

TUTORIAL
2.18

The Church sends out Paul & Barnabas

In what is commonly described as Paul's first missionary journey, the book of Acts now describes the effort by the Church to reach out beyond its borders to the ends of the earth, by sending Barnabas and Paul on a journey to share God's Word. They ask John Mark to join them.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 13:1-43**.

Last time

Peter responded to the criticism from the Jewish traditionalists for going and eating in the house of the Gentile, Cornelius, by simply giving a report of all that God had done during that time.

Hellenist believers from Cyprus, who'd fled the previous persecution in Jerusalem, went to Antioch in Syria and shared the Good News with Gentiles there. Many were saved and added to the Church. Barnabas, sent by the Apostles to assess this rapid growth, found that God's Spirit indeed was at work. He went to Tarsus and brought Saul back to help with the many opportunities to witness in Antioch.

King Herod Agrippa, executed the Apostle James, but when he arrested Peter in order to also have him killed, God miraculously rescued the former fisherman from prison.

The Antioch church is led by a diverse, gifted team

Over the last fifteen years or so since Jesus returned to a place of honor and authority beside His Father, the Apostles and early believers have been obeying His instructions to go out with the Good News about Him...to teach truth and make disciples in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Since Pentecost, the Gospel has gained a foothold in a significant number of communities around the eastern end of the Mediterranean. But now the time has come for the Church to make a more concerted push out towards the "ends of the earth".

Significantly, the initiative comes from God's Spirit. All efforts to further the Church's task that have proven to be effective - both in the time of the Apostles and down through history - have been directed and empowered by God. Luke tells of a particular day when the leaders of the Antioch church are gathered together, their thoughts focused on the Lord Jesus (Acts 13:1).

It's worth noting some features of this leadership team from Luke's description, because it fits with a pattern that will emerge more fully in the ongoing Narrative. First of all, they are functioning together as a group of committed co-workers with no indication of a hierarchy. Secondly, they are a culturally diverse group with no ethnicity being elevated over any other. Thirdly, we're told that the Antioch leadership team is comprised of both *prophets* and *teachers*.

Distinction made between *prophecy* and *teaching*

The distinction in these roles or *gifts* is important to understand in light of the pivotal transition that is still taking place during the period described here in Acts. For 400 years, as the Old Covenant wound down, God had not appointed any new storytellers or *prophets* to add to His revelation - His Narrative. Now that the New Covenant has been instituted through Jesus' death and resurrection, His Spirit is giving specific individuals within the *Ecclesia* the role and ability to speak for Him...to reinterpret the existing Narrative in light of what Jesus has accomplished and to instruct His children how to live in this new era - as individuals and as local *ecclesia*. All of the Apostles are designated *prophets*, but there are many others in the early Church who are given the privilege of being channels for God's special revelation during this transitional period. In time, as the revelation is written down and consolidates into what we know as the New Testament, the need for this role diminishes and eventually disappears.

The gift of *teaching* is identified as distinct from *prophecy*, although some, like the Apostles, are gifted with both roles. The responsibility of teaching is all about taking the *prophecy* - God's special or new revelation - and making it clear among the churches, such as in Antioch, so it can be applied in real life situations that the believers are facing. The need for this *gift* continues beyond the transitional Acts era, and nearly 2000 years later we can be grateful that wherever the true Church can be found, the Spirit still gives certain men the capacity to clarify and apply the words of the Old and New Covenant prophets contained in the Bible.

Antioch church sends out a church planting team

But back to Luke's record (Acts 13:2,3), God's Spirit makes it clear, no doubt through one of His prophet spokesmen there, that they are to appoint Saul and Barnabas to undertake some special work that He has for them. Losing these two gifted and committed members of their team, even for a time, must certainly have represented a sacrifice for the others, but they obviously have a perspective that reaches beyond the needs of their church and immediate community. There is a clear sense of the church's investment in this venture, as they send the pair out to take part in the Lord's global purposes.

And so begins the first of what have become known as *Paul's missionary journeys*. Very soon, either by his own choice, as he moves away from his former Jewish identity, or through author Luke's read of the situation, the former Pharisee scholar from Tarsus will be known in the Narrative by the Latin version of his name, Paul. He and Barnabas take young John Mark with them - who we find out later in the Narrative is a cousin of Barnabas. Also, as we've noted before, there's very strong evidence that this is the same Mark who wrote the account of Jesus' life that we know as the second Gospel.

