

Title: This is Missions!
Text: Acts 13.1-12
Theme: The primacy of the gospel and the fruit of the gospel being churches
Series: Acts
Prop Stmtnt: Missions is the spreading of the gospel for the establishment of healthy churches

Read Text:

This morning, Bobby preached in AM service at his church in Ghana. He preached from Luke and we are in the book of Acts. Luke wrote the gospel that bears his name and the book of Acts as a 2-part account to explain what Christianity is and why it is having such an impact. In Luke's gospel we learn who Jesus is and what a right response to him should be (repentance, faith and surrender) and in Acts, we see what happens when people do that. People who follow Jesus form the church. In Acts we are learning about the birth of the church and the spreading of the gospel. When the gospel takes root, it springs up into a church. Luke does not tell us everything that happened in the early days. In fact Luke tells the story of the church by focusing primarily upon two men: Peter and Paul. Peter was prominent in chapters 1-12. But after his miraculous release from prison and death in chapter 12, Peter leaves Jerusalem and we do not hear much more from him because now, the attention shifts to Paul. Paul goes on 3 missionary journeys which are church planting and church strengthening trips followed by his imprisonment. So, the rest of the book of Acts (13-28) can be summarized as 3 trips and jail.

I. The Spirit of God causes and carries out the work of God. (1-4, 9)

Our text focuses upon the role of the Spirit in the mission of the church. This is both fascinating and exciting to witness and to be part of. Let me explain. The Bible begins with God. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1.1), but in the second verse of the Bible we are introduced to the Spirit who was hovering over the face of the waters. The Holy Spirit is consistently presented as the Giver of Life. Here in the very beginning, the Spirit is taking God's creative power and causing it to bring about its intended goal. He broods over, hovers over the waters and helps bring them into form and fashion. The Spirit does the same thing to Mary as Luke is careful and consistent to point out. The Spirit hovers over Mary's waters so to speak and forms in her, the body of Christ. Now, the Spirit is hovering over the church. He is caring, forming, giving life and giving direction to those he has given eternal life to. The Spirit is actively involved in caring for creation (Genesis) and now he is actively involved in caring for the New Creation - the church and does so by causing expansion.

Why Cyprus? We know that Barnabas was from Cyprus and he probably had a desire to go back there. We also know that when the persecution against Christians broke out following the death of Stephen that some of the believers left Jerusalem and went to Cyprus. A possible (probable) part of this story is related to the fact that it was Saul/Paul who helped spearhead the persecution and now it is Paul who is going to build on, encourage and expand the work that these believers began. He was probably eager to embrace these believers that he had once treated as enemies. But, while we can understand those motivations, we have to say that ultimately it is the Spirit of God who directed them. The church was praying and fasting and the Spirit of God commissioned the church to commission Barnabas and Saul. The church fasted and prayed some more and then

sent Barnabas and Saul which is described in v.4 as being sent out by the Holy Spirit. This is so good for us to consider because in our attempt to say what kind of a church we are, we like to say that we are Christ-centered and gospel-focused. That ought to be the case. We say that we are Christ-centered as opposed to being man-centered and we say that we are gospel-focused as opposed to being moralistic and therapeutic. But, we need to remember that all that Christ accomplished through his life, death, resurrection and ascension is applied to us by the Spirit. The Spirit is all over this and stays all over this. The Spirit takes the work of Christ and gives us the eyes to see it, the heart to believe it, applies it to us, seals us with it, and then keeps us in it while forming us by it to make us look more and more like Jesus. The Spirit causes and carries out the work of God. Therefore, the Spirit causes us to be engaged in the work that he is carrying out.

When the church responds in obedience to the word of God, then there is no difference between the work of the church and the work of God. They are one in the same. If you were part of a high-level strategy meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff where it was agreed to carry out a secret mission in Iran, and you were tasked with doing one little part for that mission, you would feel, responsible, empowered, perhaps a bit overwhelmed and humbled, but certainly privileged to have this level of clearance and involvement. But, Iran is not going to be around forever and neither is America. What is going to be around forever is the kingdom of Jesus and the church is expanding the kingdom of Jesus all over this globe. So, here the Spirit of God brings the church of Antioch into a high-level strategy mission and says, "Ok, here's the plan: Barnabas and Saul are going out on mission. Notice that the Spirit of God did not tell Barnabas and Saul about this all by themselves. He told the church. The whole church was involved in this. So, when I say that the Spirit of God causes and carries out the work of God, we should all understand that He does this through the people of God. He does this through the church.

If I received clearance to be part of a high-level strategy meeting by the Joint Chiefs of Staff but that meeting took place on Sunday morning, I wouldn't go, no matter how interesting that would be. You know why? There is more happening here, with the people of God than there. Do you realize how God uses our prayers for our missionaries?

