

A Sending Church

Isaiah 52:7–10, Acts 13:1–4

We have spent a number of weeks in Acts 13. Today, let us take one more look at how our chapter begins. The pastors of the church at Antioch are meeting, and the Holy Spirit says: “Separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The church obeys, ordains them by the laying on of hands and sends them out as missionaries. This is remarkable in many ways. For one, the church at Antioch in Syria was itself a church plant. How telling that the instruction to send out missionaries was not given to the “mother church” back in Jerusalem but to a church plant! This teaches us that even younger church bodies have a responsibility to become sending churches, sending out missionaries to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.

We have considered Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey in some detail. The trip was arduous, involving hundreds of miles of walking, perilous voyages in fragile wooden boats, fording streams and rivers, and ascending over mountain passes, with the ever-present danger of highwaymen and robbers, to say nothing of shipwrecks and contrary winds.

But in the heart of God the efforts of Paul and Barnabas were well worth it. Our Old Testament text gives an apt description of missionary zeal: “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who proclaims peace, who brings glad tidings of good things, who proclaims salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ Your watchmen shall lift up their voices, with their voices they shall sing together; for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord brings back Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together, you waste places of Jerusalem! For the LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and *all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*” How is the apostles’ message described? “Good news,” “peace,” “glad tidings,” “salvation.” What is the Lord’s assessment of his faithful messengers? They have beautiful feet—imagine how tired the apostles’ feet must have been at the end of their long journey; imagine how many pairs of shoes they wore out! They didn’t have dainty, pedicured feet, such as you might see in a fashion magazine. But they were beautiful in the eyes of God! Furthermore, as our Old Testament text describes it, the apostles are “watchmen”; they inspire song. Their message, no matter how grim the situation that might face people who live in a sin-cursed earth, is that the God of heaven “reigns.” What a comfort this is in our present day, as in all the ages of the church!

How does the God of heaven make bare his holy arm in the eyes of the nations? Through the proclamation of the gospel! What is the result of the faithful church carrying out the missionary mandate? “All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” No matter how impossible or unattainable it might seem, the

church's mission will ultimately be achieved, and Christ's kingdom will be victorious. The gospel is good news—the very best news there is. As we consider our text this morning let us consider three things, the cost, the price and the challenge. First,

1. The cost

The Holy Ghost said, “Separate unto me Barnabas and Saul.” Clearly it was God's plan to propagate his message by human messengers who would give their lives to spreading the gospel. “It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor. 1:21). God could have spoken directly from heaven. Or he could have sent angels to deliver his message. Instead, he chose *men*—Barnabas and Saul.

Barnabas was a Levite from the island of Cyprus. He owned some land which he sold, bringing the money and laying it at the apostles' feet (Acts 4). He was a man committed to Christ and willing to use his personal means for the advance of the gospel. His birth name was Joses (or Joseph), but the apostles called him Barnabas, meaning *son of consolation*. Apparently Barnabas was an encourager gifted in one-on-one discipleship. When Paul returned to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas took him under his wing and introduced him to the apostles; apparently they had previously known one another. Easton observes that the impressive growth of the church at Antioch led the apostles in Jerusalem to send Barnabas there to provide leadership. He found the work so demanding that he went to Tarsus in search of Saul to assist him. Saul returned with him to Antioch and labored with him there for a whole year (Acts 11:25).

Saul himself was a native of Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, a Roman province in the southeast of Asia Minor. Tarsus was a wealthy commercial center, and had a university. Saul's father was a Pharisee of the tribe of Benjamin. As a young man Saul was sent to Jerusalem for study, where he became a pupil of the celebrated rabbi Gamaliel. After his studies he likely returned to Tarsus, but soon after Jesus' crucifixion we find him back in Jerusalem. Following the martyrdom of Stephen persecution arose against the followers of Christ. Saul took a prominent part in this, even leading a posse to Damascus to arrest Christians there, but on the way he had a vision of the resurrected Christ and became a Christian.

Though Barnabas and Saul were committed Christians with a zeal to reach people for Christ, they were nonetheless mere *men*, subject to the same temptations as other men. At the beginning of their second missionary journey they got into a sharp disagreement whether to take John Mark with them, and they parted ways.

