

Acts 13:1–3, The Gospel at Work in Sending

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[0 : 00] Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers Barnabas! Simeon who is called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manan, a lifelong friend of Herod the! and Saul.

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off. This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

Well, good morning. Great to have you here. That song, the offertory is ringing through my mind. My mind's made up. My heart is fixed.

No room, no vacancy. I'm sold out. You know, what does it look like to be a church collectively sold out for the Lord?

[1 : 17] What are the aspirations of a church that wants to give itself entirely to his work? What are the outcomes that rise up within us in regard to governing the pursuits?

What are the gospel ambitions of a community of faith in a local setting that's given themselves to him and to one another? That's what we're looking at almost all these four Sundays of September. We're trying to let you, many of you who are just moving into the neighborhood and exploring churches, ask yourself, what kind of church in this city do I want to be a part of?

In fact, all four sermons will be coming from your three pastors and in one sense, giving you the aspirations of our heart. The things that are deep down within us, they're immovable, they're fixed. They show the ambition of our soul. Last week, I opened that by asking if I had come across you in the foyer and were to ask you, what do you think Christ Church Chicago should aspire to become?

[2 : 38] What ambition should mark our life together? What outcome should govern our pursuits? Do you know what you'd say? And we picked up the theme of the month to see the gospel at work last week in proclaiming.

We're sold out to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to everyone and anyone. Not just those in our midst, but our ambition is to see it take place all over the world.

We're sold out to everyone to hear about our Savior Jesus who has transformed our lives and given us the forgiveness of sins. The gospel at work in proclaiming.

I want to add a second one today. In sending. The gospel is at work when some who serve in our midst are set apart and sent off with the gospel.

The pattern is set down in our text. And it's descriptive, not prescriptive upon the church, but nevertheless, it's a pattern that wherever you see the gospel at work, there are local congregations who not only proclaim Christ, but send people out in all kinds of gospel works in the name of Christ.

[4 : 05] And it mirrors everything we see about God and the gospel in the Bible. Jesus said, as the Father has sent me to his twelve, so I send you.

The conclusion of Romans, 1 Corinthians, Paul is hoping that you may send me on my journey. You can't read the book of Ephesians without hearing his prayer, that pray that an open door would continue to be given to me.

As 2 Timothy shuts down, he's saying to Timothy, bring Mark when you come because he's useful to me. Philemon, he's actually arguing that he's returning Onesimus so that of their own accord, they would give him back and send him out into the gospel work with Paul.

And 2 John states it so clearly, you will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, for they've gone out for the sake of the name.

Therefore, we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. The whole pattern of the New Testament says that when the gospel is at work, local churches are sold out and committed to sending.

[5 : 26] I hope you caught the implication of the 2 John text. He says, therefore, we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

That is the governor of your heart. You want to test. Test your heart on your desires, on your aspirations, on your ambitions, on the outcomes that you want for yourself and this world. You want to test the kind of church you want to be a part of. We validate that we are fellow workers for the truth in that we are sending.

It's that important. It's that critical. We prove ourselves to be fellow workers when our eyes rise above our own needs and the needs of those in our midst, to the world in which we live, and the support of those who will be sent.

So, second Sunday in September, the second aspiration of four, not only do we want to become a church proclaiming Christ, but we want to become a church that continues to be sending out others in the name of Christ.

[6 : 42] Christ. I have a friend who's pastored a church in Washington, D.C. now for about as long as I've been here. Going on 30 years, give or take a couple for either one of us.

He said this, if you can't see that the goal is bigger than your church and your ministry, you are disqualified from the pastorate.

You should not be the pastor of your church if you don't have a concern for other churches. I believe it. I believe that the ministry of the church has to have a horizon before her that expands the globe and has a heart's desire not only that breaks for the condition of the world, but that brings people to the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, let's take a look. Three simple verses. The pattern as we find it from the church in Antioch. It moves in my mind with your eyes now open to it in two simple movements.

There are some who served. The first verse through the middle of the second verse. Some who served.

[8 : 16] And then it just progresses. The first verse. The first verse. They were set apart and sent off. It's that simple. You can hang it in your mind even on the S's that I've laid out.

There are some who serve in a local congregation. And by way of implication then set apart and sent off.

Who are the some that were serving in Antioch? Well, verse 13 or chapter 13 verse 1. Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers.

Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Menaeon, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. The first and the fifth name in the list are already known to the reader in the book of Acts.

Barnabas has already been coming forth as early as chapter 4 as one who is committed even to giving of his own resources for the welfare of others. But he's also the one that was resident in the church in Jerusalem.

[9 : 27] That when things took place in Paul's life, he began to walk with Paul. The first and the fifth here are already known to the reader. And therefore there's nothing further said about them by way of description.

