategizers, just as Paul and Barnabas were.

III. The third thing we observe is that missionaries are entrusted with a message, here summed up as “the word of God,” first in v. 5, then in v. 7, and finally once more in v. 12.

Christian missionaries have been very inventive people, often going where no one of their race or language or background has ever gone before and learning to do what no one of their

background had ever done before, learning strange new languages, learning how to survive in strange and alien, often in *hostile* environments. But they were not inventors of their message. They preach today the same message that Paul and Barnabas preached. They build the church on the same foundation upon which the apostles built it in their day.

The Lord, in his great commission, had ordered his followers to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and so they did and so they have continued to do through the ages*. So fundamental is this unchanging message to missionary enterprise, so central to everything that missionaries are and do, so emphatically the reason for their ministry, that even here, after Paul had miraculously blinded Bar-Jesus in the presence of Sergius Paulus, we read that Paulus was astonished, not so much at what he had seen Paul do, but “at the teaching of the Lord.”

Here was a message he had never heard before and one that opened up an entirely new world to him. As he heard Paul explain it, he realized at once that this was the truth, the truth about everything, the truth he had been looking for all his life. It was the message that Paul had concentrated on in his conversation with Paulus and the official apparently had no difficulty realizing that it was this news, this proclamation of salvation from sin and death through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God that had brought Paul to his doorstep.

And so it would be through the ages since. Missionaries have come to people with the news about Jesus – who he was and what he had done – and encouraged people to believe that their hope of life here and forever rested on their response to this announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord and savior. They have called upon them to submit their hearts and lives to the mastery and the lordship of Jesus Christ.

As one famous missionary to India once put it.

“Our task is to go on saying to the Muslim with infinite patience, ‘Sir, consider Jesus.’ We have no other message.... It is not the case that the Muslim has seen Jesus of Nazareth and has rejected him; he has never seen him.”

You may remember Sundar Singh, one of the great Christians of the 20th century, indeed of Christian history, the Indian convert to Christianity who had grown up hating Christianity as a foreign religion, alien to his country and his people. But then when 16 years of age he was suddenly and powerfully was converted to Christ. He became himself a missionary, traveling widely in India, Afghanistan, Tibet, Burma, and elsewhere preaching and teaching the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. On one such occasion he visited a Hindu college and was challenged rather aggressively by a lecturer who asked him what he had found in Christianity that he did not have in his old religion. “I have Christ,” he replied.

“Yes, I know,” continued the lecturer impatiently, “but what particular principle or doctrine have you found that you did not have before.” “The particular thing I have found,” replied Sundar Singh, “is [Jesus] Christ.” And it was of Christ that Singh preached as he traveled, just as Paul had done there in Cyprus in town after town, synagogue after synagogue, and to every Gentile

with whom he could begin a conversation; and just as we will see him doing in the rest of chapter 13. [Cited in Stott, *Incomparable Christ*, 16]

Such is a Christian missionary: an emissary of Jesus Christ, sent by the Christian church herself, who thoughtfully, intentionally, and according to plan makes Christ known to those who do not know him and establishes churches where there were none before.

Given that Jesus Christ is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, is there, could there be, a more honored office in the world. And here in Luke 13 we have its biblical beginnings. I find it thrilling and phenomenally interesting, as I hope you do, that what Paul and Barnabas began to do here, Christian missionaries have been doing ever since, and they have been doing it in fundamentally the same way Paul and Barnabas did it as the first Christian missionaries. And so it will continue, Jesus said, until the gospel has been preached everywhere, and then the end will come.