What did it mean for the church at Antioch to become a sending church? For one thing, it meant the loss of Barnabas and Saul. Anytime a church sends leaders to take the gospel to an unreached people, it leaves a hole. I remember when my son and daughter-in-law felt the call to take the gospel as mission educators to the

Middle East, one of the elders of their church, a man whose wife and children were very active in the church's ministry, came to him and said, "Jeff, you can't leave here. God is using you here. You are very much needed here. Your work is essential."

But our Lord said, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matt. 9:37–38). When the church sends laborers to do gospel-labor in a different part of the harvest, their leaving inevitably leaves a hole in the sending church. The people of the congregation will miss them. But that's not all. The sending congregation must commit itself to financially support the missionaries. There will be some who will say, "Why are we sending our best and brightest elsewhere, when there is such a need here?" And the funds to send out missionaries will be missed as well. What congregation could not do more if it had more funds at its disposal?

Sending out a missionary is an act of faith. A congregation commits itself to send one of its own to the field. It commits itself to financially support his ministry. And it commits itself to pray. There are always many local needs to pray about, but the missionary particularly is in the devil's cross-hairs. The devil is not pleased when an articulate man of God begins to preach the gospel. The church cannot avoid spiritual warfare, as two opposing kingdoms are in conflict—the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of Satan. But we are promised victory through the power of prayer. Paul wrote, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."¹ As the sending church faithfully prays, the proclamation of the gospel goes out victoriously, winning the lost to the Savior. Men, women and whole families are rescued out of the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of God's dear Son. Yes, there is a cost to being a sending church, but an obedient congregation can expect God's blessing. Not only is there the cost, there is also

2. The price

There is a price to the missionary and to the sending church. Here is a preacher of the gospel who must go through the upheaval of moving himself and his family away from his own familiar culture to a new, strange and unfamiliar culture. Cross-

¹ Eph. 6:10–13

cultural ministry is not easy. The man called to missionary work must be flexible, trusting in the power of God to help him overcome discouragement and danger.

Then there's the financial cost. The apostle John speaks of this in 3 John 7: "For his name's sake they went forth, *taking nothing of the Gentiles.*" The gospel is not a business, a moneymaking enterprise. The apostle Peter maintains that the man called to the ministry must serve "not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly" (1 Pet. 5:2). It degrades the gospel for either the minister himself or the sending church to proceed with the hope of making a profit. The gospel must always be given with the attitude "freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). Though it is appropriate that "they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14), the gospel must be preached to lost souls irrespective of their ability to pay. In the early stages of disciple-making the cost must be borne by the sending church.

But in the case of the person who *receives* the gospel, the invitation is given, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk *without money and without price*" (Isa. 55:1). The gospel is good news—the greatest news there is. It will positively impact all who receive it. What price could a person put on being rescued from death and the devil and introduced to the Savior and lover of his soul, who will take him to heaven? Christ is the unspeakable gift, and his salvation is positively priceless. Whether you're financially well-off or have no money at all, you are invited to come to Christ and receive the gospel, the most precious thing in the world—bar none.

Late night infomercials promise to solve a problem or make life more convenient. They create a sense of urgency to induce their viewers to get out their credit card. A good infomercial can make a product seem too good to be true. Viewers are offered bonuses, gifts or limited-time offers to encourage them to make impulse decisions. Yet there is often buyer's remorse—a feeling of regret after making a purchase.

There is no buyer's remorse with the gospel! If you come to Christ, he will wash away your sins in his own blood and credit to you his perfect righteousness as a free gift. He promises to never leave you nor forsake you. He promises to make you his child and take you to heaven. The salvation he offers is guaranteed: regarding those whom he died to save he says, "none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17:12).

The cost to the receiver is zero—paid in full by the precious blood of the Son of God. If you want to buy a luxury car or property, you have to have the money. Recently there was a newspaper story of sought-after real properties in our area with asking prices up to \$2.5 million dollars—well beyond the means of middle-

class buyers. The common people are priced out of the market. Prices are even higher in other parts of the country.

But not so with the gospel! The cost to the receiver is zero, but salvation is the pearl of great price, purchased by the offering-up of the life blood of the Son of God. Christ had to give everything so that we, his people, could possess eternal salvation.