But they are two of the some and they will be the ones who are sent off. Barnabas, we know, was a Levite. Chapter 4 verse 36.

He was a Jew. Paul, we know, was a Jew as well. Two Jewish pastors now leading and orchestrating a work in Antioch.

The middle three are equally intriguing individuals. Simeon called Niger, which means black. Which could be one of a couple of different things given that his name is a Hebrew name.

Some have thought that he also was Jewish, but a person of dark complexion, while others have argued that he is from Niger, this landlocked country.

[10 : 34] In one sense, he would be West African. And in that sense, he would have been from a little place that 80% of the country was the Sahara desert.

I'm sure if he was, he probably lived in the other 20%. But here he is on this team of prophets and teachers.

And then you have Lucius, who is described as being from Cyrene. He's especially interesting because when the persecution arose through Stephen's death and Paul's pre-conversion activity against the church.

It indicates in chapter 11, and you might want to go there just to take a look at it with your own eyes. Verse 19. Now, those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch.

There's our location. We found our local church. Speaking the word to no one but Jews. But, verse 20, there were some of them men of Cyprus and Cyrene.

[11 : 49] Now, don't forget that Lucius himself is described in our own text as having come from Cyrene and now has found his way into Antioch. Who, when they came to Antioch, spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus.

And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. And the report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem. And they sent Barnabas to Antioch. And, of course, Barnabas, verse 25, will go to Tarsus to look for Saul and bring them all back. In all likelihood, Lucius is the one who's the church-planting pastoral leader of the church in Antioch, having come from Cyrene.

And notice, not only speaking to Jews, but to the Hellenists and to Greeks. So you are looking here at a church where some are serving. But it's a mixed congregation.

It's beautifully full of those who were given the promises of God in the Hebrew Scriptures, and those who were born without a promise, but have grabbed hold of it and have been grafted in.

[12 : 57] And then you have Manan, listed in our own text as a lifelong friend of Herod. The nature of their friendship we're not sure of.

Whether he had been adopted into the family, whether they just grew up on the same street, whether he was a servant to him, we don't know. But these five have now arrived in Antioch.

And notice, they've come on to the church multi-staff team at different times. They come from different geographic regions of the world, although all Roman citizens.

They come with different cultural experiences behind them, the differences of what it would have been like to grow up in one place versus another. They've been appointed the leadership of a very mixed congregation, not homogenous, anything but homogenous, filled with both Jews and Gentiles.

Quite the church, quite the pastoral staff, quite the context for aspirations. Oh, to be a church that mirrored the church in Antioch.

[14 : 15] Certainly wouldn't be anything boring about it. Might be uncomfortable at times.

Might feel unfamiliar in moments. But, the full, complete expression of the Lord in a local congregation.

These are the some who served. What about the nature of their service? The nature of their service is listed there in verse 2, but it might take a minute to come on to it.

The verse reads, While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting. The nature of their service, the worshiping of the Lord, and fasting. Now, if you're not careful, you might begin to conjure up a moment in your mind where these are now in a worship service, either the five of them or the congregation.

It might have been a called day of fasting, and something happened in the normal operating worship of the church in corporate worship and fasting. I don't think that's what's taking place.

[15 : 28] In fact, the word worshiping here, the idea of worshiping, could be misleading if it just leads your mind to think about what we do on Sunday.

The word for worship might have been better translated serving. What it entails is ordering, overseeing, planning, administering.

It's a liturgical term that would have been used for the priesthood in the Old Testament of those who were responsible for the family. So while these some were, in one sense, ordering the life of the church in time, through time, while they were planning, while they were administering, while they were meeting, while they were thinking, while they were praying, while they were fasting.

In fact, in the secular setting of the same era, that word would have been used for civil servants that just served Rome. And most of them at their own expense.

Let me get it as clear as I can then. While they were serving, you might almost think of these five as elders in the local congregation. And I've got a bunch of them here who do so at their own expense.

[16 : 46] And they are planning. They are serving. They are leading. They are teaching. That's what's happening. And so what you can envision by serving here is that these five are in conversation on the life, health, happiness, and direction of the church.

And their minds, evidently, were drawn to those who were beyond their own borders. Their meetings didn't get bogged down simply in our own affairs.

In fact, you want to know how great this church was and how much I want our church to be like it? We already have an instance in Acts where these leaders determined to think and plan and pray and act in ways that sent people beyond their own borders.

Do you know what it is? There was a famine that took place in another part of the country down in Jerusalem. There were people who were without food who were common believers. And this church begins to think about how do we help?

How do we secure the needs of even God's family? And they begin to take an offering. And they send Paul and Barnabas prior to these missionary journeys already trying to serve the needs of the church beyond.

[18:10] What a wonderful thing. This is not new to them. Listen, these five then are thinking about the world.

