

SET APART AND SENT AWAY
Acts 13:1-3

Acts 13:1-12

As noted in an earlier sermon, the book of Acts is often **divided into 2 parts**:

- The first part is **chapters 1-12** and it concerns itself, chiefly, with the **ministry of Peter** (along with John, James, Stephen, and Philip), that is, those church leaders from Jerusalem who had a ministry that centered in Jerusalem among the **Jewish converts** to faith in Christ.
- The second part is **chapters 13-28** and it concerns itself, chiefly, with the **ministry of Paul** (along with Barnabas, Silas and Luke), that is, those church leaders who were NOT from Jerusalem and who had a ministry that was NOT centered in Jerusalem but was among **Gentile converts** to faith in Christ.

So we are now in the second half.

And right from the start we see that this section is leading off with the first of three missionary journeys (as they would come to be called) that included Paul.

But before talking about that, let's first examine verse one...

Acts 13:1

Here we read of 5 different men, by name...

Barnabas. We first ran across the name Barnabas way back in Acts chapter 4. Let's turn to it...Acts 4:36. So, Barnabas was a Jew, but he wasn't from Israel. Rather he was a native of the island of Cyprus, located out in the Mediterranean Sea, west of Israel and south of modern day Turkey. Barnabas, as we see here in Acts 4 was known to the apostles. It was Barnabas who would later introduce Saul, following Saul's conversion, to the apostles in Jerusalem. And then Barnabas shows up again in Acts 11...

Acts 11:19-26

Simeon. The second man named here in Acts 13:1 is Simeon. We don't know of Simeon from any earlier account. But what is significant about him is that it says here that he was called "Niger." When we see the word Niger, in modern times, we likely think of the **nation of Niger**, located in north central Africa. My niece, for the past few years, has been the field director for Samaritan's Purse, in Niger. Niger is the Latin word for "black." So Simeon was the "black" man of this group.

When Elijah Mohammed started the Nation of Islam here in the United States, he taught that Christianity was a "**white man's religion**." He taught that white men were "devils" with the implication that Christianity was and is a **devilish religion**. Malcolm Little, who grew up in Michigan, while in prison, bought into Elijah Mohammed's teaching and accepted it "hook, line and sinker." He began at that time to call himself Malcolm X, and he became the poster child convert for the Nation of Islam (until they caught an even bigger fish named Cassius Clay a few years later). Mohammed Ali, ala Cassius Clay, would eventually, like Malcolm X, distance himself from the Nation of Islam (this cost Malcolm X his life; Mohammed Ali was spared any assassination attempt). But this notion that Christianity was and is a "white man's religion" continued to be spread.

Few things could be further from the truth.

Jesus was a Middle-eastern Jew. His earliest followers were Jews. And many of these Jews were from northern Africa. Once the church that we read of here in the book of Acts truly got established, it is of more than a little significance that **many of its leaders came from Africa**. Indeed, for those of you who (prior to the coronavirus pandemic) were in the older adult Sunday School class, you will recall that there were THREE early centers of Christianity: Jerusalem, Antioch (the city that is mentioned here in Acts 13) and Alexandria (in northern Africa). And...listen now...much of our thinking regarding God, Jesus, the Bible, the work of the Holy Spirit, and so forth is based upon the thinking of **the AFRICAN THEOLOGIANS** of the 1st to 5th centuries: people like Tertulian, Origen, Cyprian, Athanasius and Augustine. All of that to say, if there is one thing Christianity is NOT: it is that **it is NOT a white man's religion**.

Lucius. And here's Lucius...from Cyrene, i.e., northern AFRICA, in what we today would call Libya. Many Jews lived in Cyrene at this time.

Manaen. Like several of these men we don't really know anything about Manaen except what we are here told: that he was part of Herod the Tetrarch's court – this being the same Herod (Herod Antipas) who had,

according to Acts 12:2 had James, the brother of John, put to death. This is a reminder that sometimes people can end up working for someone who is a really bad person. And to that some of you might offer a hardy "Amen!"

Saul. And lastly we have Saul, who, with this chapter and from here on out will be called Paul. We noted a few months back that the name Paul or Paulos, means "little." We THINK (we do not know for sure) that Paul chose this name for himself as a reminder to all that **God had greatly humbled him** back at the time of his conversion.