We have considered the cost and the price, finally, consider

3. The challenge

Here was a growing church reaching people for Christ in Antioch. But the Holy Spirit spoke: “separate to me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The church was obedient and sent away two gifted men to the regions beyond. It committed itself to prayer and financial support, not knowing whether the mission would bear fruit or not. The church caught the vision of a lost world in need of the gospel. But would self-sustaining churches be established, or would they fizzle? Throughout history both things have happened. But supporting missions brings blessings both to the sending church and to those who receive the gospel. The sending church is blessed, knowing that it has been obedient to Christ, and that he promises that his obedient servants shall not lose their reward. And those who receive the gospel become the heirs of eternal life. Christ promises to give life both in the hereafter and in the here-and-now. He says, “I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:28). He also promises, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). What a reward! Abundant life in the here-and-now and eternal life thereafter! If you come to Christ, he will give you love, joy and peace. He will give you hope in a world of hopelessness. He will give you a sense of purpose and an eternal destiny.

I read an interview with a prominent doctor and medical ethicist who argues that life after 75 is not worth living. A few years ago he published an essay called “Why I Hope to Die at 75.” He vowed to refuse heroic medical interventions and antibiotics once he turned 75. He argues that older Americans live too long in a diminished state, raising the question “whether our consumption is worth our contribution.” The interviewer asked him, “Isn’t that an extreme position?” His answer: I’m not committing suicide. I’m not asking for euthanasia. I’m going to stop taking medications with the sole justification to prolong my life. Later he says, I do fear death. But I think I fear being sort of decrepit and falling apart more.²

What a sad way to look at aging! The Bible regards old age as a crowning achievement. The Christian doesn’t have to fear old age. God promises to look after his people. He says, “Even to your old age, I am he, and even to gray hairs I

² <https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/08/21/238642/a-doctor-and-medical-ethicist-argues-life-after-75-is-not-worth-living/>

will carry you! I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you” (Isa. 46:4). He promises, “Those who are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing” (Ps. 92:13–14). God’s people are to honor older saints: “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:32). Old age brings its share of sorrows, but for the Christian we “sorrow not, even as others which have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). For the Christian, life after 75 is indeed worth living!

The work of identifying and ordering gifted men and sending them out as church planters continues. Churches that are too small to send out evangelists and church planters can band together and pool their resources. Our church is small though not insignificant. “God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty.”³

Today is the first Lord’s day in November. Later this month we will celebrate Thanksgiving Day. Giving thanks is something that God encourages, something that honors him. Each year the OPC General Assembly encourages the congregations to take a Thank Offering which goes in its entirety to the Great Commission work of Christian education, home missions and foreign missions. If the Lord has saved you, if he has brought you out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his dear Son, if he has rescued you from hell and promised you heaven, if he has changed your heart and made you a lover of Christ, then your whole purpose has changed. Whereas once you formerly lived for self, now you live for Christ. You have a whole new outlook and new priorities. Out of gratitude to him who gave his life for you, you now want to give your life as a living sacrifice. You want to be a good steward over all that Christ has given you. Toward the end of the year, as we each reflect on the Lord’s goodness to us over the past year—how he has given us far more than we deserve, how he has blessed us exceedingly above all that we could ask or think—then we want to ask ourselves, how can I show my thanks to him? What would be an appropriate gift?

A couple churches in our presbytery have sent out evangelists to start new churches. Though that work is beyond the capability of our own local church at present, through the annual Thank Offering we at Grace OPC have the privilege of investing in the Great Commission and promoting the work that is closest to our Savior’s heart: the establishing of new churches and mission works. Be assured, dear one, that he who said, “I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” is still committed to this work. Be assured as well that as you sacrifice your time, treasure and prayers to this endeavor, he will bless you. “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together,

³ 1 Cor. 1:27

and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38). The Lord loveth a cheerful giver, and someone who gives to the work closest to the Savior’s heart will be blessed both in this life and in the life to come. “Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 3:8–12). Even in the present day God remains faithful to his promise.

The Great Commission involves teaching the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism requires the establishment of churches that in turn become self-supporting and self-propagating as they themselves become sending churches.

Will you not pray as to the part God would have you play in supporting the work of the church, and particularly the annual Thank Offering? Every penny given toward the Thank Offering goes in its entirety toward the work of Christian Education, Home Missions and Foreign Missions, the key components of the Great Commission.

Do you, like our Savior, desire to see faithful churches established here in the US and around the world, looking toward the day when the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and his rightful rule is universally recognized? Doesn’t your heart burn within you, longing to see Christ on the lips of men and women everywhere, praising him as the Lamb that was slain? If so, show by your generous gift this season that you love him with all your heart, mind, soul, strength and treasure. Amen.