Those beyond their Sunday attendance. Their minds are drawn in conversation beyond their neighborhood. They're not content with their city or their country.

They're wondering about how this gospel that could be claimed to the whole world might be accelerated through what we do in this place. That's the nature of their service.

And so it says they were set apart. We know it's going to be Barnabas and Saul. Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work.

And that this is done by the Holy Spirit's leading. How exactly the Holy Spirit talked to them? We're not told.

[19:11] And rather than speculate as though it were some audible sound. It seems to me that in time and over time and in prayer and in appointing and in leading and in fasting, they came to some collective understanding that two of these men had a particular work that ought to be released to.

And so it says they were set apart. It's a wonderful word. This setting apart. As I've looked at it this week, you're really being set apart from something.

Now, normally we think that Paul and Barnabas are simply set apart to something. But the idea of this term really is, in a sense, it's the setting of boundaries beyond.

And so these two are now being separated, set apart, set apart from their local fellowship for a time. They're going to return to Antioch and then go again. Paul will go again. This is not just a one-time, lifetime send-off, bon voyage, welcome to the global ministry partnership team.

[20:34] We'll see you in five years on sabbatical. No, this is a setting apart from their leadership in a particular congregation for a work that they felt God had called them to.

The church in Antioch, get it, was committed to taking the gospel beyond the boundaries of their own walls. They had needs in their own place.

But it didn't keep them from wanting to see the gospel declared to everyone and on display everywhere. Doesn't it sound like our own vision statement?

We exist to build up a multi-ethnic and cross-cultural congregation that will declare the gospel to everyone and display the gospel everywhere.

It's that audacious. It's that absurd. It's that absurd. But it's that real. And so here they are. On their way.

[21:39] Set apart. I want to take this morning to rehearse some of our own personal history as your pastor.

wherein we have seen God over these how many years now? 27 or more. Do similar things under the leadership of those whom you have elected as elders to further the growth of the gospel.

And I want to recount it, not in any self-congratulatory way to the leadership of this church over nearly 30 years, but for your encouragement.

Because I believe we stand today as a local church on the threshold of needing to seek God for further works that he would call us to.

1996, I was with my family in England on sabbatical from a previous church, had no intention of living my life out on the south side of Chicago.

[23:00] We returned to the church in which we were serving, middle of July. I walked into an elder meeting the first week of August, and the leadership of that church had been praying now for a long time, and they voted to plant three churches in 10 years with their own leadership, and they didn't know where or through whom.

My brother-in-law and I, John Dennis, were in the meeting. Within a week, we wondered, is this God's work for us?

Is this the role we play in the vision that God's leading this church? We offered it to the Lord in prayer, in faith, and 37 other people in the congregation in the late 1990s said, we believe God wants us to go too.

They moved. It took us about 20 years to understand the neighborhood into which we moved. But the movement of God to a local leadership some 40 miles from here impressed upon themselves to bring the gospel beyond their own walls, and they sent two of us to get it underway.

When we came here, we started with 37 people. The Lord led this church, to begin a congregation downtown.

[24 : 49] That still exists. Holy Trinity Church downtown. Today, they will have three Sunday services.

We started a church on the west side, which never found its own legs, but supported back the church downtown. We founded a congregation on the north side, which two weeks ago became their own particularized church, Christ Redeemer Chicago.

And so what's happening is every time we were thinking about what to do, the Lord was saying, you can't just think about your own selves. You've got to get the gospel out.

There have to be people that are sent. And when I look back now, over all these years, I stand amazed. Even a church planting organization that went ahead and began to help start 29 more churches.

How does that happen? Let me give you another story of the Lord's leading. We knew we wanted to help people handle the Bible better. Thus, the brochure we gave you today to be encouraged by what's come out of your own midst.

[26 : 03] We didn't think we had enough money in our own budget to help people handle the Bible. So our leadership of this church prayed and determined to start a 501c3, call it the Charles Simeon Trust.

And they appointed the first board of directors, one of them in our own midst, Jane Henzel, still on the board with me today. After all these years, it'll be 25 years in January.

The Charles Simeon Trust was financial leverage to simply help people outside of our context, learn to handle the Bible and support pastoral residents who could be trained and then sent likewise.

And now, all these years later, over 18,000 people in the coming year will be in two and a half day workshops learning how to handle the Bible in 86 different countries.

And I don't know how it happened, but I'd say this for your encouragement. If the leadership of the local church will continue to pray, what's next for us?

[27 : 11] Because we want to be marked by an ambition of sending. This is our aspiration, to see the gospel go to the ends of the earth and to see some who serve here now be set apart and sent off to the ends of the earth.

I could go on. I think of our GMP partners. We support six families and individuals who serve in other parts of the world.