In verse 2 we learn that while these men were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit made known to them that they should set apart Barnabas and Saul for the work which he had for them.

That work, which we read about in verses 4-13, is what we would call missionary work.

As I have spoken to people through the years (maybe while flying on a plane, or giving someone an Uber ride, or wherever...) it has often come up about **going on a mission trip**. Just this past week I had one of those kind of conversations. What people think of pastors, I am not sure. People are always polite when I tell them I am a pastor. Sometimes they will joke that they are glad they didn't use any foul language or tell me an off color joke. More than a few have tried to appear – or so it has seemed to me – as being "religious" by telling me that they have a second cousin, or maybe an uncle...some relative...who was or is an Episcopal minister, or some sort of clergy individual. But that's all in regards to being a pastor.

But being a missionary, or going on a mission, that's an entirely different issue. And it has seemed to me that **most people are quite genuinely interested in that sort of thing**. I think this is because so many people, from all kinds of backgrounds – religious or not – have at one time gone on a mission trip.

Being a pastor...preaching from the Bible...well, that's one thing...and that is only for a very special kind of person (or so it is thought). But going on a mission trip...feeding people, or building houses for those devastated by a hurricane...that is

something that is fairly attractive to a lot of people, maybe even to most people...for that is something they think even they can do.

In recent years a number of Christian writers have started **coming down pretty hard** on these various "short-term mission trips" that churches are known for sending their people, especially their young people, off on. They have criticized them as being little more than **sight-seeing vacations** that cost thousands of dollars that might otherwise go to those who are truly dedicated to foreign ministry.

But I have known very few missionaries who ever **STARTED** their **LIFE** of missionary service, who had not **first gone** on a short-term missions trip.

There are those stories of people like William Carey, John G. Paton, Hudson Taylor or Gladys Alyward who went to foreign fields who had **never**, prior to their going as missionaries, stepped foot beyond the border of their native country. But generally...at least in modern times...that is **not** the case.

To compare it to swimming: so instead of just jumping in all at one time, most today, first put their foot in the water and then, albeit slowly, make their way into deeper and deeper water.

Ruth and I are planning on, in 2020, **walking across America**. We both feel up to the walking, but as for making use of a motorhome (to house the couple going with us and giving us all a place to sleep at night) we're **just now getting our feet in the water**...trying to see what it is like to live out of a motorhome. We tried this a month or so back, while the motorhome was parked in front of our house. It worked fine, for whenever we realized we forgot something we would simply walk back into the house and get it (we called this "going to the store"), but eventually there won't be any "store" just feet away.

One might, given all this, think that Barnabas and Saul here were about to be those that just "jumped into the water." But the truth is, already in their lives, these two had traveled quite a bit.

Saul (Paul) was from Tarsus
Barnabas was from Cyprus

Both had lived IN JUDEA as well as OUTSIDE OF JUDEA. Both knew about Jewish life and Greek/Hellenistic and Roman life. In Acts 16:38 and 22:27 we read that Paul was, by birth, a Roman citizen. The point being that these were **cosmopolitan men**...men well acquainted with the world. So the idea of setting apart and then sending off Barnabas and Saul as those who would be missionaries particularly to non-Jews...well, they were ready for that.

Every pastor rejoices when he learns of one within his church... his flock...that desires to be used by God, full time, in some form of ministry. It is great when YOUNG PASTORS arise from within a congregation. Calvary Church, here in Lancaster County, currently has as its Senior Pastor Beau Eckert, a fellow who grew up at that church. Some of the older folks there can say, "We remember when you were just a young man." That is great when that sort of thing happens.

And every pastor rejoices when an individual or couple from within the congregation show an interest in serving as missionaries. Long ago, such individuals or couples would have been pretty much on their own in going to some foreign place, but today there are a variety of mission agencies which can help train, send and support those missionaries while they are far from their home church.

But be it as a future pastor or missionary...in either case, people have had an opportunity to watch them. And this is very important. For why should a church, for example, send off a couple as foreign missionaries, if through the years this couple has

- **never** shown an interest in telling others about Christ,
- **never** been known to be praying for their witness to their neighbors, and
- **never** disciplined even a single person in the ways of Christ?

