

Acts 12:25-13:12 Setting up a Missionary Society

Introduction

The Church at Antioch had a deserved reputation of being enthusiastic about witnessing for Jesus. They had a passion for telling people about Jesus. It was in this congregation that the first Gentiles were converted to the Christian faith. They were not content to restrict the good news being presented to their fellow Jews; in contrast to the other early churches their members took the bold step of inviting people to meet Jesus from other ethnic and different cultural backgrounds. People were attending their services who may have dressed differently; ate different types of food and had a range of different social attitudes and values. Yet their willingness to build bridges to people who needed Jesus was exemplary. I am sure that there were many mistakes made, in terms of communication, when their hearers misunderstood the gospel they were sharing. Yet the rejection of the message that would have been experienced by some of these Christians did not put them off from seeking to share their faith (Acts 11:20-21). What is more they were also aware of the needs of fellow Christians in neighbouring countries and in the face of a natural disaster (famine) were determined to do what they could to alleviate the suffering by providing a financial gift that enabled some people in Judea to be spared the potential disaster and loss of life so common when major famines occur (Acts 11:29-30). In the light of this innovative, visionary and compassionate Christian ministry at home it is no surprise at all that this congregation was the first to choose to participate in overseas mission. They had already been some people from other countries who had been converted on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem and who would have taken to gospel home with them to share with family, friends and neighbours (Acts 2). Others had been dispersed to other communities in Judea and Samaria as a result of the persecution that had arisen after the murder of Stephen (Acts 8:1-5). Yet this congregation in Syria gains the plaudits for its free choice to pray and plan for overseas evangelism. They were familiar with Jesus' words in Acts 1:8: *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* What is equally important is that they shared His passion for transmitting that good news to people beyond the boundaries of their own country. Do you also share Jesus' vision for a lost world? I hope each Christian here today can say 'yes' to this question.

1. The Church in Antioch (Acts 12:25-13:3)

(a) Its leaders (Acts 12:25-13:1) ²⁵*When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. ¹In 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* This church had grown at a phenomenal pace. The records of later church history show that it became a mega-church like some of those in South Korea today. It was estimated that it had around 100,000 members during the reign of Roman Emperor Theodosius I (347-395AD). Antioch was a city of over 300,000 people, one of the largest cities in the ancient world. Its population comprised of people of many nationalities and the Church would be reflective of the ethnic mix of the wider community. The names of the five pastors –here called *prophets and teachers*- reflect this diversity.

