

Acts 13:1-12
The First Missions Convert
by Grover Gunn
pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church
Jackson, TN

During the Korean War, Baker Company was once cut off from the rest of its regiment by an enemy advance. Regiment headquarters repeatedly tried to communicate with this missing unit, but for hours no word was heard. Finally a weak signal was received.

“Baker Company, do you read me?”

“This is Baker Company.”

“What is your situation?”

“The enemy is to the east of us,
the enemy is to the west of us,
the enemy is to the north of us,
the enemy is to the south of us.

And we’re not going to let them escape this time.”

That bold confidence in the face of overwhelming odds is also found in the early church in the book of Acts. The church was surrounded by a hostile pagan world. And some in the church had a vision for conquering the world for Christ through the power of the gospel message combined with the work of the Holy Spirit.

“The enemy is to the east of us,
the enemy is to the west of us,
the enemy is to the north of us,

the enemy is to the south of us.

And we're not going to let them escape this time."

Our text today is a decisive turning point in the early church's efforts to conquer spiritually the enemy which surrounded them on every side. Our passage today describes the beginning of Paul's first missionary journey. We can see the significance of this event if we will skip ahead a bit in the book of Acts and read the report which Paul gave to the church at Antioch when he returned home after completing this first missionary journey.

Acts 14:26-28

26 From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed.

27 Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that ***He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.***

28 So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.

Paul reported that on his first missionary journey, God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. That was Paul's own evaluation of his first missionary journey after its completion.

This is not to say that there were no Gentile Christians in any sense of the word before Paul's first missionary journey. For example, the Ethiopian eunuch was converted long before Paul's first missionary journey, even before Paul's own conversion to Christianity. The Ethiopian eunuch was a Gentile, but he was also a proselyte to the religion of the old covenant.

He had become a part of Israel as a religious community, and he was converted while on his trip home after worshipping the living and true God in Jerusalem.

The Roman centurion Cornelius had also converted to Christianity before Paul's first missionary journey, and Cornelius, a Roman, was not a Jew but a Gentile. Yet when Cornelius heard the message of Jesus, he was already what was called a God-fearer. He already acknowledged and accepted the living and true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and was not practicing pagan religion or worshipping pagan idols.

Also, at Syrian Antioch, the gospel had been preached to Hellenists. But who were the Hellenists? They were people raised with a Greek culture and heritage. Hellenists included people who were culturally Greek but who were racially Jewish. And those Hellenists who were racially Gentile could have been proselytes and God-fearers as had been the Ethiopian eunuch and the Roman centurion Cornelius.

We read that it was not until Paul's first missionary journey that God opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. It is on Paul's first missionary journey that we encounter the first totally Gentile converts. These are converts who were not only racially Gentiles, not only culturally either Greek or Roman, but who were also Gentiles in the religious sense. They were pagan Gentiles, worshipers of the false gods of the Gentile world.

Paul would later say in his letter to the Christians at Rome:

Romans 1:16

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Our passage for today is where Paul first reaches the “and also for the Greek” stage in his preaching the gospel message to a lost world.

We can also gauge the significance of today’s passage geographically. The gospel had already spread beyond Judea to the north into Samaria. The Ethiopian eunuch had taken the gospel south to Ethiopia in the northern part of Africa. The gospel had spread north from Israel to neighboring Syria. But Paul’s first missionary journey was the first organized effort to deliberately take the gospel message to the uttermost parts of the earth. When Paul and Barnabas boarded a ship to travel to the island of Cyprus, that was the first attempt to take the gospel message anywhere that could be called overseas. This was the first deliberate effort to take the gospel message to the Gentile world dominated by pagan Gentile religion.

So truly we are reading in our passage for today about God’s first opening the door of faith to the Gentiles.

In looking at our passage for today, let us first consider the nature of the sending church, the church which sent the first gospel missionaries into the pagan world of that day. This, of course, was the church at Syrian Antioch, the city of Antioch in the nation Syria to the north of Israel. Because of the large size of this city, the reference here to the church at Syrian Antioch is

probably not a reference to one local church but to the association of all the local churches in that city, what we would call a presbytery. Our passage points to some of the characteristics of the Christian church at large in this city.

The first thing we learn about the church at Syrian Antioch is that it was a church characterized by commitment to Bible teaching. We read that there were five significant prophets and teachers at this church. Of course, this was during the age of the apostles, and the church then had certain gifts which were suited for the laying of the church's foundation. Ephesians 2:20 says that the church was built upon the foundation of the New Testament apostles and prophets. At this point in history, the message of Jesus and the apostolic tradition were not yet fully committed to writing in the books which we call the New Testament. In that age, when the revelatory foundation was still being laid, there was a need for continuing revelation through living apostles and prophets. We today don't have living apostles and prophets, but we have their complete message in the writings of the New Testament. The revelatory foundation has been once for all laid in the completed canon of Scripture. Just as Jesus died once for all as an atoning sacrifice and does not have to return to earth and die again every generation, so the apostles and prophets do not have to return every generation and lay again the revelatory foundation of the church. The faith has been once for all delivered to the saints. They had the Old Testament Scriptures together with living apostles and prophets. We have the completed scriptures, the Old Testament together with the New Testament, the inscripturated apostolic tradition.