If I'm not mistaken, at least four or five of them came through our own internal training and then were sent out. Today, as you continue to give to this church, you're giving to six families who are bringing the gospel in other parts of the world.

Because we're committed to not merely thinking about our own needs. I have a list here of 113 names that are individuals, both men and women, who from when we started as a church have become part of the Chicago course on preaching and its predecessor, the Chicago plan, to see people raise up and go out.

Of the 113, I just counted them again this morning, over 40 of them, all these years later, are still in pastoral ministry. If I were to mention some of the names, you'd know some.

[28 : 40] Dan Allen, Matt Boffy, David Kamara, Kyle Edwards, Paul Fowler, Eric Stortz, James Seward, Doug O'Donnell, more and more, Colleen McFadden, more and more and more.

It's astounding. I don't know how it happens because we're neither big nor strong. But we have a leadership and we have a constituency of a congregation that says we're here for sending.

It's a beautiful thing. These are the present day signs of the gospel being at work. You're hearing my heart. You're finding yourself to the bottom of my shoes on this.

Our aspiration is to be a church that trains, equips, and sends people out for the gospel. And we ought to stop there for a moment and think of it.

Because one of the greatest dangers our church faces today, five years in now to this place, is to forget our past with all of its reckless, joyful sending to forfeit our future because we downgrade our present and turn inward.

[30 : 00] that is the danger of owning a building. That is the danger of being under the weight of needs that we're not yet fully supplying for ourselves.

I have a friend in London who said to me this week, quote, we should be longing for rest but suspicious of comfort.

I've come to the belief that this church will begin to die as we make decisions simply based upon the comfort or the completion of our own needs.

When we begin to ask, why do we have initiatives that don't make a direct investment in growing our church, we ought to be quiet and think. When we ought to ask, why would we have a plan to expand our global ministry partners when we can barely in a threadbare way support those that are there now, we ought to stop and reconsider.

Why do we have pastoral residents? Why do we send Pastor Helm off to train other people in the word when we have the same needs here? If we begin to ask, what's in it for us?

[31 : 19] What's in it for me? How are we caring for that? Then we're in trouble. And according to Mark Dever, pastor that I quoted earlier, we would be standing on the threshold of being disqualified or useful to our Lord.

Why? Because the gospel is at work in sending. I'll say it from here to the day I die.

show me a church committed to accelerating the news of Jesus beyond their own borders and I will show you a congregation that has life if not comfort.

this is where we begin and as we sit here in September it's what I remind us of. The day we forget it we are done.

A dear friend of mine just turned 100 this week. I know that scares you. I'm old enough to have friends that are 100. He told me every church has a life cycle.

[32 : 21] Every life has a life cycle. And then he began to roll it out from left to right. It starts with a mission. But over time if there's blessing the mission becomes a movement.

But then what happens is the movement stops long enough to celebrate itself and be a monument. And after it's a monument everybody's talking in terms of it as a memory.

And then at the end of the day you're nothing more than a mausoleum. So the way to keep our church moving on a 50 year trajectory with gospel growth is to delay death.

That's the role of the leadership of this church. May this church die the slowest of slow deaths because we have a leadership committed to pushing the clock back from memories and monuments and movements to mission.

And what is the mission to proclaim Christ and to see that some who serve here are sent off which validates us as a fellow worker for the truth.

[33 : 37] So while tomorrow night and I'm about done your elders are going to meet as we do every month sometimes times more than that we are going to spend an hour strategically thinking about the care that we are giving to this congregation because that internal need is so important.

We are also going to think about how might the Lord free this congregation from its remaining construction debt as fast as we have been retired how could he lift this from us because this would be an accelerant for us and that too will be an internal conversation.

But hear me your leadership will not neglect to keep our eyes keenly focused on what may be next. We want to emulate Antioch.

I want our church to be sending people off. I want to see commissioning services and teary goodbyes and can't wait till you come back because we're bringing the gospel to somebody else.

I want to ask again should we plant a church? church. We're not out of debt. We did it before.

[35 : 17] It about killed us. Yes it did. And what a glorious way to die. I want us to ask what about more global missionary partners?

Are there any in our midst under the hand of God who would be separated out cross culturally to another part of the world that our resources can help speed them on their way?

I want us to ask we have four pastoral residents. In five years would the Lord give us six? I want us to ask who can go out?

What summer interns can come in? What short term projects can we take up? Who can we get all over the world with the gospel?

Because I'm convinced that the gospel is at work when the church takes some who serve and set them apart and send them off.

[36 : 32] Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this month you've given us prior to our fall series in the book of Daniel. Thank you for these four weeks where our church family can hear from her pastors in ways that touch the interior makeup of our soul.

And I pray that they would be foundational messages for us. that we would as a family be reminded or acquainted for the first time on the aspirations of our fellowship.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Why don't you put in Tammy