Barnabas (Acts 4:36: ³⁶*Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement)*) was a Cypriot, born in a staunchly Jewish family. He was accorded the status of a Levite and, as a result, was allowed to participate in temple services when in Jerusalem. It is most likely that he had played a prominent role in his local synagogue in Cyprus also. He was a warm-hearted man and an inspirational leader. He was a gifted bridge-builder who sought to equip and encourage other people for their ministries for God. It is probable that he had been a key leader in the Jerusalem congregation who had been gifted to the newer church at Antioch to provide wise and constructive leadership in its crucial early years (Acts 11:22-24). This wise man was on the lookout for younger people whose gifts could be used and developed in God's service. May those of us who are older find ways to encourage and support our younger members. I thank the Lord for what does happen behind the scenes in this church, but we can always be on the lookout to do even better for the Lord. **Simon called Niger** was a black African who had been based in Cyrene (Libya). It is not impossible that he was the man who was compelled to carry Jesus' cross (Luke 23:26), on the day Jesus was crucified. This is even more plausible when it is recognised that his family were known to various Christians in the Early Church. Mark 15:21 refers to Simon as *the father of Alexander and Rufus* and Paul rather cryptically in Romans 16:13 declares: *Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too.* The third leader was **Lucius**, a North African man who came from Cyrene. The fourth was **Manaen**, who was a close associate (foster-brother?) of Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. It is remarkable that this prominent Edomite (Jordanian today) had come to faith and given up his life of luxury at the court to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. Herod Antipas, who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-29) and who ridiculed Jesus at His mock trial before the crucifixion (Luke 23:7-12) was deeply interested in the gospel but unwilling to pay the price of accepting it. Did Manaen first hear the gospel from the preaching of John the Baptist? This is most probable, but impossible to prove. However, something extraordinary had touched his life causing him to leave everything behind to follow Jesus. The final and possibly the youngest member of the team was **Saul** of Tarsus. Prior to his conversion this fanatical Turkish Jew, Saul, might not even have had any dealings at all with some of the other people in this church, even leaders such as Manaen. What a difference the Gospel has made in his life, breaking down the barriers that separated Jews and Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:14-18 ¹⁴*For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two (Jews and Gentiles) one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in His flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.)* This church was representative of its community in its ethnic diversity. What an ideal place for missionary training! How sad when a church is located in an area of great ethnic diversity that its membership and regular adherents are almost exclusively drawn from one ethnic background. Saul and Barnabas did not expect up to this point that they would be working elsewhere in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. God was working in them and through them so that when new doors of opportunity opened up they would be ready and equipped to cope with the challenges and opportunities that lay before them. God is at work in your life and mine. All the range of life's experiences we have faced can be used to assist other people in the future. What happened to us in the past may have been sad or even plain wrong and inappropriate, but out of the trials through which we have passed God can make us a blessing to other people who are facing similar issues at some point in the future. (b) **Its ministry** (Acts 13:2-3)²*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." ³So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. We know very little about the regular worship services of the Early Christian Church. What brief information we have indicates that they had two services on the Lord's Day –the first in the early morning at around 5am, prior to heading off for work at 6am until 12 noon. This was the most likely service to which outsiders would be invited and where an evangelistic presentation might be made. The late afternoon gathering began with a main meal in the large home where the church met, which was necessary as those church members who were slaves, the majority in many cases, might not have eaten at all or not very well that day. It was followed by a communion service for that Christian community to conclude Sunday together and encourage one another for the rest of the week. Something special was happening in Antioch as this was not an average service or day because they were *worshipping the Lord and fasting* (Acts 13:2). Luke in Acts very carefully selects his material to give not only a precise historical account, but a careful prompt concerning the pattern of worship and witness of church life amongst his readers. Although fasting was a more common practice amongst Jews and followers of Jesus at that time than today, it is worth noting that Luke has included this detail for a reason. I suspect that the whole church were praying and fasting during a time when they were seeking the Lord's guidance and will about some unknown issues. Notice that it is almost certainly the congregation that were engaged in this activity not just the five leaders (John Stott, *Acts*, p. 216, makes this point very clearly). Just as in the congregation at Jerusalem when the deacons were appointed (Acts 6:1-7) the leaders insisted that the whole community of faith took the responsibility for making the decision under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We do not apologise for appointing leaders to carry out those particular responsibilities associated with those ministry positions, but equally we insist that the whole gathered congregation in the church meeting takes the responsibility for the appointment of a minister or deacons; or significant financial choices regarding personnel or premises. Medieval Christianity adopted the hierarchical structures of civil society and a dress code to match. After the Reformation in the 16th Century it was the duty of Bible-based Christians to take a step back and ask: are the doctrines and practices of the church aligned with what Jesus had in mind for His Church or have secular influences from politicians or other rulers had a greater influence than the King of Kings on the way we operate? Notice when Paul and Barnabas came back from their first missionary journey –to whom did they give a report of their work? Acts 14:27 gives us the answer: *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.* The church had set them apart for ministry and they were accountable to that local church at the end of their service abroad. The calling was general not specific at that meeting. The time gap between Acts 13:2-3 and Acts 13:4 which records their departure from Syria was almost certainly weeks or months later rather than days. It is possible that the congregation had been in careful discussion about how to fulfil the Great Commission for overseas mission and wondered whom should be set apart for carrying out this work. If this was the case as seems probable then the guidance from the Holy Spirit in verse two becomes very clear. It was two of their most gifted members who were called to this work. This is no surprise because if a person is unsuitable for leadership in Christian work in the home church then they are even less likely to be effective in another country and culture. This was, therefore, a sacrifice for the church to commission them for this task as well as a big step for these two individual Christian believers. I have no doubt that there was further prayer for these men prior to the commissioning service described in verse three. However, notice again how seriously the whole church prepared for this commissioning: *after they had fasted and prayed, they placed*

their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:3). It was a whole church responsibility to follow the process through, then and now.