Another pattern is established here that we'll see repeated throughout the Acts Narrative. Even though Paul obviously has a very prominent role, the early Church's efforts to take the truth into new areas actually takes place through a network of interdependent teams, with the support of local churches...a very different picture from the over-achieving super-gifted individualist missionary that's sometimes projected as the ideal. Involving younger co-worker disciples like John Mark is something we've already seen Barnabas do, and we'll likewise see Paul make a habit of doing this with others.

Barnabas, Paul and John Mark go to Cyprus

With God's Spirit guiding them, they head first to Barnabas' home island of Cyprus. That probably meant a couple of hours' walk from Antioch down to the harbor at Seleucia, then on board one of the square-rigged cargo ships that reserve some space for passengers (the picture below is of a replica of a Roman '*corbita*' thought to be the type used by Paul). With good weather and favorable winds, they'd be docking in Salamis, the main port on the island's east coast, before nightfall (Acts 13:4-12).

Luke doesn't say specifically, but it's very possible they were welcomed here by a small *ecclesia* in this city that is the main commercial centre for the island. If so, the church is made up of believers who fled the persecution a few years ago in Jerusalem and others who've been reached through their witness for the Lord Jesus. While in town, Paul, Barnabas and John Mark visit the Jewish synagogue and preach God's Word - something that will be a pattern in many places they visit on their travels.

After leaving Salamis, they travel "from town to town across the entire island" as the text puts it. Along the way they have opportunity to share the truth with the governor of the island, who becomes a believer. Although the Narrative

doesn't say specifically, this conversion of a well-educated Roman aristocrat may have been a pivotal point for Paul in shaping and broadening his view of who God intends for him to target with the proclamation of the Good News.

John Mark leaves; Paul and Barnabas go to Antioch

The three men leave Cyprus by ship from *Paphos* on the southwest coast, headed for *Pamphylia*, a region in the south of the area known then as *Asia Minor* - today part of the Antalya province in Turkey (Acts 13:13-43). They land in *Perga*, coastal gateway to the area and a city known for malaria. Later Paul will mention that he was sick soon after having gone through there. At this point, John Mark leaves them and heads back to Jerusalem. Luke doesn't comment here on the dynamics, but we find out later in the Narrative that Paul isn't impressed and considers it a desertion...it will be a long time before his trust in the younger man is restored. Meanwhile, Paul and Barnabas head north over very rugged terrain on roads notorious for bandits. They reach the Roman colony city Antioch...often distinguished from other cities with the same name by referencing the nearby region of *Pisidia*. Luke records that the two men attend the Sabbath service at the local synagogue and Paul accepts an invitation to speak. He skillfully ties together threads from the Old Covenant Narrative, focusing first of all on God's sovereignty and His grace. Then he asserts clearly that God has made a way through the death and resurrection of King David's descendant, Jesus, for people to have their sins forgiven and to stand righteous in His eyes - something the Law given to Moses could never achieve. He strongly urges his audience to listen and believe this message from God.

We should note that it's not only ethnic Jews who hear the Good News proclaimed in the synagogues they visit in this city and elsewhere. The Jewish diaspora in the period of Hellenization two or three centuries before, means that many communities throughout much of the Roman Empire have been exposed to the truth about the one Creator God. Some have converted to Judaism, submitting to the initiation rituals - most notably circumcision. Many others, while believing in the God of the Jews, are not prepared to take such a definitive step...but they do attend the synagogue regularly to hear teaching from the ancient Jewish Scriptures. In these cases, they are inevitably familiar with the passages foretelling the coming of the Messiah from the prophets, such as Isaiah. As we'll see from the Narrative, Paul and the others often find soil already well prepared for the Good News among these Gentile worshippers. In fact, a number of them will end up being the core of local fellowships that spring up in many of the cities Paul and the others visit. By contrast, it is often the orthodox Jews who react negatively and even violently to this new revelation from God and those who bring it.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. To what degree do you feel that we should interpret the circumstances and events described in the Acts account as *transitional*? Please elaborate on your answer. Try to avoid as much as possible existing labels or doctrinal positions...think in terms of how you see God's Narrative leading us to place this time of the Apostles within the whole picture of His revelation and purposes.
2. What does the term *missionary* represent:
 - a) for you,
 - b) for other Christians you know,
 - c) for non-Christians in general?

On the whole, do you feel it is a positive thing to have this special designation? Why? If you were sent out from your church to work in another culture, how would you like to be described?



ACTIVITIES

The Church sends out Paul and Barnabas

1. Look closely at Paul's sermon in the synagogue (Acts 13:16-41). Then:
 - a) Provide tentative section headings if we were to divide it up like this: vv16-25, vv26-37 and vv38-41.
 - b) Make any observations you can about the way he tailored his message for his audience.
 - c) Identify any lessons you've learned from his example to help in sharing the Gospel with others?