Part of my burden in preaching through the book of Acts is to help us reset our definition and view of the church. This is ground zero for the carrying out of God's plan. There is a war that is going on in the skies around us and the angelic forces are being strengthened by our prayers and worship (Daniel 9). Angels are observing our worship. (1 Cor. 11) The Spirit of God is opening blind eyes and giving people faith to believe and grace to obey and to choose to treasure Him above all. The Spirit of God is preparing people to leave their jobs and comforts and go to other countries to preach the gospel. Does this matter to you? Does this affect us like it should? Ann Ortlund used to say that if we really understood what was going on when the church gathered for worship, the ushers would not be handing out bulletins, but instead would be handing out helmets and seatbelts. She is right! Think about it. In the opening moments of creation, the Spirit is hovering over the waters and essentially saying to myriads of angels who were observing, "watch this! Watch what I do with this, because it is going to absolutely amaze you!!" And Job 38.7 says, it did. They shouted for joy!! Later the Spirit is hovering over Mary and essentially saying to the myriads of angels who were observing, "Watch what I do through her, because this is going to absolutely amaze you and Luke 2.13-14 says it did because those angels were

shouting for joy and telling the shepherds that they needed to see this too. Now, what is going on in the church? The church gathers together and the angels are observing as the Spirit essentially says to them, “watch what I do with this mess. Watch what I do with these people. Watch how I am going to carry out the plan and the Spirit hovers over us, shapes and fashions us, forms us, fills us, deploys us and uses us to carry out the mission of God, and what happens? Well, as we read last week from Revelation 4 and 5, those myriads of angels are around the throne and saying, “you did it!” You redeemed a people from every tribe, language and nation and here they are!” Then we join in the chorus. Mortals join that happy chorus!

Why are we prone to say, “hey, I need to cut out a little early cause I’m meeting a friend for lunch today.” We are prone to do this because we have no idea what is really going on. Let the church at Antioch school us. They may not have had a nice building, clean nurseries, awesome children’s curriculum and a sweet youth ministry. Their logo may have been a bit lame, their website a little glitchy, and the temperature in the gathering room less than ideal. But, when they gathered, they expected to meet with God and God met with them.

So, Barnabas and Saul (and we find out in a bit that John Mark too) went from Antioch to Seleucia (16 miles) because Seleucia is the port city where they boarded a boat and sailed 62 miles to Cyprus, and landed at Salamis. We will pick that up in point 3 and verse 5. But before we do that, do not miss this very obvious point.

II. The Church is called to reproduce other churches. (2)

Evangelism (preaching, teaching, witnessing, and sharing the gospel) produces Church-forming Christians who commit to helping one another look more like Jesus and caring for others. This is what every believer is to be engaged in and therefore our churches are comprised of members, bound together by the gospel who while helping one another look more like Jesus are always looking for ways to share the gospel of Jesus with others, so they can become part of the family. This is part of what it means to be a Christian. The NT does not have a category for someone who is a Christian who is not part of a local church. Churches are called to reproduce other churches by the believers reaching other people who become part of, or help establish local churches. Reaching people in our culture and area is the same as church planting. Reaching people in other countries, contexts, cultures, languages and ethnicities is called missions. Missions is the planting of churches as a result of taking the gospel across ethnic, linguistic and geographic boundaries where these believers are taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded. Let me repeat that. Missions is taking the gospel across ethnic, linguistic and geographic boundaries in order to form churches where believers are taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded.¹

When missions becomes disconnected from the local church it ceases to be missions. Missions is from the church and it is for the church. Cross cultural evangelism that is not done by the church and for the church is not really missions. What is sadly shocking is how many mission agencies fail to understand this. They are often gloriously motivated to see people hear the gospel, but end up stunting and destroying the good they do because they do not read and understand the book of Acts and the epistles. Do not expect campus ministries to produce churches. Do not expect

¹ Definition taken from Andy Johnson’s book on Missions, p.35

mission agencies to produce churches. Do not expect seminaries and bible colleges to produce churches. It is not their job. Do not expect lone-ranger Christians to go off by themselves and produce churches. Churches are called to reproduce churches. Therefore, if you want healthy churches to be planted, we have to be a healthy church. If we want the missionaries that we support to help establish and support healthy local churches full of faithful members, we have to be faithful members. We will reproduce what we are.

III. The Church is formed by the Spirit of God through the Word of God. (5-6a)

Barnabas, Saul and John Mark get off the boat in Salamis and went to the synagogues in the city. The fact that there were synagogues (plural) meant that there was a decent population of Jews who were living there. They went to these synagogues and proclaimed the Word of God. That is, they preached the gospel. Now Luke does not say whether or not there were any results of their preaching. But I am guessing there was substantial gospel fruit for four reasons: 1) When Luke describes the proclamation of the Word of God, it is usually associated with conversions. 2) This is when John Mark is mentioned as assisting them, which quite possibly meant that he assisted them with baptizing and discipling the new believers and 3) Later in chapter 15, Barnabas and John Mark go back to Cyprus in order to encourage and strengthen the believers there. 4) The proconsul, Sergius Paulus summons Barnabas and Saul to come tell him about the Word of God. This leader obviously heard about them, which was quite likely because of the influence they were having on the island and at least in the city of Paphos.