2. The Mission in Cyprus (Acts 13:4-12)

(a) **Its strategy** (Acts 13:4-7)⁴*The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus.* ⁵*When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper.* ⁶*They travelled through the whole island until they came to Paphos. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus,* ⁷*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.* These two missionaries went to Seleucia, the nearest port at the mouth of the Orontes river and sailed to Cyprus. They landed at Salamis, a commercial city on the east coast of Cyprus. It was a much smaller place than Antioch, but crucially it was a cosmopolitan city with a wide range of nationalities making their home in that community. They moved from community to community sharing their faith until they arrived in Paphos, a ninety mile trip from east to west on the island, the provincial capital of the island where the Roman governor was based. The pattern of their outreach strategy was to begin with the people with whom they had the most in common – fellow Jews. Acts 13:5 states: *When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues.* The regular adherents and members of the synagogue communities would be familiar with their Bible. Interestingly the Early Church used the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (written in Greek) to make it easier for non-Jewish hearers of the Gospel to understand what they were saying. The Gospel is powerful in changing lives, but it is most effective in the people who already have some connection to its truth—either a previous synagogue (then or church now) attender or a person who was a friend of a believer and who had seen its impact on their daily lives. On this first trip it is most unlikely that any of their meetings were in the open air. They were gaining confidence in communicating their faith in the places of worship where they had been given an opportunity to speak. The same principle applies today. The vast majority of people who come to faith in Christ have had some prior contact with a church or Christians. Over 90% of new believers can identify an individual or individuals who were crucial witnesses for the Lord in their journey to faith. Very few people in the last thirty to forty years have come to faith in major evangelistic events. They have their place but one to one and small group forms of outreach are considerably more effective in our contemporary culture. For centuries the large crowd context would have been predominant—but in the last twenty years small group settings such as *Christianity Explored* or *Alpha* or *Emmaus* or something similar has been much more effective. In every generation the people of God have to ask the hard questions about our outreach strategies –are we relating effectively to the people of our generation in the most suitable way in this cultural context? The biggest challenge for the vast majority of Christians in Western Europe today is to have the confidence to believe that God can use them to lead other people to faith in Christ. In too many congregations five or ten years may pass between people being converted. In these churches the loss of expectation and meaningful prayer to this end can have a devastating effect on their ability to see people come to faith in Christ. Over a four week period in August and September we will have a focus on how we can be

more effective in pointing people to Jesus using a course called *Just Walk across the Room*. There is always a place for general leafleting of an area or distribution of Christian literature, but the most effective forms of witness will be with individuals with whom we already have some kind of contact or relationship. (b) **Its effectiveness** (Acts 13:8-12)⁸*But Elymas the sorcerer (for that is what his name means) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. ⁹Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰"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? ¹¹Now 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. ¹²When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.* (i) **The Reaction** God had sent Barnabas and Saul to Cyprus. Although we don't have the details I think it likely that there were small groups of people in most of the towns with synagogues that they visited who accepted Jesus as their Messiah. At this stage the average synagogue welcomed Jews with a variety of opinions and accommodating those who acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah might not have been a major issue. Within forty years the situation would change. Followers of 'the Nazarene' were banned and a prayer invoking a curse upon such people became common later in the 1st century AD. However, Luke's narrative is heavily condensed. He focused his report on one man, the governor of the island, Sergius Paulus, a Roman proconsul. Luke now highlights the first encounter of a Gentile individual with the Gospel on one of Paul's missionary journeys. He has described Peter's meeting with Cornelius and other Romans in Caesarea (Acts 10-11) and their ground-breaking significance. Here is a man of influence with no synagogue link, no prior exposure to the gospel or any previous known connection with the Jews –except for an apostate Jew, Elymas, who engaged in all kinds of doubtful occult practices! It is Elymas bar Jesus (the name 'Elymas' means 'wise man' or 'sorcerer'; 'bar Jesus' means 'son of salvation' or 'son of the Saviour'. The irony of the situation in the Roman court is not lost on Luke. (ii) **The Responses Elymas** There are two ethnic Jews present each fervently proclaiming their 'gospel'. Elymas, the court entertainer who impressed those present with his occult powers, but now desperately frightened that the governor might believe in the God of the Jews! Sergius Paulus is a superstitious Roman official curious about religion and wanting to know what Saul and Barnabas had been teaching around the island. I have the conviction that the softly spoken Barnabas took the lead with Saul (now called Paul) silently praying and waiting an opportune moment to take part. Whatever tricks Elymas was getting up to they had been working until Paul spoke up and proclaimed how God would decide the outcome of that confrontation: ⁹*Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight at Elymas and said, ¹⁰"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? ¹¹Now 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* (Acts13:9-11). Can you recall another fanatical Jew who had no time for Jesus losing his sight for a time and needing someone to guide him by the hand? Saul himself (Acts 9:1-9)! Isaiah 5:20 declared a judgement on such people from God: *Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and*