But Barnabas and Saul?

They were known...they were proven.

- Barnabas was KNOWN to be a substantial giver to the work of Christ and he was also known as an encourager.

- And as for Saul, almost from the "get go" of his conversion, he had been offering a defense of the gospel before Judaism's leaders.

So the Holy Spirit said "set **them** apart."

And having done so the text tells us in verse 3 that they

Fasted

Prayed

Laid hands on them, and then

Sent them out

Four things: fasted, prayed, laid hands on, and sent out/sent away.

I think Luke, the author of this text, was being VERY SPECIFIC in his language here, wanting us to note all four of these practices...

Fasting. We do this...some STILL do this today...so that we might take time ordinarily spent EATING and instead of eating spend that time CONTEMPLATING, REFLECTING, and MEDITATING. We, in effect swap

food for wisdom

carrots for spiritual insight, and

bread for manna from heaven

When we fast, we are depriving ourselves with the hope that God might particularly lead us, direct us and guide us.

Prayer Prayer is talking to God. Sometimes it may seem like a one-way conversation, but if fasting is a time of contemplation or reflection upon the word of God, prayer is our response to that contemplation.

Laying on of hands The New Testament scriptures mention this many times. **It is the New Covenant equivalent of the Old Covenant "anointing with oil."** It is meant to represent God's presence...God's anointing. 1 Timothy 5:22. When church leaders "lay hands" on a person it represents God's hand or hands being upon that person's life. At times, God's hand may be a heavy hand (a hand of discipline maybe) upon a believer. At other times it may be a comforting hand assuring us that he will never leave us. But this hand of God is never absent from the believer's life. God never withdraws his hand from us. He will do that to the world. Romans 1 talks about that and how God "gives people up," in a sense "washing his hands" of them. But that is the world, and not the people of God.

When I was a young boy, my dad would sometimes walk behind me with a hand on my shoulder. **That hand would guide me**, in effect turning my body in the direction I was supposed to keep walking. Sometimes that hand would go on to my head, there doing the same thing. It was a sort of **remote control kind of steering**.

That's what God does when he has his hand upon us. And for missionaries, living in a foreign place, often needing to learn to speak a different language in a different culture, there is a **TREMENDOUS NEED** for that kind of hand direction.

Sending them off. It has been said that long ago, a missionary would pack up his or her things in a coffin when sending their personal items to the foreign field. The reason for the coffin was that it was understood **they likely would never be coming home alive.**

They called these kind of missionaries "lifers": meaning, they weren't going just on some short-term trip. They were going for the rest of their lives.

And how true that was.

John G. Paton arrived in the New Hebrides Islands back in the early 19th century with his young wife. The people on the island where they were going to work were cannibals. Not long after the Patons arrived, John's wife died. He buried her in secret, during the night, and told no one. For he had already become aware that if the natives found out about her death soon enough they would dig up her body and eat it.

The sending off of missionaries, even today, carries with it a note of some finality. Sure, today they may be able to make their way back home within a day or two, regardless of where they may be. But death can come anytime, anywhere to anyone. And so we often properly sing with those that we are sending off the old song "God be with us till we meet again."

The chorus to that song goes,

Till we meet, Till we meet
Till we meet at Jesus' feet
Till we meet, Till we meet
God be with us 'til we meet again.

It has often been said that **every one of us are either a missionary or a mission field.** There is, of course, **some truth** in that statement.

But the sending off of a missionary or a missionary couple is **a special kind of calling and a special kind of work.** It is good that the modern church has not lost sight of that fact. So many modern churches are consumed with trying to be relevant – in trying to **BREAK DOWN THE WALLS** between the church and the world. But in their search for relevancy they have lost sight of the fact that there are **holy practices** that the church should maintain that the world may never understand, grasp or appreciate.

Fasting

Praying

Laying on of hands, and

Sending away

These are words without meaning, words without understanding, to the world. But let us not erase them or forget them or consider them irrelevant. For these are at the heart of what the church is to be.

We are a holy people set apart to bring a message of hope and reconciliation with God to a very lost world.

Would to God that he would set apart many others for a lifetime of service to our King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Amen? Amen.