Because this description of the church at Syrian Antioch begins with a list of their prophets and teachers, we sense the importance that this church put upon the inspired word of God. They recognized the unique importance of God's Word. It is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. There are many other rules in life, but this is the only rule that is infallible, the only rule that never fails, the only rule that is absolutely true. In this sense, Scripture is in a category all to itself. It is no accident that people with this sort of zeal for the Word of God sent out the first missionaries to the pagan nations. Only a people with a zeal for the Word of God would have a zeal for sending out missionaries and a willingness to make the sacrifice required to do it.

What is the Bible? What is the significance of the Bible's message? Is the Bible just one religious book among many? Other people have their own religions, their own holy books, their own beliefs. Why should we arrogantly impose our religion upon others? That is the way many people think. They think that there are many ways to God, and that the Bible merely describes one of them.

But if the Bible is truly unique, if the Bible is the only revelation from the living and true God, if Jesus is the only name given among men whereby we must be saved, then that's totally different. If this is the case, then we must spread this message. This is what these people believed, and this is what these people did. They sent out missionaries.

The second thing to notice about this sending church is that they were a true household of faith where the gospel had already overcome within their midst many seemingly insurmountable barriers. This church was a living testimony that the gospel is for all types of people and that the gospel can unite as one all kinds of people.

Jesus had once asked His disciples, Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters? And Jesus had answered His own question. Jesus said, My mother and my brothers and my sisters are those who do the will of God.

The gospel has a power to overcome all racial and cultural and social and economic barriers. The gospel enables peoples from diverse backgrounds to unite in their heart commitment to doing the will of God.

We see that diversity in the list of these five prophets and teachers from the church at Syrian Antioch. Barnabas was a Jew from the island of Cyprus, a Jew from the priestly tribe of Levi. Saul, who later became known as the apostle Paul, was a Pharisee from Tarsus in Cilicia. One of the five was Simeon called Niger. Simeon is a Hebrew name, but Niger means black. This man was probably a proselyte to the worship of the God of Israel from a race with darker skin pigmentation. Lucius of Cyrene was from a country in north Africa. And Manaen was raised with Herod Antipas, one of the rulers from the family of Herod the Great. This one called Manaen was from the upper crust of society.

What a truly diverse group of people! What would such a group have to do with each other? What is it that brings them together and that holds them together? They were all united by their common heart commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were a spiritual family united by their commitment to doing the will of God after the example of Jesus and through the power of Jesus. They were also living proof that the gospel is for those from every nation, tribe and tongue. It is no accident that this church was the first to send out missionaries to people different from themselves with the conviction that the gospel would overcome all barriers.

The next thing we notice about the church at Syrian Antioch is that they were a dedicated church. We read that they ministered to the Lord. The word here translated “ministered” has a special reference to worship. These were people who believed in worshiping God. They saw the significance of worshiping God, the importance of assembling together to adore God, to give Him praise, to acknowledge His greatness. Again, it is no accident that a church which recognized the importance of giving glory to God was the first church to send out missionaries. If we have a zeal for giving God glory, then one way we can give God more glory is to spread His worship throughout the world. People dedicated to giving God glory will work toward that prophesied day we read about in Malachi 1:11:

For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down,
My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place
incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering;
For My name shall be great among the nations, Says the
LORD of hosts.

This prophecy will be fulfilled in this age through the fulfillment of the great commission of Jesus Christ. Jesus commanded the church to go to all nations and to disciple them, teaching them to observe all that Jesus has taught. This church was dedicated to obeying this mandate from Jesus.

We read that this church fasted and prayed. It is important that fasting and prayer are here put together because fasting is not something one does to earn “brownie points” with God. Fasting is not some magic technique we can use to make God give us what we want. They fasted because they were dedicated to praying. They were so dedicated to prayer that at times they gave up their normal times for eating to devote themselves to prayer. A person can get so involved in doing something that is very important to him, that he doesn’t notice when it is time to eat. He continues his activity during the normal meal time and skips eating. These people were so involved in prayer that at times they skipped eating to continue praying. They were steeped in the revealed Word of God, and they were praying for guidance on applying this word from God to their lives. They wanted guidance from God, and they wanted to submit to it obediently.