light for darkness... The Gospel of Jesus produces a crisis and demands a response not only from this Roman official, but from each one of us. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour –if not why not today? Elymas from his upbringing knew of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but declined to follow their God. He wanted to live life his own way. He would happily have sung with Frank Sinatra ‘My way’ –but that is the way to eternal ruin. The lyric of that most arrogant song include the following: **And now, the end is here** And so I face the final curtain My friend, I'll say it clear I'll state my case, of which I'm certain I've lived a life that's full I travelled each and every highway And more, much more than this, I did it my way... For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught To say the things he truly feels and **not the words of one who kneels** The record shows I took the blows and did it my way! Jesus never forces anyone to follow Him, but provides you and me with the invitation to trust. Him –have you done that? One day all will bow the knee to Him (Philippians 2:10) –do it now and honour King Jesus! **Sergius Paulus** –Acts 13:12 states: ¹²*When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord.* This man had one opportunity to trust the Lord and he took it. He was not afraid of what other people might think, but equally had no idea what it would mean for his future life by trusting Jesus. He would be God’s person in that community. God opens doors for the preaching of His word which no-one can shut. In 1838 Dr Moody Stuart, minister of St Luke’s Church of Scotland congregation in Edinburgh, received a visit from the Hon. Mrs Smith of Dunesk. She came with a gift of 100 guineas (£105) for the Church of Scotland’s Mission to the Jews. The minister declined to accept the money at first, because no such body existed nor had anyone ever proposed in the C. of S. that such an agency be established. She persuaded him to bank the money until it was set up. Later that year such an agency was set up [In her will after she died in 1873 she left £600 to the Free Church of Scotland’s mission to the Jews in Palestine. This cause was founded in 1885 and began work in Tiberias and Safad!] What a lady of faith! Four godly ministers in 1839 set off on a world tour of Jewish communities to see where God would have them set up a mission station. Ill health caused the two older men Dr’s Alexander Black and Alexander Keith to set off home early while Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew Bonar visited more countries. On the boat home sailing along the Danube the virulent fever which had afflicted so many people (malaria) was contracted by these men. This was a city with sixteen thousand Jews but it was controlled by the Archduke Joseph, a fervent Roman Catholic who would not permit Protestants to have a work in his city. However, he had married Archduchess Marie Dorothea of the House of Wurtemberg, a devout Evangelical Christian. On her own knowing no other believers in the city she prayed fervently every day for god to send ministers of the Gospel to her city. Cutting a long story short she opened the way for a mission to begin in Budapest. In May 1840 the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland voted to launch this work [David McDougall, *In Search of Israel*, 1941, pp.21-35]. Two extraordinary women of faith and a team of ministers open to the leading of the Holy Spirit saw God do more than they could have imagined or prayed for! This is our God too. May we have a sense of prayerful expectancy that He can also make our witness effective for the winning of men and women and younger people who need our Saviour. The Church at Antioch was willing to pray, fast and seek God –will we? The members of the church at Antioch were willing to go –if God called them –are you? The members of the Church at Antioch rejoiced when they saw the spiritual harvest that had resulted from their obedience to God –may we be similarly obedient and in God’s time see a mighty response to the Gospel in our generation, Amen.