This pattern of preaching the gospel in the synagogues describes their ministry in Cyprus and starting in Salamis they do this throughout the entire island until they get to the city of Paphos. We do not know how long they were there in Cyprus, but it was probably at least a few months. But, the obvious point that we need to see is that the preaching of the Word of God is what the Spirit uses to bring people to faith in Christ who are formed into a church. Again, this is missions.

There are many humanitarian trips that people go on that are compassionate and helpful, like going to areas where they have no clean drinking water and helping them get wells where villages have access to good water. That is a nice thing to do. But, just getting people access to clean drinking water is not missions. Establishing hospitals and clinics are compassionate and helpful, but while it is nice to help people with illness and accidents, it is not in and of itself missions. Please keep in mind that Satan does not care if people go to hell with clean drinking water or not. Getting wells and hospitals are nice, but building a well does not mean that you have done missions. Missions is taking the gospel across ethnic, linguistic and geographic boundaries in order to form churches where believers are taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded.

Now, getting access to clean drinking water and doing medical things for people CAN be part of missions. My son has been on four trips to Cambodia where he participated in helping villages get access to clean drinking water in order that, the missionaries there had long term relationships with those villages in order to present the gospel. The clean drinking water was a means of getting an open door in order to preach the gospel.

As Jews, Barnabas and Saul had access to synagogues where they could go in and preach the gospel. Going into the synagogues was a great strategy and an open door that the Lord provided. My point is that we have to make certain that the missions that we do has as its intention and focus, the proclamation of the Word of God because our mission as a church is to reproduce churches. Not everyone in missions is tasked with being the leader of a church plant. But, everyone in missions needs to be focused on seeing that goal being realized. If I am teaching in a school in Vietnam, I should be doing that in order to present the gospel to these students and other people as well as help start or encourage a local church. If all my kids learn science and math but never hear the gospel, then I am not doing missions.

IV. The Word of God exposes sin and creates faith. (6-12)

This is why doing humanitarian things like digging wells and providing medical care is so much easier than missions. The Word of God exposes sin and that is controversial, offensive and will result in conflict. Look at what happens. Barnabas, Saul and John Mark are obviously having some impact. The proconsul, of this senatorial province of Rome is a man of intelligence. He is interested in what Barnabas and Saul are saying, so he summons them because he wants to hear the Word of God.

At this point a little war breaks out. Like many rulers, Sergius has an advisor who is an astrologer who tries to predict the future or at the very least advise him according to divination when it would most advantageous to do certain things. Some of you remember that Nancy Reagan was in to this sort of thing. It is pagan. The advisor's name is Elymas and when he realizes that his boss, his employer, his access to influence and power is interested in the Word of God, Elymas panics because he knows that if his boss turns to God and his word, then there is no longer any need for Elymas' services. So, this man is doing everything he can to stop Sergius from hearing and believing the gospel.

But Elymas is up against a power that he cannot control and he cannot stop. And Saul, who is now referred to as Paul, "filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, "You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?" Then Paul tells him that he is going to be judged by God for a time by experiencing blindness and immediately he is struck blind. Paul knows what it is like to be blind. And Elymas whose job was to tell his boss secrets, now cannot see. The man who supposedly had access to divine sources is at their mercy. The man who possessed these secret powers is helpless and is seeking people to lead him by the hand. The proconsul sees this and believes because, (notice the text – v.12) "for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord."

The gospel is astonishing.

This is the power of the gospel. This is the power of God's Word. It exposes sin that is no match for the power of God and it causes faith.

Takeaways:

1. Do you expect to meet with God?

2. This is for real and this is for keeps.

Elymas and Sergius represent the two possible responses to the gospel. Either you oppose it and will be judged or you believe it and are saved. There is no middle ground. The fact that Luke names the proconsul is evidence that this leader (well-known) became a well-known Christian.

3. The preaching of the gospel was the emphasis of the ministry, not miracles or other things.

We simply cannot improve on God's Word. Preaching God's Word seems crazy in the moment. Seriously, who is going to listen to this? I think of this Sunday after Sunday. I stand before you, reading from a book that is 2,000 – 3,500 years old and has no pictures. What are the chances? Humanly speaking – 0%. But that is the point.

In Ezekiel 37 God put the prophet Ezekiel in a valley where a terrible slaughter had taken place. The valley was full of human remains that had so decayed that all that was left was bones. And these bones were dry. Meaning, they were good and dead. They had been dead for a long time. There in that inglorious cemetery surrounded by death, God says to Ezekiel – preach! Tell them the Word of the Lord. Tell them to hear the Word of the Lord. But how can dead, dry bones hear? Humanly speaking, they can't! But Ezekiel does it anyway. He preaches God's Word to all of these dead people. And when he does, something starts to happen. These bones start coming together and forming people and then the wind comes and fills them with life and the result is that this valley which had been full of death is now filled with an "exceedingly large army." That, brothers and sisters is the power of God's Word. God's Word created the universe. God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul. God's Word causes dead men to come alive and spiritually dead people to believe. There is nothing so powerful, so effective, so enduring than the Word of God.

We have to be a church that forever treasures the Word of God so that our missions are marked by the preaching of the Word of God so that we reproduce churches that are centered around the Word of God because nothing else will save.