They received the infallible Word of God from a combination of written Scripture and living prophets. We receive the infallible Word of God completely from written Scripture in its completed form. Other than that difference that they had living prophets and we don’t, we should follow their example. We should be people of the book who pray for God to guide us in living out

the book, in taking action consistent with the book, in stepping out in faith rooted in the book.

When they determined what action they could take to live out the message of the Bible, they were willing to sacrifice to accomplish this. God had blessed them with five prophets and teachers. Don't you know they valued highly every one of those gifted men whom the risen Christ had given to them for their edification. In order to send out the message to others, they were willing to give up, at least temporarily, two of these prophets and teachers, forty percent of the gift God had given them.

Do you know why some preachers can never go on short term missionary trips? Because their congregation is not willing to make the sacrifice of their being gone from the pulpit for a few Sundays. The church at Syrian Antioch was not like that at all.

We read that the church laid hands on Paul and Barnabas. Again, this is probably what we would call a presbytery, a regional church, an association of local churches, which did this. They laid hands on Paul and Barnabas. This symbolized their setting apart these two men for the special work to which they believed God was calling them. This symbolized their identifying with them. This work would be not only the work of Paul and Barnabas but also the work of the church which was sending them. This symbolized their commitment to support Paul and Barnabas in their work in every possible way.

There are many good illustrations of a church's supporting a missionary. One of my favorite illustrations of this is based on

the way people used to sometimes dive for pearls. One man would put on a big, cumbersome diving suite with an air hose attached to it. Another man would stay on the ship, and he would turn the crank on a hand pump which pumped air into the hose connected to the diving suit. The man with the diving suit on would go down into the hostile, alien environment on the ocean floor to look for pearls. He was able to survive there in that hostile environment because the man on the boat was providing him with the air he needed to survive. The church at Syrian Antioch was the man on the boat whose job was to keep pumping that air. Paul was the man in the diving suit who went into a hostile environment to do an important job and who was dependent upon the continuing support of the man on the boat with the pump.

The next thing we see in our passage is the first success of this missionary endeavor. Paul and Barnabas went to the island of Cyprus, the home country of Barnabas. We read that there was a ruler there named Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man. This man called for Barnabas and Paul and sought to hear the word of God. Men in their natural state are dead in sin. They are blind to the truth and in love with moral darkness. And yet God chooses to save people out of every nation of the world. And so when the gospel goes forth, God works in the hearts of these people through the Holy Spirit and overcomes their blindness and draws them to the truth. The gospel is foolishness to the Greek, a stumbling block to the Jew, but to everyone who is called, the gospel is the power of God and the wisdom of God. When the gospel goes forth in general to a multitude of people, it is like sheet lightning. It is grand and beautiful for all to see, but it

strikes no one. But when the gospel goes out with the irresistible power of the Holy Spirit, it is like bolt lightning, the forked flash from heaven which hits with irresistible power. This man had been hit with the bolt lightning of the gospel message coming in the power of the Holy Spirit.

What we see next is the opposition. Even though the gospel is destined to win, even though Jesus is seated at the right hand of God as Lord of the universe, the devil is still going about like a fatally wounded beast seeking to take others with him to destruction. The devil is not going to give in without a fight. In our passage for today, the devil had his agent, a Jewish man named Bar-Jesus, which means “Son of Salvation.” He was in reality an agent of the devil masquerading as an angel of light. Whenever the gospel is making a difference, there will be powerful opposition. There will be those who try to deceive and to confuse and to pervert the truth. When we seek to minister and to uphold the gospel and then we encounter such opposition, we must believe that Jesus is with us. We must believe that though Satan is a strong man, Jesus has bound Satan and can use us to plunder Satan’s treasure. Because Jesus has bound Satan, Satan can no longer deceive the nations as Satan once did before Christ came. Jesus enables us to plunder Satan’s treasure as through the gospel people are translated from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God’s love. Greater is He who is in us than he who is in the world.

“The enemy is to the east of us,
the enemy is to the west of us,
the enemy is to the north of us,
the enemy is to the south of us.

And we're not going to let them escape this time."

Do you believe in the power of Jesus Christ? To begin with, do you believe that Jesus has the power to change your own life? Do you believe in Jesus enough to be committed to worshiping Him on the Lord's Day with God's people? Do you believe in Jesus enough to being committed to praying to Him? Do you believe in Jesus enough to dedicate yourself to living for Him on a daily basis? Do you believe that Jesus has the power to change not only your life but the lives of others? Do you believe Jesus can deliver our own society from Satan's strong grip? Do you believe Jesus has the power to conquer the world spiritually through the gospel message?

The apostle Paul believed in the power of Jesus, and you should too. One way we can express our belief in the power of Jesus is to support the work of missionaries, those who seek to bring the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth.